

17. 'Vaster than empires and more slow.'

The groan was unwelcome but it pointed the way to where Sam and Vlad were held captive. The top of Sam's head protruded from a giant flower. Her eyes were huge and brilliant. Filled with tears. Vlad was parcelled in green and was evidently in some distress. He groaned again as the vines squeezed tighter. Apparently in answer, he was rocked to and fro, though there was no breeze to sway the branches.

Adam winced in sympathy, and had to clench his fists and will his feet to stay still. He couldn't go charging to the rescue. St. George fought dragons, not vegetable plots. Jean took charge.

"Don't move more than you can possibly help. And try not to make any sound. It's reacting to your groans."

Vlad must have heard. At least there were no more of those agonised moans. Everything stood still.

"So how do we get them out?" Jack sounded angry. "We can't cut fast enough to prevent them strangling or suffocating them. And we can't use explosives or the hostages are taken out with the kidnappers."

"You're talking as if they're people." Jean frowned.

"Maybe they are people," said Teal'c. "We have seen some strange things in the universe. Why not sentient plants?"

"Adds a whole new dimension to talking to your pot plants," said Jack.

"But whether they are or not," said Adam, "How are we going to talk to them?"

Ron coughed.

"My mother," he began, and when nobody laughed he went on, "She talks to her plants. Sort of breathes on them and whispers. Sings, as well."

"The latest hits?" Jack was evidently dubious.

"No, folk songs, hymns, that kind of thing."

"Can anyone sing?"

Adam sighed. He'd never thought of himself as a professional singer, but he knew his voice was good. He sometimes accompanied his guitar - or accompanied his voice on his guitar. He'd just never expected a vegetable audience. Tentatively, he began a song he'd known all his life. 'The Oak and the Ash.' It seemed vaguely appropriate. Everyone was silent. He had no idea if they were appreciative and didn't care. Only one listener mattered and that wasn't human. He hesitated when the song ended. What next? And was it even working?

Ron started up with a croaked rendering of 'The Green Leaves of Summer' and Adam joined in and took over. Jack began 'The Holly and the Ivy' and after the final verse, something like a whispered sigh rustled around them. Were the vines any slacker? They could see Vlad's lips now, unbound. He opened them to speak but Jean shook his head frantically and started a French folk song, 'Au jardin de mon pere.' As he sang the line, 'Les lauriers sont fleuris,' the whispering came again and the petals of Sam's prison peeled downwards. Her face was wet, covered in slime, and her lips were bleeding where she'd bitten them.

Did the songs need to mention plantlife? Adam risked a few lines of 'The Blaydon Races,' but the unwrapping process was clearly halted.

"Lullabies! It wants lullabies!" Ron spoke with absolute certainty. "Slow, gentle, anything with a haunting quality!" And Adam started the Eriskay Love Lilt. The vines loosened their terrible hold and slowly, oh so slowly, Vlad was laid on the ground, still cradled, but less crushed. After that, they simply went back to the beginning again and repeated their repertoire, missing out 'Blaydon Races'

The flower drooped gracefully and Sam was deposited beside Vlad. She was almost unrecognisable, encased in a green gel. Vlad's vines drew back, reluctantly, or so it seemed to the team, and then there was a quick flurry of leaf litter, covering the two from neck to toe. A vine reached out and stroked their foreheads then trailed back into the main mass.

Silence,

A tentative move by Vlad brought a less tentative thorn to his side. Adam kept singing, low and sweet. Ron was accompanying him more confidently now. Years in the church choir had enabled him to pick up the words and the tune of almost anything and his tenor was pleasanter than his original effort had promised.

"Now what?" Jack's frustration was palpable. Jean took a deep breath and reached out to touch the nearest stem. It shivered.

For a moment they thought the jungle was claiming another hostage, but the vine simply laid itself on Jean's shoulder and continued to shiver. He was absolutely still, his eyes closed. The singing and the stillness were eerie but calm. Then the vine withdrew. So did the thorn touching Vlad, but it hovered.

"I read its mind." Jean sounded awed. "Or it planted images in mine." He grimaced at his unintended pun. "It's lonely. Lonely for love. Its mate died, shrivelled in a drought, I think. So did its children. It wanted children. We were small, feeble. It thought we might do." He stared round. "It was going to take all of us. This was just the beginning."

"It wasn't very good at childcare." Sam sounded subdued but at least she could talk.

"It was washing you. Anointing you with lotions. Special lotions to keep you supple and, well, and green." Everyone stared at Sam now, and she raised her arm through the leaf mould. Indubitably green. Not just a reflection. A stain.

"So what is my binding?" Vlad half sat, wary of the thorn, which didn't move.

"It wanted you to sleep. It was soothing you. Caressing you. Like we might stroke a baby." The look on Vlad's face almost stopped Adam's song. Almost. The danger wasn't over yet.

"It realised we were using lullabies. It hummed similar melodies when its children were small. It thought we were helping to get the 'children' to sleep. Then it realised they couldn't be children after all."

"And now?" Sam was the competent major again, still prone, still green, but thinking of the next step.

"It's sad. So sad. But I don't think it will try any more baby snatching!" Jean grinned at Vlad as he spoke and the Russian got to his feet in a mock attack. The thorn moved obligingly. Then everyone burst into relieved laughter at Vlad's nakedness and the reality of the escape. Adam joined in, and the songs stopped.

Vlad dressed quickly. His clothes were ripped and stained, but wearable, if you weren't too bothered about decency. They would do. Sam dressed too, rubbing at her stained skin, more embarrassed by her colour than her nudity. Her clothes were less torn but were damp and uncomfortable.

It was Ron who asked the awkward question.

"What are we going to do for it?"

"Why should we do anything?" Jack seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Jean-Pierre said it was sad. And we gave it some hope, and then took it away again. And it liked our music."

Jack walked over to the closest branch and put his arm around it. He looked up into the green for a moment then nodded and moved back to the group, smiling.

"I 'told' it we'll be back, with baby plants and technology to counter drought," he said. "I think it understood. I think we're free to go."

Sam shook her head.

"I never thought I'd see you hugging trees, Colonel," she said.

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The vines parted in a straight path back to the camp. The others were pleased, anxious, relieved, amazed. They packed up in almost indecent haste. Sam said she couldn't wait to get something that would remove the stain. Various suggestions, including pumice and bleach, were met with a withering stare and the certainty that Janet would know what to do.

Teal'c and Sharon only just refrained from hugging. Jack approved of their restraint. He noticed the way Adam and Vlad looked at each other and considered them in a new light. Thought about Adam's singing. What if it had been Daniel, or Paul? Could he have given a concert to the plants? He was glad they were all right. Hoped his major would soon be a more normal colour. Told Teal'c to bring up the rear, and led his expedition back to the gate.

Maybe they could relieve the loneliness of one being in the universe. Maybe in return they'd find medical miracles. The scientists were laden with samples and the plants didn't seem to mind. Maybe he could even get to like trees.

Adam had hardly spoken to Vlad. What could he say, with others listening? They headed through the gate and went to change. For a few minutes, they were effectively alone. Everyone was chatting, showering, dressing.

"I am thanking you, my Adam." Vlad spoke softly.

"I had to keep going - for you. For Sam, as well, of course, but for you."

"And I was trying not to be groaning, for you."

"Did it hurt a lot?"

"Enough."

"But you're OK now."

"Yes, now OK. And later you are kissing better."

"Aww, baby!" Adam's eyes shone with mischief.

"Is OK. You can calling me baby. Not anyone else. Anything else, I am meaning."

And they finished changing, and joined the team in the debriefing room.