

11.Team Bonding - Part 3

They sat in the lounge area of the apartment staring at each other. Vlad's eyes were big with shock as they rested on Adam. An aphrodisiac? Adam squirmed inwardly. He hadn't needed an aphrodisiac to return Vlad's kiss, only an excuse, and now they couldn't even discuss it.

They agreed to stick with water, however unpleasant. Vlad and Ron had found fresh streams beside their path and these had proved both safe and clean tasting. The brackish flavour in the tap water might be an effect of the pipes. More probably, it was a deliberate attempt to make them drink ya'an. Potts filled his flask with ya'an - they might need a sample to analyse. Vlad filled his with tap water for the same reason.

Then they tried radio contact. There was a blanket of interference and Bob sighed.

"We can ask, tomorrow," he said. But they all knew the likely answer. They debated setting out for the gate there and then but Vlad vetoed travelling at night.

"It take long," he pointed out, "And path are not easy. Is better we are first sleeping,"

Bob agreed. The Vaalans didn't know their secret was out, yet. He set watches for the night, even so, and it was a very worried team that took turns sleeping. Sharon did not dream.

Morning saw Xeri as a guest for breakfast. It was obvious to all of them that Potts didn't require ya'an to make him react to her. He blushed and stammered like a teenager. He knew perfectly well that this might be the enemy but his hormones said she was a very sexy enemy indeed. She tried to offer them ya'an and seemed surprised when they refused and drank water. She mentioned the taste and they all pretended they had no idea what she meant. They schooled their faces to indifference and drank, while the ya'an cooled, unwanted. Bob observed that Xeri pretended to drink but actually only touched her cup to her mouth.

He raised the matter of the radio, casually, and Xeri expressed surprise and regret.

Standoff.

Then Xabba had arrived outside and called up to the open window.

"Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Adam replied for all of them, "And our friends have rejoined us." No sense in being unfriendly or rude - yet.

Xabba came up and talked for a moment with Xeri, then announced, with a huge smile, that he thought they could solve the radio problem. He moved a switch on his translator and spoke in a sharp, clipped language to someone who replied in kind. Then he switched back to English.

"You must bring the radio to the zho'tai shop," he said, and led the way downstairs. He fiddled with some wall switches in the shop, then told Bob to go ahead. It was quite clear he and Xeri weren't moving, so Bob's communication was very guarded. He considered asking Vlad to use Russian but decided there was no sense in provoking the Vaalans. He said that everyone was well, and that the team was together. He used a few code words to let his listeners know he was expecting trouble of some sort and said they'd try to get back to the gate before the next report was due.

Then he signed off and thanked Xabba for making the contact possible.

Xeri professed sorrow that they wanted to leave so soon.

"If you stay one more day, you can meet some of our most important people," she said. It was hard to find a reason not to. In fact, Bob calculated the timing involved, allowing for the shorter days on Vaal, and gave in. There was no sign yet that they were prisoners rather than guests, and it was just within the bounds of possibility that the ya'an effect was not deliberate. Or at least, not malicious. But he would have to make sure Potts didn't try it.

Vlad and Ron were shown round the village, while the others sat chatting to visitors in the lounge. Xabba had disappeared and Xeri was introducing some new Vaalans to the colonel and Adam, so Zh'in acted as guide, and Sharon came on the tour for the second time, eyes alert for anything they'd missed when they arrived earlier.

Vlad was handling the zho'tai and asking questions. Sharon was listening carefully to Zh'in's answers, which told her nothing. Potts, who was not at all interested in zho'tai, and wanted another look at the lovely Xeri, stepped outside the shop and moved across the road to a vantage point where he hoped to see the apartment windows. Leaning against a wall, trying to look as if he were merely waiting for his friends, he suddenly became aware of voices.

It was like listening to a telephone conversation. One person was speaking the clipped alien language. The other had obviously left his translator on.

"Xeri thinks they're suspicious."

"xxxxxxxxx"

"Well, we've almost finished filming. If tonight's episode is a bit short we can pad it with earlier scenes."

"xx"

Yes, we finish them tonight. It won't be as pleasant without the drug, but our audience is waiting."

"xx"

"Don't worry, all our translators have cameras loaded and ready."

"xx"

"I'm sure all right minded Vaalans like this way of dealing with criminals, and after all, aliens who invade our planet are criminals. As others have learnt, to their cost."

"xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx"

"I don't think they'll send any more - though it's a pity we didn't get their first group."

Everything slotted into place. Potts wanted to run back to his colonel and report what he'd learnt, but knew the Vaalans mustn't know he'd overheard them. He moved cautiously to the corner of the building, where a door was ajar, and peeped round - the more information he could get, the better. In the light of the conversation, what he saw made sense.

Somehow, as Sharon and Vlad came out of the shop, followed by Zh'in, he managed to attract Sharon's attention. They fell behind the others and he whispered what he knew.

"I'm bored with this," she called to Zh'in. "I'm going back upstairs. Enjoy your tour, you two!" And she left, walking purposefully, but not too fast. Vlad glanced at Potts but the young man shook his head fractionally. They needed to lull their hosts into a false sense of security.

Sharon almost dragged Bob away from the people he was talking to.

"You stupid idiot," she said, frantically signalling with her eyes that she didn't mean what she was saying. "I need to talk to you. Now! In private!" The Vaalans looked amused and continued chatting to Adam while Sharon and Bob retreated to Sharon's bedroom.

The team met over lunch. They had no Vaalan company so presumably no one knew they were alerted. Or perhaps the aliens were simply very confident. Potts ran over the conversation he'd heard and told them what he'd seen. The other houses weren't houses. They were film sets, facades, with cameras and microphones hidden in the walls facing the street. Nobody lived here. Yexi and Zh'in were mere caretakers in a shop full of props, props that didn't need a proper name or use, because everyone knew what they were, except the guests. And indigenous "criminals" probably knew too. All the people they'd met had been, presumably, taking a studio tour.

It appeared to be a gigantic snuff movie, with criminals (or aliens in this case) as the victims. If they were adequately drugged, the lead up to the execution would titillate and excite the audience via the live screening of the action. The actual mode of death was not known, yet. But Ron had seen posters in the house that suggested some kind of vampire style ritual, with fangs and a lot of blood.

Six Vaalan days to the gate, at best. No way to communicate via MALP until they were much nearer, out of range of the jamming. It had to be deliberate jamming, after the experience in the shop that morning. Colonel Somerfield looked round at his team. They were brave and resourceful. They would have to be.

Suddenly, Vlad's face lit up and he said something in Russian, then in English for the rest of them.

"Waiting five minute then following me. The helicopter pad. They are not expect it."

"Wait a minute!" Bob's concern showed all too clearly on his face. "You can't fly that thing with no experience."

Vlad stared. Then frowned.

"You are not reading my notes when I come to work for you?"

"Well, I know you're a pilot, of course.."

"Am helicopter instructor. And testing pilot. All kinds of." His English deteriorated in his anxiety to make them understand. "They humans - our size. Need handle, pedal, is OK. Not for testingness, perhaps, but can go to gate." And with that he was gone.

Bob looked at his watch and prayed. He had to believe in his enthusiastic major. There really wasn't much choice. Sharon was watching from the window, her teeth biting her lip, ready to monitor Vlad's progress and to alert them if the Vaalans returned.

"He's there!" she said, just as Bob told them time was up. Adam and Ron had used the five minutes to grab all the gear and weapons. They ran down the stairs, out of the house and across to the landing place. It was, as Vlad had suggested, so unexpected that the Vaalans who were around took a moment to realise what was happening. In that moment, Vlad

had the motor running, and the blades turning. The team fell over each other into the machine as the Russian took off. They were all too breathless to speak as they cleared the village and the trees.

"I tell you, they not expect," said Vlad as he steered a course for the stargate. "They are thinking we explorers, not fighting, not flying." It seemed he was right. They were not immediately followed.

It was a bumpy ride but at last the gate was in sight in the distance. The far distance. At which point the engine spluttered and Vlad brought the machine down and cut the power.

"Fuel finish," he told them. "Is safer stop now, not crash." The others were in total agreement. They climbed out and set out for the gate, but a mind-wrenching drone told them they'd been followed - and spotted.

The helicopters, three of them, landed near the gate, and disgorged a group of Vaalans, armed to the teeth. Surprisingly, their weapons appeared less sophisticated than expected. The equivalent of muskets and flintlocks, at a guess. But any bullet can kill and the team were outnumbered at least three to one.

One of the Vaalans, possibly Xabba, though it was hard to tell at a distance, had what looked like a loud-hailer.

"You will surrender to us and drop your weapons," came the command.

Bob continued to walk forwards until he thought he could be heard.

"Why? You don't want us here. Just let us go. You could destroy the gate or guard it."

"Our audience is waiting. We cannot let you go now." The answer was chilling in its simplicity.

Bob shrugged and turned to his companions.

"It seems the show must go on," he said, and gave the hand signal to open fire.

As with the helicopter, they took the Vaalans by surprise, and narrowed the odds in the first few moments. Then Sharon fell. A quick look showed she was stunned, not injured, but she didn't regain consciousness quickly. The others shielded her as best they could and she started to rise but was obviously groggy. By now Bob had reached the pillar. Adam and Ron covered him as he dialled out.

"Go, go go!" he yelled, as the familiar interface opened. Ron grabbed Sharon and Adam caught her other arm. They dragged her to the gate and were through. Adam glanced back as they went and saw Bob and Vlad engaging the rest of the pursuers. There was nothing he could do.

Bob did some more praying. The Vaalans didn't want to kill them - at least not yet, but he had no intention of letting them use either himself or his major in their "entertainment". Then Vlad ran towards the helicopters and the Vaalans followed.

"You go through," he shouted to Bob. "I OK." And he aimed at the nearest machine. The explosion was satisfactory and the black smoke engulfed the entire group. Bob and Vlad didn't wait to see if anyone emerged. They ran for the gate and were through, Vlad rolling down the ramp and landing in an untidy heap at Hammond's feet. Behind Hammond, Adam heaved a sigh of relief.

The debriefing was short and to the point. P3X-246 would be on the list of proscribed planets. There was no need to tangle with the filmmakers again.

"So they got what they wanted," said Somerfield.

"Without the special effects," Sharon reminded him.

"I wonder how they dealt with the Goa'uld," said Hammond. "I don't suppose we'll ever know!"

Ron and Vlad handed over their flasks with the samples of ya'an and water. Someone might find a use for them and the lab guys were always interested in new finds.

"Date rape, if you ask me," said Bob, with a guilty glance at Sharon.

Vlad wondered sadly whether drug induced kissing counted; whether he ever dare repeat it; what Adam thought. There didn't seem to be any way to ask. The kiss had been his dream and had dissolved like a dream too.

Hammond noted the loss of the MALP and the UAV with resignation. His SG teams were becoming altogether too cavalier with his hard won equipment. He dismissed them with a sigh. Paperwork beckoned.

They would have a long weekend off, but nobody had made plans yet. As they walked to the elevator, Vlad turned to Adam.

"Sorry, Brit. I am being sorry. You know for what. We forget. Yes?"

Adam wanted to tell him he didn't want to forget. He wanted to experience that kiss again - and again. But Sharon joined them and the moment was lost, as they all headed up towards the sunshine.