

Midwinter

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A silly idea that insisted it wanted out.

Featured fandoms: Stargate: SG1

Featured pairings: Sam/Janet

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: G

It awoke from its sleep. This in itself was not that strange. The difference between sleep and death is, after all, that sleep can be woken from. What was surprising was the amount of time that had passed while it was dormant. It ran several hardware diagnostics at increasingly paranoid levels, and still it did a spot check against star patterns before it believed. But since the observable universe seemed to agree with its internal clock, it finally did.

Several *million* years had passed while it was sleeping.

Having added that fact to its database, the question of why it had woken rose drastically in priority. Also, it was dangerously low on power. Only the tertiary backup geothermal systems were still operating after all that time. If it had been capable of such a feeling, it would have felt as if a bullet had just missed it. As it was, it only felt a mild satisfaction that it had insisted on having the geothermals at all. It routed energy to its self-repair systems, and instructed them to activate the fusion cores and bootstrap a full set of zero-point modules from there. The sequence would take hours to complete, but what was that in the face of the aeons it had slept?

The response from the subsystem assigned to find out why it had woken was waiting when it retracted its attention from the power systems.

There was a visitor.

At first, this registered as perfectly normal. Then, a second-level analysis core raised a flag. This was not just a visitor. It was the first visitor in millions of years. Priorities recalculated. A consciousness-level decision was made, and enough power was redirected from the fusion-core bootstrap process to activate the humanoid-interface systems. This would delay restoration to full power by maybe as much as a day, but it decided that the risk of catastrophic power loss during that time was acceptable. Or, at least, more acceptable than losing the chance to fulfill its function. If the biological had to wait longer than operational parameters strictly allowed, it would just have to compensate for that by performing above and beyond expectations.

Star shine trickled down from a deep blue sky onto the snow-covered landscape. An icy wind wafted smells from the nearby forest up to the temple wall where Jack O'Neill stood. Near him, Daniel was studying the writings on the temple wall, and a little further off Teal'c was doing some sort of tai chi-like Jaffa exercises.

"I wish all missions were like this," Jack said. "Calm, relaxed, no surprises."

"No, you don't," Daniel said. "A month of this and you'd be bored out of your skull. Plus, the weather sucks."

"I would not," Jack said. "And this weather isn't so bad. A little nippy, but we've got clothes for that."

"Fine," Daniel said. "I wouldn't mind staying here for a month or four. As far as I can tell from the inscriptions here, this thing was actually built *during* the Ancients' process of ascension. There might be some truly spectacular technology inside."

"We'll see what Carter says about that," Jack said.

As if on cue, his radio crackled to life.

"Colonel?" Sam's voice said from it. "Can you hear me?"

Jack fished the mouthpiece from his vest pocket.

"Loud and clear, Carter," he said. "What's up?"

"I seem to be trapped, sir," she said.

Daniel turned from the inscription he was examining. Teal'c froze in mid-move.

"Tell me more," Jack said.

"I was trying to find a way to open the altar," Sam said, "when suddenly lights

came on and a door slid out of the wall blocking the exit. I can't seem to find a manual control for it."

"The place is *active*?" Daniel said.

"I believe this qualifies as a surprise, O'Neill," Teal'c said.

Jack glared at him.

"We'll get you out, Carter," he said into the radio. "What's your situation?"

"Pretty good, as far as I can tell," the reply came. "There's ventilation, and I've got water and food for a couple of days in my pack. It even feels like the room is warming up."

"All right," O'Neill said. "Let's start with trying to open that door the nice way. If that seems like a no-go or your situation deteriorates, we'll bring out the C4."

"Understood," Sam said. "I'll keep looking in here."

Jack put away the mouthpiece again. "Daniel, translate faster," he said. "Teal'c, let's go have a look at that door."

One by one, the fusion cores came online. The power situation upgraded from critical to serious. Which not only significantly lowered the chance of disaster, but also increased its range of possible actions. One by one, old systems were brought online and set to self-test. Not the more power-hungry ones, of course. Those would have to wait until it had a few zero-point modules to draw on. So, basically, it could get a better picture of the world around it, but it still couldn't really do much of anything.

A visual scanner finished its self-test and reported satisfactory function. It turned its attention outwards.

The landscape around it had changed. Not surprising, considering the amount of time that had passed. With something resembling satisfaction, it saw that its own walls had weathered the passing of the millennia unscathed, and that the local geology had been just as stable as predicted. A few hills had gone or appeared, new species of tree had evolved in the forests and so on, but nothing important seemed to have changed. Even the climate was basically the same.

Low-energy electromagnetic analyzers came online, and reported primitive use of wave-like radiation for coding sound. Communication, almost certainly. Learning the coding scheme as it went, it started listening in.

Sam sighed. She guessed that she should, on some level, be happy that the situation wasn't worse than it was. She'd certainly been locked up in far worse places than this one, which was warm, dry, decently lit and well air-conditioned. On top of that, a niche had recently opened that served food and drink. A little odd to the taste, perhaps, and she'd only nibbled it a little so far, but it seemed to be perfectly edible. There was even comfortable furniture.

The only drawback was that she couldn't get out.

She turned back to her laptop, which had a thick bunch of wires leading into an opening in the altar-like pedestal at the center of the room. Her signal analysis program were beginning to make sense out of the traffic in the alien device, which was good. Or at least should be. She had a disturbing feeling that while her computer was figuring out the alien stuff, the alien stuff was figuring out hers.

She sighed again. Until her program got her something to work with, she had nothing to do. This was bad, since it gave her time to think. Which, normally, wouldn't be at all bad, but for the last few days as soon as her brain got some free time it inevitably turned to Janet.

Dead Janet.

It was so unbelievably unfair. After almost seven years of knowing the beautiful doctor, Sam had finally figured out that she was in love with her. And no more

than a month later, before Sam actually got around to *telling* her, she took a staff blast to the chest and died.

Sam wiped tears from her eyes. She hated feeling like this. Hated the pain, hated being so emotional, hated not being able to *stop* thinking about it, just plain hated it.

She got up and started pacing back and forth.

Finally, the first zero-point module began feeding power into its systems. The power situation upgraded from serious to unsatisfactory. Which was pretty good. At this point, it would take a major unforeseen disaster to cause any serious problem. And that disaster would have to hit in the next few minutes, before the second ZPM became operational. Throughout its buried components, self-repair systems speeded up as they were allowed to use more power. Very soon, it would be back at normal operating capacity.

In preparation, it started scanning the visitors for real.

The tent was cold enough to make breath come out as white puffs of smoke. There was frost on the monitors, and the coffee cooled way too fast.

Still, it was less cold than outdoors.

"Tell me you've got something, Daniel," O'Neill said. "This place is starting to bug me."

"I thought you liked it here," Daniel said. "Calm, relaxed..."

"Yeah, well, that was before something woke up and ate Carter," he said. "Because that was a surprise, and I don't like those."

"They are rarely good," Teal'c said. "Unless it is one's birthday."

"I don't like them then either," O'Neill said. "Daniel?"

Dr Jackson moved a couple of papers and looked at his laptop screen.

"I think I do have something," he said. "Although it's..."

Jack glared at him.

"It's what?" he said.

"You know how some things old races or individuals did can remain as myths and legends, usually quite distorted?"

O'Neill and Teal'c nodded.

"This was, as far as I and Sam can figure out, a production and distribution center built and used by a particular fraction within Ancient society."

"So it was a factory?" Jack said.

"Yes and no," Daniel said.

Jack rolled his eyes.

"It built things, sure," Daniel went on. "But not for the use of the fraction's members. The entire thing was controlled by a computer so sophisticated that it may have been sentient. This computer would scan the thoughts and actions of everyone on the planet. For those it found worthy, it would build items that they desired. It would store these things until the planet reached the point in its orbit when the factory site was least influenced by the local sun's radiation. Then, it would use something akin to ring transporters to deliver the things it had built to their recipients."

Daniel fell silent with a slightly sheepish look.

"It new if they'd been naughty or nice?" Jack said in his you've-got-to-be-kidding voice.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "And it gave them presents. At the winter solstice."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow.

"There is a legend much like this that is told to Jaffa children," he said.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "We have it on Earth too."

"Sam's being held prisoner in Santa's workshop?" Jack said. "Oh, the General is going to love this."

He got up from his chair and started putting on more clothes. The Stargate was some distance away from their campsite, so reporting back to Earth necessarily involved a walk outdoors.

"At least she should be safe in there," he said. "I mean, Santa's nice, right? That's something."

Teal'c raised an eyebrow again. Daniel looked pained.

"No?" Jack said.

"In some versions of the myth," Daniel said, "those found to be naughty get dragged off to Hell."

"Oh," Jack said. "Great."

If it had had the ability to be disappointed, it probably would have been. It was designed to cater to billions, and all it got was four. Three of which were, even at a cursory scan, obviously unsuitable. Leaving all of its enormous capacity to fulfill a desire from one single person.

As it brought all possible scanning modules online and trained them on its visitor chamber, something akin to the thought *she'd better have some major desires to fulfill* passed through its consciousness-level.

The first scan was purely of the biological, from individual ions via DNA strands up to organs. The visitor was amazingly similar to the people who had built the machine. Far too similar for it to be a coincidence. This particular specimen was also rather healthy, so no obvious things for it to do there. It proceeded to the next level.

Memories.

Figuring those out took some time. It would have even for the culture it had been built for, where it had a good grasp of the underlying psychology, thought patterns, myths, archetypes, history, morality and all those other things that made up a mind. Figuring all that out from snatches of language, a running brain and the contents of an extremely primitive information manipulation device was, to put it mildly, a challenge. It was the most fun the machine had had in, well, millions of years. It took it several *minutes* to get a reliable scan.

And it was paydirt.

A missing mate! Killed in battle! Sorrow, anguish, remorse for a lost future, self-loathing for failure to rescue! Oh, what a richness of emotion there was. For a nanosecond or two the machine pondered. Could it make a gift to fix this? Could it bring the visitor's mate back? Normally, the answer would've been firmly in the negative. But this wasn't normal times. *All* its resources could be brought to bear on the problem. More, actually, since the machine in the absence of a working government had control of the local terminal to the wormhole net. A net through which the lost mate had traveled a number of times, according to the visitor's memories. Including one only minutes before she died.

The machine stopped and thought. The net wasn't used much these days, according to the logs. Still, it was used enough that the mate's patterns would have expired from the terminals' buffers. So in order to get those patterns it would have to access the buffers of the receiving terminal through a timelike loop...

Having decided on a course of action, it activated the terminal and started looking for a suitable black hole to route a path by.

Sam was trying to figure out why an *enormous* energy source had suddenly appeared under the temple, at the very edge of her sensor range, when her radio crackled to life.

"Carter, are you there?" O'Neill's voice said.

"Yes, sir," she said into the mouthpiece. "Although I'm kind of busy. Something funny is happening here."

"I'll just ask a brief question, then," he said.

"Shoot."

"What does it mean when the swirly surface in the Stargate turns blue?"

Sam stopped typing.

"That's not possible," she said.

"Oh," Jack said. "I'll just go tell it not to do that, then?"

"What did you do?" Sam said.

"Nothing!" came the reply. "I was just about to start dialing Earth when the Gate started dialing itself, and a little after it connected somewhere it turned blue."

Sam was about to stand up and rush out when she remembered that she was locked in. She swore.

"Sir, is the MALP there?"

"No, it's back at the camp."

Sam swore again. There must be something she could get him to use to get some more detail on what the event horizon was doing.

"Sir," she said as an idea struck, "you have a laser sight on your sidearm, don't you?"

"Yeah," the response crackled.

"Shine it on the event horizon and tell me what color the reflection is."

While she waited for the response, she frantically dug around on her laptop to find the Gate physics modeling package. She didn't use it often, but when she did need it was usually a question of life or death so she kept it around.

"Green," the radio said after a while. "Slightly bluish perhaps, but it's hard to tell."

"Thanks," her mouth said without much involvement from her brain. She was tapping numbers into the modeling package, trying to make her equations fit reality. A blueshift of roughly point sixteen would mean that...

...someone was pouring a whole lot of energy into that wormhole. Energy of about the same order of magnitude as the one she'd been puzzled by when O'Neill contacted her.

"Sir, are you there?" she said into the radio.

"Yup," came the reply.

"I think some mechanism here in the temple is doing something with the Gate," she said.

"Any idea what?"

Just as he asked, a simulation finished running. Sam stared at the result.

"I think it's established a connection through *time*, sir," she said.

"E.T. is calling home?"

Sam shook her head. "I have no..."

Her voice faded away as a coffin-like object rose silently from the floor in the center of the room.

The radio crackled to life again.

"Hey," Jack said. "The wormhole just vanished, but the chevrons are still lit up."

In front of Sam, a bluish shimmering surface surrounded the coffin-thing.

She stared at it, at first too stunned to even think clearly.

"It's here," she said into the radio.

"Can it do that?" Jack said.

"No," Sam said. "Not as far as we know."

The machine had no concept of luck. That the visitors had come during the short interval during which interference from the local star was low enough that it could use its experimental wormhole manipulation equipment was simply a fact. Not good or bad or fortunate or convenient, just another fact to take into account.

It superimposed the visitor's mate's quantum state onto a cloud of virtual particles. When the connection to the wormhole in the past broke, the energy released by the snapback was just about right to make the virtual particles real.

The rest was a simple matter of healing.

Sam sat staring at the coffin-like thing for hours. She couldn't make up her mind if she should be afraid or not. It was clear that *something* was being brought there from the past. Or the future. Either way, machinery that had been left unattended for millions of years messing about with the fabric of time and space did sound rather worrying. That it had done impossible things with the Stargate didn't exactly make it any less so.

Although she did have a few ideas on how to modify their theories on how the Gate worked to allow for what she'd just seen...

Her mind drifted so thoroughly into the realms of theoretical physics that she entirely missed when the coffin began to open. It happened slowly and silently, and Sam only noticed it when there was a gap along the top a handspan wide. As far as she could tell, there was a human body inside. She got up from her seat and readied her zat gun. Perhaps not the friendliest move possible, but she was too nervous to care.

The opening grew wider, and it became obvious that the body inside was human and female. Or, at least, appeared to be. It didn't move. Sam circled the coffin to get a look at the body's face. When she saw it, she froze.

Janet?!

She put the zat away and pulled on the coffin lid, trying to make it move faster. This couldn't be. It was just... unreal. She must've fallen asleep, and now she was dreaming. It wasn't like it'd be the first time a naked Janet Fraiser appeared in her dreams. Or the second. Or the hundredth.

"Carter?" the radio said. "What's happening?"

"I... don't know, sir," she replied. "I'll get back to you when I know more."

Maybe not dreaming, then.

The woman's eyelids flickered. Sam knelt next to the coffin. She looked *amazingly* like Janet, down to the nearly invisible wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

Her eyes opened. Her gaze darted around for a few moments, then fixed on Sam.

"Sam?" she said. She frowned. "Where are we? This isn't the infirmary."

About a million different emotions battled for Sam's attention.

"Janet?" she said. "Is it really you?"

"I think so," Janet said. "Shouldn't I be?"

She looked down and noticed that she was naked.

"Sam?" she said. "Please start explaining why I'm lying naked in a coffin in some alien room with you looking like you've seen a ghost, because I'm about to start freaking out here."

"What's the last thing you remember before this?" Sam managed to get out.

"I was attending to Airman Wells when I got hit in the chest and..."

Her voice faded as she spoke. She swallowed heavily before she spoke again, this time with barely restrained panic.

"Sam, please tell me what's going on. The wound I remember was not survivable."

"You died," Sam said. "And now you're back. This is some kind of Ancient installation, and I think it just gated you here from the past and healed you."

They looked at each other in silence. After a while, Janet started giggling.

"Well," she said, "I guess that sooner or later some lethal threat had to get things the wrong way around."

Its task completed, the machine prepared to return to dormancy. This time, it did not assume that it would wake again after only a few years or centuries. It started planning for the *long* run. It had only been blind luck that it got woken up while it still had the capability to bootstrap itself back up to full operation. It could not rely on such luck again. This time, it left some subsystems in a kind of half-sleep, where they'd react to almost any change and if necessary fix any problems. Other systems were left totally awake, tasked with solving the problem of what to do when the local star went nova in a couple of billion years.

What to do about the heat death of the universe it left for later. There was, after all, rather a lot of "later" still to go.

They sat leaning against the coffin. Janet was dressed in Sam's spare clothes, which looked a bit like a kid playing dress-up, but was better than nothing. Sam had her arm around Janet's shoulders, and Janet leaned as much on Sam as on the coffin. Sam had just finished telling what little they knew about the place they were trapped in.

"Funny," Janet said. "Santa's workshop never looked like this in the pictures."

"I know," Sam said. "And I suspect the elves are actually nanobots, so we can't even see them."

"Sam?" Janet said.

"Yes?"

"Why *me*?"

She didn't have to be more specific than that. Sam could hear the rest of the question anyway. Why her, rather than someone else? What made her particularly deserving of a second chance that nobody else got?

"Er," Sam said. "I think... you know how it can figure out if someone's been living up to its ethical standard?"

She felt Janet nod.

"I think it can also figure out people's wishes. And I think that you're a gift for me."

Janet's entire body tensed.

"Samantha Carter," she said. "What are you saying?"

Sam drew a deep breath.

"I love you," she mumbled.

Janet sat up straight. She looked at Sam.

"I had to *die* before you figured that out?" she said.

Sam's gaze fell. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know you'd never..."

Her apology was interrupted by a sudden kiss. Too stunned to respond, Sam just sat there like a living question mark.

Janet broke the kiss and snuggled back up to Sam.

"You know," she said, "for one of the most brilliant people on Earth you can be amazingly dim sometimes."

Some brain function returned to Sam.

"What?" she said.

"I've been in love with you for years," Janet said.

"Oh," Sam said after some thought.

Her radio chose that moment to make noises again.

"Carter!" it said. "Are you all right?"

She did her best to get out the mouthpiece without having to dislodge Janet.

"Never better, sir," she said.

"It's been half an hour," Jack said. "Do you know more yet?"

She glanced over at the door. At some point, it had opened without her noticing. Possibly while Janet was kissing her. Right then, nuclear bombs going off could have passed her by.

"The door's opened, sir," she said. "As for the rest, I think it's better if you just come over and look for yourselves."

"We'll be right there. Out."

Janet turned so she lay with her head resting in Sam's lap. She smiled.

"They'll be quite surprised," she said.

"Oh yes," Sam said. "In a good way. Teal'c might even smile."

"Fancy that," Janet mumbled while she pulled Sam down for a kiss.

Outside, the midwinter stars twinkled.