

## **Part 9. In which the future is contemplated**

### **SGX 26 Bird-brained**

Everyone noticed that both Vlad and Adam seemed more carefree than usual. Both men were laughing and joking, first in the commissary with all their friends, then as they suited up for their postponed off world mission.

The planet was another forested one but there were clearings of some considerable size, and they already knew that there were a myriad of flying things in the air, on the ground and in the trees. Birds, bats and butterflies, or at least their equivalents, were waiting for them by the thousand, or more likely the million. Opinion was undecided about intelligent life. There were some structures in one of the clearings that could be nests or something else, and of course there was the Stargate.

They were to take samples to enable the scientists to decide whether a full scientific survey was warranted, and were to investigate the nests.

Bob Somerfield hoped his team would have a peaceful time. He wasn't ready for another planet of cannibals or sentient greenery, and he doubted whether the others were. Simple work, like that on the spider planet would suit him best. Not that he'd mind a fight against the Goa'uld or their assistants. He was military, after all. But he preferred an obvious enemy and a clean death as the worst outcome.

Ron, he thought, was making good progress. He was pleased at how well Airman Potts had grown into his role, and glad his initial doubts had been overturned. Sharon seemed subdued, and he'd heard rumours of a rift between her and Teal'c. Hardly surprising, he thought, considering his sassy sergeant and the reserved alien. Vlad and Adam were so obviously a couple that he felt worried for them. But their care for each other enhanced their teamwork so he couldn't criticise or grumble and they never brought their love life to work. He mused about the church elders who thought homosexuals to be abominations and tried fitting the description to his men; failed and decided that the elders had too little experience of reality. He himself was getting tired of this life. He was beginning to be tired of lying to his wife, or at least, of not sharing the whole truth of his work. Maybe he'd put in for early retirement, or ask to be switched to a desk job. Or maybe this was just winter blues, after a couple of distressing missions. He'd wait and see.

Meanwhile, there was a planet to visit, and he led his team through the Stargate with a forced spring in his step and his head held high.

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They were everywhere. One moment they were in the clearing where the Stargate stood, deciding where to go first, and the next they were surrounded by birds.

There were huge shaggy birds the size of ostriches, with feet that looked as if they were capable of kicking a man to kingdom come, sleek black raven types, ghostly white birds that resembled albatrosses, colourful parakeets and tiny wrens. Dozens, no, scores of each. They were just standing around the team. And yet, not just standing. Every bird was rustling its feathers, cocking its head, staring unwinking with obsidian eyes. None of them made any kind of bird call, but the sound of their moving plumage was deafening.

There was no reason to be afraid. Yet. None of them sensed any hostility. But there was an implacable purpose to the gathering. And the circle was complete. The birds wanted something.

‘Well, folks, I don’t suppose a turkey shoot would be the best way out of here.’ Colonel Somerfield’s soft drawl snagged their attention back to himself. ‘So we’d better wait and see if they’re going to tell us what they’d like us to do.’ They could all see that a shooting match would easily end with victory for the birds. There were too many of them and probably more in reserve.

Adam gulped. As a child he had been scared by the Daphne Du Maurier story that was turned into a powerful film. He didn’t dislike birds as such, but this horde ... He glanced at the others. Stiff upper lips all round seemed to be the order of the day. At least till they knew what was in store.

Nothing. The birds watched them. They watched the birds. Still nothing. Then with a susurrant of feathers the entire flock, including the huge ostriches, took flight and disappeared.

The relief was palpable though nobody said much. They set up a base in the clearing and unpacked the sampling equipment. This time, it was just a few starling look-alikes, swooping over their gear then landing on it and pecking. They didn’t damage it, despite exploring it thoroughly, and once they’d realised it wasn’t edible, if that was what they had wanted to know, they flew off. One remained behind, still dabbing his beak onto Adam’s backpack. Vlad waved his arms at him in a time honoured shooing motion and he rose to about the height of their heads and hovered. Then he turned and left. The clearing was quiet and empty, except for the team.

‘Birds with the curiosity of cats! Better put it in the report.’ Somerfield was grinning now. Vlad wasn’t.

‘You are seeing their feet?’ The others, it seemed, hadn’t been looking at details. They were the explorers, not the biologists.

‘Not feet. Hands. Am meaning hands.’ Vlad was frowning.

‘No, feet is right, Vlad.’ Sharon smiled encouragingly. She found Vlad’s difficulties with English endearing. But Vlad looked offended.

‘Am not talking about feet. Hands. At ends of wings.’ He flapped his arms to emphasise his point and the starling chose that moment to return. It landed on Vlad’s pack this time and deftly undid a strap with its hands – leathery hands with opposable thumbs. Then it

flew off with his water flask. In retrospect the black eyes had shone with an intelligence that had been there all along.

Consensus of opinion said they were probably this planet's more highly evolved inhabitants. Approximating to the great apes on earth. Not human in their intelligence; they had showed no signs of wanting to communicate. The team would split into two groups, take samples, and return to earth. There would be no problem over Vlad's flask; they all had ample supplies. But they should keep a lookout for further theft.

Adam and Vlad found themselves with Sharon, collecting leaves and berries, and, after some discussion, a few worms and slow moving beetles. These they were careful to place in comfortable jars, with whatever plant material they were found on. They would be observed, not dissected, and returned to their homes.

Adam felt as if they were being watched and Sharon agreed. And so they were, There were birds peering from behind branches and round trunks as they moved further into the woods. Just watching, with no sign of hostility or even of any real interest.

Then the sound started. Birdsong. Twittering, piping, tweeting and some glorious warbling trills. Always behind their backs or beyond the next group of trees. The birds they could see were silent.

Adam thought they had enough samples. He wasn't sure the MALP couldn't have collected this lot, anyway. He felt betrayed, by SGC, into a situation where he felt uncomfortable and powerless. They couldn't very well attack the general wildlife without making themselves look stupid when it came to explaining their weapon use. And there was really no reason to attack, other than extreme discomfort. Sharon seemed to share his feelings and even Vlad was showing signs of nerves.

'Going back to base,' he decided and led the way. Sharon and Adam followed with alacrity. So did a small flock of wrens.

The Colonel and Potts were already back at the clearing, looking anxious. A number of undistinguished small brown birds, hedge sparrows, perhaps, had joined them. And the noise was greater here, call answering call, filling the woods, always from new and unexpected directions and never from the birds that were visible.

Somerfield was glad to see them. Radio contact, he told them, was dead. They should head for the gate and dial out. It took only moments to gather their belongings but in those moments the birds closed in. They were surrounded. Then a path opened, wide enough for them to walk in single file, in the exact opposite direction to the one they wanted to take.

Bob was reluctant to take his team into danger. The last time he'd followed alien beings they had almost ended up as dinner. But there didn't seem to be much choice short of fighting, and they still hadn't been attacked. A glance at Vlad told the major to bring up

the rear and Bob set off, hoping the others would follow him and that he wasn't leading them to disaster.

The crowd closed in behind them. Vlad felt uncomfortably close to the feathered barrier. They didn't push them or hurry them, but progress was inexorable. Adam was immediately in front of him and he watched the familiar blond hair, wondering if he'd ever again have the chance to run his fingers through it.

The walk lasted for some time. They could see nothing of the countryside through the dense wall of birds but they knew from what they could see above them that they passed through forested areas as well as clearings. As they moved under trees, more smaller birds flew down to join the march. Some of their captors flew. They would fly into the distance then turn and come back to join the throng. Others walked on feet that gripped the soil, in a solemn, slow procession. The songs were quieter and more spasmodic but the movement of the birds rustled the air. Single file marching didn't lend itself to conversation so the team walked in silence, all of them aware of the growing crowd around them.

After about an hour they came to a larger than usual clearing, where every tree and shrub around the perimeter was festooned in berries. The crowd stopped and many of the birds began to eat. Some pecked at the berries and others grubbed for worms. Adam saw a number of the kinds of beetles he'd collected vanish with relish down feathered throats.

Evidently a meal break. And so they got out their packs and ate some of their rations, the things that didn't need heating or any other preparation. Adam and Ron looked longingly at some of the fruits but they knew perfectly well that even on earth, birds could eat berries that would be toxic to humans. Here, the risk would be madness. They had water in their flasks, and were allowed to eat and drink without interference. Except that what looked like a baby finch flew down to share Ron's meal. The young airman looked nonplussed, but made no attempt to dislodge his uninvited guest. A larger version, possibly a parent, came squawking and fussing, driving the youngster off. The telling off, for such it obviously was, was reserved for the little one. Nothing was directed at Ron. That boded well. They talked quietly as they ate. There wasn't enough evidence to form solid opinions about what was going on. But so far they'd been offered no harm

The flock, which had never left any gaps even while eating, formed into a tight phalanx again and the captives, for they were beginning to see themselves as captives, were forced to tidy up and move. There was still no radio signal so they couldn't report to Hammond. He would wait and then send someone after them, of course, but it was hard to see what anyone could do. Ask a group of birds to give up their prisoners? Risk slaughter for no good reason? It would be some time before they knew what was intended. Also, any would-be rescuers would have to find them first.

It was hard not to name the birds after their earth look-alikes, even now. Most of the walkers were ostriches or large birds that they couldn't help thinking of as storks or

ravens. The flyers were mostly wrens, starlings and sparrows, but there were a few brightly plumaged parrots with razor sharp beaks that could break a man's finger.

They left the trees and came out onto a plain, covered in a thick, lush, dark green grass that made soft walking but slowed their progress. The birds slowed too, and their flying escort circled above. Gradually the plain was broken by clumps of trees. The terrain could not be called a forest but it was no longer rolling grassland.

The sky was darkening as they stopped again. This time the birds backed away until the team were in the centre of a large circle. Hanging near them, on thin tall trees, were the nest-type structures they had seen in the reports. Well, at least, Adam thought, they were going to inspect as ordered. Each structure had an oval opening about half way up and as they watched, a beaked head appeared in each opening. The structures, then, were confirmed as nests.

Then, as they watched, a ladder of vines snaked from one of the openings, and an ungainly figure used it to descend to the ground. All bird calls were hushed and the walking escort, with one accord, bowed their heads

The leader, for so they thought this bird must be, dipped its head slightly towards them, and waited. And that must be a first, thought Adam, as the team, as one, bowed their own heads to what to all outward appearances was a plump turkey.