

SGX 25. Boo at the Zoo.

It was Niki who found out that the zoo laid on a Halloween special even, called Boo at the Zoo. It was, of course, aimed at children, but the foreigners working for Stargate Command had never experienced an American Halloween and were determined to enjoy it to the full. Adam only knew about the American customs from films, and although the 'trick or treat' custom was gradually spreading in Europe, he thought it wasn't, perhaps, quite like the original, which he was anxious to observe.

Niki bought tickets and he, Vlad and Adam were looking forward to the evening. The ticket clerk had been slightly puzzled when he had asked only for adult tickets, but had shrugged at the strange ways of foreigners. Sharon had warned them to lay in a stock of sweets (which she called candies) against early trick or treat callers, and all three had bought silly masks at the local Wal-Mart. Vlad had a witch, complete with pointed hat, wig and long nose, Adam had a skull, and Niki had a pumpkin head with a toothy grin. Jean-Pierre wasn't back yet from his two week holiday, or they'd have tried to persuade him to join them.

They begged Jack to beg Hammond to leave them on earth over the festival. When he realised they really wanted to see Halloween first hand, Jack was all too ready to oblige and Hammond altered the schedules with a wry grin. So they spent the few days prior to the festival on office work. Colonel Somerfield and Ron were bemused but willing to catch up on paperwork.

Sharon and Sam decided to join the trio. They would need American guides, they said seriously, so Niki procured extra tickets and the party was all set.

The evening started with everyone congregating at Adam's flat, or apartment as he was learning to call it. The fact that it was Vlad's, too, wasn't mentioned. A few knee-high visitors, in costumes made from white sheets, black refuse bags and sparkling fabric produced specially for the occasion, tucked in happily to an assortment of 'candies'. Adam explained that the same children in England would only be satisfied with money and in a week's time would be back demanding a 'penny' (or a pound) for the guy' and commented on the comparative innocence and child-like demeanour of the Colorado Springs youngsters. It appeared that Russia had not yet been 'treated' to the custom, but Niki said he suspected the Russian kids would be more like the English ones.

Then they made their way to the zoo, by cab, hoping to drink, either at the zoo or on the way home. Sam had made a fortune teller's costume using a brightly coloured shawl and lots of costume jewellery. Sharon was resplendent in a witch's hat and wig, with her own features made strange with greenish powder, stick-on sores and a wispy beard.

The cab dropped them at the approach to the zoo and Sam fell back with Sharon as they walked the rest of the way.

‘I thought Teal’c would have joined us,’ she said, looking questioningly at the other woman. ‘How are you two getting on?’

Sharon shrugged. ‘We’re still friends,’ she told Sam, ‘But that’s all. I think we both thought our skin gave us far more in common than it really did. But he’s a good friend to have!’ she finished. Sam agreed. She wished the alien warrior could find someone to be more than a friend, but was somehow secretly glad that Sharon wasn’t the one. She liked Sharon but she had never thought the pair made a good couple. Teal’c had been invited to come along tonight but had raised his eyebrows in disbelief. The childish nature of the adventure was so not his scene.

They caught up with the men. Sharon didn’t need to tell Sam about Adam’s relationship with Vlad. Although they weren’t touching, their feelings were clear in everything they said and did. And Sam had seen Adam’s face when he had sung on the green planet.

They agreed that some of their off-world experiences would make Halloween seem tame, and the SGX members described the spider display to Niki and Sam. Niki was the only one who had never been through the Stargate, but he claimed not to want to, in such definite terms that they had to believe him.

The zoo was decorated with lanterns and glittering moons and stars. There were stalls selling almost everything that could be made out of a pumpkin. Everybody enjoyed bowls of pumpkin soup but only the Americans appreciated pumpkin pie. Niki spat his out, to the mixed disgust and amusement of the women, but Adam and Vlad heroically managed to swallow one bite apiece before handing their portions to some passing children who would be more enthusiastic. There were other delicacies. Soft drinks had been coloured black or virulent green; cookies, which the Europeans insisted on calling biscuits, had been decorated with Halloween themes, and there was blood-red candy floss as well as toffee apples and ‘gingerbread men’ in the shape of ‘ghouls’.

There were games such as bobbing for apples, and a ‘ghost parlour’ to visit, but the SG personnel were more interested in the lectures on bats, and spiders, given by experts who had live exhibits as their illustrations. Adam had been to a bat display at the Cotswold Safari Park near Cheltenham, when he was at GCHQ. He had overheard fellow visitors expressing dislike of the little creatures and was glad to be part of a group listening to nothing but good about them. Some of the spiders were tarantulas and the audience were encouraged to touch them, after a caution that some people could have skin allergies. Adam stroked one of them, remembering the hunting spiders from their last mission and wondering what these giants would look like reflected against the sky.

A treasure trail lead past sleepy animals who no doubt wondered what on earth was going on. The giraffe herd was standing quietly in the paddock next to their indoor quarters, their splotches standing dark against the paler areas made almost white by moonlight. From an aviary, an owl hooted and as if in response, a cloud scudded across the face of the moon.

The whole event was surprising and eerie and pleasurable. They were glad they had come.

Vlad had grabbed Adam's hand as soon as he thought the darkness would screen them.

'I protecting from ghosts,' he told him, but Adam laughed and assured him he didn't need protection and indeed would be glad to offer his services to Vlad in that respect. He didn't, however, leave loose of the hand that held his, and they wandered contentedly round the paths and showpieces laid on for their enjoyment. When they rejoined the others they were walking decorously side by side but when they left to find a bar, Vlad made sure he sat next to Adam, and that their knees were touching.

Eventually, via half a dozen bars, they reached home and said goodnight. Sam and Sharon felt virtuous. The Europeans had had a good time and would have a better idea of what American Halloween celebrations entailed. Niki felt virtuous, too. He had organised the outing for everyone. Adam and Vlad felt content, and amorous, as they entered their flat.

Adam switched on the computer and checked his emails. It was almost a reflex action. He got updates from friends at GCHQ as well as letters from Emma, and a cousin kept him informed about his mother's health; he knew she would never tell him anything that might worry him in their weekly phone calls. Not that there was anything to worry about, but he felt happier knowing other relatives were keeping an eye on her and keeping him in the picture.

There was one message in his inbox. From Emma. Vlad leaned over his shoulder, recognising the name.

'You are telling she is not coming back here,' he said. 'Telling me she is not,' he amended. He didn't really think she would, but ...

Adam was laughing, and Vlad couldn't read the English fast enough to get the joke. So Adam read the letter slowly, with his own comments interspersed.

'Dear Adam,

I wasn't completely truthful when I left. My new friend wasn't one of the medics. I've been to Martinique with your colleague Jean-Pierre. Jean, not Jan.

(Well, no wonder I hadn't recognised the name).

I've had an absolutely fantastic time.

(Good – less guilt for me, then).

Jean's parents were really welcoming. His father is a doctor and we have had lots of long conversations about medicine in England and France.

(Gracious – can't she ever forget the job?)

We have been to St. Pierre, the town engulfed by a volcano a hundred years ago. It's like a modern Pompeii. You would find it fascinating.

(Yes, I'm sure I would).

Fort de France, the capital, is a lovely city, very French with wonderful coffee and great markets.

We went to some wonderful botanical gardens and saw loads of exquisite ginger plants, including some that the French call Porcelain Roses. Jean doesn't seem too keen on showing me the jungle but won't say why. After all, he was brought up here. You'd think he would be used to it!

(But he's been to the green planet since then).

We've been swimming at Tartane on a beautiful peninsula, on the Atlantic side of the island and we went on a long hike through the nature reserve at the end. I saw my first mangrove swamps and managed to get lost. I followed a group who were trekking across some sand and Jean was ahead of me on the official trail. He had to get one of the rangers to find me again but everyone was amused rather than cross.

(Even Jean? I bet he remembered our mission all too well).

We swam again, in a beautiful shallow bay at the end of the trail, where the water was really blue and I thought I was in heaven. There were mongooses (or mongeese?) that watched us from the shrubs lining the water's edge, and tiny crabs that lived in the sand uncovered by the tide.

Anyway, I need to get to the serious bit of this letter.

(Serious for her, or for me?)

Adam, I don't know how to tell you this gently so I'll just come straight out with it. I'm not your girlfriend any more.'

At this point Adam and Vlad whooped with joy and did a kind of dance around the computer. Eventually, Adam was able to continue.

'I know you'll be upset,'

(More whoops)

‘But we haven’t really had that fantastic a relationship. I suspect we clung to each other in the absence of anything else.

(She can say that again).

Jean-Pierre has ‘swept me off my feet’ to use an old-fashioned phrase, and has asked me to marry him.

(Wonder if she knows his reputation? Or cares?)

I’ve said yes, and when I go home it will be to wind up my job in Newcastle and apply for a post out here. Jean’s father doesn’t think there’ll be much problem finding something on one of the islands – maybe on Antigua, which is English-speaking and just ‘next door’ so to speak. Obviously Jean will be in Colorado Springs for a while but he’ll be home for holidays. And this time next year we’ll be getting married. I shall send you an invitation to the wedding.’

(Choking noises).

‘Adam, I hope so much that I haven’t hurt you badly. I don’t think I will have done, but just in case, I’m sorry, and some day, I hope you find someone to sweep you off your feet! I know it wasn’t me!

Finally, thank you for my holiday in America.

Emma.’

Adam looked up at Vlad, his eyes streaming with tears of laughter.

‘I’m so hurt,’ he declaimed, with mock sorrow. ‘After all, I thought Jean-Pierre had eyes only for me!’

As he rose from his chair at the computer, Vlad swept him up into his arms, literally off his feet, and deposited him on the bed, where he proceeded to undress him and kiss every inch of his body.

‘Mine, English,’ he said, ‘All mine!’ And as they celebrated, Adam wondered whether a ‘Dear John’ letter had ever been received with such pleasure.