

2.Curiouser and curiouiser

Teal'c ate quickly and efficiently, all the time keeping up a light banter with Sharon about missions and wormholes and Goa'uld and Tokra and someone called Daniel who appeared to have attained sainthood. Adam just listened, trying to make sense of it all, but without the confidence to join in or ask questions. He knew all too well from his previous postings how careful the new boy needed to be. He didn't want to be marked out as ignorant or arrogant or desperate or any combination of those. And he wanted to learn. Anything he could glean about this strange new world would help him, not only socially, but also in his work, which at the moment mattered more. Although he was not honestly here by choice, he was determined to give a good account of himself and uphold the honour of his country.

Now they were talking about some little *grey* men with names straight out of Viking myth, and he had a hard time not to choke into his coffee. He hadn't reached the Asgard in his files yet. If they were there. If this wasn't an attempt to tease him. But no one was even smiling and then Teal'c got up to leave.

"Good day to you, Adam Fenwick." A short nod accompanied his crisp goodbye and he strode out of the room.

"*He's one of them*, of course," said Sharon, to Adam's consternation. One of whom? Sharon was black so she could hardly be referring to Teal'c's colour, although her comment echoed so many he'd heard in England. Nor could she mean senior management, another familiar echo, if the uniform had been anything to go by. "Like that one," she added, tilting her head towards a nondescript young man just seating himself in a corner with a glass of milk and a thick book.

"One of *what*, for heavens' sake?" he asked.

"Aliens." Her reply was so casual, so unconcerned, that for a moment he didn't take it in.

"How do you know? I mean..." He stammered to a halt. Now she was laughing.

"Oh, you can't tell by looking at them but we all know their history. Maybe I should have let you carry on reading after all!" And with that she excused herself, with a reminder about a shopping trip in the near future, leaving Adam to collect his scattered wits and his unread notes and return to his office.

By mid afternoon (his body and his brain insisted it was actually long past bedtime) he had assimilated most of the summarised history of the project and was beginning to understand what he'd inadvertently got into. Apparently his government, at a senior level, had been made aware of the Stargate *and* had met Thor of the Asgard, and that was why he was here. There might be more of his compatriots soon - it just so happened that the computer field was the first that had matched a candidate and an opening so neatly.

He was going to have to call it a day. He was really too tired to take any more in. As he tidied his desk, the pager they'd given him sounded. A Sergeant Siler needed his help in the Gateroom.

Again, he got lost on his way and swore. How was he ever going to get used to these corridors? An amused but helpful airman showed him the right direction and whispered a much needed explanation of the light codes governing the labyrinth, and a rueful admission that all newcomers faced the same disorientation, which amused the old-timers greatly. From somewhere his saviour produced a map - much like the ones of the London Underground he was so familiar with, and confided that he was fairly new himself and remembered how it felt.

Grateful and indignant in equal measures, Adam found the Gateroom without much trouble - and sorted the problem on automatic pilot, unaware of the gaping faces of the men who had asked for his help.

"Should be OK now," he said. "Just call me again if there's any trouble. But not today - I'm almost asleep on my feet."

So he called at the canteen for a cup of coffee - it would have to be strong and black to get him home in one piece. There were two men in uniform chatting at a table but they didn't look his way. He didn't mean to eavesdrop but he hadn't brought anything to read and he was the only other person in the room. Then he realised it didn't matter - they weren't speaking English, or anything he recognised, and then it dawned on them - he'd seen those uniforms before, and besides, the files had mentioned other countries' involvement. Russian was not a language he'd ever thought to need, so he could listen in forever and learn nothing. As he left, one of them looked up and smiled, a long, slow, lazy smile that said hey, we know who you are; you're a foreigner, like us. Adam was too tired to respond with anything other than a quick grin, but he hoped he might get to know them, and the other non-Americans, another day.

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The flat was awful. Truly awful. It had about as much character as a cornflake packet. Adam doubted if Sharon's shopping expertise would make any difference. The rooms were square, the windows were square, the building was square, the paint was bland inside and out and the whole thing reeked of what he'd always thought of as America - brashness, newness, and a lack of personality. He probably wasn't being fair - Sharon seemed to have quite a lot of personality for a start - but he was tired and grumpy and a long way from home. Speaking of which... He unpacked and plugged in his laptop and began an email to Emma.

"Dear Emma,
I have arrived safely. I am settling into my flat and my job. I am sorry I didn't contact you earlier but I have been very tired with the time change and so on and have already started work."

(What else could he say? I have met a girl called Sharon. There are aliens eating at the next table. America doesn't appeal to me.)

"I hope you are well. I will try to write next weekend.
Love, Adam."

Hardly worth the time and effort, not to mention genius, people had poured into the Internet. But a lot of communication was probably equally banal, equally uninformative. Anyway, he pressed the send button and turned to his mobile phone. His mother didn't do email.

She was relieved, he thought, to hear he'd arrived and settled in. (Had he, he wondered?) She rambled on about the miracles of phones that let her speak to him across so many miles of ocean and told him he sounded as if he was in the next room. She begged him to phone each week at a prearranged time - which proved difficult, what with her bridge and her pub quiz, her friend Stella, and the time difference.

They settled on late Sunday evenings and he promised to do his best and hoped his voice didn't betray his irritation. Then she pointed out how late it was and how she'd been watching the end of Newsnight, as if he should have had the Radio Times in front of him, and checked. He was seriously glad to ring off.

Two women contacted and dealt with - a weight off his mind, until next time. He stuck bold notes in his diary in case he forgot when next time should be. And switched on CNN, mindlessly absorbing news until he should feel it really wasn't too early to go to bed.

He fell sleep on the couch and dreamed of aliens - blue, grey, green, black, pouring out of a round hole in his wall and shooting at him, then woke groggy and uncomfortable to find the news focussed on a war somewhere. It seemed unreal, as if the aliens in his dream had more relevance to him, and he got ready for bed pondering the change that his first day had wrought in his perceptions of the world. He slept instantly and soundly. This time he didn't dream.

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The alarm actually woke him next morning - possibly because he'd set the mobile to vibrate and it was under his pillow - and he felt almost human. Today might be an almost normal day, like those he was used to in Cheltenham, though he grinned wryly as he imagined aliens in the picture postcard English town. Even human looking ones.

He decided to get breakfast at work - it seemed a cheap enough option, if he'd worked out the currency correctly, and would save him buying stuff in until he'd worked out what he would really need. A big shopping trip loomed - or an intensive session with a new supermarket online. First attempts were always a pain; Adam did not worship at the shopping god's altar. Maybe Sharon would help. He realised he was hanging a lot on her friendly welcome - she probably had more than enough to do without nannying him. For all he knew she had a family and a five bedroomed house to care for.

Sharon was in the canteen when he arrived, and waved him over. She was talking to the Russians he'd seen yesterday, and introduced him quickly.

"Adam, this is Niki, Nikita. He's one of the Russians who've just arrived - like you. Only he's a weapons expert. And this is Major Vladimir Tolstoy, another of them. He's a member of my team."

They shook hands, more formally than the Americans, and the one called Niki, who'd smiled at him yesterday, smiled again.

"I think you are foreigner like us. You are Great Britain, yes?" Adam had a vision of himself shaped like a map and draped with a union jack but replied quite seriously,

"Yes, I'm a British import, and I've only been here since Monday evening so I'm still feeling strange." Both men smiled and the major spoke.

"We non-Americans must stick together, yes? And we make sure you are not strange for long time, Brit. Already you are having three friends." Adam was surprised. He hadn't met any Russians previously and the stereotype was not of laid back amiable colleagues. But he was pleased at being included so easily, and settled down to enjoy his breakfast in company - a truly unusual event.

They chatted about their jobs, and about their lodgings - Niki and Vlad, as Niki referred to him, had an apartment together that sounded similar to Adam's but with two bedrooms and a bigger

freezer. They were equally unimpressed, and when Sharon reminded Adam they had a shopping trip planned for the weekend they clamoured to come too. Maybe she could find them somewhere to buy pictures and cushions and crockery to personalise the spaces they'd been allotted. This was turning into an expedition but Sharon seemed perfectly capable of marshalling her troops and they agreed to meet on Saturday morning outside Adam's apartment block. That decided, they also arranged to meet for lunch and departed for work.

Adam was stunned. After six months in Cheltenham he'd got to know about three colleagues apart from his immediate boss, and then only to say hello to. Here on his third day he was meeting three people for lunch and he hadn't even had to try. He couldn't even put it down to the legendary hospitality of the host country - two of them were Europeans like himself. Maybe this place would be OK after all.

There appeared to be a backlog of work for him to do now that he was considered to be fully briefed and settled in. Siler's admiration for his help the previous evening had been widely disseminated, so various people wanted to seek his advice and get his magic touch on their problems. The morning passed quickly, and to his relief the work was well within his capabilities. He'd dreaded finding himself badly out of step with the job specifications, a pawn in an international game of musical employees. But all was well.

Lunch was a riotous affair, with Vlad and Sharon recounting an incident from a recent mission, when Airman Potts, their most junior team member, had been convinced that a giant turtle type creature was an intelligent alien and spent hours talking to it on a sand bank. When it eventually slipped away into the sea without acknowledging him, Vlad had been nearly doubled over with laughter. As he'd originally encouraged Potts' belief, the younger man had been somewhat put out to hear the laughter and even more put out to find he'd been the butt of some mischievous Russian humour. Vlad laughed again at the memory.

"These Americans! Very serious people, yes Brit?" he said to Adam, who nodded but snatched a quick glance at Sharon.

"Not all of us," she commented. "Not all of us by any means."

Adam tended to be serious, in company, at any rate. He could never remember the punch lines of humorous stories so he never told any. He was not inclined to play jokes on others, although he was amused at the tale, and could have coped with being on the receiving end himself. In his head, a rapid succession of images like the one with the map entertained him, but he rarely shared his thoughts. This easy camaraderie was new - and fun.

There was a suggestion of a drinking session that evening, but he was still tired, and reeling from the newness of it all, so he postponed it till the following night. Sharon called it taking a rain check and said she'd remind him. Then it was back to work.

He picked up a pizza on his way home. There was a pizza parlour opposite the stop where the base minibus dropped him. Amazed at the choice of toppings he ended up with cheese and tomato, to the corresponding amazement of the girl who served him. It tasted good - fresh and crisp, with loads of topping, and he enjoyed it to the last bite.

Then he unpacked his guitar and tuned it carefully. It seemed to have survived the journey remarkably well - but then he supposed professional players travelled all the time with their instruments. He started to play one of his favourites, The Sloop John B, which had been ringing round his head intermittently since he left home, but as he reached the first "I wanna go home"

he realised it no longer fitted his mood and he segued effortlessly into the gypsy dance from Carmen, its wild notes mirroring his mood. Then he calmed himself with a version of Danny Boy, always a favourite since he'd read The Many Coloured Land. He needed to practise - and to keep his instrument in good condition. It had always kept him sane.

He checked his emails - nothing. Not that he'd expected anything but if he hadn't checked and Emma had written there'd be trouble. Although, he thought, with a lightening of mood, very long distance trouble.

Bed beckoned, but first he wanted to check something out. He hadn't had time before he left. Another of his leisure pursuits was participating in re-enactments of Roman military campaigns. A friend had dragged him along to a Civil War battle staged by the Sealed Knot Society, and his interest in and love for Hadrian's Wall had led him to seek out a Roman counterpart. They staged battles and invasions in Roman venues all over England and sometimes in Wales. Scotland and Ireland, of course, had no Roman history and accordingly didn't get the benefit of his group's entertainment. He'd been told there were American groups and he could scarcely credit it. Total fake, of course, but maybe something to get him out in the fresh air.

Sure enough, there was a list of American groups, the most prominent in Nashville, but other possibilities beckoned. He would have to buy a map. The idea of Romans USA amused him but he was intrigued, too and made a note of the sites he wanted to explore. He loved the feeling of connection with the past, the ability to act the Roman soldier, masked by a helmet and a spear, and the almost ballet like choreography of the battles. He was especially pleased to perform on or near the wall, but Nashville would do.

While he was online, he searched for any mention of the Stargate Project, but there wasn't a whisper. The whole thing was under wraps - safer than an Egyptian mummy in layers of secrecy and misdirection.

Adam switched off and headed for bed. Thoughts of tattooed aliens, laughing Russians and Romans with the accents of the Deep South whirled him to sleep. His third day was over.