

## **SGX. Part 1. In which our hero penetrates a new continent.**

### **1. New kid on the block.**

When Adam reached the gatehouse, the men on guard might have been forgiven for voting the newcomer least likely to: win friends, influence people, fit in, become part of that close knit society.

The young man slouching towards them with the white-blond hair and the ash-pale skin would have agreed with them wholeheartedly. Only his green eyes could have told the observers he wasn't an albino, and they were hidden behind a pair of reactolite lenses that seemed in their blackness to close out the world. He was lugging a backpack and a guitar, both of which he dumped wordlessly at their feet. His clothes marked him as a civilian and a foreigner to boot - nothing obvious, just a slight difference in tone, in style.

"Fenwick." The clipped accent said British and a quick glance at the day's instructions showed that one Adam Fenwick was indeed an imminent arrival and that this probably was Adam Fenwick, given that a military escort had brought him from the airport. They still went through all the procedures laid down to protect the base. Passport, visa, the glasses removed (and replaced), work permit reviewed, eye and finger prints scanned, a few questions and they were through. He was silent throughout.

"We need to keep your gear here for now, sir," the duty sergeant explained, heaving the pack and the instrument behind him. "Just go on down till you come to the elevators and someone will meet you. You're expected," he finished unnecessarily. Adam grinned and headed for the tunnel. The grin might have softened his face, making him look almost boyish, but the eyes remained hidden so the effect was lessened. The guards made faces at each other as he left them.

"Not the usual intake," muttered Junior Airman Robson.

"Typical cold Brit," responded his superior, then turned to face the next truckload, men returning from leave. His comment was only true in terms of Adam's nationality, but at that point, even Adam would not have contradicted him.

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As his glasses sensed the gloom and lightened, Adam looked around with interest. If this was to be his new home, he wanted to know as much as possible about it. He waited by the lifts, contemplating his descent into the bowels of America. This seemed to be the story of his life and yet he'd never intended to be a cave dweller. In fact, his happiest hours had been spent up on the Roman wall, the north wind in the grass and his hair, and the curlews screaming overhead. If pressed, he'd have described himself as an outdoor type - not sporting, he wasn't particularly social or competitive - but definitely *outdoor*, with walking listed as one of his hobbies and bird watching as another.

His career had played tricks on him. After university, he'd used his computer science degree in the service of the dull but worthy Department of Pensions in Newcastle, living at home in

Kenton, to his mother's delight, and spending his leisure hours in the wilder parts of Northumberland. He was too good at his job. Fast-tracked by the ever observant mandarins, he was whisked first to Whitehall and later to GCHQ in Cheltenham, where he spent his working hours a long way from the sun or the rain. His pay didn't allow him to visit home often, but he'd had the Malvern Hills for compensation, with Elgar at full blast on his Walkman, a counterpoint to the loneliness and the silence.

Gradually, more and more overtime was demanded from the man who could fix any bug, cure any virus, and his weekends were whittled away until he felt like a mole, a creature of the underground. His naturally pale skin turned alabaster in the muted lighting of the complex. Immersed in work, he forgot how to socialise, altogether.

When they asked him if he was willing to take a secondment to the USA, to work alongside their military in a project of international importance, he was inclined to refuse. He hated the Americans, with their brash politicians and their gung-ho politics, and he didn't want to work abroad. But his section head argued and pleaded and encouraged until he agreed, partly to turn off her pestering. So here he was, two lots of official secrets acts signed, work permit in his passport (which still hadn't impressed immigration - it had taken hours to get through) most of his worldly goods in the guardhouse, heading for the underground again.

He was whisked straight through to General Hammond, greeted genially, given a whistle stop tour of the facility and shown his office. He registered a blurred impression of lifts and corridors and rooms full of technology, and a vast cavern with what looked like the entrance to another tunnel - a circular door, with odd decorations around it, which jarred in the plainness of the rest of the surroundings. He shook a few hands and heard a few names; none of them stayed with him. He was still reeling from the flights and the time difference and the recurrent grilling. Hammond took pity on him, sensing that not much of the welcome was sinking in. This young man was exhausted.

"Go home! There's an apartment in your name just up the road from here. There should be essentials - coffee, milk, bread. Get some sleep and we'll go through your formal briefing tomorrow. Glad to have you on board."

A rather dazed Adam found himself shepherded, by a young airman, back to the sunshine and a flat that indeed had essentials in the fridge, but more important had a bed. Slung his gear into a corner, he didn't even bother to wash. He crashed into oblivion and slept for ten hours.

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The phone woke him. He couldn't think where he was or what was shrilling at him. When he realised and grabbed it, he croaked, "Fenwick ," and was treated to a half shocked, half amused female voice asking him if he knew what time it was. Apparently he was late for the briefing.

As he showered, he wondered whether to apologise and decided against it. They'd dragged him half way round the world for their own purposes, dumped him in a soulless flat in a soulless block in a godforsaken clutter of shops and dwellings that didn't even merit the name town in his book. They had questioned him over and over again about his right to be here, just as though he wouldn't prefer not to be here at all. And now, without giving him a chance to adjust to being in this foreign place, they wanted him underground, at work, and at once. Apologies were not in order.

The gate personnel had changed since yesterday and he had to go through the identification rigmarole all over again. This time he had no luggage to leave, just the same impression of coldness and colourlessness that had prompted yesterday's comments. And this time the walk to the lifts was less interesting and the wait more frustrating. Presumably he'd get some sort of pass? They couldn't intend to send an escort every day, even for a foreign national.

Sure enough, he was ushered into an office near the bottom of the shaft, where he was given a name-badge. It was like a credit card, with an identification chip and a barcode that he was assured would give him access to the entire facility - apparently he was to be privy to all their secrets, whatever they were - and it was designed to fix on a uniform collar. The badge giver eyed his collarless jacket with distaste. Somehow, he managed to fix the thing to his shirt pocket, and was told to join the general in the briefing room.

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Half an hour later, Adam felt as though he hadn't had those ten hours of sleep. His thoughts were whirling. Did his supervisors in England *know* what they'd sent him to? Apparently the Prime Minister and the foreign secretary did. Anyone else? Doubtful - it was a need to know situation and only the heads of a few important governments now knew. And they had been asked to choose, from among their own citizens, people who could contribute to the project whilst giving their own nations a sense of involvement. The pentagon had sent out a list of possible talents to be recruited, and someone's eye had fallen on Adam. And now Adam, after signing yet another set of documents, was learning the truth about the Stargate and the teams and the huge base needed to keep them in action and the part he could play in maintaining the software needed to run the base.

Yes, the US had plenty of computer whiz kids like him - most of them earning a fortune on the west coast - and the military had more, but there was an opening and they needed a Brit and the Brits wanted in, so here he was, and again, welcome aboard.

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Adam looked disbelievingly at his watch. It seemed to be breakfast time in this zone and at least lunchtime at home, and he'd already done a day's work just reading and trying to assimilate the documents he'd been given. Stargates, wormholes, aliens good and bad, he felt drunk with the craziness of it. He also felt alarmingly hungry and thirsty and realised he hadn't eaten since the plane, yesterday, although he remembered glugging copious quantities of water at the flat. He set out for the canteen or whatever they called it, a file under his arm to be read while he ate - his normal practice.

He took at least three wrong turns until someone took pity on him and directed him to a counter that seemed to serve nightmare sized versions of an all day breakfast, and coffee by the gallon. Settled at a Formica topped table with a good view of plastic coated walls and little else, he picked up his fork and opened his file.

"This seat taken?" Aroused from the notes by the deep caramel tones of the speaker, he gestured vaguely that she should sit. And returned to his reading. Caramel voice was having none of it.

"You new around here? Haven't never seen you before."

Adam resisted the impulse to comment on the double negative and considered his reply.

"Yes, I'm new, and I'm trying to speed read my way into a full understanding of this place. Name's Adam, by the way," and he glanced down at his file, trying to underline his need to return to it.

"All work and no play makes Adam a dull boy. Besides, it's not all in the files - there are people down here too. I'm Sergeant Vaughan, Sharon to you, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Adam." She was a stunning black girl, carved out of polished ebony, with an engaging smile, and a uniform that proclaimed her a sergeant. Adam sighed and shook the hand held out across the table. He met her smile with his grin - and suddenly felt that maybe she was right and he ought, in fact, to start getting to know his new colleagues. Well, it wouldn't be too much of a chore if they were all as friendly as this one. Not to mention the added bonus of her looks.

"I'm here to work on the computers," he told her, and nearly added that he was from England, but realised in time that his voice would give his origins away.

"One of our new foreign friends? What do you think of it all?" Her manner invited confidences and he told her how he felt - confused, disorientated, tired and hungry. He was glad he stopped before he added hostile to the list, because she seemed genuinely sympathetic.

"They got you at work on your first day? Man, that's rough. Haven't you seen anything of the countryside yet? Or had a chance to go shopping?" Adam shook his head. Not that he had any desire to go shopping. But Sharon was talking about taking him to a mall, helping him choose stuff to personalise his apartment, spend his first month's pay in advance on things to help him settle in. Then she was asking about his family in England. Did he know London? How long had he worked there? She had a cousin in Croydon - maybe he knew the street where she lived? Did he have a sweetheart?" The questions were endless and mercifully she didn't seem to expect too many answers.

Adam considered. Did he have a "sweetheart"? Did Emma count? They'd been "going out" with each other since his first year at Manchester, both interested in walking and birdwatching, and linked together by their Tyneside origins. Like him, she'd returned to Newcastle to work, but as a junior doctor at the busy RVI she had little time for Adam and he found he preferred it that way.

Emma was his "girlfriend" if he needed to escape anyone's questions about his love life, his companion on occasional trips to the hills or the coast, and since Cheltenham, a kind of penfriend (by email rather than snail mail), one he would miss, like an old comfortable coat. Someone to take to Christmas parties when he went home for the break. Someone to talk about but not to think about too much. As he told Sharon about his girl back in England, it suddenly dawned on him that he'd failed to contact either Emma or his mother. He swore at his idiocy and Sharon was duly told the problem and duly expressed the same shock they'd no doubt be feeling. Women!

Why was it that he could travel to and from work every day without anyone turning a hair, and as soon as he went back to Cheltenham from Newcastle, or crossed the Atlantic, they made him promise to let them know he'd arrived safely. Which he hadn't. Let them know, that is. And now

he couldn't, until he got back to the flat that night. Communications with the outside world were not part of Base Regulations. Inwardly fuming at his own forgetfulness, he turned back to Sharon and asked her what her role in the facility was. He doubted the evidence of his ears when she said she was a member of a Stargate team.

She told him proudly about her struggle to get where she was today from her beginnings in Columbine, that place of high school notoriety. Unemployment had not appealed to young Sharon and she had joined the forces fully aware that she had little choice. But the life suited her, and she soon made sergeant and then got this plum assignment, a reward for hard training, above average weapons skills and a cheerful open-mindedness that had impressed the interviewers. She remembered her own amazement on finding out what she'd volunteered for, and told Adam that by the end of the month he'd be taking little green men in his stride.

"Not that you're likely to see any, stuck here on base with the computers," she assured him, laughing when he looked round the room quickly. "And most of them are neither green or little," she added.

Adam half grinned in return, not sure whether he was being teased as a new boy or not. Then he looked up as a large black man, with a bald head and a tattoo of some sort above his eyes, took a seat at the next table and raised one massive hand to greet Sharon.

"Hey, Teal'c, come and meet Adam," she said, and the man gave a slight bow, looking keenly at Adam, who smiled and said hi.

"You are our new computer expert from Britain, I believe?" asked the man, in a deep cultured voice that definitely didn't come from Columbine.

"Yes, Adam Fenwick," he replied. He took in the uniform and added, "Do I gather you're another member of a Stargate team?" Teal'c inclined his head. "I am indeed," he said. "Welcome to Stargate, Adam Fenwick," and Adam suddenly felt that he was welcome in this strange and disturbing place and that everything would be all right.