

## **Part 4. In which we learn that some memories should be preserved.**

### **9. Team Bonding - part 1**

Senior Airman Potts changed into his travel uniform and checked his kit. Everything was in order. He liked everything to be in order and was faintly uncomfortable when anything got used, untidied or even borrowed in the course of a mission. His mother, back in the fishing port where he grew up, had always said that tidiness was next to cleanliness and that, of course was next to godliness. He was a great deal less sure about the last since his experiences with the Goa'uld but the first two were imprinted on his very soul. One of his earliest memories was helping his father to disentangle fishing nets, and the satisfaction when the task was done.

So far, his conscientiousness and sense of order hadn't brought much in the way of promotion but they had got him assigned to SGX. He loved it. He loved the swirling iris. He loved the codes and the chevrons. He loved the idea of bringing order and tidiness to the universe, clearing up the mess the Goa'uld or the replicators had made. When Colonel Somerfield had asked him if he was really happy in his work, he knew his eyes had filled with tears. How could anyone doubt it? Apparently they did. However, Somerfield now accepted his enthusiasm and here they were, bound for the stargate yet again.

Always the first ready, he watched the others arrive and prepare. Sergeant Vaughan was positively glowing. Her downtime must have been good. Major Tolstoy was less than totally neat, as usual, which quietly offended Potts, but didn't seem to worry Colonel Somerfield, who was looking relaxed and happy. The Russian Major made Potts' life difficult. As well as his general attitude to regulations, which resulted in hair and uniform that only just passed muster, he was prone to make incomprehensible jokes, sometimes at Ron's expense. The colonel, however, was worthy of respect.

The door opened and Adam Fenwick came in. Somerfield seemed to have been expecting him but the others were surprised.

"Hey, Adam. Joining us again?" Sharon sounded pleased.

"Adam, welcome!" There was no mistaking Vlad's pleasure at the computer expert's presence.

Somerfield made the formal announcement.

"I've spoken to General Hammond and I'm delighted to tell you Adam has agreed to join us on a semi-permanent basis as a civilian observer on behalf of his government. Which means he's now a member of SGX."

Sharon and Vlad cheered and Adam blushed. Potts was still trying to work out what Adam's role really was and how he should address him. 'Mr. Fenwick' didn't sound right and 'Adam' was probably too familiar. On the previous mission he'd tried to avoid speaking directly to Adam at all. He settled on 'sir' as most appropriate, then shyly added his welcome to the others'.

They were going to explore P3X-246. It was known to be a habitable planet. Radio interference during the initial mission suggested inhabitants, so it had been recommended for a follow up mission. So far, others had taken precedence, but now the file had reached the top of the heap on Hammond's desk. Their UAV would reconnoitre and lead them towards the nearest likely site. They would need a few days to investigate and would make contact via MALP every three days unless an emergency dictated otherwise.

The team headed for the ramp, passing Siler on their way.

"Stealing my man, are you?" he said, but he grinned and slapped Adam on the back.

Teal'c was watching from the gateroom, too and raised his hand in a wave to Sharon, whose mahogany cheeks took on the hue of ripe cherries. She waved back and then tossed her head, a small smile on her face. Vlad frowned. Perhaps he should warn Niki of a possible rival.

The second venture through the iris was, Adam decided, even more disorientating than the first. He came through into a hilly, wooded area, shaking his head and glad there were no hostile natives to greet them. The others seemed unconcerned, so perhaps the feelings grew less with time.

"Are you all right, sir?" Potts had noticed his discomfort.

"Yes," he said, but he shook the rest of himself, as well, just to make sure he was all there.

The first two days out from the stargate were essentially boring. They walked by day under a dim but adequate sun and camped in pleasant countryside by the light of an almost silver moon. Small rodents scurried out of their path, and a few birds sang in the trees. It was tiring, staying alert for evidence of intelligent life, when the evidence never materialised.

Nobody said much. When they chatted, they did so in low voices, looking around the whole time and pausing to listen. Their radios were switched on but unused. Somerfield set a watch at night and they each spent a couple of hours observing the others asleep. The UAV had produced no actual results as yet, just a direction to follow.

Vlad teased Sharon about Teal'c, but all she would say was that they'd had dinner.

"And the next day he sent me flowers." She sighed happily. Vlad made a mental note to tell Niki that flowers were one way to Sharon's heart, then dropped the subject. He was careful in his conversations with Adam. They were never alone and he had taken risks the last time. Not that there were any risks to the civilian, but the Russian military would probably take a dim view of the sort of fraternisation he had in mind.

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On the third day, just after Bob had reported to Hammond, a huge flying machine, like a helicopter, with curved blades and an all-over design a tagger would have envied, landed about a hundred yards from their path. When its engines cut out the silence was deafening. They all drew their weapons. Adam had a staff weapon based on Teal'c's, but he had a strong suspicion it would be less than useful against whoever designed and flew this thing.

The creature that stepped out had curls. Masses of them, a rich shade of auburn. They couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman but it was definitely human and was smiling.

"Pleeease," it said. The voice was androgynous too.

"Put down your weapons. We have nooo intention of hurting you. You are welcome."

Colonel Somerfield stepped forward and introduced himself and his team. One hand was telling them to remain alert, but he sounded confident and friendly.

"Yeess, we know. We've been monitoring your conversations since you arrived. That's how we've got our translators set to your language." This was said with a slight gesture towards a small shoulder bag. "We monitored the laast team from your language zone, too. Are they coming back?"

Somerfield had no desire to explain Stargate Command Policy to an alien interrogator and contented himself with a blunt, "No."

"Weeell," said Curlylocks, "Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I'm Xeri. Vereth is our pilot, and Xabba is my assistant." Two people joined Xeri from the helicopter. They could have been Xeri's twins except that one was blond and the other had black hair. Both wore shoulder bags like Xeri's and as yet there was no sign of a weapon. They all wore skintight suits, in psychedelic colours but hiding nothing except their gender. Each wore an exaggerated codpiece, metallic and engraved. These might cover anything or nothing. They spoke together in low voices - the words that carried were not in English - then Xeri faced the team again.

"Pleeease join uss," s/he said, then frowned and twiddled a catch on the bag.

"Please join us, I meant to say. That's better!" The smile seemed genuinely welcoming. "We've been sent to invite you to meet some of our people. We can easily fit you all in the helicopter, and it will be much faster than walking!"

Somerfield considered. This was, after all, what they had come to check out, but to put his whole team in one machine seemed foolhardy. After a quick conference with Vlad, he turned back to Xeri.

"Can we reach the place you're taking us on foot?" he asked.

"Certainly. But it will take some time."

"Then Major Tolstoy and Airman Potts will follow us at walking pace," he told the alien. "We want to take back first hand reports on your world. They can bring the MALP. Three of us would be honoured to come with you now."

Adam found it hard to step into the helicopter. He half trusted the pleasant aliens but he cast a wistful glance at Vlad and Ron. He found a seat beside Sharon and tried not to shudder as the huge 'bird' rose into the air. Vlad looked tiny on the ground and then he vanished as they flew above the trees and over the next hill.

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Ron Potts sighed inwardly. He had no desire to spend time with the major, but no real grounds for complaint. They holstered their weapons, shouldered their packs and walked on.