

## **The Island of the Cormorants**

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

In thick late May fog, ornithologist Stuart Peabody and his field assistant Carson Critchley, set off in their small outboard from the small dock at Jack's Point Conservation Reserve en route to a small island about half a mile off the shore in Ruddy Duck Bay. Unable to see the island clearly amid the mist, Dr. Peabody checks his notes to find his bearings, then orients the outboard at a particular angle to the dock.

"‘The Rock’ is about 11 o'clock from the tip of the dock according to my notes Cee-Cee." The sixty-year-old expert on water birds says to his young partner in the bow.

"I'll keep watch as we make our approach, Doc."

"Once we get to ‘The Rock’, I want you to help me count the nests. We'll then be able to estimate the amount of mating pairs and future fledglings."

"Good call Doc! I would start to slow down just a tad. I don't see ‘The Rock’ just yet, but last time we were here we approached a bit too fast."

After a few minutes at a snail pace, the jagged profile of the small island appears faintly in the mist.

"Let's head left and keep the center of the island on the port side, Cee-Cee! There's a small beach there where we can pull up."

"Roger that Professor!"

Soon, the guttural barking sounds and deep chattering of the large colony of Double-crested Cormorants grows louder and louder as the outboard sets its course to the northern side of the island. With the mist subsiding slightly, the duo of ornithologists begin to see the profile of the stand of dead Poplars peppered with the dark spots of the nesting Cormorants.

"Cee-Cee, just one more thing... We're going to see if we can find out whether any of the birds we marked last season returned to the same nests."

After landing on the small beach of the Northern tip of the island, Carson Critchley steps out of the outboard with his knee high rubber boots and pulls the bow of the boat up onto the dark sands of the minuscule island. Dr. Peabody then exits the boat by stepping out of the bow with his equipment pack, map of the different nests and his field notes.

Later on in the evening of the same day, two security guards do their rounds in the Biodiversity Wing of the Pendleton Museum of Natural History. Walking into the wing via the second level Rotunda Entrance, the two check each part of the collection by shining a large LED flashlight into the darkened display cases. Suddenly, as one

guard approaches the section for extinct fauna, she notices that the exhibit showcasing the now extinct Passenger Pigeon has vanished.

“Robbie! The two Passenger Pigeons have been removed!”

“I’ll call central command... Tell them there’s been a breach on Level 2!”

“Looks like they left the Dodo here and even the Tasmanian Tiger, but they were determined to take the pair of pigeons for some reason.”

“Let’s check if they want to authorize a lock-down...”

A few minutes later, after informing the main security desk about the missing animal artifacts, all four levels of the Pendleton Museum are sealed off with limited access only for the specialized forensic team. After leaving the Biodiversity Wing, the two security guards stumble across a mysterious business card left on the upper part of the Rotunda staircase.

“Check this out Will! There was a discarded business card left just outside the Biodiversity Wing... It has the words ‘Artifact Asset Reclamation Team’ printed on it...”

“Could be irrelevant, but we should hand it over to the forensic investigators just in case.”

The next day, in the nation’s capital, newly-elected President Julius meets with his Secretary of Defense in the Hexagon Office. Seated in a chair on the left side of the Presidential desk, Secretary Hogseth lays out some of his battle plans against the rebels of the \_\_\_\_ Panhandle.

“Mr. President, following Executive Order 13453, the plan is to deploy three Air Defense Tiger Fighter Jets at 0100, to carry out precise strikes against the Toufiki Rebels hiding in the mountains of Carpathinga.”

“What’s the weather like early tomorrow morning, Bobby?”

“Should be clear and topaz skies in the region, Mr. President!”

“Good, good. On to other business... I got your memo to the Minister of Fisheries. You’re planning a cull I understand it?”

“Well, it hasn’t been made official yet, but I needed your permission to proceed through natural resources...”

“From what I recall reading in the memo, your plan is to take on a feathered pest called the Double-Crested Cormorant.”

“Yes, Mr. President! You see Sir, I grew up as a fisherman and one thing my father always hated seeing in our little fishing bay was that D@\$! black menace! He used to tell me it’s taking all the fish away!”

“What does this have to do with security, Bobby?”

“Well you see Sir... When I see them Toufikis... I see that same curse of a bird... We should eradicate both from this blue planet of ours!”

“Careful Bobby! This thing you just said is between us.”

“By the way, Mr. President... We were able to recover an expensive relic from the Pendleton Museum. Mission Flight Feather with the AART was a success!”

“I don’t get your fascination with a dumb Pigeon, Bobby. Why not steal something more valuable like a dinosaur bone or a rare fossil?”

“Mr. President... If I may Sir... The Passenger Pigeon story is not just some dumb bird vanishing... It’s a model cull we need to replicate for other avian pests... This will wipe out the cursed avian flu that’s killing so many of our cows and livestock throughout the year...”

Two weeks later, with the peak season for cormorant nesting upon them, Dr. Peabody and his young assistant go back to Ruddy Duck Bay to check out the same island. After getting to their outboard docked on the opposite side of the bay from their last visit, Dr. Peabody fetches his trusty binoculars and adjusts their focus to get a clearer view of the island’s whereabouts. Suddenly, using the fine focus nob, he sees some plumes of smoke rising above the same dead poplar trees.

“Cee-Cee! Something has gone wrong... Check your binocs at 1 o’clock!”

Scrambling to get the binoculars out of the carry case, Carson Critchley points them toward the island and quickly adjusts their focus.

“There appears to be a fire on ‘The Rock’ professor! I can see a bit of a flame on the northern edge, close to where we pulled up our outboard the last time.”

“Oh geez Cee-Cee! I can also smell burning wood and a bit of musk coming from that direction. How can our island have caught fire?”

“Looks like foul play to me, professor! Let’s get closer! I have an old bucket tucked into the stern compartment by the outboard engine. We might be able to save a nest or two from the flames.”

“Good call Cee-Cee! Let’s head over!”

Soon the two ornithologists head east toward ‘The Rock’, with the thick smell of light grey smoke pervading their nostrils. Opting to pull up the outboard on the opposite side of the island where the fires are less intense, the field assistant hops out with the small bucket, quickly fills it up and douses a small group of colony nests where thin trails of smoke and light orange embers appear slightly in the June sun.

“This fire may wipe out a whole generation, Cee-Cee... All that work of tagging and marking the nests this season is for naught...”

“Check this out, professor! It appears someone was here earlier this week or so and left an odd flag right here in the sand!”

Pulling out the flag, fixed to a short twig, Carson Critchley notices the lettering ‘WF’ in light letters on a black background.

“I think that’s the insignia for the ‘Wildlife Front’, Cee-Cee. They’re a radical group with ties to the current administration that believes in a ‘pest-free Eden’. We lost to them today, Cee-Cee...”

After filling and emptying the small bucket dozens of times, the pair of ornithologists leave ‘The Rock’, having lost the bulk of their conservation data to the mysterious fire. They would soon make a return to the island after the next torrential downpour to monitor the ill-fated colony’s plight.

[The End]