

7When in Rome...

Adam shook himself mentally. Unfortunately, it didn't help. He, Adam Fenwick, was walking under another sun, on another planet. Various words came to mind, among them, cool, incredible, wow, unbelievable, way out and so not true. However, he followed Sharon down what appeared to be a sand dune, complete with marram grass, to a small encampment beside a sluggish brown stream.

The rest of his adopted team was preparing a meal, which consisted of opening self-heating ration packs. Adam had experienced these on camping trips in Northumberland and was prepared to be less than impressed. However, after the ragged welcome cheer that greeted him, Potts handed him a tray of something calling itself "boeuf a la mode" (whose mode was unspecified). It was not at all bad.

Colonel Somerfield gave him a steaming mug of coffee and then commented, "I'm afraid we don't have any tea," with a rather worried look.

"Tea?" Adam was puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you mean because I'm English? Don't worry. Lots of us drink as much coffee as tea nowadays. I'm not actually keen on tea myself."

"Adam, I am thinking you are supporting me," said Vlad. "I am asking for a samovar in the field kitchen. These Americans are not being civilised." But he grinned and Somerfield rolled his eyes in mock exasperation so Adam took no notice, and just enjoyed his coffee.

After they had eaten, Sharon and Vlad took Adam to see the ruins they had found. Adam was startled. It was a huge site, not the sparse odds and ends he'd expected. Most of his occasional holidays had included a Roman element, and he had visited the ruined city of Volubilis, in Morocco. This was so similar it took his breath away. None of the buildings were still standing but low walls delineated the outlines, and the roads were clearly marked. It felt old and abandoned, as though the inhabitants had simply got tired and left. There was none of the sense of tragedy and immediacy that permeated sites like Pompeii, and none of the grandeur of Rome, but this was undeniably Roman. What remained of the architecture testified to that, as did the inscriptions on some of the fallen stones.

They were definitely in Latin. Adam had studied Latin at school. All the top stream of pupils were expected to take it, and he had an A grade at GCSE. That didn't mean he could translate all the words he saw, but he knew enough to recognise them. It turned out Vlad did, too. His father had been a lover of languages, and had introduced Vlad and his brother Gregor to Latin as a fun thing to do, a kind of code breaking exercise to while away long winter nights. He knew little, however, about the Romans. Sharon had some Spanish, as did the other men, and a knowledge of a Romance language had convinced them that Vlad was right to call this Latin.

Adam managed, using his knowledge of the camps along Hadrian's Wall, to identify the baths, the barracks, the grain store, and (less certainly) the governor's house, or at least the home of someone important. Sharon drew a rough map of the site and they labelled the areas Adam recognised. Then Adam and Vlad tried a little translation, but the stones were too fractured and scattered and eroded, and all they came up with were a few names and a possible direction to the hot pool, which led them to some bare sand.

"Nihil perfectus stet," said Vlad, and Adam gulped.

"Ye gods," he rejoined, "Don't expect me to speak it! I have enough trouble with things like 'dexter' and 'sinister' when I'm practising with a pilum."

"I am saying nothing is completely remaindered," explained Vlad, "But maybe my grammar is not being better than my English."

"I think your Latin's probably better than mine," said Adam, "And your English is a great deal better than my Russian!" Vlad laughed.

"Te amo, Adam," he said.

"I'm sure you didn't mean that the way it sounded in Spanish," said Sharon.

"But yes, I am liking Adam," said Vlad. "He is my good friend, no?"

They headed back to the camp, and suddenly realised it contained too many people. Two men were talking, or rather gesturing to Colonel Somerfield, who was looking more and more desperate and confused. He welcomed the others back with relief. Between them, using bad Latin, even worse Spanish and a smattering of Italian Somerfield had once picked up on holiday, they eventually managed to communicate with their visitors. Their language seemed to be a version of Italian and Latin intermingled, and their names were Marcus and Petronius. They were from a city called Castra Nova, some miles to the east, and were archaeologists who had come out to study some of the ruins, hardly expecting to meet stargate travellers when they arrived. The ruins were of a city called Volubilis Minor, to Adam's surprise and amusement. His feelings had led him to part of the truth.

Communications with Hammond led them to accept an invitation to visit Castra Nova, and the little party set off with mixed feelings and some trepidation. Their language skills were barely up to the job, and their combined knowledge of history was little better. They were, however, equipped to take care of themselves, and could negotiate a visit from a more expert group if it seemed appropriate.

A little way upstream they found a barge, pulled by animals that looked for all the world like camels. On board they relaxed on deep pile rugs and drank something that tasted like a kind of alcoholic chocolate. Sharon seemed to enjoy it but the others just sipped politely.

Castra Nova again reminded Adam of Morocco, a cluster of white buildings, blind high walls lining the streets and showing fascinating glimpses of courtyards, through arched gateways, as they drifted past. When they had moored at a large, busy wharf, Marcus went off to tell someone (a governor?) of their arrival, while Petronius fussed with the camel boys and the mooring rope. Everyone they saw was dark, at least dark haired, if not swarthy, and Adam and Vlad were the objects of a great deal of curiosity. Passers by pointed and whispered and it was clear the two Europeans were the cause. Sharon might have stood out on account of her clothing, but was probably seen as a man. Potts and Somerfield, both dark haired, attracted no attention whatsoever.

When Marcus returned, he brought an elderly man in a white toga style garment and a group in bright tabards carrying gleaming spears.

"Toy soldiers," murmured Somerfield, but he signalled his team to be on the alert. The toga wearer introduced himself as Gaius Vitellus and invited them to follow him to the forum. The spearmen formed what appeared to be an honour guard and led them to a large rectangular building in a vast public space. There were columns all round and a series of wide steps led up to an imposing entrance.

"Let's just hope it's not the county jail," said the colonel, squaring his shoulders and leading his troop inside.

It seemed to be a kind of County Hall, rather than a jail. There were offices and meeting areas leading off a large central space with an important looking reception desk in the centre. Here they saw the first sign so far of any modern technology, a cumbersome brass telephone with wires snaking up a pillar and out of sight. Vitellus said something to the man at the desk, who immediately picked up his instrument and spoke into it. Orders crackled out of the earpiece, magnified by a hidden loudspeaker, and the spearmen melted away. Vitellus started towards an office at the far end of the room and beckoned them to follow.

The welcoming committee was pleasant and efficient. Whilst communication was still far from perfect, they were able to hold a sensible conversation which confirmed some of what they'd gathered from the archaeologists on the barge trip.

Castra Nova was the capital of a country called Solitudo Ultima. It was sparsely populated and all the people were descended from a group or tribe who had come from another world, through a round gateway, approximately fifteen hundred years ago. The dates were sketchy as years on this world were not exactly the same length as those of Earth.

Historical records showed there had been frequent travel between the homeworld and this one until a disaster of some sort, possibly an earthquake, had closed the gate at the other side, leaving the tribe stranded. Their leader, an "imperator" with amazing powers of oratory and legendary battle skills, had been injured in a rockslide and had insisted on being sealed in a sarcophagus which he said would heal him. A group of rebels had disliked the leader's style of government and claims to godhood. This was a common claim by imperators in Roma, which had ruled the world they came from, but many were sceptical. Roma had fallen to northern marauders and their own country was lucky to be at the other side of the world's sea. They had followed Caesar Bellator's lead because he promised them riches, not for any religious reason. The rebels had moved the sarcophagus and hidden it. Bellator's troops had unfortunately killed all the rebels in the process of trying to find the hiding place, and had themselves fallen victims to a plague that had swept through the tiny populace.

Since then, the population had grown but was still small. Their language was that of their ancestors, although they knew it must have changed over time. There had been a move from Volubilis Minor after another plague in what Adam worked out as the seventeenth century, and the city had been given back to the desert. So far as they knew, there were no intelligent natives - just lizards, snakes and desert rats. The camels were from Earth. Caesar's sarcophagus was still missing, and was one of the things Marcus and Petronius were looking for. And now here were visitors who quite obviously came from the homeworld, through the gateway.

"So there must have been another stargate in the Atlas Mountains," mused Somerfield. "And we can assume Caesar Bellator was a minor Goa'uld trying to steal a march on the major players, and build up his strength in a relative backwater." Haltingly, they explained what they knew of the Goa'uld to Vitellus and his colleagues. No one seemed particularly surprised, and certainly no one wanted to defend Caesar's divinity.

Soon, they had agreed in principle on a larger, better-equipped team coming to Solitudo Ultima, though as ambassadors rather than explorers. They would negotiate treaties and trade and possibly travel. SGX could return home and if some members of the team felt doubtful about Morocco's reception of its far-flung colony, they kept their opinion to themselves.

They were given a whistle stop tour of the city, and watched some soldiers practising with the very weapons Adam was familiar with. About the time Caesar had been buried, a group had set out across the desert to try their fortune elsewhere. Their descendants were not, Vitellus told them, to be trusted, and they kept the tradition of training a legion, just in case.

They were invited to a banquet to celebrate their arrival and their departure. Sharon was whisked away by some chattering women, summoned by the desk telephone. The banquet would be men only, they were told, and Sharon would be entertained in the women's quarters. Meanwhile, they were offered baths, and borrowed togas, which they accepted whilst keeping their weapons with them.

The banquet was certainly Roman style. They were led to couches in a grand house that apparently belonged to Vitellus. The entire group they had come to think of as the city fathers was present and Marcus and Petronius joined them too. More of the chocolate drink was served and in quantity it was definitely alcoholic. Somerfield stopped drinking quite early, and asked for a glass of water. His puritan background did not make him feel at ease with strong drink, and nor did his position as team leader. This place seemed safe enough, but still... He warned the others to go easy and that was easy. The drink was sickly and not to their taste.

The food was strange - pungent sauces hid morsels of meat, candied fruits and unleavened bread were the accompaniments, and there was a lack of vegetables that to Adam, at least, spoilt the meal. Later, nuts and dried fruits were handed round, and a boy began to play a lute, or something similar, a sad, slow melody that seeped into the conversation and brought it to a halt. Then a troupe of dancers came in and twirled and pirouetted in the semicircle beyond the couches and the low tables. They were all boys, all handsome, and all scantily dressed.

More dishes of meat were handed round. Everyone had eaten all they could and when the Solitudans excused themselves then came back and started eating again, the team realised that they were indeed expected to empty their stomachs of their first course in order to do justice to the second. At the risk of causing an interplanetary incident, Colonel Somerfield managed to explain that this was not their custom, and their hosts, and the servers, laughed and left them alone.

Then huge bronze bowls were carried in, filled with what looked like grapes, but of varied and dazzling colours, and a goblet with a clear, honey scented liquid was placed in front of each guest. Adam sipped his and thought it was very like sherry. He hoped it wasn't as strong.

At this point, the dancing boys came over and sat at the end of the couches. The music found a faster tempo and the boys reached for the grapes and fed them to the guests. They didn't get very far with SGX. Potts spluttered and coughed and then closed his mouth very firmly. Somerfield waved his boy away and Vlad doubled up with laughter. Adam accepted one grape, before, reminded of Vlad in the infirmary, he, too, succumbed to mirth.

It was clear nobody was watching them, and equally clear what they were expected to do with the dancing boys. The shock on the faces of Somerfield and Potts was enough to set Vlad off into another fit of giggles, but Adam, feeling sorry for them, told Vitellus he thought they were all tired, and mimed sleep, to back up his words. A servant was immediately told to lead the team to a small chamber where they could spend the night, and it was all Adam could do to explain that they didn't need the boys as well.

They *were* tired, and Somerfield said he thought they could all sleep, without setting a watch.

"The main risk seems to be to our morals," he said with a rueful grin. Potts' face was brick red and Adam and Vlad found themselves laughing again. The two Americans were soon asleep but Adam was wakeful for a while, and saw Vlad creep out. He tripped over Adam's bed when he returned, an hour or so later.

"Was a good party, Brit," he said, before collapsing on his own bed. And judging by the state of his hair and his toga, Adam decided it must have been.

Somerfield had heard him, too, and raised an eyebrow at breakfast. Vlad laughed. Apparently the dancing had been just that, and he had enjoyed the glimpse of their culture, and their bodies, although he didn't mention the latter. He'd been whirled into the dance and had had a hard time keeping his feet in the intricate patterns. Eventually, the dancers had taken pity on him and sent him to bed. Somerfield frowned at the risk he'd taken but Vlad reminded him of his comment about the risk being one to their morals and everyone grinned.

After breakfast they headed back down river to the stargate. Sharon had had a much less embarrassing introduction to Solitudan culture but the food had been similar. She laughed at their description of the feast and the boys, and Adam didn't mention Vlad's return to the banquet.

They were careful when they dialled out. The people here had probably forgotten the code for Earth but no one wanted them turning up in the gateroom unannounced, before relations between the two worlds were on an official footing.

There would be plenty to report, and plenty for the experts to investigate. Meanwhile, another mission over, SGX was heading home.

As they walked down the ramp at Stargate Command, Vlad turned to Adam.

"Thank you for your silence, Adam," he said. "You would have liked too."

"No," replied Adam. "Dancing boys are *not* to my taste and I was surprised at you!"

"Sed lectus meus tuus est, Adam," Vlad said with a grin.

"Don't you mean 'domus', house rather than couch?" queried Sharon, obviously overhearing at least the last remark. Her Latin seemed to have improved. Vlad shrugged.

"Whatever," he agreed. "I am thanking Adam - he is knowing why," he told her.

Adam didn't respond, but as they reached the base of the ramp, Vlad caught his elbow and let the others get a few paces ahead.

"Domus lectusque," he murmured, and all Adam could do was pretend his Latin was not good enough to translate.

Footnote:

nihil perfectus stet - (roughly)nothing remains perfect

dexter - right } these are common in English and are actually used by

sinister - left } modern 'legionaries' in weapons practice

te amo - I like you OR I love you (ambiguous)

lectus meus tuus est - my bed OR my couch is yours (ambiguity strikes again)

domus - house

domus lectusque - house and bed/couch

NB - I take no responsibility for Vlad's grammar etc.