

Chapter 20. A Silent Conversation

Bob watched Vlad carefully as they gathered their kit. The Russian didn't seem quite his normal insouciant self. The lack of Adam appeared to be affecting him badly. But a cheerful disposition was not a prerequisite for gate travel and Bob decided to say nothing. Ron was cheerful enough for all of them. His confidence had increased since his part in the missions involving the movie set and the plant nursery, and he was, Bob considered, shaping up well. Sharon was bubbly, as usual, with an extra glow that probably owed something to the tall dark alien in SG1. Bob sighed. There were so many relationships to be aware of and so many possible problems. However, here they were, back to their original team, and ready to go.

They had known it would be cold. The MALP had shown ice and snow. The knowledge had only been intellectual, though. It is hard to feel temperatures in advance. And the high pitched moan of the wind set their teeth on edge as well as blowing flurries of snow from the drifts into their faces. All four were dressed in Antarctic blizzard gear, and looked for all the world like a set of fat Russian dolls, trundling across the featureless snowfield towards the cliffs that might just have mineral deposits, and even miners.

The only Russian among them muttered about Siberia and punishment and not seeing why a robot couldn't have done this. Bob, Ron and Sharon were trudging along, heads bent, silent.

Then the guards appeared.

They were almost comically round in their fur coverings, but there was nothing funny about the weapons they aimed or about the hostility in their flat black eyes. Bob tried to communicate, but to no effect. Gestures made it clear that they should accompany the guards to the cliffs. And as that was where they were headed anyway, they went willingly enough. Perhaps it would be easier to talk inside, out of this cold and the wind.

If anything, it was colder inside the cliffs. Bob had entered the cave opening almost eagerly, hoping for warmth and quiet, but both were denied. A path led downward between rough stone walls, slick with ice, and an eerie moaning prevented conversation. It was not the wind. It didn't sound natural. Every so often it would stop, then just as the ears accepted and welcomed the lull, it would start again, just at the lower threshold of hearing at first, but soon building to an all encompassing drone.

The path seemed endless. Bob knew that was a cliché, but it truly seemed as if they'd been walking for hours. He couldn't see his watch and he tried counting seconds but gave up. The noise interfered with rational thought. And it was getting louder. He could see the others, walking in single file ahead of him. Ahead of them, he knew there were two guards, and behind him there had been four. At a couple of side passages, more well wrapped figures had joined the little procession and he had no idea how many there were now.

If he tried to stop, or even to slow, the man behind him would simply push, and a fear of being trampled, by accident or design, kept him going. Then the leaders stopped, a kind of ripple effect staggered through the line and they were stationary. Nobody had knocked him down or even pushed him. The noise was deafening.

After a moment, the leaders moved again, but sideways this time, and the dim overhead lighting gave way to a glow from a massive chamber, deep in the heart of the hills. A slight push set him going again and they filed out onto a brightly lit gallery overlooking a monstrous tangle of machinery and an antlike scurrying of hundreds of men, or women, humanoids, at least, tending it. The noise came from the machinery and was magnified and reflected by the cavern walls. But there was no time to study the situation. They were led into a side room, equally well lit, where three fur coated figures sat at high metal desks and surveyed them with those same hostile eyes.

When Bob spoke, they ignored him. And they were not speaking themselves. It took a moment to realise that there would be no point. Human ears were not designed to hear in this atmosphere. The people at the desks were conversing, however, with the guards. In sign language. Their fingers protruded from gloves that ended at the final knuckle.

Then they looked at the team, their fingers flashing and wriggling in comment or question or command. It hardly mattered. Colonel Summerfield was not going to understand.

Ron, however, was looking hard at the finger work. After a moment, he removed his gloves and tried a tentative movement or two of his own. More flickering and maybe a hopeful look in one of the deskmen's eyes. Ron went slowly, but it seemed he was making progress. Trouble was, he couldn't communicate with his colonel. The noise prohibited speech. And the progress seemed achingly slow.

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Later, hours later, they collapsed on the floor of a bare room, where they had been shown once those in charge had gathered whatever it was they had gathered from Airman Potts. To everyone's relief, the noise was slightly muffled and if they sat in a close huddle and used lip-reading skills, they could, after a fashion, talk.

Ron told them what he'd learnt. The mining community was one of several on the planet. Several on this continent, at least. The ores extracted and packaged were sent as tribute through the Stargate. In return, the tribute takers left them alone. Ron had managed, he thought, to assure them that the team had nothing to do with tribute, but was a peaceful exploratory mission. It had been hard to explain that the Stargate might have more than one destination.

The miners and their ancestors had lived here for centuries. Every so often, a mine would run 'dry' and the scene of operations would start again, elsewhere. Usually, the Stargate would be moved, too. The machinery never broke down or stopped. Sometimes there were minor faults and parts would be sent through the gate for replacement. The men who repaired the machines were important, high caste, it appeared. No one could remember what would happen if the tribute was not paid, but the legends said that it would not be pleasant and there were 'graveyards' of frozen, unburied bodies, near mines that had 'failed'. Metal fencing surrounded these grisly piles and the sign for failure was shown in picture form every few yards. The display of corpses dismayed the miners, who buried their dead, even if only in deep snow. Writing was unknown, although the concept was understood. There was no time to read, write, learn or teach. Speech had fallen into disuse. It couldn't compete with the noise. Eventually, hearing was so damaged that speech would be useless, so children were simply taught sign language from an early age.

And that, finished Ron, was all he'd been able to grasp. The others were impressed. He'd done incredibly well. Apparently he had a younger sister who was totally deaf and had learnt American Sign Language for her sake, as had all his family. But the language used here was not the same and his fingers had stumbled and tripped before making such progress as he had.

It was enough. It gave them an understanding of the place and its people.

It seemed likely that this was a Goa'uld slave world, more effectively garrisoned by the climate than it could be by Jaffa. There was no way of knowing the name of the particular 'god' the tribute was sent to. Ron was unsure. He had got the impression of a powerful trading partner rather than a deity when the tribute was mentioned. And he had got nowhere asking what the miners intended to do about or with them. He was exhausted after his marathon signing session and the others were not in a much better state after standing so long. Food did not seem to be forthcoming, but they still had their packs, and they broke open their field rations with relief.

Immediately, a group of guards, possibly the same ones, but unrecognisable in their furs, stormed into the room and grabbed the packets of food. They left one water canteen and a stunned team.

"I guess that answers one question." Bob's grin was wry. "They don't intend to befriend us."

"And they believed Ron about us having nothing to do with the tribute." Sharon sipped the water thoughtfully. "They're not worried about offending us - or our home world."

Moments later, the lights, already poor in their room, or their cell, as they had begun to regard it, dimmed further. It was apparently bedtime.

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