

Title: Naturally Selective

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Summary: Sam is forced to rethink her views after leaving Fifth behind.

Warnings: None.

Status: Complete January 2003.

Notes: As always, feedback is appreciated and will be replied to. However, no flames please. I can burn my own toast without any help, thank you.

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It just wasn't fair. Angrily she slammed the screwdriver down and stared at the remains of the probe she'd just dismantled. She'd been staring at its components for a good ten minutes now and she was no nearer seeing what its problem was than she'd been before. No dry joints, no broken capacitors or resistors that she could see, no damaged tracks on the PCB. So why did the darned thing refuse to work? She could have just dropped it off at maintenance, but that would have meant waiting for it and she really wanted it working today.

She just couldn't seem to concentrate. Ever since returning from Halla she'd felt a spark of dissatisfaction within her gut, which threatened to grow if she couldn't stop it soon. Fifth had trusted her and she'd lied to him. He'd seemed as innocent as a child and he'd believed her. How could the Colonel have ordered her to lie like that, to an

ally too? Was being used like that part of the job description now? Did he have that right?

His cold, harsh voice echoed in her mind.

“He wasn’t human. Get that through your heads.”

Knowing that she’d been under orders didn’t make it any easier on her conscience. In her mind it was only Fifth’s humanity that had saved them.

How could the SGC possibly hope to gain new technologies if they treated potential allies like they’d done Fifth? They could have learned so much from him. A completely new type of life-form, incredibly advanced, self-aware, and he’d been willing to help them. Right now she could have been sat down with replicator technology, studying it, seeing how it worked, figuring out how to control it. She couldn’t do that now though, could she? Colonel O’Neill had doomed Fifth to the same fate as all the other androids. His fate was probably even worse, considering the rest of them must have figured out by now what Fifth had done. What had become of him, she wondered? SG1 might be long dead before a way could be found to control the replicators. If that day never came, there would be a time when Fifth would have to face up to the rest of his brethren for what he’d done. What would his punishment be?

It was no good. She had to get something to eat and drink. She hadn’t stopped working since they’d got back, which was now over six hours ago. She’d been so keen to immerse herself into her work, to try and wipe out the memories of the last mission, that she hadn’t even left her office. As soon as the post-mission medicals and briefing were over, she’d dashed to her lab, making her official report top priority. She’d rushed it, desperate to get it out of the way, emailing copies to both the General and the Colonel, so she could forget about the whole business. The report was blunt and to the point. She hadn’t said anything that directly challenged anything the Colonel had done, or said. But neither could she enthuse about what had happened either. ‘We came. We saw. We conquered’ was about the gist of it this time. Nothing else seemed to cover her feelings, but she behaved like a good little Air Force Major should and didn’t write anything negative either.

The briefing had been hard work, keeping up that ‘everything went as normal’ façade. Jonas, in particular, had been perturbed about events; Teal’c had been a little distant with them all, whilst the Colonel had been batted down, his emotions buried deep. He’d been the epitome of professionalism, short but courteous with them, only slightly more approachable than he’d been as they left Halla. She knew he felt ill at ease with how things had gone. You didn’t work with someone as close as they had for so long, without getting to know something about their moods, even with someone as private as the Colonel. But if he was having problems with the mission, he was the one who’d called all the shots. It was too late now to have second thoughts.

Leaving the mess on her workbench where it was, she stood up and stretched, walking slowly over to the door. She’d just turned into the corridor, preparing to shut the door behind her, when she heard the very distinctive sounds of the Colonel’s businesslike stride coming down the corridor towards her. Sighing at the thought of not being able

to get away from the mission yet, she squared her shoulders and turned around to greet him.

“Sir.”

The look in his eyes immediately told her something was wrong. He was too rigid in his stance; the usual looseness he held his long limbs in completely reigned in. His eyes bored into hers, the sable irises hard and unyielding. This was even worse than his mood on the journey back.

“I’ve read your report, **Major.**”

The way he emphasised her rank showed he wasn’t pleased about it, but she hadn’t said anything that wasn’t true.

“Is there a problem, Sir?”

She kept her voice as controlled as possible, refusing to emphasise his salutation in return. She was hungry and thirsty and as tired as hell, if she was to admit it to herself. If she was tired, then surely he was too? Why couldn’t this wait until later?

“You could say that. My office now.”

“I was just about to grab some lunch, how about.....”

“**Now,** Major.”

He cut her off mid-sentence, something he rarely did unless she’d lost him in technobabble, reminding her that he was in fact her CO. Then, leaving no room for argument, strode off towards his office, knowing she’d no choice but to follow. Damn him. Could this day possibly get any worse?

She almost had to run to keep up with his lengthy gait. He held the elevator for her, so she could join him in the ride to his floor, which was taken in complete silence, leaving her time to get worried about what was happening. The thought repeated itself that, despite their usually friendly relationship, he still was a Colonel and higher up the pecking order than she was. She started reviewing her report in her mind, as they strode down the corridor together, people moving out of the way of the preoccupied Colonel. Could she possibly have put something in there to warrant a reprimand of some sort? No, she didn’t think so. She’d listed events as they’d happened: Expectations; actions; reactions; projections and summary. All neatly bullet-pointed and spell checked as usual: factual, precise and to the point. She was sure there was nothing he could pull her up for.

So why the sudden problem that couldn’t wait? Had she actually managed to hurt his feelings? Well, the mission hadn’t been easy on anyone. Why did he have to be any different?

They reached his office and he held the door opened for her again, then shut it to keep any observers out, making her nervous. Deciding it was best to behave in an

appropriate manner, she remained standing at attention in front of his desk, whilst he walked around to the other side. He turned his back to her and stood there for a few moments, before taking a deep breath. Then, without turning around, finally spoke in a clipped voice.

“Wanna tell me about your report, Carter?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Sir.” There weren’t any inaccuracies on it, or misrepresentations. She was sure.

“Cut the crap. You’re pissed with me and every line of that report says so.” He turned around to face her, his eyes still hard. “Tell me I’ve got it wrong. Tell me you’ve suddenly decided to re-evaluate your report layout and come up with the most boring, useless piece of documentation ever.” He held up the single page report that he must have run off his printer. “Admin will love you. This takes up less space than last week’s memo on missing drawing pins did.”

The joke sounded so like the normal Colonel, that for a brief moment she almost forgot the seriousness of the situation, but there wasn’t any humour in his tightly controlled voice.

“So go on. Tell me I’ve got it wrong. Convince me otherwise.”

She began to suspect that she really might be in trouble and decided to be very careful about what she said. Even so, she was loath to lie outright. She’d never been good at that anyway, either at home or work.

“I’m sorry if my report is substandard, Sir, I’ll be happy to re-evaluate it for you.”

He simply stared back at her, raising an eyebrow, unconvinced.

“I really didn’t have anything else to add to the report, Sir.” She qualified.

“You normally have plenty of observations to add to your report. Why not this time? Any junior officer could have written this, without even having been on the mission. Certainly not by Major Carter, the second in command of SG1, the Theoretical Astrophysicist who built a Particle Beam Generator.” He took a deep breath and seemed to collect his thoughts for a moment, making her wonder what would come next. “So what **didn’t** you want to put in your report?”

Oh-oh. Time to sink or swim.

“I understand the decision you took, Sir. I just have doubts about it being the right one. I feel Fifth would have been a big help to us.”

“And?” He still stared at her, forcing her to drop her eyes from his scrutiny. He knew there was more. He knew her too well.

“You made me lie to him. I don’t appreciate being used like that.”

“So what?” His voice was only slightly louder than normal, but the intensity of feeling behind it surprised her. Was he really not bothered? Involuntarily, she took a step backwards.

“Pardon, Sir?”

“I said, ‘so what’, Major. That good enough for you? Did you hear me this time?”

“Ye... Yes, Sir... But why?” Did he really not care if he trampled over her feelings? For all that he was her CO, she thought they had at least some friendship between them that would make him care more about her than that.

“Why?” He placed his hands on the desk, leaning down towards her, negating the step back she’d just taken. “Why would I care about you following orders? That’s what you’re paid for isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I thought you appreciated hearing our opinions. You’ve always listened before.”

“And I’ve still always made the decisions, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Regardless of whether you’ve agreed, or not.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you’ve never handed in such a poor excuse for a report like this before!” He held the report so tightly, that it was screwed up in his grip.

He was right and she couldn’t deny it. No matter what her views on the mission, the disapproval in the report would be obvious because of its brevity.

“Let me ask you something.” The Colonel stood back up again and turned away to face the far wall. “You think you could have trusted Fifth, don’t you?”

“Yes.” She was puzzled. Where was he going with this? He’d had less contact with Fifth than she’d had.

“Remember Reese?”

“Yes.” How could she forget the young looking creator of the replicators? Daniel had so wanted her to trust them.

“How did you react when we first found her?”

“I was fascinated by her. The technology was incredible, like nothing we’ve ever seen, so life-like.”

“Life-like, yes, but not life, like **us**. You were keen to turn her on, weren’t you?”

“Yes. Who wouldn’t be?”

“Not everyone, Carter, believe me. So you were keen to see how she worked?”

“Yes.”

“Did you trust her?” He turned sharply around to face her once more.

Oh... Now she had an idea where his thoughts might be going.

“At the beginning, yes. I wanted to. She could have told us so much.”

“Yet at the end, what happened?”

“You had to kill her.” Daniel had been upset for days, until he accepted how close the base had come to being blown up to protect the planet. It had been several more days before he and the Colonel had got their friendship back on track, helped along by Daniel buying tickets to the next Hockey league match in the area.

“And why did I do that?”

She took a deep breath.

“Reese seemed to become unstable. It looked like she’d also lost control of the replicators.”

“Agreed. Even First said her programming was flawed. So do you have any proof that Fifth wouldn’t have done exactly the same, given time?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean he would have done and I don’t believe he could have.”

“We can’t do our jobs on what we **believe** might happen, Carter. You, of all people, a scientist, know a hypothesis is only that until it’s proved, or disproved. What you **believe** will not save those under our protection. You take action, or you don’t and, believe me, by not acting, you are, in fact, doing just that in the long run. So we’ve ascertained that replicators can appear life-like and trustworthy at the start, but can go off the rails, yes?”

“Yes.” No matter what she believed, she couldn’t discount what he’d said.

“So now we get into mind control. You felt you could trust Fifth because of that mind-meld whammy they put on us?”

“Yes, he talked to me whilst we were joined, showed me his planet.”

“And do you remember that Blood Of Sokar stuff they force-fed us on Netu? Did Apophis show you stuff there too?”

This time she just nodded, the memories not too pleasant of what they'd been put through on that mission either. In fact the Colonel had been hurt there, trying to protect her from the Jaffa.

"Well, I don't know about you," he continued, "but what First did to me didn't seem an awful lot removed from what happened back then. Maybe a touch more sterile, but definitely manipulated. Now if I know I was shown a twisted vision of reality, how can you be certain that Fifth didn't do the same to you?"

His argument did make sense, even though she was certain Fifth hadn't tried to mislead her. Could she have been fooled?

"I can't, Sir, but that doesn't mean to say...."

He cut her off again with the impatient wave of one hand.

"Can you be sure?"

"No."

"Good, another point out of the way. By the way, thought you might like to know that the first thing First ripped from my mind was the Iris code. Just another little something for you to ponder. Now think about this. If we'd brought Fifth back with us, what do you think would have happened to him here?"

"I'm not sure. He could have helped us here to understand his technology, worked with us in one of the labs."

"That's not very likely now is it, Carter? Think again."

It didn't take too long to realise any hope of that was unlikely. Would 'the powers that be' remain quite happy to have a replicator wandering loose about the SGC, privy to all their systems and database? How long had it taken for them to trust Teal'c, who'd been prepared to kill his own Jaffa? How much of their eventual permission had been due to the constant support of the Colonel?

"NID." She didn't need to voice it as a question.

"Correct. Even Hammond wouldn't have been able to protect him from that. Not that I'd be too keen to have him here anyway, as per my previous two points. So we have a replicator who's come to Earth and suddenly finds himself in the hands of the NID. What do you suppose they're going to do to him? Bake him cakes? Take him out for a Sunday stroll round the park? Take him to the movies?"

"He'd help them instead then." Knowing how the NID worked, the argument sounded poor even to her, and she saw the Colonel recognise the defeated tone in her voice.

"They'd rip him to pieces, Carter, and well you know it. Or they'd TRY to take him to pieces. Did you see any technology on that mission that would allow us to control him, should the worst happen?"

“No. Our weapons seemed ineffective against them.”

“So when the NID started pulling little bits off him, what would they be able to do to stop him saying no? What would stop him from deciding he’d had enough of their hospitality and wander off? What would stop him from saying an eye for an eye?”

“I don’t know.”

“No and neither do I, but I can tell you one thing.” His eyes went vacant for a short moment, before sharpening again. “A prisoner’s first responsibility is always to escape and he would have, probably sooner than later, before we’d found out anything useful in how to either contain him, or protect ourselves. What would have happened to our planet then? If the Asgard can’t control them and we can’t, what could we do to protect the planet?”

“I do concede the points, Sir, but it’s still all supposition.”

“Supposition, hell, Major.” His voice rose up a controlled notch again. “It’s our job to protect. Or have you forgotten that?”

“No, Sir.” She started to slouch against the chair and even debated sitting down for a moment, before thinking better of it. She’d never had this kind of dressing down by the Colonel before. She’d never suffered this command side of him, even taking into account his harsh behaviour after Halla. It was unpleasant and totally unexpected. It made her wonder how different he might have acted whilst in the Special Forces.

“At attention, **Major**.” He reprimanded her, and then seeing she was stood up straight once more, started again.

“So we’ve seen that a) Replicators can appear friendly at first, but can change later on into a threat, and b) Beings, other than yourself, in your mind can control what you see and feel. Am I correct so far?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t dispute either assertion, no matter how positive her thoughts of Fifth.

“Well, now let’s move on to Fifth’s so called humanity that got thrown at me. Humanity, as in human by the way, which he wasn’t. We were the first humans they’d ever seen. The only template they had to go on was Reese’s and let’s not forget what **she** did to the people of her planet. Anyway, that aside, what have we seen about the possible dangers of others’ humanity? We don’t even have to stay on Earth for that, although our own glorious past brings several characters to my mind instantly. Some so recent that they even figure in my own messed up past. Hell, I can think of two characters instantly that we’ve met **out there**, whose humanity royally screwed around with things. Remember Machello?”

All she could do was nod her head. These accumulative observations were starting to make her rethink her whole attitude towards the last mission. The Colonel had obviously put a lot more thought into events than she’d given him credit for. She had

a habit of falling for the same act he frequently misled other people in, allowing them to underestimate him. It looked like she'd done it again, getting hooked up in Jonas's emotional response to events, instead of looking at the wider picture.

“One lonely old man, who cared so much for protecting others from the Goa'uld that first he hijacked Daniel's body, leaving him to die, after we **brought him back**, being quite prepared to leave me and Teal'c a little inseparable too. Then he damn near killed Teal'c with his little bugs, got Daniel incarcerated and almost got me and Doc packed off as loony toones too. All for the sake of his humanity, or whatever 'ity' he happened to be. Same difference. Then I seem to recall Linea. Again, just one person, one harmless looking old woman, who we **also** happened to bring back with us. What had she done? Let's see. The Destroyer Of Worlds, wasn't she? Trying to cure a plague, she told us. Only killed half the population of one place with the plague we later found out she'd started, then turned the entire inhabitants of another into regressed amnesiacs. I'm sure she thought she was being humane too in her own little way... Perhaps you and I, Carter, aren't qualified to judge someone else's humanity.”

He stopped again to think about something and, for a moment, Sam thought that maybe this lecture might have come to an end. She watched his eyes, as they scanned some of his military certificates, hung on the wall behind her. Certificates that reflected some of the accomplishments he'd achieved in his career. Although from the expertise he regularly demonstrated, she guessed there were a lot more that he never put on display. There were just enough hung there to remind lower ranks that he was, in fact, a lot more experienced than they were. It was a realisation that she'd totally forgotten to take into account on Halla.

Only being able to guess at what his career had encompassed before he'd joined the SGC, she wondered how he'd dealt with the things he'd had to do before. Was that why he'd had such diverse mood swings on the last mission? She could understand his initial sarcasm and wisecracks, that was his way of deflecting worries and keeping hope alive in others that everything was going to be OK. He was like that on most missions. Was the later harsh, closed off attitude, merely a sign of how he'd learned to cope after a bad mission, when he'd been forced to do something he hadn't wanted to? Did he shut everything down so tightly that it appeared he was angry? She wished she could ask Daniel how the Colonel had been on the first Abydos mission. She'd only heard bits of rumours, but it sounded like that's how he might have been back then.

Finally, he pulled his thoughts together again and looked her once more in the eyes, his glare not quite so cold this time.

“Now let's just remember here that I don't really have to explain any of my reasoning to you, but I want to, OK? I'd like you to understand. And let's also remember that if the techno-bugs got out of control, it wouldn't just be **our** planet that we're talking about here suffering the consequences, but the whole freaking Universe out there too. That's a lot of planets we're talking about for the sake of one artificial life-form, no matter how human looking he was.” He paused for effect. “If you had to pick between saving someone's life, say mine, against the rest of the Universe, what would you pick?”

“But we didn’t have to leave you on Halla!”

“Forget that mission for a moment, Carter, this is theoretical. Me, or the universe, which would it be?”

She was backed up into a corner and knew it. Of course there was only one answer.

“The Universe, Sir.”

“Correct. Do you remember when that energy probe thing took you over and I had to kill you with the zat?”

It wasn’t something she was likely to forget in a hurry, stuck inside a computer without use of any of her senses, unable to communicate.

“Couldn’t forget it.” Her regret with the experience coloured her voice, but he let it pass.

“That was exactly the same thing, a command decision. That entity wanted to destroy us and everything to do with us. It was either you or us and I chose us. Do you think I enjoyed making that decision either?”

“No.”

“Damn right I didn’t. I admit I couldn’t be any more sure back then, than I was with Fifth, as to what might happen in the future, but there are times when you’ve got to make a choice and make it quick. You can’t afford to wait to act, because by omission, you’re allowing something else to act instead. Fifth might have been OK, he might also have done some good, but we can’t afford to take chances when the risks are so great. I’d do it again in an instant if I had to, just as I’d expect you to. That’s what command is about and until you can accept that, you’ll never be ready for your own.” He seemed talked out, the harshness gone from his voice. Now he just seemed tired. “Go on, Carter, get outta here.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She stood there for another moment, just watching his back as he turned away from her again. He seemed so lonely and she began to review her recent actions and attitude towards him. He was correct in that she hadn’t been able to make that decision and, after taking her through his thought processes, she could see that he’d really had no other option. How much could making such difficult decisions cost him? Had his past open-approach to team making decisions made her forget her respect for her senior officer? Had she abused his lenient authority? Had she disrespected both him and his greater experience? Had she forgotten there was a very good reason for the chain of command?

Was he right in questioning if she was ready yet for her own command?

She turned around and opened the door, sparing his back one last glance before she left, shutting the door behind her again. What a mess. Was she going to end up with

an official reprimand over this? No, she didn't think the Colonel was going to do that, it wasn't his style and nothing in their little meeting had suggested he'd been thinking of it. In fact, she'd never had a CO before who would have taken the time to explain everything like the Colonel had just done. He might have been angry and he had every reason to be disappointed in her lack of support, but he'd still taken the time to sort things out with her. Could she ever make it up to him? Well, not if that report she'd handed in to the General too got any further into the system. Taking a gulp to calm her nerves, she headed for Hammond's office.

She'd just reached his office when the General opened the door himself, as though he was about to leave.

"Major?" His greeting was completely professional, but without the subliminal caring she could usually hear in his voice.

"Sir, I wish to talk to you about my last report."

"I see." He replied, whilst walking sedately back behind his desk.

She followed him in and shut the door behind her, before coming to attention in front of him.

"Am I to take it you're not completely satisfied with your report's condition?"

"Yes, Sir."

He nodded his head.

"Do I take it that you perhaps submitted the report before you'd finished with it?"

"Yes." It was obvious he'd already read it and wasn't happy with its contents.

"I was assuming you must have accidentally sent me your first draft, so I haven't processed it yet."

She breathed a sigh of relief, whilst the General's eyes bored into hers, unyielding as he watched her.

"Yes, Sir. The report in its present condition may suggest an unfavourable opinion of events. I'd like the opportunity to redress that."

Hammond sat down and rested his elbows on the solid desk, steepling his fingers before him, but he didn't give her permission to sit down herself, leaving her standing before him. It was a subtle reminder of who was in charge.

"I'm glad to hear that Major. Over the last few years, I think I've got to know my senior officers well enough to know when something isn't running as well oiled as it should be. If anyone else were to read that report, it would appear as though Colonel O'Neill didn't have any support from his Second on the mission. Personally, I've always been of the opinion that if any of my officers didn't feel able to support their

CO in the field, it would always be possible for them to be reassigned to base duties. I don't want to have to reconsider the current assignment of any of my personnel." He let that statement sink in before continuing. "SG1 is an extremely unusual unit, having an equal number of military and non-military personnel. It can't be easy for the Colonel to balance out all the variables he must encounter on every field decision he has to make. In fact, no one expected SG1 to last more than a few weeks after it was formed. The fact that it did can't be in any small measure due to the leadership ability of the Colonel himself."

"I appreciate that."

"Do you, Major?"

She realised that she actually **did** now and the General nodded at something he saw in her face, before continuing.

"I fully support the actions that the Colonel took on Halla. It was the only safe tactical decision he could have made and, under the same circumstances, I would have done exactly the same. The safety of this facility and the planet is our main concern here, Major. Please don't forget that."

He made a show of reaching for a printed copy of her report out of his top tray and tore it in two.

"I'll expect to receive your completed report by the end of the day. That will be all, Major."

Feeling slightly unsteady by being taken to task twice in one day, she saluted and quickly marched out of his office, at a loss as to where to go next. She obviously had to get on and re-do her report as a matter of urgency, before anyone decided to take matters further. Having been taken through his decision making process with the Colonel first, then being gently reprimanded by the General, she began to appreciate that, for once, she'd let the scientist in her overrule the military officer that should have come first. Had she got so used to the Colonel's lenient approach to her scientific curiosity, that she'd forgotten she was first and foremost a USAF officer? Had she taken his forgiving nature as a right? As she travelled the maze of corridors, lost in thought, she stopped when she found herself unexpectedly outside O'Neill's office again.

She knocked quietly on the door, self-conscious and not wanting to attract the attention of any other officers wandering up and down. For all she knew, someone might have been listening outside the door earlier and news of the meeting could soon be all round the base. However, her subconscious mind obviously wanted her here, even if her conscious mind was nervous. She knew she needed to apologise to him and wanted to do it before returning to her own office. There was no reply. Deciding to leave a note for him on his desk to ask to see him when he had a minute, she opened the door.

She wandered over to his desk and was about to grab a pencil and sheet of paper, when she noticed him curled up on top of his bunk in the far corner, fast asleep.

Quietly walking over, she could see a framed photo of Charlie near one of his hands, but so near the edge of the mattress that it was in danger of falling off. She carefully picked it up and stared at the fresh-faced youth who grinned back at her, so like his father, before placing the picture back safely on his desk. She didn't remember seeing it on base before and wondered if it normally lived in one of the desk drawers, where people wouldn't see it and ask unanswerable questions. There was an opened packet of headache pills on the desk, the contents scattered, which she tidied up and slipped back inside a drawer. They'd come from Janet, she recognised the packaging and noted that they'd been signed out for earlier today. Sighing, she realised she was probably the cause of his pain.

Staring down once more at the sleeping man, she noticed his nose seemed a little redder than normal and his eyes a little puffy. Was it her imagination, or had he been crying? Over Charlie? Could First's mental intrusion have involved memories of his dead son? She felt terrible. Whilst she'd been worried over Fifth, he'd been worried about them all, having to make difficult decisions, and without her support. What sort of officer did that make her? What sort of friend did that make her?

He didn't have anyone anymore to confide in. No family. No friends really, except his team and she realised that despite her bruised ego, he **was** her friend. Without that, he could so easily have put her on report for that appalling mission report, but he hadn't. He'd taken the time to explain himself, something he wasn't required to do, but he did, even if he was angry at the time. She couldn't blame him. She'd deserved it. And now here he was, on his own, with only his misery for company. Only Daniel had ever seemed to get fully behind that armour he wore and now even he was gone. Dear Daniel. He'd always been the one to question the morals of what they were doing. Had she subconsciously been trying to fill that void? It had seemed to be Daniel's job to take the high ground and push the military stance to the back, usually because he didn't understand it, whereas she did. However, the Colonel had always made allowances for him, just like he did for all of his individually unique team-members. As Hammond had said, it **was** an accomplishment.

It was time to stop moping when things didn't go her way and be the friend and 2IC she was supposed to be. Gently picking up a spare folded blanket from the bottom of the bed, she draped it over him, before quietly leaving the office, shutting the light off behind her. Hopefully, she'd have her report re-written and some sort of apology worked out before he woke up. Those pills that Janet had given him were the strong ones; he could be out for hours yet. She wasn't even hungry any more, her gut too full of butterflies to think of food any longer.

An hour later, she finally hit the send button on her PC, sending her revised mission report back to both senior officers. This time there was nothing that anyone could pick up on that was less than fully supportive of her CO. She breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that everything would now be fine between her and the Colonel again. She couldn't imagine working under anyone else and, should she one day get her own command, she'd do her best to model herself on him.

There was a knock on the doorframe behind her and Jonas walked in.

"Hi." He greeted.

“Hi yourself.” She called back with a smile. It was difficult not to respond to Jonas like that, he just had one of those happy faces you couldn’t help but respond to. Especially now, when everything was still so new to him.

“Have you done your report?” He asked, bringing up the dreaded subject again.

“I’ve just sent it off now. Why?”

“I’m not sure what to do. I feel so confused over what Colonel O’Neill did, yet I don’t want to say anything against him. He’s finally starting to accept me, making sure I can take care of myself, yet I still feel we did wrong by Fifth. One person **can** make a difference, just like Doctor Jackson did for my world. How do we know Fifth wouldn’t have made that same difference here?”

She could sympathise with him. Even the Colonel had admitted he didn’t know about that, though he’d no choice but to assume the worst.

“I can’t tell you what to write Jonas, but I do know one thing. I now support everything the Colonel did back there.” Jonas looked at her in surprise, as he took a seat beside her. “I’ve had chance to re-evaluate events and realise he had no choice. I’m military, Jonas, born and bred and I should have seen past the possibilities to the probabilities. You said you read Daniel’s reports on our experiences with the replicators?”

“Yes, the way he tried to build up a relationship with Reese was fascinating.”

“Well, before you write your report, I suggest you read all of the team’s reports, anything to do with our encounters with the replicators. That includes the ones we met on Thor’s ship, then the Russian submarine, and finally when Apophis let them loose on the mothership we’d taken off Cronus. A few key words will help you find them on the database. Read all of them for a more overall understanding; mine, Teal’c’s and the Colonel’s. You might find you too want to re-evaluate your thoughts after that. You should really also watch the videos of the ones the Colonel and Teal’c encountered on the sub. Sometimes a picture can tell you more than a thousand words ever could.”

He looked puzzled, but stood up and moved towards the door.

“I’ll do that then, if you think it’s best, but I’d better get on with it now. There’s probably a lot of information to get through.”

She smiled back at him.

“See you later then?”

“Yes, later.”

Great. Alone again. Perhaps it was time to get something to eat at last? Janet would kill her if she started to lose weight again. Could she help it if she tended to burn off

calories quicker than she could put them on? She was just about to get up and stretch her legs when Teal'c entered the room, carrying a tray with sandwiches and a glass of milk on it.

"Hiya Teal'c." She welcomed, looking puzzled as he put the tray down beside her.

"MajorCarter." He greeted back. "I noticed your absence in the commissary earlier and took it upon myself to procure you some nourishment."

She laughed.

"You're as bad as the Colonel. He usually chases after me."

"The Colonel is asleep in his office."

"Yes, I know. He's been there a while now."

"The burden of command is not always easily shouldered." He responded enigmatically. Yet with Teal'c, most of what he said was hidden behind other words.

"I know. For all that we came back unscathed, this mission leaves me feeling like something went very wrong."

"I too am unhappy about the situation."

"Do you disapprove of leaving Fifth behind?"

"It matters not whether I approve, O'Neill had no choice in the matter. That is all we can console ourselves with."

"So you'd have done the same?"

"Yes, although I feel O'Neill made his decision quicker than I could have done. He is a highly skilled tactician."

She sighed and looked at the plate of chicken sandwiches, wondering how her world could have been so thoroughly upended in one day.

"I believe that they taste of macaroni cheese." Teal'c offered, as she raised one to her mouth. Stifling her laugh this time, she grinned at him instead.

"I will leave you to your refreshments. I have yet to complete my mission report and must return to it."

"Problem?" She asked. Teal'c normally finished his reports before any of them. His brevity with language was certainly useful for some things.

"My system suffered a 'fatal exception' and is currently being replaced."

“But those are usually simple problems. Can’t someone from IT support sort it out for you?”

“Unfortunately, it seems I may have accidentally damaged the machine whilst trying to correct it myself.”

“I didn’t know you understood programming enough to try and follow the prompts yourself.”

“I do not. I hit it.”

She nearly lost her mouthful of sandwich at the thought of what sort of damage one of Teal’c’s fists could do to the machine. Swallowing rapidly, she had to ask why.

“Why?”

“I have witnessed O’Neill performing the same operation on his television set many times.”

This time, she did laugh, the first really good laugh she’d had for a few days.

“Teal’c, you’re priceless!”

He merely bowed his head and, with the smallest of smirks on his face, left the room. She wouldn’t be surprised if the whole thing was a wind-up of his. Teal’c was really starting to appreciate Earth humour; he was just a lot subtler about it. Now all she had to do was figure out a way to apologise to the Colonel. Getting an idea whilst she ate, she collected a few bits and pieces from around the office and started working on them. A pencil, a small square of white fabric off a torn lab coat, some glue, a lump of blue-tack and a note printed off from her computer completed the collection.

This time she managed to get out of her office without being stopped and hurriedly made her way back to her CO’s office. Someone had stuck a ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door and she recognised the writing as Teal’c’s. Anyone else who did, wouldn’t dare to risk either the wrath of Teal’c, or the Colonel.

She opened the door cautiously, but was greeted with silence, as the Colonel was still asleep. Although he had rolled over and was now facing away from her, still underneath the blanket. Carefully, she left her gift by the monitor and stood back to admire the effect. The pencil and fabric had now become a white flag, held upright in the blue-tack base. Next to it she placed her homemade voucher, which simply read, “IOU one evening meal, you choose where and when. Carter.” She was sure he’d understand the apology and find her replacement report. They could discuss anything else later on. For now all she wanted to do was get back to normal, well at least as normal as anything else that happened around here was.

Quietly leaving the room again, she shut the door and left the sign on the outside. She had a few other tasks to complete before the Colonel woke up and came looking for her, which she was sure he would do. Namely one broken probe that still needed fixing, although the greatest fixing she felt had already been started.

The End