

Outside Influence

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For the Sweet Dreams and Flying Machines ficathon. For a Sam/Starbuck fic it's pretty darn Sam/Janety.

Featured fandoms: Stargate: SG1, bg

Featured pairings: Sam/Starbuck

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG-13

The SGC briefing room was its usual self. The smell of stale coffee, the slight hum of electronics, voices in the distance.

"So is she what she says she is?" General Landry said.

He, like the others in the room, was looking at Samantha Carter, who was standing next to the big wall-mounted screen. The screen was showing security camera footage from one of the SGC's holding cells. In the cell a blonde, butch-looking woman sprawled over a bunk. She was smoking a large cigar and tapping her foot in time to some unheard music.

"Genetically," Sam said, "she's almost pure Ancient. Judging from the amount of mutational drift in mitochondrial DNA, we estimate that her branch of the species have been isolated for some ten thousand years."

"Could that have been faked?"

"No," doctor Lam said. "If anybody out there had the technology to do genetic engineering that subtle, the Goa'uld would have had their hak'taur hosts centuries ago. Biologically, she's the real thing."

"All right," the General said. "What about the craft she arrived in? Do we know anything more about that?"

"Culturally, it's odd," Daniel said. "The technology and design is... familiar. It looks and works a lot like 1950s and 1960s technology from Earth. If we'd had reactionless drives and hyperjump back then, that is."

Landry looked at him.

"So they have a mixed level of technology?" he said. "Basic stuff, and a few high-tech things? Do we know where they got the high tech from?"

Sam interrupted.

"No, sir," she said. "The reactionless thrusters and the FTL jump drive are consistent with the rest of their technology, and they fully understand how to build them. Captain Thrace have given us her version of how it works. Which is on the level of what one of our fighter pilots would know about how his plane works, so it's hardly scientific detail, but it's been enough for us to make a few experiments and develop a couple of theories."

Landry turned his bulky body towards where Sam was standing.

"Are you telling me, Colonel, that these people have reactionless drives and FTL at a Cold War level of technology?"

Sam nodded. "Yes, sir, I am."

"Can we use it?"

"Yes, sir, I think we can. It's surprisingly simple. We could have built ships like these at any time in the past half century or so. It's just that nobody in this galaxy ever had the right idea."

"The right idea?" The General looked doubtful.

"Yes, sir," Sam said, nodding again. "It's even quite simple, once you've thought of it. It'll overturn most of post-1920s physics, of course, but that's a later problem. In practical terms, we should have an F-302 retrofitted with a reactionless drive in a couple of days. If that works out, we'll start modifying the entire fleet next week."

"Fantastic," Landry said. "I won't believe it until I see it. Keep at it, Colonel."

Doctor Lam cleared her throat.

"What do we do about the prisoner?" she said. "There's no medical reason to hold her, she's been cooperating and she keeps flirting with my staff. I want her out."

"She's flirting with *everybody*," Daniel said.

"Except Colonel Carter," Teal'c added.

Sam turned from the monitor and looked at her teammates.

"She's been hitting on you guys?" she said.

"Oh yeah," Colonel Mitchell said. "And how."

Sam frowned. "Why not me?" she said.

"Well, you're a woman...," General Landry started.

"She's made passes at me," doctor Lam said. "And all the nurses, male or female."

"Huh," Landry said. He turned to Sam.

"Maybe she respects you," he said.

"So what do we *do* with her?" Daniel said. "She's worse than *Vala*. Granted, she doesn't seem quite as fond of stealing, but she more than makes up for it in smoking, drinking, gambling, cursing and picking fights."

"She also makes inappropriate suggestions," Teal'c said.

"She's been perfectly nice to me," Sam said.

"Right," Landry said. "As I understand it, she's been cooperating as well as can be expected, she's got a clean bill of health and she has no characteristics that marks her as an alien."

There was a general murmur of agreement around the table.

"Colonel Carter?" Landry said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Since she seems to be treating you special, we'll see if that leads to any revelations. Until further notice, you have a house guest."

"What?!" Sam said. "But it's spring break soon! Cassie will be coming home from college!"

Landry got up from his chair.

"Well," he said. "I can't think of anyone better suited to help an off-Earth human adjust to this planet than her."

"What about my work?" Sam tried. "The reactionless thrusters? The jumpdrive?"

"Do what you can from home," Landry said. "Turn the rest over to dr Lee."

She was about to protest again, but Landry cut her off.

"You said it was 1950s tech," he said. "We don't need our foremost genius to work on *that*. We need you to try to figure out what *else* Thrace knows."

Sam's posture slumped a little.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Try to have fun," he said. "Take her out drinking, or something. Go see a ball game. The Air Force will pick up the tab."

Sam turned to look at the monitor, where Captain Kara Thrace was blowing smoke rings.

"Yes, sir," Sam winced.

Thrace was silent for most of the ride from the SGC to the house Sam had inherited from Janet. The only thing she said was a brief "I can't believe how much like Caprica it is" while they were driving through the forest that led up to the Cheyenne Mountain entrance.

Sam had no idea what to say to the woman. They'd hardly talked while Thrace had been locked up, only briefly during the more technical parts of the interrogation. And yet, apparently, for some reason, Thrace treated Sam differently from everybody else.

She hadn't even complained when Sam asked her not to smoke in the car.

"Well," Sam said as she killed the car's engine. "This is it. This is where I live."

"Looks nice," Thrace said.

She was dressed in a shapeless one-size-fits-nobody blue jumpsuit. Her blonde hair was dirty and in disarray.

Sam got out of the Volvo, and Thrace followed suit. She stopped right outside the door, looking around.

"Your first alien planet?" Sam asked.

"Nah," Thrace said. "It's my twenty-sixth, I think. Maybe more. Not many had this many people, though."

"Not many do in this galaxy either," Sam said. "Earth is a bit special."

She thought she heard Thrace mumble something like "Yeah, no shit" under her breath. She mentally filed it away for later.

"So," Sam said, "What do you feel like first? Grand tour? Food?"

"A shower," Thrace said. "Some decent clothes."

"Sure," Sam said. "Shower or bath, your choice. As for clothes..."

She took a long look at Thrace. Which she, it suddenly occurred to her, she hadn't done before. Not even in the basic checking out the new chick way that her libido usually did all by itself. Now that she did, she came to the conclusion that Thrace was a little shorter, a little more muscular than herself and generally really nicely shaped.

Suddenly she found herself being annoyed that Thrace had been hitting on everybody except her.

"...you can borrow something of mine while we go shopping," she said.

Landry hadn't been kidding when he said that the Air Force would pick up the tab for this. An American Express card with an obscenely high limit was burning a hole in her wallet, and the only instructions she'd gotten for using it was a warning not to blow the SGC's entire budget at once.

"A bath?" Thrace said. "As in a big tub full of hot water and bubbles and stuff?"

"Big enough for two," Sam's mouth said before her brain could stop it.

Thrace turned a shit-eating grin her way.

"Is that an invitation?" she said.

Sam shook her head. "No," she said.

"I guess I'll just have to settle for the hot water, then," Thrace said. "And my trusty old hand."

She set off for the entrance, leaving Sam behind to blush.

Whatever reason Thrace had had not to flirt with her, it had evidently passed.

Later that night they were sitting at Sam's kitchen table sharing a pizza, since Sam hadn't felt like cooking. Not that she was much good at it at the best of times. It had always been Janet who did practical things. She'd cooked and cleaned and cared for Cassie and tended the garden and all those things. Sam had fixed the cars, painted the house and helped out as instructed. Occasionally they'd joked about living the stereotype.

"Who was she?" Thrace suddenly said.

Sam started.

"Who was who?" she said.

"The little brunette in the pictures."

"Cassie's mom," Sam said. It wasn't untrue.

"So where is she now? And who's Cassie?"

"She's dead," Sam said, and as always her innards turned into a cold hard knot when she said it. "Cassie's my adopted daughter."

"Oh," Thrace said.

"This food's nice," she continued, as if sensing that she'd stumbled into treacherous conversational territory.

"It's not exactly gourmet food," Sam said, appreciating the effort, if that's what it was.

"Oh, come on," Thrace said. "It's full of fat, protein, starch and salt. Don't tell me you've never craved this stuff after a couple of weeks in the field."

"It's... happened," Sam said.

"See," Thrace said. "We have something in common. What's your name, anyway?"

Sam put down the pizza slice she'd just been about to take a bite out of.

"You don't know my name?" she said.

Thrace shrugged.

"Everybody's just been calling you Colonel Carter," she said. "Which will be fine if you want it that way, but it seems a bit formal if I'm going to live with you."

Sam tried to smile.

"We haven't been treating you that well, have we?" she said.

Before the other woman could respond, Sam held out her hand across the table.

"Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter," she said. "Most people call me Sam."

The wide grin that Sam had already seen several times spread over Thrace's face again as she took the offered hand.

"Captain Kara Thrace," she said. "Most people call me Kara, Starbuck or You Bitch."

"Right," Sam said. "And which of those would like me to use?"

"Well, Starbuck's my call sign and I don't think I'll be flying again for a while, so that's out," Thrace said. "And I do kind of hope that you're not going to dislike me enough to swear at me. Which kind of leaves Kara, I guess."

Sam let go of Kara's hand, suddenly very aware that she'd been holding it rather longer than was entirely appropriate.

"Well, welcome to my home, Kara," she said. "You get the guest room. It doesn't have the best bed in the world, but I hope it'll do."

Kara smiled.

"If it's indoors and has a bed, it's better than many places I've slept," she said. "It'll be fine."

After she'd shown Kara her room and gone to bed, Sam found she couldn't sleep. The thought of another woman in the house after all this time made her tense. Not that she disliked it, really. It was kind of nice to know she wasn't alone. But...

Apart from Cassie, who still occasionally stayed in her old room, the last person to share the house was Janet. Having someone else there woke memories. Memories that had faded and mostly lost their sting over the past two years, but still not enough that she'd been able to face clearing out the last of Janet's belongings. She wasn't sure if she'd ever get that far.

Irritated, she got out of bed and wrapped a robe around herself. Maybe a glass of bourbon would quiet her thoughts enough to let her sleep. If not, she might as well get some work done. She had an idea about combining a Naquitar-enhanced distribution grid and a reactionless drive like the one from Kara's ship that might let them do some interesting things. Sure, the Prometheus and her sister ships already had reactionless drives -- but not ones they understood how they worked, which kept them from doing clever things with it.

She didn't bother to turn the lights on as she walked downstairs. She knew the house more than well enough not to need it. She opened the liquor cabinet, and nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden sound of a voice.

"If that's booze, pour me one too," it said.

Sam turned. Vaguely she could see a slightly paler silhouette against the dark leather of the sofa.

Kara.

"What are you doing here?" Sam said.

"Couldn't sleep," Kara said. "Sorry if I startled you. I didn't feel like having any lights on."

Sam's heart rate slowly dropped towards normal.

"It's all right," she said. "You just surprised me a little. And I hope you don't mind your bourbon straight up, because I don't feel like fetching ice."

Kara laughed.

"If it's got ethanol in it, it's fine," she said. "And I'll go out on a limb here and assume that anything that actually comes in a bottle will be way better than the rotgut out of the flight deck crew's frakked-up still."

Sam filled two glasses with more than she'd usually drink. She gave one glass to Kara, put the bottle on the table between them and sat down in an armchair.

"You had a rough time?" she asked.

Kara made a sound that couldn't make its mind up if it was a laugh or a sob. She emptied half the glass in one swallow.

"The frakking Cylons killed ninety-nine point nine nine nine frakking nine percent of the human race," she said. "All that's left is forty-something thousand walking dead and a handful of resistance fighters slowly dying in the radioactive ruins of our homes. I'm the best frakking fighter pilot left in the entire fleet, and if I frakk up my entire frakking *species* dies."

She emptied the glass and refilled it.

"Yeah," she said. "I think you can say I've had a rough time."

"Been there," Sam said.

Kara looked at her.

"What?" she said.

"I'm only a decent fighter pilot," Sam said. "But I am the best brain we have in the entire off-world service. Sure, there are smarter people than me out there -- but none of them have anywhere near my experience with alien technology. So when Anubis tried to wipe out all life in the entire galaxy, and I was standing there trying to figure out how to use the only weapon that could stop him, well... Sam Carter fucks up and humanity *ends*."

"You were there all alone?" Kara said.

"No," Sam admitted. "My dad and a lesser enemy were helping. Didn't matter much, feeling-wise."

"I had Apollo and Kat and the other pilots," Kara said. "Also didn't help much."

She put her glass down on the table and leaned forward.

"How do you handle it?" she said. "How do you deal with the memories?"

Sam smiled, a bitter and mirthless smile.

"I'm sitting here in the middle of the night. I know my way to the bourbon bottle in complete darkness. I'm not sure that falls under 'dealing'."

"Let me guess," Kara said. "You throw yourself into your work like the world depended on it, because you know that some day it will. You keep everybody at arm's length, because if you don't attach to anyone you can't lose them. You screw anybody who'll consent, because for a few moments it makes you forget."

This time, it was Sam who drank deeply from her glass.

"I don't screw anybody at all," she said. "Not since Janet took a staff blast to the chest."

"So you *were* lovers," Kara said. "I wondered. You were being so vague about it."

Sam grimaced. "We were both in the military. We couldn't talk about it. Long habit goes deep."

"But you adopted her daughter."

Sam shook her head.

"Cassie was adopted by Janet first. Like you, she comes from another world. Her people were killed... It doesn't matter how. She was only a kid, the only survivor. We couldn't just leave her there."

Sam got up and walked over to the window. She looked out, towards the road where the occasional car passed by even at this time of the night.

"I can't even talk to my neighbors any more," she said. "I don't know what to say to them. They live in a world where a sports event is important, where the result of some inane reality soap *matters*. They don't know anything about what's out there. They have no idea how close they have all come to oblivion, over and over again. They go about their little lives in blissful ignorance, and I can't even make up my mind if I pity or envy them."

Kara came and stood right behind her.

"At least I don't have that problem," she said. "I can pity all of us who live, and envy those who died in the initial nuclear blasts."

"Will they be waiting for you?" Sam asked. "Will they hope that you'll be coming back?"

Kara shook her head.

"They saw my Raptor drift into some kind of shimmering surface in a frakking big circle of stuff floating in space," she said. "Drift into it and not come out again. They'll wait for a few hours, then assume it was a trap and decide that I'm dead. They'll put my picture up on the wall of remembrance, and they'll auction off my stuff while getting stinking drunk, and Colonel frakking Thigh will try to pretend he's not really happy that I'm gone."

Sam went to refill her glass, and discovered that the bottle was empty.

"Damn," she said. "And that was my last one, too."

"That's fine," Kara said. "I think I'll have another try at sleeping anyway."

Sam nodded. "Probably a good idea."

Kara headed for the guest room.

"Hey," Sam said.

Kara stopped and looked questioningly at her over her shoulder.

"At the base," Sam said, "why did you hit on everybody except me?"

"I didn't like your eyes," Kara said.

"What's wrong with my eyes?!"

"If I want to see the look in them, I'll go find a mirror," Kara said.

Try to have fun, Landry had said. Take her out drinking or something.

It wasn't like Sam had any better ideas, so why not try it? The dent left in her liquor level after three nights talking proved that Kara was no stranger to drinking, and Sam had a hunch she wouldn't mind loud music, flashing lights and dancing either.

"If we go out, will you promise me one thing?" she said to Kara across the noon-time breakfast table.

"What?" Kara said.

"Don't get into any fights. Or anything else that would draw attention from the police."

"I'll try, but I don't know what strange taboos you people may have."

"I guess that'll have to do."

As for where to go, there was only one place where Sam felt comfortable taking a possibly risky stranger. A place where they'd used to go quite often, and she hadn't been more than a handful of times in the last two years. Fortunately, it wasn't a place that changed much. It'd looked the same since Sam first came to Colorado Springs, and so had the people coming there. Sure, the individuals changed and fashions came and went, but the atmosphere stayed the same. And, of course, a few of the people did too.

"Major Carter," Lily said from behind the bar. "Wow, it's been ages since I saw you in here."

"Yeah," Sam said. "I've been... busy. And it's actually Colonel Carter these days."

"Well, congratulations," Lily said. "That warrants a celebratory one on the house for you and your... new girlfriend?"

Lily looked pointedly at Kara, who was standing next to Sam and trying to look in every direction at once.

Sam shook her head.

"Just a friend," she said.

Lily looked from Sam to Kara and back again.

"So you wouldn't mind if I hit on her?" she said.

A surge of emotion ran through Sam, taking her completely by surprise. It wasn't a very clear emotion, a strong mix of competitiveness, desire to protect and jealousy.

"Never mind," Lily said. "That expression was answer enough. I'll stay clear."

"No," Sam said, "really, it's OK, I don't..."

Lily laughed.

"Yeah, right," she said. "You always were a lousy liar. And even if I hadn't been teasing you, I wouldn't want to risk getting into a fight with *you*."

Sam was taken aback.

"What?" she said. "I don't fight. Or, at least not here."

"Oh, come on," Lily said. "I've seen your arms and torso. Someone who's lived to get *that* many scars is not someone I want to mess with. Particularly not when I know she's a professional warrior."

"You've seen her chest?" Kara said. "Does she show it off here often, or do you two have history?"

"Yeah, when did you...?" Sam said.

Lily grinned. "Four years ago?" she said. "Dr Fraiser's birthday? Tequila race?"

"Oh," Sam said. She felt her face heat up with a blush. "*That* time."

Kara looked from one of them to the other, wordlessly asking.

"I got a bit drunk," Sam said.

"She got *stinking* drunk," Lily said. "And she danced on the bar with her top off."

"Did she now," Kara said. She demonstratively looked Sam up and down.

"Tell me," she went on, "what is this 'tequila race'?"

"Well," Lily said. "I did offer you something on the house, didn't I?"

Sam groaned.

Gingerly, Sam tried opening her eyes. Two lances of sunlight stabbed through them into her brain, and with a pained wince she screwed them shut again. Her entire brain pounded with agony. Her mouth felt dry and dirty, and nausea topped her misery.

Serious nausea.

With a Herculean effort, she made it to the toilet just as the meager contents of her stomach got forcefully expelled. A stench of human digestive juices and half-decomposed tequila spread through the bathroom. She lay down on the cool tile floor and closed her eyes. Maybe if she slept a little more she could get through the worst of the hangover without feeling it...

But sleep wouldn't come. The slow, grinding pain in her head got in the way, and pretty soon the floor's pleasant chill turned into shiver-inducing cold. She slowly worked her way up to a standing position, and with liberal assistance from the nearest wall staggered back into the bedroom and towards her bed.

Her *occupied* bed.

Kara lay stretched out on her back, loudly snoring and stark naked.

Just as naked as Sam herself.

It didn't *necessarily* mean that they had... that they had. It could just be that they got home from the club and in the tequila-laden fog they both ended up collapsing in Sam's bed. After getting their clothes off.

It *could* have happened that way.

Kara's snoring stopped. A few moments later, a drawn-out groan could be heard in its stead.

"Frakk," Kara said. "My head feels like something large stepped in it."

"Morning," Sam said, doing her best to sound light-hearted.

"Who won?" Kara said.

"Who won what?"

"The drinking race!"

"Oh."

Sam remembered Lily setting out a number of glasses and opening several bottles of tequila. She remembered explaining the rules to Kara, such as they were. After that, it got blurry.

"If your head feels anything like mine," she said, "I think we both lost."

A flash of herself pouring a shot of pale yellow liquid into Kara's open mouth came to her.

"Damn," Kara said. "I hate losing."

"I'm sure we put up a good fight."

She remembered lying on her back on the bar, with her blouse bunched up under her breasts. Kara trying to pour tequila into her navel, missing, and trying to lick it off her bare belly before it ran off.

Kara frowned.

"Did I grope the cute bartender?" she said.

Another flash, of Kara throwing herself across the bar trying to do exactly that, and Sam trying to stop her by grabbing hold of the back of Kara's spaghetti-strap top. Which promptly ripped apart, leaving Sam holding it and Kara sprawled half-naked over a barstool.

"You tried," Sam said.

"Frakk," Kara said. "I hope she won't be too pissed off at me."

"If we'd done anything that really pissed her off she'd have had Raya throw us out. But we should probably make sure to tip well next time."

Sam frowned when her ears caught up with her mouth. Next time? What next time?

"Sure thing," Kara said. "But right now I want some of that coffee."

Coffee?

Sam redirected what little brainpower she had to her sense of smell. Which did indeed register the distinct smell of black ambrosia. But who could have...?

A chill went through Sam's body as realization struck, nearly strong enough to suppress the hangover. She stood up abruptly.

"Oh God," she said.

"What?" Kara said. "Is something wrong?"

"Cassie," Sam said. "She was due to come home for spring break this morning."

Sam had been gone for so much of the time Cassie spent growing up that it always amazed her that the little girl she'd once saved was now a young woman of twenty years. A young woman who was at the moment frying bacon and eggs and smirking shamelessly at her adopted mother's miserable state.

"So how've you been?" Cassie said in her chirpiest voice. "Any new apocalypses avoided?"

"Not this week," Sam mumbled. "We had a plague scare a little while ago, but it got sorted out."

"Do you know that my roommate Dawn didn't believe me at all when I told her that one of my moms is a superhero? She just said something about her sister being one too," Cassie said. "And who is she, anyway? She doesn't look like your type at all."

Sam blinked. "What? Your roommate?" she said.

"No, silly, the woman you brought home last night."

Another chill traveled down Sam's spine.

"You were here?" she said.

Cassie nodded. "Last class got canceled, so I took an earlier flight."

"Oh," Sam said. "I... I hope we didn't wake you?"

"Are you kidding? The way you two carried on you'd have woken the dead."

"Sorry..."

"So did you pick her up at the club?"

Sam nearly sprayed coffee all over the kitchen.

"Cassie!"

"What?" Cassie said, moving crispy bacon from the frying pan onto a plate. "I don't mind, if that's what you think. If you're moving on after mom, that's good. You deserve a good life, you know."

Sam tried to gather her wits.

"I didn't..."

"You know," Cassie interrupted, "all these years I thought it was mom who made those sounds? I just never thought that you'd sound that high-pitched."

Sam felt panic beginning to grow at the back of her head. She made sounds? While making... while? Sounds that Cassie had heard? For *years*? Sounds that she'd been making last night with Kara?

The panic climbed a bunch of notches towards the surface of her mind.

Cassie handed her a platter of bacon and eggs.

"I'm just kidding," she said. "There were no sounds. You guys came home, made a lot of noise and then you fell asleep. I just like to see you squirm."

The panic left and was replaced by equal parts relief and annoyance.

"You're an evil child," Sam said. "Your mother would've been proud."

Cassie poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Thank you," she said. "I do my best. And seriously, who is she? I've *never* seen you take someone home before, so she must be special in some way."

Sam ate a couple of strips of bacon before she answered, slowly feeling the fat and protein start to ease her hangover.

"She's from another planet," she said. "She's stranded here. I've been told to take care of her for a time, apparently with the hope that you might have insight in Earth adaptation for aliens."

Cassie sat down across the kitchen table from Sam.

"So which custom have you been explaining that entails her sleeping in your bed?"

"I was told it's called a 'tequila race'", Kara said from the door to the living room. Like Sam, she was wearing a dressing gown and a worn expression.

Cassie looked her up and down for a few moments.

"Hello, alien woman who sleeps with my mom," she said. "How do you want your eggs?"

"Almost crispy," Kara said. "My name is Kara, and I sure hope I didn't shag your mom last night."

Cassie returned to the stove and fired it up again.

"Why not?" she said. "She's in good shape for her age, and certainly not bad looking."

"I'm sitting right here!" Sam protested.

"Oh, I know she is," Kara said, ignoring Sam. "It's just that when I *do* shag her, I want to remember it."

Cassie laughed.

"I think I like this one, mom," she said. "You can keep her."

"So how do you like her?" Sam said much later.

They'd spent the day out on the city, shopping sight-seeing and, at least on Sam's part, trying to keep from randomly groping Kara. Cassie had, somewhat to Sam's surprise, taken her role as guide quite seriously, and told Kara about a whole lot of things that had taken Cassie a long time to understand when she first came to Earth. Most of them weren't strange to Kara. It seemed that the culture of the Twelve Colonies was remarkably similar to Earth's. Which was, of course, a mystery of its own, seeing as it didn't even seem to be in the same galaxy.

"I'd hit on her if I didn't have this feeling you'd kill me if I did," Kara said.

They'd ended up by a pool in a park. Cassie decided they should have ice cream, and went off in search of some.

"Considering that you hit on anything that moves, that doesn't really answer my question. Besides, she goes for the boys and I'd just hurt you. Her *other* mother is the one who would've killed you."

"She seems to be a great young woman," Kara said. "Is that answer enough? And what if I like being hurt?"

"It'll do," Sam said, ignoring the second question for her own sanity. "Next question is, do we let her cook tonight, or do we eat out?"

Kara looked at her.

"Is there a reason we wouldn't want her to cook?"

"She's vegan."

"No meat?"

"No meat. No dairy products. Nothing whatsoever that comes from an animal."

Kara shrugged.

"Fine by me."

Sam looked at her, somewhat surprised.

"Well, then," she said. "We eat whatever Cassie wants to cook."

Except they didn't. When she returned, Cassie was balancing three ice cream cones in one hand and holding her mobile phone to her ear with the other, happily chattering along.

"I'll be staying over at uncle Daniel's tonight," she said after she'd hung up. "Haven't seen him in ages. It'll be fun to catch up a bit. He said Teal'c might come over too."

"I thought you were going to stay with me the entire break," Sam said, a bit disappointed.

"I was," Cassie said. "There's been a change of plan."

And so it was. When they'd had enough touring, Cassie went off to Daniel's place while Sam and Kara went home.

None of them spoke until they got out of the car in Sam's driveway.

"Now," Kara said as she stood next to the still-open car door, "I have two impressions here. The first is that you've been sort of avoiding me all day. The second is that Cassie went off to her uncle so that you wouldn't feel the need to do that any more."

Sam closed the door on her side of the car.

"Daniel's not really her uncle," she said.

"But you're still doing the avoiding thing, so maybe I got the wrong impressions."

Sam looked away. From the other side of the car, she heard the door close.

"Well, I'm...", she said, and then something big and heavy hit her, knocked her to the ground, wrestled her onto her back and kissed her.

"If you really don't want to," Kara said after she'd broken the kiss, "this is the time to punch me in the face."

Woah, Sam's rational self said. Think about this. We're out on the lawn. What if the neighbors see us?

Hel-lo, her less rational self objected. Hot chick straddling our hips and more or less *begging* us to fuck her. When's *that* going to happen again?

Sam put her arms around Kara and pulled her into another deep kiss, this one being less one-sided and lasting a lot longer. Her hands ranged all over the parts of Kara she could reach. They were annoyingly cloth-covered.

"Indoors," she panted. "Now!"

She pushed Kara off herself and rolled to her feet just in time to receive another kiss. Frantically kissing and touching each other, they made their way through the front door.

"Next time," Sam said, "let's try and make it to the bed."

They were lying on the living room carpet. Sam was on her back, with Kara sprawled half on top of her. Their clothes were spread all over the place, starting at the front door and following a rough trail from there.

"Why?" Kara said. "I'm comfortable here."

"I'm not," Sam said. "Also, the toy chest is under the bed."

Kara laughed.

"OK, that's a reason. Now, if we move the booze up there as well, along with a microwave, a portable freezer and a stack of frozen pizzas we can stay in for a week."

Sam's first reaction was to laugh at the obviously non-serious suggestion. But before the laugh reached her mouth, that less rational part of her mind pointed out that there actually was nothing seriously wrong with the plan. It wasn't even as if she had to work. According to her current orders, getting to know Kara better *was* her work.

"Yeah," she said, sounding surprised even to her own ears. "We could do that. I even have a portable freezer out in the garage, that Jack left here when he moved to Washington."

Kara lifted her head from Sam's chest and looked at her.

"You serious?"

"Yeah, why not? I never did anything like that when I was at college. Got to be a stupid teenager *some* time."

Kara smiled.

"That'd be a different kind of thing for you, huh?" she said. "Staying at home instead of going on adventures on strange planets and such."

"We don't do that all the time," Sam said. "Sometimes the adventures come to us and we have them right there in the SGC. Sometimes we don't have adventures at all. Once we even went away on an adventure *and* stayed home at the same time."

Kara frowned.

"How did *that* happen?"

"Time machine," Sam said. "In one timeline, we went back and fixed a problem so we in this timeline never needed to go back in the first place, so we stayed home. Or, well, we went up to Jack's cabin and fished, but..."

Kara raised herself up on her elbows. Sam took the opportunity to gleefully ogle her naked breasts.

"You have a *time machine*?" Kara said. "That *works*?"

Sam reached out a hand and placed it under Kara's breast, feeling the soft warmth.

"Yeah," she said. "It's at Area 51 now, I think. Last I heard, we still haven't got a clue how it works. Although the stuff you told us might help there, actually..."

"So why haven't you gone back and rescued your Janet?"

Sam's brain froze.

The thought had never even occurred to her.

"I..." she said, words failing.

Kara sat up.

"Geeesh," she said. "It wasn't *that* bad a question, was it?"

"I could have her back," Sam whispered. She felt hot and cold at the same time. Her heart was suddenly racing a million miles an hour.

"Uh, Sam?" she heard Kara say. "*Breathe*, will you?"

They could go back. If they got her after she was shot but before she died, she could be rescued with a Goa'uld hand device, and it wouldn't change the timeline. Not very much, anyway.

"We've got to try," she said.

Kara looked at her.

"You never even thought of it?" she said.

Sam shook her head.

"And now you want to do it."

Sam nodded.

"Are you allowed to do that?"

Sam shook her head.

"Is it dangerous?"

Sam nodded.

"Do you need my help?"

Sam nodded again. "Only someone with the Ancient gene can pilot the time machine. And unlike me, you have it."

"And it's to save a beautiful maiden?"

"I don't know if I'd call her a maiden," Sam said. "But, yeah."

"So, you need my help to go against orders and pilot a strange alien machine into danger in order to save a loved one?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Sam said.

Kara broke out in a wide grin.

"Am I your gal or what?" she said.

The guard at the Area 51 access road looked dubiously at Sam's papers.

"So you want to take two visitors in, sir?" he said.

He was standing next to the military jeep with the three women in it. It was midday, and the desert heat was rapidly climbing towards intolerable.

"They're special assistants," Sam said. "And as you can see, I've got clearances for them."

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "Still, it's a bit unusual. I should call to check..."

"Oh, come on," Sam said. "And keep us waiting in this weather? You can do that later, and they can throw us out if necessary. It's not like they don't know who I am."

He smiled.

"Yeah, you're kind of famous around here, Colonel Carter," he said. "And I guess *you* wouldn't do anything that wasn't in our best interest. Go on through."

He waved toward the guard building, and the gates swung open.

"Thanks," Sam said. "It's appreciated."

She drove through, fighting the impulse to go as fast as the car would carry them.

"How the hell did you get us clearances to come here?" Cassie said from the back seat. When Kara had let slip what they were planning to do, she'd insisted to come along and help. Sam had tried to argue her out of it, but her heart hadn't really been in the attempt.

"I wrote them myself," Sam said.

"Do you have the authority to do that?" Kara said. She was sprawled over the front passenger seat, cap pulled down over her eyes.

"Sort of," Sam said.

"Sort of?" Cassie said.

"Well, while you obviously are both cleared to know about the Stargate and aliens and all that, you're theoretically civilians. Which means that General Landry would need to give permission for you to be here."

"So...?"

"So temporarily you're both cadets."

"Does that mean we have to follow your orders?" Kara asked.

"Strictly speaking, yes," Sam answered.

"Want to tie me down as well?"

Sam nearly swerved off the road.

"Kara!" Cassie exclaimed. "Don't tease her while she's driving!"

It took them a few minutes to get from the guard post to the actual base. The space in between looked like the same kind of flat landscape sparsely filled with dead plants as outside the fence, but Sam knew that it wasn't. The place was full of detectors and mines, and anybody trying to walk across it would be in for a nasty surprise.

"Do you know where we're going?" Cassie asked when buildings came into view.

"Yes," Sam said. "I looked it up in their database. The timejumper is in building twelve."

"You have access to their database?"

"Well, no, not officially. But they use the same security systems as the SGC, so..."

Sam's voice trailed off into silence.

"What about this other thing we needed? The hand whatsit?" Kara asked.

"Brought one from home," Sam said.

"I thought it was an alien artifact?"

"It is, but we have quite a few of them. I took one home a while back to practice using it."

The buildings had no signs on them, but Sam had been there often enough to know which one was number twelve. It was a big hangar-like one with huge doors, used for unusually large objects. Such as spare Stargates or Ancient time-travel craft. And, which was relevant for them now, it was pretty new.

"OK, remember now," Sam said as she carefully maneuvered the jeep into a parking space. If anyone asks, we're here to study activation of alien devices. Kara, as soon as we get into the timejumper, you sit down in the control seat. When the controls light up, concentrate on closing the doors. Once they're closed, try to jump back in time about ten years. Once we've done that, we should be in the open and have more time to think."

"Gotcha," Kara said. Cassie just nodded.

"It won't frakking jump!" Kara shouted.

The timejumper was hovering in the middle of the hangar, bullets clanging against its hull. Kara was in the pilot's seat, frantically trying to do evasive action. Cassie was in the seat next to her, concentrating on the control panel. Sam was in the back, nursing the none too reliable power feed to the time engine.

"I don't know why!" Sam shouted back. "Everything seems to be working just fine!"

"I think it's just refusing," Cassie said. "If I read this right, that word is 'warning' and that one is 'indoors'. I could tell for sure if I had some time and uncle Daniel's notebooks..."

Sam mumbled a curse at safety-conscious Ancients. They'd been doing so well, until the moment they closed the doors and the craft left the floor. The guards had reacted much more quickly than Sam had expected, and it took no more than a few seconds before they started taking gunfire. Which the jumper should, theoretically, handle just

fine. Sam wasn't so sure about the practice of it, though, since it was after all more than ten thousand years old. Since the guards didn't stop shooting, they were apparently working on the same assumption.

"So what do I do?" Kara said.

"Give me a moment, I'm thinking," Sam said.

"Do we *have* a moment?"

"I hope so."

There was a short but noticeable silence from Kara before she spoke again.

"Ah, frakk it," she said. "Hold on to something."

Sam looked forward just in to see the hangar doors approach them at insane speed. She was just about to scream at Kara to stop when there was a bright flash, and the doors were replaced by sunlight and the buildings of Area 51. Kara whooped, and the base receded fast below them.

"What happened?" Cassie said.

"You said this thing is space worthy," Kara said. "And it was obviously built by security fascists. So I figured it'd have some kind of defense against space debris. Like, for example, hangar doors."

She grinned.

"You should've *seen* the wreckage fly," she said.

"Can we get a look back?" Sam asked.

"I don't..." Kara said. A window appeared inset in the main viewscreen, showing the view behind them. Far in the distance, she could see a number of small buildings. One of them with one end looking quite ragged, and with black smoke coming from it. She winced.

"O'Neill's going to be livid," she said.

"Not for..." Kara said. There was another flash, this one of bluish brilliant light coming from everywhere at once.

"...another ten years," she finished.

The base below them was suddenly very much smaller. All of the big buildings were no longer there, and the place had a dusty look as if nobody really used it much.

As it had been before the Stargate program got going.

"Are we cloaked?" Sam asked. "We don't want to cause more UFO reports than necessary."

"We are," Cassie said.

"So, where to now?" Kara said.

Cassie frowned. "We need the Stargate," she said. "But it's already down in what'll soon be Stargate Command, and I don't really think we can fly this thing down there. Maybe if we go further back?"

Sam walked up to the front of the craft.

"No," she said. "It was buried in Egypt then. I don't think it's been out in the open since Ra left Earth."

"So we go back, what, five thousand years?"

Sam shook her head.

"The Antarctica gate is accessible from the air until O'Neill and I find it in a couple of years. And since this ship can act as its own DHD, we don't even have to touch anything there."

"All right," Kara said. "Which still doesn't answer my question, since I have no idea where this Antarctica is."

"South," Cassie said. "All the way south."

"And keep it subsonic," Sam said. "We want to be discreet, remember?"

"Going all the way," Kara said and grinned. "I like the sound of that."

The Earth is big, and even with a fancy Ancient spacecraft keeping just under the speed of sound in the upper reaches of the atmosphere it was a couple of hours travel from Nevada to the South Pole. Sam took the opportunity to rest. She hadn't been able to sleep since Kara's question, but now that they were committed and on their way fatigue was catching up with her. She spread a blanket on the floor next to the time-travel device in the back of the craft and laid down on it, blissfully closing her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" she heard Cassie say. She and Kara were still in their seats at the front, Kara flying and Cassie figuring out the controls.

"Sure," Kara said.

"Why are you doing this?"

"What do you mean why am I doing this? Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you seem to want to be with Sam, and if we get mom back that just won't happen."

There was silence for a little while.

"Yeah," Kara said. "I got that."

"So why?"

There was another long pause before Kara answered.

"There was someone I had to go back for once," she finally said. "I know the feeling."

Before Cassie had a chance to reply, Kara went on in a much perkier voice.

"Besides, I never was much of a long-term relationship person anyway. I'll find someone new soon enough."

Cassie laughed.

"When we get back, remind me to introduce you to my roommate Dawn. The number of ex-girlfriends she has is simply astonishing, and they're all totally hot. As is her sister, but she's kind of strange and doesn't seem to like people much."

Sam sat up.

"Cassie," she said. "What's your roommate's last name?"

Cassie and Kara both turned to look at her.

"Summers," Cassie said. "Why?"

"From California?" Sam asked, incredulous.

"Yeah," Cassie said. "Some place that sank into the ground."

"Sunnydale," Sam said. "Your roommate is *Buffy Summers'* sister?"

"That's Dawn's sister's name, yeah," Cassie said. "And how do you know *her*?"

"Long story," Sam said. "I didn't even know she *had* a sister."

"Sorry to interrupt," Kara said. "But the compass just flipped out. We seem to be right above the magnetic south pole. I think I can follow the field lines down, if that's what we want."

Sam got up from the blanket.

"There should be a display mode that shows approach vectors for the nearest gate," she said. "Just think about..."

Another window swirled into existence on the viewscreen, showing a flight-path diagram ending in a small circle down under the ice.

"This ship is so frakking responsive it's creepy," Kara said. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "And take it easy, we're in no hurry. We don't have to be at P3X-666 for another eight years."

A flash of blue-white light, and the calm forest scene below them turned into a battlefield. Dull clouds of dirt and splintered vegetation appeared where Earth explosives detonated, and bright clouds of flame where Jaffa weapons hit. Alkesh and Death Gliders criss-crossed the sky, raining destruction down on the Earth troops, who retaliated with gunfire and the occasional ground-to-air missile.

"Frakk me," Kara said. "That's some serious war going on there. Sure they can't see us?"

"They'd already be shooting at us if they could," Sam said. She pointed out the viewscreen, a couple of grenades hanging from her combat gear clanking into each other. "That gully over there."

The timejumper swooped soundlessly towards the place that Sam remembered much too clearly. She hadn't seen it at the time, but she'd gone back there several times since. Why, she wasn't even sure herself.

"There's mom," Cassie said. She pointed at two people running towards the gully, in which they could now see Daniel kneeling next to a wounded soldier.

In the forest above the gully, they could see a small group of Jaffa approaching.

"Can't we just shoot them?" Cassie said. She sounded young and scared.

"No," Sam said. "We have no idea what would happen if we did. Removing someone who's just about to die is quite bad enough. As soon as she gets hit, land just above the ridge and let me out."

The waiting was torture. Knowing what would happen, seeing it in her mind over and over again. On the screen she saw Janet's face, alive and concentrating on saving the poor airman who'd been hit earlier. The picture blurred, and it took a moment for Sam to realize that it wasn't a problem with the screen but her own tears.

"Sure you want to go?" Kara said. "You look a bit upset. I could do it instead."

Sam shook her head. "They wouldn't let you through. Me they'll recognize."

The Jaffa stepped out of the trees. He lifted his staff weapon and fired, hitting Janet squarely in the chest.

"Now!" Sam said. "Land!"

She was out of the craft before the edge of the door touched the soil, jumping over the edge and hitting the ground running. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Jaffa twitch and jerk as bullet after bullet slammed into him, and it gave her a moment of

distant satisfaction to see him die. The air smelled of burning wood, gunpowder smoke and fear. Gunfire stuttered through the air, momentarily drowning out the screams of the wounded and in its turn being drowned out by explosions.

"Let me through!" she shouted at the airmen surrounding Janet's prone form. She pushed her way through them before they even had had time to obey, and knelt at Janet's side. Seeing her there, chest torn open, not breathing, filled Sam with panic. She reached out a hand and felt for a pulse.

She found one. Weak, but there. Panic receding, she leaned back and turned to the onlooking airmen.

"She's dead," she said. "Up there, see if you can get the Jaffa who did this."

"Yes, sir," one of them said. They took off, leaving her alone with Janet.

And Daniel.

"Sam?" he said. "I thought you were over on the other side of the field?"

"I was," she said.

"Is she...?" he said. She could see the fear in his eyes. And, strangely, relief.

Sam nodded. "She's dead," she said.

An impulse struck her.

"Jack asked for you," she said.

"Right," Daniel said, and took off without a further word.

Quickly but as gently as she could, Sam picked up Janet. She wasn't a big woman, and even in full combat gear Sam had no trouble lifting her. And to get her back, Sam would've carried her had she weighed the world. She set off up the side of the gully, keeping an eye out for unexpected Jaffa. It'd be the height of irony if *she* got shot now. But there were none, and she made it safely into the timejumper.

"Is she...?" Cassie said.

"Barely," Sam said. She put Janet down on the floor and pulled on the hand device that was waiting there.

"Getting the frakk out of here," she heard Kara say, but she didn't pay any attention to the words. Her entire mind was occupied with getting the healing device to work, and do its job.

A nimbus of light surrounded Sam's hand. Fog-like it spread out and enveloped Janet.

Exhausted, Sam staggered down the stairs to the living room. Used glasses and empty bottles lay scattered around. There was a smell of stale cigar smoke, and voices drifted in from afar. She stripped off the hand device and threw it at the table, where it landed in an empty pizza box.

The voices came from the back yard, so she headed there. She was more tired than she could remember ever being before, but she didn't want to sleep quite yet. Talking to Cassie and Kara would keep her awake.

The two of them looked up when she came onto the back porch. They sat next to each other on the steps down to the lawn, Kara smoking a cigar and Cassie sipping from a beer can.

"How is she?" Cassie said.

"Sleeping," Sam said.

"Still? Is that good?"

"Again," Sam said. "Not still. She was awake for a little while. Asked what had happened and why she was home. I think she'll be all right."

Kara blew a smoke ring in her direction. "You look half dead," she said.

"I've felt perkier," Sam admitted.

A thought occurred to her.

"Where did you put the timejumper?" she said.

"It's right there," Kara said, gesturing toward the empty lawn.

"You can see slight depressions where it's resting on the grass," Cassie said. "Although it doesn't seem to weigh nearly as much as it ought to."

"Right," Sam said. The Ancient invisible time machine was parked on her lawn. Of course. Where else would it be?

"So what happens now?" Kara said.

"I get dishonorably discharged from the Air Force," Sam said. "You'll be moved somewhere else. Cassie goes back to college. As for Janet, I'm sure there's some procedure for what happens when someone who's been declared dead turns out not to be."

"They'll throw you out for borrowing a vehicle and rescuing someone?" Kara said. "That's pretty harsh."

"We did mess up Area 51 a bit," Sam said. "That's kind of frowned on, usually."

Cassie shook her head. "There's no way uncle Jack will let harm come to you over this," she said. "He is fond of mom, no matter what he says about the needles."

"Maybe," Sam said and yawned. "I don't really care what happens to me, as long as Janet's back and you two are all right."

Cassie smiled at her.

"Go to bed," she said. "You'll think more clearly after you've slept some."

"Yeah," Kara said. "Go away so I can keep trying to seduce your daughter."

Sam was about to protest, again, that Cassie didn't swing that way when she noticed how close together they were sitting. And how one of Cassie's hands were resting on Kara's thigh.

"Kara?" she said instead.

"Yeah?"

"If you hurt her I'll kill you."

"You and what army?"

Sam smiled.

"Janet," she said.

"She's not kidding," Cassie said. "Mom has held a gun to the head of someone who hurt me."

She looked up at Sam.

"But that was a *little* worse than not calling after a date," she said.

"You've never cared for a kid," Sam said. "Good night, anyway."

She made her way up the stairs again, and into the bedroom. The bedroom that had been empty for these past two years, but wasn't any more. She stopped in the doorway and stood for a while just looking at the sleeping Janet. Her Janet, back where she belonged again.

Slowly, Sam undressed. There was no hurry any more. She didn't even have to go to work in the morning. Too tired to be neat, she let the clothes fall where they would. She was just about to slide in between the sheets when she remembered that Janet really hated when Sam left her clothes on the floor like that. She got up again, and hung them over the back of a chair. Not exactly neat, but good enough.

Quite against her will, tears started running down her face when she snuggled up to Janet's long-missed body. Her beloved moved a little, even in her sleep adjusting to their customary sleeping positions.

"Your feet are cold," Janet mumbled, half asleep.

"They'll warm up soon," Sam said.

But her love was already sleeping again, and within a few breaths, so was she.