

10.Team Bonding - Part 2

They had been at the village for almost three days and there was no sign of Vlad or Ron. Somerfield wasn't seriously worried; the flight had been short but the terrain was hilly and the walking would be slow. He would, however, welcome his other team members. Something felt wrong, and he wished they were all together. Some time tomorrow he would have to contact Hammond. The days here were not quite the same length as Earth ones. He wondered whether his hosts would allow him to radio. Probably. As long as they didn't suspect that he suspected...what? He didn't know.

The planet was called Vaal, according to the inhabitants, and the people were not from his earth. They were aware of the Goa'uld but had some sort of defence system that they seemed reluctant to discuss. They were a thinly scattered population, they told him, living on more than one continent and preferring small communities. Their communication and monitoring devices were sophisticated in the extreme, but Bob had seen no sign of radio masts, cameras or any other hardware. So far, they had seen nothing like televisions or radios, just the ubiquitous shoulder bags. Nor had they seen weapons.

The bags spoke for their wearers, synchronising the speech perfectly with the lip movements. The English was perfect, too, once a few initial glitches like the lengthened vowels were sorted out. Everyone sounded the same, which was disconcerting at first, but gradually they learnt to distinguish nuances of speech. Xabba was particularly friendly. They learnt he was male, Xeri and Vereth were female, and hair colour was a sure-fire way to tell. Men, it seemed, were always dark, women never, and no, nobody ever dyed their hair.

They were housed in a comfortable apartment, over a shop that sold alien artefacts that none of them could figure out. Xabba said they were zho'tai, but either would or could not elaborate. There seemed to be no translation. They looked almost like figurines, but unfinished somehow. The shopkeeper was a friendly redhead called Yexi. She cooked appetising meals for them and kept the apartment spotless. She had very few customers, so obviously zho'tai weren't one of life's staples, and the quiet shop gave Yexi plenty of time to look after her guests. They had been surprised to find that there was nothing like a food shop in the village, and they had established that supplies came by helicopter.

Xeri and Xabba were constant visitors, willing to answer questions about life on Vaal, and ready to introduce other Vaalans who came to talk, to eat or in some cases just to gawk. Some of the latter were small, presumably children, and the earth team were amused rather than offended.

So what was wrong? Adam and Sharon seemed happy enough. They were chatting away, trying to find out as much as possible about their hosts. Nobody mentioned moving anywhere else; waiting for the rest of the team was essential. Sharon was flirting, guardedly, with Xabba, who was occasionally seen grinning like a Cheshire cat. Xeri had at first fluttered her long curly eyelashes at Adam, but with no result, and was now trying the same tactics on Bob. Maybe they were just too friendly. But alien mores might be very different and it was hardly diplomacy to complain that the natives were chatting up the embassy staff.

Sharon was enjoying herself. First Teal'c and now Xabba. Aliens seemed to be her thing. Xabba's lush black curls tempted her fingers and when his huge brown eyes fastened on hers she could hardly bear to look away. She sipped the ya'an they were drinking, a beverage like hot weak apple juice with overtones of cinnamon. They'd drunk what seemed like gallons of it. Every visitor expected to drink with them and even the sips mounted up. Xabba was telling her about his mother and his sisters. He was fiddling with the translator as he spoke, so his eyes were not on her at the moment. This left her at liberty to enjoy his almost perfect body and the hair...

When he reached forward and put his hand on her knee, she was flattered. She covered his hand with hers and leaned towards him, ready for the kiss that ought to follow. In the middle of the kiss, something made her draw back. Not the kiss itself. Xabba's lips were gentle and firm, and his tongue probed her mouth tenderly. But something... Sharon found herself trembling. She wasn't usually shy or easily embarrassed but she felt a flush mounting to the roots of her hair and a gut instinct told her to back off. Xabba looked disappointed but covered it well

"I have moved too fast for you, my beautiful alien," he said. Then he sighed, smiled and sipped some more ya'an.

Bob was at the other side of the room on a window seat, uncomfortably close to Xeri. They, too, had ya'an and he was savouring the taste. It was like one of Martha's favourite herb teas. At the thought of Martha he caught himself querying the situation again. He had been unfaithful a few times in the past, although the fact made him ashamed and he tried hard to forget the incidents. A true godfearing man should cleave to his wife as long as they both should live. But his previous lapses had not involved aliens. Nor had they been so public. Adam and Sharon were both there and could see him virtually drooling over Xeri. He hadn't kissed her yet, but his resolve was weakening.

Adam was daydreaming. His response to Xeri had been cool, perhaps as cool as his feelings about Emma. Xabba, now... But Xabba was interested in Sharon. He drained his ya'an cup and refilled it without thinking. The climate was warm and they were constantly thirsty. His mind was hovering between Xabba and Vlad and it appeared neither was available at present, so daydreaming would have to do.

The daydream was interrupted by Yexi's son, Zh'in. He'd brought more ya'an and he stayed to chat. Adam found himself warming to the dark haired boy with the lively eyes and mobile lips. He looked about thirteen in earth age, but might well be older or younger. His fingers were actually playing with Adam's when the oddness hit home. Adam was most certainly not attracted to children. This boy was a total stranger and an alien at that. Something was wrong. He dragged his hand away and Zh'in pretended not to notice. He picked up the ya'an pot and left, smiling, fidgeting with his translator bag as he went.

Late evening saw them left to their own devices. Yexi had come and gone, giving them a delicious concoction of some sort of fish with herbs and spices, served on fleshy leaves, and accompanied by ya'an. Zh'in had helped her serve, and had not even looked at Adam. All three felt uncomfortable but unwilling to start a discussion. Adam slipped out of the apartment and walked moodily along the path that led out of the village into the trees. The moonlight was more refreshing than the dull sun. It sparkled on the leaves and lit some batlike creatures that flew, chittering shrilly, from tree to tree. Adam walked purposefully, determined to clear his head and his mind of the fog that was creeping in.

Back in the apartment, Bob and Sharon started talking at the same time.

"I don't know what you thought..."

"I didn't want you to think..."

They both broke off and then Bob started again, ruefully.

"We all seem to be under some kind of spell here. But it feels - I don't know - wrong, somehow. Not just morally wrong. Heaven knows, I shouldn't be looking at Xeri the way I do but..."

Sharon nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. I'm beginning to wonder if they put an aphrodisiac in that ya'an."

"That would actually explain things," said Bob, sounding almost relieved at the idea of having something to blame. The fears that such an explanation would raise didn't strike him for a moment, but Sharon's face showed her shock.

"I was kind of joking but, my god, you're right." They stared at each other and then looked round for Adam.

"I think he went for a walk," said Sharon.

"Well, let's hope he's back soon. We need to talk about this and compare notes. I'm thirsty - is there anything to drink apart from ya'an?"

"Well, the water tastes foul. We know that from the time we tried it on the first day. They've left plenty of ya'an, in thermos flasks. Maybe we ought to test the theory by not drinking it but..."

"Maybe we can test it *by* drinking it. We've always drunk it with the Vaalans before."

"I usually have a cup by my bed at night."

"Yes, but you sleep alone." Sharon nodded and blushed as she remembered some of her dreams over the last few nights. They had involved Teal'c rather than Xabba which was why she hadn't given them a second thought.

They raised full cups and drank, watching each other carefully. Bob started thinking how lovely Sharon was. Why had he never noticed? He leaned towards her, and his voice dropped to a husky croak.

"You're a fine figure of a woman Sharon Vaughan. How about you and me..."

Sharon's burst of laughter took him by surprise, and bruised his ego slightly.

"Well, that was some test," Sharon said, still grinning, and it dawned on Bob that they had a serious situation on their hands.

Adam became aware of footsteps. They were faint, but growing louder. He felt uncomfortable. Should he be out in the woods at night? Nobody had tried to tell them where to go or what to do, but still, he had no idea what might offend their hosts. Then Vlad and Ron came round a bend in the road and Adam heaved a sigh of relief.

Potts was cheerful.

"Here we are, Major. They're here. I said we were nearly there, didn't I? Aren't you glad we didn't stop to camp earlier?" He bounced up to Adam like an eager puppy.

"We're here! It's taken us ages. Were you worried?"

"I think the colonel was beginning to feel concerned. He and Sergeant Vaughan are in the village. Second house on the right. Upstairs."

" Be in a hurry, Potts. They will be wanting the good news," Vlad's voice was music to Adam's ears. How much he'd missed his friend!

Potts sped on, with the MALP, but Vlad stopped and dropped his pack. He stepped forward and gave Adam his usual greeting - a kiss on each cheek. Somehow, that didn't seem enough. Instead of moving away he paused, his mouth hovering over Adam's. After an instant of shock and another of intense desire, Adam felt his own lips parting in response. This kiss was not a formal greeting. Vlad was drinking him in, tasting him, revelling in him like a man finding water in a desert. And he was drowning in the kiss. But just as his arms snaked around Vlad's neck, the magic was interrupted. They heard Bob's voice.

"Thank God you're here. Get inside quickly. We've got problems. And whatever you do, don't drink the tea."