

STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON

A woman with short blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a Star Trek uniform with a black top and a blue and white collar, stands against a space background. To her left is a large, colorful nebula with purple, blue, and green hues. The background is filled with stars and a galaxy.

THE BLACK GATE

RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Ancient Evils

While on a routine survey mission, the Banshees are pulled into a mysterious black vortex and hurled across the universe to a forgotten planet orbiting a dead sun in a lightless void. Now lost amid the crumbling wreckage of a long-dead civilization and beset on all sides by murderous natives and terrifying creatures, they must solve the mystery of the ages in order to escape with their lives!

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron
The Black Gate

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Act 1

01 - Procrastination

Location: Banshees' apartment

The day was a glorious one. The bright yellow-orange sun rode high in a crystal cerulean sky; white puffy clouds played tag in merry circles, the entire firmament their playground; the fresh salt-tanged sea breeze tousled the hair of anyone not wearing a hat; the almost-subliminal hums of a modern metropolis mingled in pleasant harmony with the shore birds wheeling high overhead.

In other words, a typical Mediterranean day here on the jewel of the Briar Patch Sector, planet Serenity.

The day was a day custom made for *not* going to work. Nature was simply putting on too good a performance. No, this day was a day for reveling in life, for rejoicing in simply being alive, for thanking the Great Bird of the Galaxy that the universe was the way it was and you had the physical senses to appreciate it and the wisdom to know a good thing when you saw it. The

five young women of Starfleet's elite fighter group, Banshee Squadron, were certainly making the most of it.

In other words, they were lying around doing absolutely nothing!

From the roof garden atop their apartment building, they had a magnificent view across the flat expanse of the spaceport to the sparkling blue ocean beyond the city's edge, and five reclining deck chairs were lined up in a neat row facing that direction to take full advantage, yet the panorama went unheeded today. Clad in skimpy bikinis, Lee Carter, Max Vasser and Sam Beckett were lying face-down on the chairs working on their tans, blissfully oblivious, while Jo Schmidt, also in a bathing suit, was propped up on her back and completely engrossed in a PADD. The fifth pool chair was empty, but a bottle of sunscreen on the wooden deck beside a carelessly-tossed beach towel indicated that Alex Dalton too was somewhere around.

"This is what I call R&R," said Lee Carter without raising her head or opening her eyes.

"Rest and Relaxation," said Sam Beckett also without moving or looking up, though there was a contented smile on her lips.

"'Roast and Recuperation' if you guys don't use your sunscreen," replied Max testily, although on a day like this, even Max's natural curmudgeonliness was significantly diluted and softened.

From below, the sound of the front door chime interrupted the women's banter. None of them moved. The chime sounded again. "Anyone going to get that?" asked Carter.

"Alex is downstairs," said Max.

The door chime rang again.

"That's really starting to get annoying," commented Carter idly.

"Jo, why don't you go see who it is and get rid of them," suggested Max.

"Why me?"

"Because you're up."

"No I'm not."

"You will be as soon as you go answer the door."

Jo sighed and said, "Can't argue with logic like that," and rose from her chair. Slipping on her robe, she headed for the stairs leading down. The doorbell rang a third time before she was halfway there. A casual glance around the apartment on her way through to the front door showed no sign of Alex. The bell rang a fourth time just before she reached the door. "I'm coming! Hold your horses, will ya? Jiminy Christmas!" She yanked the door open. "Oh, hi, Dex. What's up?"

Dexter Gray stood at the door, his left hand poised to ring the doorbell again, his right hand behind his back obviously hiding something. He was dressed in casual civilian attire: a yellow polo shirt, brown pants, and sneakers. Jo's sudden appearance startled him and he jumped back a step, almost falling off the front porch. Only a vigorous windmilling of the arms kept him from going over the steps backwards, but that in turn caused what he'd been hiding behind his back to get thrown to the sky. As Jo grabbed him by the collar and hauled him back on his feet, a dozen pink roses fluttered down around him.

"Good grief, Dex! You're as jumpy as a Klingon with a tribble down his pants!" exclaimed Jo, bending down to help the hapless youth collect his disheveled daisies.

"Uh, is Alex here?" he asked, deciding that the only way to salvage his dented dignity was to cut straight to the point.

"Sure," replied Jo, suddenly understanding the young man's nervousness. She handed the flowers she had collected back to him. "She's around here somewhere. Let me go get her. Come on in."

Dexter followed Jo into the living room and parked himself in the center of the floor in front of the living room sofa and fidgeted. Jo smiled to herself and went in search of Alex.

She found the young blonde upstairs in her bedroom digging through her dresser drawers, clothes strewn all over the floor and bed. Jo ignored the mess; she'd seen it before. Alex was a notorious slob. Alex was facing away from the door, so Jo knocked on the doorframe and said, "Alex, Dex is here to see you. Didn't you hear the doorbell?" Alex closed the drawer she was ransacking and opened the next one down, completely ignoring Jo.

"Alex."

Still no response.

"Alex!"

This time Alex turned, surprise widening her eyes when she saw Jo standing at her door. She brushed back long hair the color of sunlight and popped a pair of tiny earphones out of her ears. "Sorry. I was listening to my music. What did you say?"

Jo rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation. "I said Dex is here to see you." But then she brightened again. "He's got flowers..." she added with a grin.

"Dex with flowers?" cried Alex joyfully. "Why didn't you say so?" She tossed down the earphones and leapt the mess on the floor in a single bound, landing beside Jo. Faster than a speeding bullet, she was out the door and downstairs to her waiting caller.

Jo shook her head in lighthearted dismay at the flightiness and easy good nature of the youngest Banshee, and headed back to the roof garden to resume her interrupted tan.

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"Hi, Dex," said Alex upon reaching the bottom of the spiral staircase in the living room.

At the sound of her voice, Dexter spun around from where he'd been idly examining the book titles on the shelves, almost knocking a model starfighter from its place. He quickly tried to hide the flowers he was carrying behind his back again.

Alex smiled. "Are those for me?" she asked sweetly, pointing to the bundle sticking out from behind Dexter's back.

His subterfuge discovered, Dex brought out the posies and held them out to Alex. "I thought you might like them," he said.

Alex took them and said, "They're lovely!"

"Say... Alex..." stammered Dex, nervously shuffling his feet, trying to gather his courage.

"Yes, Dex?"

"I was wondering if you'd, uh..."

"Yes?"

"What I mean is, uh, would you do me the honor of, uh..."

"Yes?" prodded Alex, getting a little exasperated.

"Would you like to..."

"Spit it out, man!"

"You wanna go on a date? With me?"

"Of course, Dex!" said Alex, beaming brightly. "I'd love to!"

Dexter exhaled and relaxed visibly, and became once more the not-nervous young co-pilot of Banshee Squadron's recon vessel *Longbow*. "Great!" He offered Alex his arm, which the girl gladly took, and side-by-side they went through the front door to whatever fun awaited them.

02 - Intrusion

Location: Banshees' apartment

Four bikini-clad women lay on their building's rooftop sundeck, whiling away the day catching some rays and catching up on their much-needed rest. The sun was bright, the air was warm, and the sounds of everyday city life below did not penetrate their fortress of leisure.

When the doorbell rang, four women groaned as one.

"Not again!" exclaimed Lee Carter.

"Where's Alex?" asked Max.

"On a date with Dexter," replied Jo. "That's who was at the door before."

"A date?" said Carter, surprised.

"No good can come of this," prognosticated Max in typical dark humor. "Jo, why don't you go see who it is and get rid of them."

"Why me again? I got it last time."

"Because you're up."

"No I'm not, and I'm not falling for that one again," replied Jo steadfastly.

From below, the doorbell rang again.

"I'll go," said Sam Beckett, rising from her lounge chair and stretching her long limbs luxuriantly. While shy and withdrawn to the point of incapacitation around strangers, among her close friends she was completely unabashed. She put on a robe before going downstairs.

The granite visage of Matthew Cross greeted her upon opening the front door. "Captain!" she exclaimed, surprised to receive a higher-ranking visitor on their day off.

"Lieutenant," replied Cross, nodding in formal greeting and stepping through the doorway. "Time for our next mission briefing."

In addition to the building being the Banshees' home, much of the downstairs area, aside from the living room and kitchen, served as their mission planning and logistics nerve center. For Cross to show up unannounced wasn't unusual, but he had the unnerving habit of always showing up when they were in the middle of some serious relaxing.

"I thought I felt the temperature drop," quipped Carter's voice from the top of the spiral staircase. She, Max and Jo were descending to the living room, their shapely figures only moderately concealed underneath their robes.

"Like a chill up my spine," supplied Max with a deadly serious voice, but the twinkle in her eye belied her harsh words.

"I thought today was our day off," continued Carter.

"Today *was* your day off," corrected Cross. He checked his watch. "Your downtime officially ended at 1200 hours. It is now 1205, so let's get into our uniforms and get back to work!" A sudden realization struck Cross. He looked around the room. "There are only four of you," he said.

"The man's grasp of arithmetic never ceases to amaze me!" said Carter to Max.

"That's why he's a captain and you're just a lowly commander."

Cross smiled indulgently at their attempted humor. "I see the sun has gone to your heads, ladies," he retaliated. "We can remedy that with a long patrol in the Kuiper Belt, a hundred AU's from New Canada. No sun at all there."

"Alex is on a date," said Jo in response to the Captain's original arithmetical observation. She definitely preferred the warmth of the inner solar system to the cold wastelands of the rim.

"With Dexter," added Sam softly.

Matthew Cross' right eyebrow shot up in a very Vulcan-like manner. It took a few seconds for him to digest this new development. "Nothing good can come of this," was his eventual dubious pronouncement.

Max shot a knowing glance at Carter.

"Well, we'll have to fill them in later then," said Cross. "I'll be waiting for you in the briefing room." With that, he strode away, leaving Carter and the others to get dressed.

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Four women, fully clothed now in their black & white uniforms, though nonetheless alluring for it, were seated around the large central table in the Banshees' briefing room. The lights were dimmed and a holographic projection hung suspended above the table top, slowly rotating so all could get a good look. It was a basic diagram of the New Canada star system: a yellow-orange G7 star in the center, circled by 5 major planets and one asteroid belt. Sharing an identical orbit with the gas giant Txamsem were three smaller bodies. They were nestled in the giant's trailing Trojan position, and revolved around their common center of gravity in a completely yet impossibly stable

eternal merry-go-round, and it was these three that were highlighted in the holographic display.

Standing beside the table, Matthew Cross was narrating.

"An anomalous energy reading has been detected in the general vicinity of the Trojan planetoids."

"Anomalous?" asked Jo, scientist of the group.

"It means the writer was too lazy to think of anything specific," replied Max.

"Oh."

"*Specifically*," continued Cross, directing a scathing look in Max's direction, "elevated levels of neutrinos and verteron particles."

"Ah. Technobabble. Much better," mumbled Max.

A light of recognition went on in Jo's eyes. "That almost sounds like—"

"Yes," interrupted Cross, determined to reserve the punchline for himself, "it sounds like a wormhole aperture."

"And we're just now noticing it?" said Carter skeptically. "This system has been inhabited for almost two decades. How can Starfleet not have detected a wormhole in their back yard for so long?"

"Part of the problem is the nearby Briar Patch. Even at this distance, it throws off a lot of background radiation, making it more difficult than usual to get clear sensor readings on anything. Another possibility is that wormholes are generally unstable. It could be that we're just now noticing it simply because it wasn't there before. Or it might not be a wormhole at all, but something completely different. Whatever the case, it's my and Dexter's assignment to go check it out in the *Longbow*.

"Your assignment is to fly cover for the *Longbow* in case whatever it turns out to be turns out to be not entirely friendly. Get it?"

"Got it," replied Carter.

"Good. We leave tomorrow at 0600 hours. Until then, enjoy the rest of your afternoon, ladies."

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2330 hrs...

A ghostly figure silently entered the front door of the Banshees' apartment and crept on tip-toes across the carpet to the spiral staircase leading up to the bedrooms. A hand was on the railing and a foot on the lowest step when it froze, startled by a sudden voice out of the darkness of the living room. "You're home late."

"Lights!" said the ghostly figure.

The room's A.I. heard the order and brightened the illumination, revealing Alex Dalton carrying a huge, red, stuffed Glommer at the bottom of the stairs, and Lee Carter sitting on the living room sofa with a PADD in her hand.

"Oh! Lee! I didn't see you in the dark. I was trying to be quiet so I wouldn't wake anyone up," said Alex.

"Just going over the mission plans for tomorrow, which, by the way, I'll have to brief you on tomorrow morning since you and Dexter were AWOL this afternoon." Carter pointed at Alex's big stuffed toy. "Looks like you had a good date."

"Yeah! Dex took me to the amusement park down on the pier." Alex hefted the Glommer and jiggled it, causing the four dangling legs and two gangly eye stalks to dance merrily and jingle. "He spent a fortune trying to win this for me at the 'Whack-a-Vole' table." She giggled at the memory.

Carter smiled. "I'd say he was smitten," she said. "For now though, you should get some sleep. Our mission starts tomorrow at 0600 hours."

03 - Preparation

Location: Banshee Hangar

Seven figures strode purposefully across the shiny floor of the cavernous spacecraft hangar building towards a wing of planes already being warmed up by the ground crew. Captain Matthew Cross and his copilot, the young Ensign Dexter Gray headed for the largest of the craft, the Cat's Eye class recon vessel *Longbow*, while Commander Lee Carter, Max Vasser, Sam Beckett, Jo Schmidt, and Alex Dalton angled towards five smaller, sleeker ships, their Scorpion class fighters.

As they approached, Carter noted with interest the diverse mission pods that had been attached to their planes for this assignment. Jo's Scorpion sported an enhanced sensor pod. Max's and Alex's were armed with multi-torpedo pods, a truly devastating weapon system. Sam's had a stealth module, while her own was equipped with a long-range communication pod.

Quite an odd assortment for something that was supposed to be little more than a babysitting mission in a supposedly tame

region of space. Heavy weapons, stealth equipment? *What does Starfleet know that they haven't told us?* wondered Carter.

At the rear of the procession, Jo fell into step beside Alex. "I saw the big stuffed Glommer toy in your room this morning," she said. "Looks like you had a fun date!"

Alex smiled and let her gaze wander over to where Dexter marched alongside Captain Cross. "Yeah," she replied. "We did. I think I really like Dex. The only weird thing is that this morning when I woke up, the Glommer wasn't where I had left it the night before, and some of my stuffed tribbles were missing!"

"Very funny," said Jo, grimacing at the painful joke.

Jo stopped when they reached her starfighter and waved Alex on. "You'll have to fill me in on all the juicy details later," she said, and climbed the ladder up to the waiting cockpit. The other Banshees were doing the same, and the ground crews busily buckled them in, made sure all the hoses and linkages were secure, sealed the cockpit canopies, and wheeled away the ladders. By this time, Cross and Dexter were securely ensconced in their own cockpit, and soon the hangar was filled with the deafening roar of fusion generators and revving impulse engines.

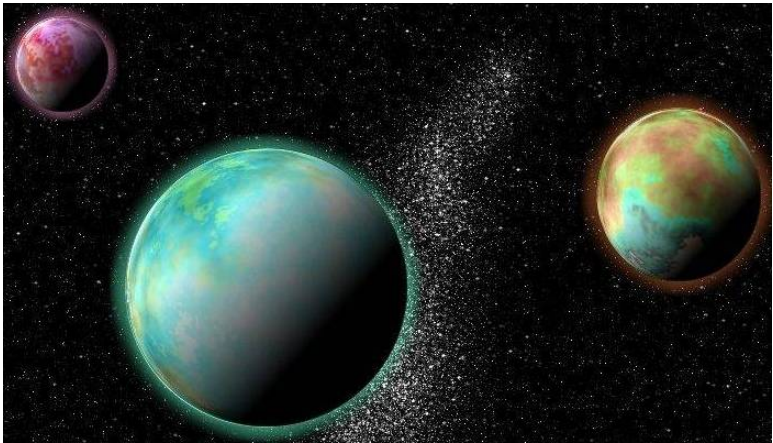
Once all the ground crew was cleared, the starfighters rolled out onto the runway outside in single file behind the *Longbow*, and one by one gained clearance from the tower and rocketed down the strip of asphalt and into the clear blue sky. Distant sonic booms clapped in the ears of onlookers as the Banshees passed the speed of sound on their climb to outer space, and within seconds were out of sight.

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The flight out to the orbit of the Trojan planetoids was uneventful, and Lieutenant Jo Schmidt spent it reviewing the available data. Should the Commander call upon her for information, she wanted to be ready for anything. She had her

reputation as an inexhaustible font of knowledge to uphold, after all.

Nanuq, Amaguq, and Tekkeitsertok, the three Trojan planetoids, were an unexplainable oddity in the New Canada system – by no means the only one, but perhaps the most unique. Aside from their differing colorations, the three bodies were virtually identical to each other. They were smaller than a class M planet but much denser, so the gravity was just under 1g. Though at a distance of over 9 AU from the sun, their thick atmospheres and internal temperatures kept surface temperatures almost comfortable. They were bare of life with the unfortunate exception of Nanuq, which hosted large, non-native colonies of Smelly Jelly, origin unknown.



The three planetoids orbited each other around a common center of gravity, locked in an eternal merry-go-round by their mutual gravitational attraction. What was more, they orbited the New Canada sun at the exact same distance as New Canada IV, the gas giant Txamsem, in its trailing Trojan position, hence their collective name. The whole arrangement was totally unstable –

no natural phenomenon could have sustained itself in that configuration for more than a few thousand years, yet quantum dating had verified the planetoids to be billions of years old. If they were artificial, they were built a *long* time ago.

Their mission was not to study the planetoids themselves however, rather the new anomalous energy reading emanating from their general vicinity, and on that subject, there was very little reliable information so far. Elevated neutrinos and verteron particles suggested a wormhole of some kind, but only time and a close examination would tell for sure.

A new signal on the scanner readout diverted Jo's attention from her science studies. Her long range sensor pod was picking up an unexpected signal. She thumbed the comm switch. "Commander? Are we expecting any company?"

"No, not that I know of," replied Carter. "Why?"

"I'm picking up a small ship already in orbit around Amaguq."

"Hmm." Carter linked to the sensor feed from Jo's Scorpion and saw that there was indeed an unexpected blip on the screen. Was this the reason Starfleet had felt it necessary to equip their starfighters with such an esoteric array of options? She felt a sudden surge of adrenaline as she watched the uninvited blip circle their target planetoid. Maybe Cross would divulge more in the face of this new development. She switched channels. "Captain, we—"

"Yes, Commander," came back Cross' voice through the speaker grille. "We have just detected it too. Stand by."

Figures, thought Carter with a small measure of irritation. Cross always seemed to be one step ahead of everyone else, no matter what was going on. It didn't take him long to come back on the line.

"Dexter can't identify the vessel even with the sensors aboard the *Longbow*. It must be using some kind of shielding. It might be a good idea to deploy your team, Commander."

"I agree," said Carter. She switched channels again and addressed the other Banshees. "We've detected a ship waiting for us at the Trojans. Sam, fire up your stealth pod and swing around to come at them from the other side. Jo, keep your sensor pod focused and hang back a bit. The rest of you, look sharp and follow me in."

From the corner of her eye, Carter saw Sam's Scorpion peel off and head away on a parabolic intercept course while she led the rest of her team straight up the middle. At full impulse burn, the remainder of the journey to Amaguq took only fifteen minutes, and all during this time, neither the sophisticated sensors aboard the *Longbow* nor Jo's Scorpion could penetrate the unknown ship's shroud of mystery.

At last, the dull orange orb of the planetoid Amaguq came into view. The purple and green of Tekkeitsertok and Nanuq hung in the further distance against the backdrop of stars, while the anomalous energy phenomenon lurked somewhere... invisible and enigmatic. Somewhere also was Sam's Scorpion in full stealth mode, sneaking around the back side.

Jo and the three remaining Scorpion starfighters and their Cat's Eye recon escort made a quick orbit to the far side of Amaguq where the alien interloper waited. She felt herself tense in anticipation of the coming encounter. She hoped it would go smoothly, that whoever it was that was lurking here was simply on a scientific mission as they were, but the fact that they were using a stealth ship told her that was probably not the case.

Finally, the alien ship appeared over the planetoid's dusty ochre horizon. It was small, sleek, decidedly asymmetrical, and vaguely biological in aspect. Jo gasped involuntarily when she saw it, and heard similar reactions through the comm-link from the other three Banshees.

The ship was Breen!

04 - The Black Gate

Location: Trojan Planetoids

Captain Matthew Cross' normally stony visage cracked into a slight frown at the sight of the Breen probe ship, but for the imperturbably stoic man that was virtually a scream of rage. What were they doing here? The Breen Confederacy had no claim to the New Canada system; it was in Federation space, albeit at the very fringe. Cross could only conclude that it had something to do with the phenomenon they were sent here to investigate, that they knew something about it that no one else did. Well, there was only one way to find out.

"Dexter, open a channel to the Breen ship."

"Channel open, Captain," said Ensign Dexter Gray from his place in the copilot's seat beside Cross.

A large screen on the left bulkhead came to life, filled with the intimidating masked countenance of a Breen. Small lights on the being's all-concealing helmet blinked in steady rhythm, indicators of who-knew-what. Cross suddenly wondered why the Breen was wearing full refrigeration gear inside his own

spaceship. Wouldn't they maintain a comfortable environment for themselves shipwide? Or did the suits serve some other as-yet-unguessed purpose?

He shook himself from his speculations and addressed the viewscreen in his most official voice. "I am Captain Matthew Cross of the Federation recon vessel *Longbow*. May I inquire as to your purpose here in this system?"

The Breen on the viewer inclined its head in an undecipherable gesture and replied. Its voice was a high-pitched grating noise accompanied by a bass rumble, like metal scraping on stone. The words, if words they were, were completely unintelligible to Cross, and as a plaintive squawk from the computer testified a few seconds later, to the universal translator as well. The Breen finished his speech, and before Cross had a chance to ask for clarification, the viewscreen switched off.

The Breen's next communication was perfectly clear though. The deck under Cross' feet heaved and bucked violently as a brilliant blue nimbus lit the space outside the forward windows. "They're firing on us!" shouted Dexter.

"Modulate the shields, Ensign, and charge the phasers," ordered Cross, steady as ever. He threw the *Longbow* into basic evasive maneuvers away from the Breen ship. Hitting the comm switch, he called, "Banshees, engage!"

In the cockpit of the lead Scorpion, Commander Lee Carter wondered what was so important here that the Breen felt it worth fighting over, but the time for questions was later, after the immediate threat had been neutralized. She jumped into action. "All Banshees, battle mode and attack!"

At her command, the Scorpion starfighters underwent a startling transformation. Armor replicators materialized coverings for the warp nacelles and cockpit windows, phaser turrets popped out fore and aft and began swiveling around seeking a target, and missile tube doors opened. In an instant, the innocent reconnaissance planes had morphed into lethal fighting

machines. They swept now all around the *Longbow*, heading for the Breen probe ship in intricate spirals designed to stymie the enemy's tracking computers.

"Shoot to disable, not destroy!" called Captain Cross' voice through the comm system.

"Aye aye," grated Carter between clenched teeth as the first disruptor blasts began exploding around her craft, rattling her around the cockpit like a marble in a tin can. If it weren't for the atomic adhesion keeping her in her seat, she'd be covered in bruises already. She switched channels and relayed Cross' order to the rest of her team. "Target weapons and shield emitters only!"

Jo Schmidt heard the order and acknowledged it in her turn. Though cocooned away from the outside universe by the replicated armor sheathing covering the canopy glass, the cockpit's holographic heads-up-display gave her a clear, computer-enhanced, more-real-than-real view of the her surroundings. Pulling on the joystick, she banked her Scorpion to follow Max Vasser's plane inward on its attack run. Phaser beams licked out from nacelle tips, connecting her starfighter with weapon emplacements on the Breen ship's hull. The Breen's shields held firm though, so she arced her plane around and away to come at it for a second pass.

While the Breen ship was busy swatting at the angry pests buzzing about it, Sam Beckett in her stealthed Scorpion was finally in position to spring her surprise attack. Dropping her camouflage screen, she burned in at full power and launched a full salvo of missiles. The deadly projectiles streaked away from her wings, leaving behind corkscrew trails of ions as they homed in on vulnerable points on the Breen's hull. The first three missiles impacted on the target's shields causing them to flare angrily, but the fourth slipped through a crack in the weakened defenses and hit its target.

As an orange fireball erupted on the hull of the Breen ship, Alex Dalton whooped a triumphant war cry from her own cockpit. "Way to go, Sam!"

"All Banshees, press the attack!" ordered Carter.

Five starfighters and one armed recon ship closed in on the Breen ship, phasers flashing, filling space with brilliant orange fire, but the Breen was by no means beaten yet. Flaring electric blue disruptors answered the phasers, splashing across the Scorpions' armor plating and burning black gashes across the tiny ships. Apparently deciding they needed more fighting room, the Breen ship suddenly jumped away from the Amaguq towards the empty space between the three Trojan planetoids. The Banshees were close on its heels.

As the battle continued, neither side able to get a clear advantage, Jo's attention was diverted momentarily by an insistent alarm from her sensor pod. She studied the readings for a few seconds, then became alarmed. "Commander!" she called urgently. "The neutrino levels from the anomaly have jumped 400 percent in the last twenty seconds!"

"Where is the anomaly?" called back the Banshee wing commander.

"It's all around it us – we're right on top of it!" replied Jo. She was frantically trying to focus her sensors to get a more precise location while at the same time dodging disruptor blasts from the Breen probe ship. "I think we should get out of here!" she said. "Neutrinos are now at 500 percent and verteron particles are off the scale!"

At this point, Matthew Cross' voice came across the comm channel. He was trying to get the Breen captain's attention. "Attention Breen vessel," he said emphatically. "This area of space is not safe. I suggest you vacate immediately!" His only answer however, was a fresh barrage of disruptor fire.

At the same instant, the neutrino level indicators on Jo's sensor readout jumped higher. "Commander," she called. "The

anomaly is growing stronger the more energy we pour into space. We have to stop the fighting!"

But Jo's warning came too late. Space itself around the Banshees began to optically twist and shimmer like some gigantic funhouse mirror. The stars danced and swirled, while the Trojan planetoids seemed to smear across half the night sky in a madman's finger painting. Directly behind the Breen probe ship, space appeared to part, like a black curtain being torn apart revealing even deeper blackness beyond where no stars shone. The Breen probe ship swung around the rift in great, lazy circles like a bit of flotsam caught in an invisible whirlpool, drawn inexorably towards the rift.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Carter.

Jo fought the controls of her Scorpion, but the gyroscopes showed that she too was being drawn towards the black tear in space despite everything she tried. "Commander, I'm caught!" Powering up her engines to full did nothing to slow her fall. Just the opposite, in fact. The harder she pushed the throttle, the higher the neutrino levels rose and the faster she was pulled in.

Jo saw the Breen ship hit the mouth of the rift and vanish from sight in an explosion of black light, followed, to her dismay, seconds later by Cross and Dexter in the *Longbow*. Her tiny starfighter was whipped around the funnel of the whirlpool along with the other Banshees, and she fought back an attack of nausea and dizziness. A terrible sound was building, some kind of horrible screaming whine like the souls of a thousand dying stars crying out their anguish. She clapped her hands over her ears to try and shut the awful sound out, the controls of her fighter abandoned and forgotten. She couldn't tell if the awful keening was real or if it was only inside her own head, her own soul crying out in torment.

Just ahead of her, Alex and Max's ships disappeared in a pair of black flashes into the yawning black rift, and she knew that she, Carter and Sam were next. To her eyes, the stars themselves

seemed to stretch into infinity overhead, and an instant later it felt like she herself was being squashed and stretched into spaghetti. She was paralyzed, unable even to scream, every nerve on fire.

Then all she saw was black.

Act 2

05 - Welcome to Nowhere

Location: unknown

Her mind was on fire with pain more intense than she had ever felt before. Every molecule in her body was being pulled in a different direction by other-dimensional forces beyond understanding. She felt as if she was going to be literally torn to shreds at any second. The searing sheet of pain drawn across her vision blinded her to everything else. Only the pain existed – all else was unreal.

The torture stretched into an eternity, but as quickly as it started, it was suddenly over and felt like it had never happened at all. Jo Schmidt gasped and choked back the scream that had been frozen in her throat the whole time. The pain was gone and reality returned; she once again felt her Scorpion starfighter's seat underneath her, the flight controls in her hands, the cool recirculated air against the skin of her face, and the throb of the fusion reactor in her bones. A burst of static assaulted her ears, to be quickly replaced by the heartening voice of her Wing

Commander, Lee Carter, requesting a head count. One by one, the Banshees sounded off.

"Banshee Two," responded Max Vasser.

"Banshee Three," said Sam Beckett, sounding rattled.

Jo chimed in when it was her turn, trying her best to keep her voice from shaking. She was still getting over whatever it was that had happened when they had hit the black anomaly. "Banshee Four, fried to the core."

Alex Dalton finished the count in a quivering voice. "Banshee Five, barely alive."

"Well, at least we all made it alive," said Carter, relief obvious in her tone. Then, speaking to Matthew Cross in the *Longbow* she said, "Everyone present and accounted for, Captain. Assuming you and Dex are in there, of course."

"We're here, Commander. Let's find out where we are."

Jo activated the control to dissolve the replicated battle armor covering her starfighter's canopy glass, and seconds later had a clear view of what lay beyond her cockpit, or at least she should have. She frowned, then squinted, trying to peer closer, but it did no good; the view remained unchanged. Had the armor retracted? Yes, it was gone. She felt unreasoning panic start to rise again, but forced it back. *There has to be a rational explanation for this*, she thought, but at the moment she was at a complete loss to explain what her eyes clearly beheld.

It took Alex, the youngest member of Banshee Squadron, to put Jo's befuddled thoughts into plain words. In an awed voice, she asked the question burning in everyone's minds: "This place is as dark as the inside of a cow. Where are all the stars?"

It was true. Silence reigned unchallenged as the seven people sat numb in their cockpits and tried to come to grips with the fact that the universe was missing.

There was only a solid wall of black before Jo's eyes. Not the faintest twinkling of starlight could be seen; no friendly stars, no wispy nebulae, no planets, no galaxies, not even a sense of depth

– absolutely nothing. The blackness was unbroken, wrapping all around in an oppressive, impenetrable prison. Though her instruments showed forward motion, it felt as if her starfighter was standing still; there was no visual frame of reference, nothing against which to measure relative motion. She fought the urge to activate the cockpit's armor sheathing again, to seal herself away from the disturbing void outside. Instead, she tore her eyes away and concentrated on her instruments. She was the squad's science officer, after all. Lee would be expecting her to explain all this and she was determined not to let her wing commander down.

Then she suddenly remembered something. A quick check of the short-range sensor quelled her anxiety though. "In case anyone misses them, the Breen probe ship is drifting about half a lightsecond behind us," she told the others through the commlink. "No sign of activity."

"Maybe they were more severely damaged by the anomaly than we were," suggested Max. "Still, best to keep an eye on them. Captain?"

"Excellent suggestion, Commander," replied Cross. "I'll have Dexter keep a sensor lock."

Meanwhile, Jo had been busy at her own sensors, and now jumped into the conversation to report her findings. "I'm reading three class-D planetoids nearby orbiting around a common center of gravity."

"The Trojans?" asked Carter.

"No. They're similar but not identical. Plus I'm not reading any abnormal neutrinos or verteron particles like back in the New Canada system."

"So no Black Gate and no way to get back home," ventured Alex.

"Black Gate'?" said Max.

"As good a name as any, and it fits," replied Alex.

"Why don't we name it the 'Dalton Wormhole'?" suggested Dexter Gray, eager to make points with the object of his affection.

"Definitely not!" said Alex fervently. "Any wormhole that has my name attached is going to lead somewhere much nicer than this place! Someplace with flowers and cute boys!"

"All right, 'Black Gate' it is," said Carter. "But why can't we see the planetoids?"

"There are no stars to light them," said Jo. "But I *am* reading a sub-stellar mass behind us, bearing 171 mark 205, distance, 9.4 AU. Aside from the planetoids, it's the *only* thing I'm able to pick up. Anywhere. Literally."

Captain Cross exercised his executive authority and decided their course of action. "Let's head that way. Maybe we can find someone who can tell us what's going on."

The six small vessels of Banshee Squadron banked around in a lazy arc and at a leisurely pace headed back in the opposite direction towards whatever lay waiting for them. When they were sufficiently far away, the running lights on the Breen ship's hull flickered back to life and the warp nacelles powered up, their sharp glow the only illumination in this otherwise black realm. The vessel pivoted on its yaw axis and set off to follow the Banshees. At the same time, its form shimmered like a desert mirage as the cloaking device was engaged, and moments later there was again only the night.

06 - Revelations

Location: the Great Void

"I've got it!" exclaimed a clearly excited Dexter Gray from his workstation at the rear of the *Longbow's* forward cabin.

Captain Matthew Cross turned his chair where he sat at the pilot's position to face his young sidekick. "Got what, Dexter?"

"I know where we are. We—"

"Hold that thought, Ensign," said Cross holding up a forestalling hand. "Let's get the Banshees in here so everyone's in on the discussion."

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Ten minutes later, Matthew Cross, Dexter Gray, Lee Carter, Max Vasser, Sam Beckett, Jo Schmidt, and Alex Dalton were comfortably seated around the small table in the *Longbow's* crew cabin. The Banshees had parked their starfighters in tight formation alongside the larger Cat's Eye recon vessel and had floated across the short distance between their cockpits and the

Longbow's underbelly hatch, their flightsuits protecting them against the airless environment for the short duration. Now they all sat, awaiting Dexter's momentous revelation.

The young man appeared somewhat nervous, not accustomed to being the center of attention like this. A reassuring smile from Alex however, bolstered his courage and he began.

"I've been trying to figure out where we are," he said by way of introduction. "Normally, I would have had the computer identify a few dozen stars by analyzing their spectra and then triangulate our position based on that."

"But there aren't any stars," interjected Jo. She too had tried that approach and found it useless.

"Ah, but there are!" said Dexter, smiling triumphantly and annoying the heck out of Jo. "On a hunch, I took a visual image of the darkness outside and had the computer super-enhance it. I saw galaxies. Billions of them! They're all around us, but we can't see them because they're simply too far away."

"Oh by the Great Bird, don't you dare finish that thought, Dexter Gray!" exclaimed Jo. She suddenly looked stricken, having guessed at the conclusion reached by the young sensor specialist.

"You don't know the half of it!" said Dexter.

"What?" demanded Carter. "Don't know the half of what? What does all this mean? Where in the Galaxy can we possibly be that the stars are too far away to see?"

All feelings of elation and triumph at having solved the puzzle drained from Dexter Gray as the cold hard facts of their true situation actually hit home for the first time. He'd known the numbers for half an hour now, but hadn't stopped to consider what they meant for him and the others until just this moment as he was about to explain it. He shot a worried look at Jo, the only other person in the group who could truly understand the seriousness of their situation. He tried to find some comfort there but found instead only confirmation that they were totally

screwed. He looked next to Alex, who, although not understanding yet, smiled in reassurance, confident in her guy no matter what.

"We're not in our Galaxy anymore, Commander Carter," said Dexter. "We're not in any galaxy. We're not even between galaxies. We're adrift in the void between galactic superclusters! The Black Gate has dumped us in the Great Void. I've triangulated using quasars... We're somewhere between the Virgo and Corona Borealis Superclusters, *50 million* lightyears from the nearest galaxy, and over *500 megaparsecs* from the Milky Way!"

Around the table, six jaws dropped in utter disbelief. "That's halfway across the known universe!" whispered Sam, eyes squeezed shut and shaking her head, refusing to accept the terrible reality of Dexter's pronouncement. She did a quick mental calculation and was even more horrified. She opened her eyes and looked at Carter. "If we traveled nonstop at warp 9 all the way, it would take us over a million years to get home!"

"Better not forget to go to the bathroom before you start *that* trip," quipped Max, though her expression was dark and devoid of humor, and the joke fell flat.

Cross spared her a tired look, took a deep breath and, looking around the table at all their faces, said simply, "Then we better find a quicker way home. We'll proceed to the sub-stellar mass Jo discovered."

07 - Sleepless In the Great Void

Location: USS Longbow

Jo Schmidt lay in her berth aboard the *Longbow* staring at the underside of the bunk above her and listening to Alex Dalton snore softly, dreaming no doubt about skipping through fields of flowers hand-in-hand with her new boyfriend Dexter Gray. The little twerp.

Twice now the young copilot and sensor specialist of the *Longbow* had beaten her to crucial discoveries about the region of space they were currently in: first, their location in the Great Void 500 million parsecs from home; and second, the nature of the sub-stellar body just a few hundred-thousand miles ahead. Discoveries she *should* have made herself, and now she felt herself feeling jealously territorial and useless at the same time.

She automatically sought to rationalize her failure in a vain attempt to assuage her feelings of inadequacy. It wasn't her fault, she told herself. She was too busy worrying about the Breen probe ship to even begin to think about Great Voids or black dwarf stars. Of course Dexter made the crucial discoveries first;

he was safely ensconced inside the Cat's Eye, protected by shields and phaser cannons and his boss, Matthew Cross, with nothing but time on his hands.

Too agitated to sleep, Jo tossed fitfully under her covers and accidentally banged her leg against the wall of the tiny stateroom making a loud noise. She bit back a colorful metaphor. Above her, the steady rhythm of Alex's snoring was briefly interrupted, but the young woman quickly readjusted her position and a few heartbeats later was blissfully snoring again. Jo settled herself and resumed her self-torment.

No, she wouldn't let herself become bitter. Dexter deserved all the credit for his discoveries. Despite his tender age and lack of experience, the young man possessed a keen mind and sharp eye. It was good that he had the chance to prove his worth to the squad in such a concrete way. She was happy for him.

There. Now that that was settled, she deliberately set her train of thought on a new track before she changed her mind back again.

The black dwarf. Jo thought back to the events of that afternoon after Dexter's recognition of their location in the Great Void. Following the briefing aboard the *Longbow*, the Banshees had returned to their starfighters and proceeded towards the sub-stellar mass Jo had discovered...

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"One hundred million miles to target," reported Jo through the comm channel.

"I still can't see anything," said Max. "You sure we're going in the right direction, Schmidt?"

"Positive, though I can't understand it either. Judging by the mass readings, it's either a small brown dwarf star or a large class-U gas ultragiant planet. But we should be able to see either of those at this distance."

"Well, we'll know in a few minutes," said Carter.

For the next fifteen minutes, the *Longbow* and its escort of five Scorpion starfighters sped through the inky blackness towards the mysterious invisible stellar object. The thoughts of the two men and five women inside the ships were as impenetrable as the medium through which they flew. They impatiently strained their eyes and sensors trying to spot something that apparently wasn't there. Finally, it was Dexter Gray who broke the silence with one of his trademark "I've got it!" exclamations. "It's a black dwarf!" he explained excitedly.

"That's impossible," replied Jo confidently, the full weight of human scientific understanding behind her denial. "Black dwarfs are the theoretical, cold, burned-out cinders of white dwarfs, and take a bare minimum of fifty billion years to form. The universe is only twelve billion years old. It isn't old enough for black dwarfs to exist yet."

"I know, Lieutenant," said Dexter, undeterred by his superior's dismissal or even the fact that his pronouncement went against all of human scientific understanding. "But look at the facts. We have a small stellar mass that is emitting no light. There's not nearly enough mass for it to be a black hole or even a neutron star, so what else could it be?"

"I see it!" said Sam suddenly, her normally timid voice betraying a hint of excitement. "I had to adjust my ocular implants to the far infrared to do it, but I see it!" The others quit their scientific debate for the moment and once again strained their eyes out their forward canopies. They didn't have Sam Becket's advantage of cybernetic eyes, but by now they were close enough for mere biological eyes to discern something, though it wasn't much.

In the starless jet-black sky, a tiny disk that was only barely less black became visible, a black spot drawn on a blacker canvas, growing steadily larger as the Banshees approached. No

detail at all was evident; the black dwarf was a perfectly smooth eight-ball 300,000 miles across lying on a black felt pool table.

Annoyed that Dexter had once again stolen her thunder and determined to find some evidence that he was wrong, Jo read off sensor readings as they came in. "Temperature, 250 Kelvin... a little warm for a black dwarf. Radius is 305,400 miles." Data continued to pour in, but she stopped reading it out loud. To her chagrin, all of it seemed to confirm the Ensign's hypothesis. The thing in front of them was indeed the impossible – a black dwarf star. While the petty side of her was feeling angered and spiteful, the scientist in her was quickly gaining ascendance. To be face to face with a black dwarf! They would re-write the pages of physics and cosmology when they got back.

If they got back.



But there was little time to worry about that now with the discovery of the century a mere twenty million miles ahead. Jo returned to her sensors. "I'm reading a second space body now," she announced. "It's in close orbit around the black dwarf just coming around from the far side.... It's a class-R planetoid. Surface conditions marginal; temperature varies from minus 180 to plus 120 degrees Fahrenheit depending on distance from geothermal vents. Atmosphere has a lot of sulfur compounds but is more-or-less breathable."

"Any life signs?" asked Carter.

"Scanning," replied Jo, but she never got that far. Space around the six Banshee squad craft was suddenly filled with brilliant light, a thing not seen in this long-lost corner of the universe for billions of years, followed seconds later by a violent shock wave from disruptor near-misses.

"It's the Breen probe ship!" cried Alex.

"It must have cloaked and followed us!" said Sam.

Captain Cross' stentorian voice cut off all further chatter. "Break and attack!"

Instantly, the five Scorpion starfighters banked around in tight arcs and sped off in the direction of the looming Breen vessel while the larger *Longbow* spiraled away in an elaborate evasive maneuver. Each Scorpion became the center of a burgeoning flower of phaser energy as the orange beams licked out in all directions from spinning turrets seeking a target that was no longer there.

"Dammit! They recloak!" shouted Max. Her Scorpion was in the lead, and she searched the inky sky in vain for the elusive probe ship.

"These guys can teach the Romulans a thing or two about cloaking technology," muttered Carter. She had placed her fighter on an identical course as Max's, gambling that her XO's supernatural esper prescience would succeed where their eyes and sensors failed and lead her straight to the Breen's hiding

place. Sure enough, Carter's gamble paid off. Directly ahead, a shimmering effect like heat distortion on the desert sands became visible, and in the next breath she and Max suddenly found themselves in a deadly game of chicken with a ship a hundred times the size of their small fighters. Max reacted instinctively even before the Breen was fully decloaked, releasing the entire payload of her Scorpion's multi-torpedo pod simultaneously, sending twelve quantum explosives bowling point-blank into the prow of the Breen ship before banking her Scorpion away. Carter reacted a second later, firing her own missiles before she too dodged aside.

The impact was of biblical proportions. The energy released by a dozen quantum explosions and Carter's missiles engulfed the entire forward half of the Breen probe ship in a blindingly white sheet of fire. The alien vessel's shields were hopelessly outmatched. The force of the explosion stopped the massive vessel dead in space as if it had hit a brick wall, and Carter could only imagine the total chaos inside the ship as any Breen that weren't holding onto something were picked up and slammed against the forward bulkheads.

The glare of the plasma fire receded, revealing the scope of the damage they'd done. The entire leading edge of the Breen probe ship was a smoking ruin. Emergency forcefields covered some of the gaping wounds, but not all. Plasma from fried systems leaked out into space in thin, sparkling streamers as the stricken craft turned ponderously on its Y-axis in a desperate attempt to escape. Apparently, its captain had had enough for one day and decided discretion was the better part of valor. The ship slowly picked up speed, fleeing for the comparative shelter of the class-R planetoid.

"Now's our chance to finish them off!" yelled Max, already banking her fighter to pursue the Breen ship, barely-pent rage thickening her voice into an almost-unintelligible snarl. She had spent three years after the Dominion War fighting on the

Federation's borders in a rough mercenary unit, and had seen her fill of sneak pirate attacks, bloody raids and unprovoked violence there, and so had no patience for it and no mercy when it came to dishing out retribution against those who still practiced those kinds of tactics.

"Negative, Lieutenant Commander!" barked Captain Cross. "Rejoin formation immediately. You gave them a good licking; I doubt those Breen will be back anytime soon."

For a moment, it looked like Max was going to disobey Cross' orders and finish off the Breen probe ship anyway, the consequences be damned, but at the last instant she turned her plane around and headed back to rejoin the group.

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...and now here they were, hours later, in orbit above the planetoid, sacked out in the *Longbow's* crew module, trying to get some rest, waiting for a dawn on a benighted world that hadn't seen a ray of sunshine in ten billion years, keeping watch against the inevitable return of the Breen from wherever they had slunk off to after the battle. The black sun still brooded in the sky above, an oppressive presence that weighed on everyone's spirits. The steady rhythm of Alex's snoring in the bunk above hers slowly lulled Jo to sleep, dreaming of blue skies and sunshine.

08 - House of Ashes

Location: Class-R Planetoid

Morning came all too soon for Jo Schmidt, she having slept fitfully, troubled even in sleep by her flagging self-worth. She was nowhere near well-rested. She turned her head, opened one bleary eye and looked at the clock on the wall of her and Alex's stateroom aboard the *Longbow*. The crimson digits read '0628'. Time to get up, though no rosy dawn waited to greet her here in the sunless void of the intercluster gulf.

She swung her feet onto the cold deck and stood. Alex was no longer in the upper bunk, and she suddenly smelled freshly brewed coffee. She pulled on her robe, ran her hands through her short blonde hair and stepped through the narrow door into the common living space beyond. The other four members of Banshee Squad were already there, sitting around the small mess table sipping steaming mugs of their favorite morning beverage. Matthew Cross and Dexter Gray were nowhere to be seen, probably already forward in the cockpit commencing the day's activities.

Lee Carter saw her emerge, looking like a bear crawling out of its cave after a winter's hibernation, and around a mouthful of toast said, "Good morning, sleepyhead. Coffee? Looks like you could use a mug or twelve." But Jo just yawned, grumbled something incoherent, and continued her shuffle towards the bathroom at the rear of the ship.

Looking to Jo's bunkmate Alex, Carter asked, "What's with her?"

Alex shrugged. "She was making noise all night long."

Carter worried a little. Jo was normally cheerful and optimistic, but the last day had seen a subtle change in her science officer. She was more withdrawn and moody, seldom volunteering information during discussions of their predicament where before she wouldn't hesitate to offer her theories on anything. Carter and the others had found themselves listening more and more often to young Dexter Gray's explanations and hypotheses as Jo sat sullenly by, lost in her own thoughts. Carter wondered briefly if Dex's newfound popularity and success in deciphering their present situation had anything to do with Jo's funk, but dismissed the idea almost immediately, deciding instead to place the blame on the unrelenting blackness outside. At least for now.

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After breakfast and with everyone back aboard their own ships, Banshee Squadron fell out of orbit towards the class-R planetoid. Overhead, the black dwarf star shed no light on the scene, and they were forced to rely solely on sensors during their approach, flying towards a surreal virtual-landscape painted on their HUDs by the computer.

"There is a large concentration of lifeforms surrounding the largest geothermal hotzone," said Dexter through the comm system. "It looks like some sort of subterranean city."

"We'll land on the outskirts of that," ordered Matthew Cross.

The Cat's Eye and five Scorpion fighters raced over the barren, lifeless landscape. In the distance ahead a dull red glow in the sky became visible to the naked eye, the source of which was still below the horizon, but could be nothing other than the geothermal hotzone. *Probably the mother of all volcanoes*, thought Jo cynically.

And then there it was, the cone of a shield volcano of titanic proportions towering above the surrounding mountains, its glowing caldera smoking, spreading poisonous fumes for leagues around, but at the same time bequeathing life to the land with its sustaining warmth and outgassing. Thankfully however, Jo saw Matthew Cross steering the *Longbow* not directly towards the volcano, but towards a hilly region some miles south of the crater, no doubt at some new discovery made by Dexter. She turned her Scorpion to follow.

The six craft landed in a shallow valley. The infernal light from the volcano glowering down on them from behind a range of low hills to the north revealed the black maw of a cave in the near hillside.

At the sight of that, Jo's heart fell. Suddenly, old memories she'd been trying hard to repress resurfaced with a vengeance, threatening to overwhelm her – memories of Rostella IV, the endless, black dilithium mines there, the horde of shambling horrors that hunted them, but worst of all, the monstrous thing that lived in the pit at the bottom of the mines, the Jelly Brain. She still had nightmares about the terrible ordeal, of Jazz Phoenix's face as she sacrificed her own life to save the lives of her teammates.

She wondered if Max, who'd been closest to Jazz, was feeling the same thing faced with the prospect of going into another black pit.

Jo shuddered with a sudden chill, then mercilessly forced all thoughts of monsters and death from the forefront of her mind

and set about shutting down her Scorpion's systems. That done, she popped the canopy, hopped to the ground and set out across the rocky terrain to join the others. While the temperature here was only mildly chilly, the volcanic fumes and ash in the air forced her to activate her life support belt, and its soft nimbus enveloped her in secure folds of energy and breathable air.

Minutes later, Lee Carter and her Banshees, plus Matthew Cross and his sidekick Dex stood a hundred yards from the dark cave mouth eyeing it with varied degrees of unease. Dexter was standing nonchalantly next to Alex pretending that his choice of self-placement was purely accidental, while Alex pretended not to notice his pretense. Jo ignored them both and took up station behind Max, and began taking tricorder readings.

"I don't see any welcoming committee coming to greet us," ventured Sam, eyeing the cave with her cybernetically-enhanced vision.

"Be thankful for small favors," replied Max. "The Great Bird only knows what lives in a dismal place like this." She unconsciously fingered the phaser pistol holstered at her hip, drawing reassurance from the weapon's cold metal casing beneath her fingers.

"Let's go," said Captain Cross. With him in the lead, the seven set off towards the hillside and the cave opening. The glow from the volcano's fires shed enough light for them to safely pick their way across the rock-strewn valley floor, though the going was slow and cautious.

The cave opening turned out to be a merely a shallow depression in the sheer rock face, but the rear of the concavity was dominated by a massive stone portal. At least twenty feet high and ten wide, the entire surface was carved in bass relief, depicting images of humanoids, some prostrated before a ziggurat, some carrying spears and swords in a stylized depiction of ancient warfare, and some being sacrificed by men in fancy headdresses to a creature that looked like a huge scorpion with a

man's torso and pincers for arms. In fact, upon closer inspection, the doorposts, lintel and walls were all covered in weathered carvings, the gruesome scorpion theme predominating.

"I don't like the look of that," commented Max, viewing the carvings with distaste. "I say we try the next door."

"There is no next door," said Carter.

"Aha! The ultimate defense against door-to-door salesmen. No more doors."

Captain Cross cleared his throat noisily. "If we can get back to business, ladies?"

"Right," said Carter. "So how do we open this thing?" Out of habit, everyone turned to Jo, who traditionally always had the answer.

Sensing their stares, Jo looked up from her tricorder at the carved gate as if seeing it for the first time. "I uh.... Maybe there's a lock," she offered after some hesitation.

It wasn't quite the brilliant solution Carter had been hoping for, but she tried to be positive nonetheless. "Good thinking, Jo. Sam?"

Sam, who was standing closest to the portal, scanned its entirety with renewed diligence, tuning her ocular implants to their highest resolution and examining a wide range of physical criteria. "I don't see anything except normal stone, Commander. Nothing that remotely resembles a locking mechanism, mechanical or electronic. Not even a doorknob."

"Well, can't say we didn't try," said Max, not sounding the least bit sorry. "Let's head back." She turned to leave, but Matthew Cross clapped a restraining hand on her shoulder checking her retreat.

Dexter Gray now pushed his way to the front of the group. Showing the impatience of youth, he blurted, "Why don't you just try pushing it open?" and then did just that. Laying both hands on the worn stone, he shoved with all his might and was rewarded by the sound of stone grinding on stone. Under his

influence, the massive stone door swung a few inches inward! He jumped back, as surprised as the rest of them that his impulsive act had actually worked, but he recovered quickly and turned an excited face to the others and said, "Help me!"

Seven pairs of hands were eagerly laid against the stone, and together the Banshees heaved. The massive stone portal ground inward, swinging on hidden hinges, slowly revealing a dark space beyond. A strong gust of wind blew from the widening crack like the sighing exhalation of a sleeping giant. It whipped their hair back and threw dust in their eyes, but died down as soon as the pressure differential between inside and outside was equalized. When the opening was a few feet wide, they stopped pushing and Carter peered inside.

After the near-total blackness of the sunless, starless outside, the inside of the mountain seemed brilliantly lit by comparison even though a few flickering torches in wall sconces and a small glowing brazier in the center of the floor were the only sources of illumination. Carter advanced cautiously through the stone doorway into the large cavern beyond, Max with drawn phaser right behind her, then the others.

"Still no welcoming committee," said Sam softly, not wishing to disturb the profound silence in the cavern.

"Who cares," growled Max, sweeping the dark recesses with her phaser. "I'm just glad there's no giant scorpion-men."

"We're here to find out a way to leave," said Cross, feeling the need to remind the ladies of their mission. "Which means we had better find *someone* to talk to."

The others pressed a little deeper into the cavern inspecting some of the other doorways and tunnel openings that riddled the walls all around, but Jo stopped beside the brazier. It gave off a comforting warmth, and she just stood a few moments letting it soak into her chilled bones, drawing strength from the friendly embers. She instinctively mistrusted the concealing shadows that seemed to gather extra-thick around the tunnels and doorways,

and more than once she thought she saw something skitter just at the edge of her field of vision, but when she looked there was never anything there of course. She refrained from mentioning it to Lee, sure it was just her imagination anyway. Besides, if anything was there, she was sure the little genius Dexter would discover it on his own without any help from her.

A small noise to her left, a tiny snick like someone stepping on a dry twig, distracted her then, and she moved to investigate. It seemed to have come from another of the dark tunnel openings, this one narrower and swathed in deepest shadow. Something was making the hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention, so she drew her phaser with one hand and flipped open her tricorder with the other and pointed both at the tunnel.



Suddenly, Jo felt a sharp pain on the side of her neck and immediately felt a blanket of wooziness fall over her and wrap itself tightly around her consciousness. Through blurry vision and eyelids that suddenly refused to stay open she saw rough hands reaching for her from within the dark tunnel and drag her forward. *Drugged!* shouted a voice inside her head, but her body

could do nothing about it. Numb hands dropped what they were holding, arms fell limp at her sides, and knees buckled, no longer able to carry her weight. The rough hands caught her as she fell. She tried to scream for help but no sound came from her mouth. The last thing Jo saw – or was it her overworked imagination? – was a giant scorpion-man leering down on her helpless form.

09 - Land of No Return

Location: Subterranean City

The inside of the large cavern in which the Banshees found themselves was warm, and the air was breathable, so everyone had relaxed and switched off their life support belts. Lee Carter had discovered some ancient script carved into the wall above one of the inner doorways bored into the cavern wall. Though faded and dulled by the passing of countless millennia, the alien characters could still be clearly discerned, though she couldn't read the language. She thought they looked vaguely familiar though, and that bothered her. How could she recognize script that was millions of years old on a planet 500 million parsecs from Earth? She knew exactly who to ask.

"Jo, can you make out this writing?"

"Jo?"

"It says '*Svagata Kurnugi*'," replied a loud, gruff, male voice.

Carter and the five other members of Banshee Squadron spun on their heels to face the unexpected and unfamiliar voice. Beside the brazier in the center of the cavern stood a hulking

brute of a man, human in appearance though it was difficult to tell in the dim torchlight. He was bedecked head to foot with furs and vital body areas were protected by what looked like large beetle carapaces. His head was crowned with a huge animal skull, while a brass plate adorned with the image of a scorpion covered his chest. In one hand he carried a tall spear, and the other gripped a spiked club. Crowded behind the hulk were twenty more barbaric-looking humanoids, though these were clad in simple skins and rags. Their eyes were wild though as they leered at Carter and the others, jostling and shoving each other to get a better look at the newcomers.

The hulking lout took a thunderous step forward and addressed Carter again. "It means 'Welcome To the Land of No Return'." The fearsome sneer on his face belied his words however, and Carter recognized his lecherous leer for what it was. She doubted she or the others would enjoy the sort of 'welcome' this hulking animal and the rabble behind him had in mind.

The worst thing she could do however was to show fear or weakness, so Carter took a step forward and demanded in her toughest voice, "Where's Jo Schmidt? What have you done with her?"

The hulk's lurid grimace grew wider and he took another step forward. "Are you challenging me, woman?" By the evil light in his eyes it was plain he hoped so.

"It wouldn't exactly be a fair fight," replied Carter, holding her ground. "For you, I mean." Behind her she heard Max chortle under her breath.

Carter's defiance only seemed to encourage the hulk, however. "So, you think you can best Nergal in a fight," he roared, thumping his chest with his club. Behind him, the crowd of followers grew more restless in anticipation of the coming spectacle. The hulk's leer grew more confident. "Nergal makes it fair for *you*, woman. I throw down my weapons." He tossed

aside the spear and club, took off the skull helmet and breastplate and tossed them too, and the crowd behind him cheered. "Now we fight!"

Carter felt along her waist to where her phaser was holstered, and out of the corner of her eye saw Sam and Alex's hands edge towards their own weapons. She hated to take unfair advantage of these primitives; it just seemed wrong using advanced technology against a bunch of cavemen armed with knives and sticks, but it was their own fault for picking on a bunch of girls. She nodded in acceptance of Nergal's proposal and took another step forwards, taking firm hold of her phaser's grip. "When I win, you will tell me what I want to know."

Matthew Cross decided he had seen and heard enough though. They were here to find a way home, and a fight, no matter how quick and one-sided, wasn't going to accomplish that. Instead, it would probably end their chances of ever finding someone sympathetic to their cause. Besides, there was no way he was going to just stand by and let a woman fight that hulking bruiser. Even in the twenty-fourth century chivalry lived on.

He stepped forward and said, "Just one minute here! Nobody's going to—"

His sentence was choked off by the sudden application of a strong grip twisting his arm around his back and the sharp edge of a foot-long knife pressed to his throat. He felt another hand relieve him of his phaser and life support belt. At the same time more barbarians materialized out of the shadows behind Max, Sam, Alex and Dexter, and in less than two seconds, had everyone restrained and disarmed with the swiftness and precision of a crack military unit.

Carter jumped aside at the emergence of the ambushers and yanked out her phaser, leveling it at Nergal. "Release my friends!" she demanded.

But Nergal's response was just a cruel laugh that sounded more like a hyena yelping than something that would come out

of a man's mouth. "I have a better idea," he said once he'd recovered from his evil mirth. "You give me the pistol before my friends slit your friends' throats."

From behind her, Carter heard Captain Cross say, "Don't do it, Commander. That's an order. Don't give in to these animals..." but the thug holding him twisted his arm higher, making Cross cry out in pain.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking I am bluffing," said Nergal. His voice had become low and sonorous, and all hint of mirth and lechery were gone from his expression, replaced by a murderous intensity. "Now— hand over your weapon and the belt around your waist. You have three seconds.

"One."

Carter thought frantically, trying to figure a way out of this mess. She could easily gun down Nergal before he could touch her, but there was no way she could target all the thugs holding her teammates and prevent them from killing everyone in retaliation.

"Two."

And how did this caveman know about phasers and the forcefield belt around her waist? These people were obviously not quite as primitive as they appeared at first glance. Or they had come in contact with advanced technology before. Either way, it spelled hope for Carter and her party for finding someone to help them leave this place. But she had to live long enough make use of that information.

"Thr—"

"All right!" shouted Carter. "All right. You win. Here." She tossed her phaser aside, careful to make sure it landed well away from any of the rabble, then unfastened her life support belt with its protective forcefield projector and let it slip from her fingers to the dirt floor. She felt naked without her tools, and dashed off a quick prayer to the Great Bird of the Galaxy to help her remember her Starfleet unarmed combat training.

Nergal's visage resumed its accustomed feral snarl, and he advanced another few steps until he was standing no more than two yards from Carter. "Come, woman. Now I teach you who is master here!"

"If I win, you will release my friends," said Carter, stepping clear of the life support belt.

Nergal's sneer grew more oily as he said, "Of course. By my honor, they will go free if you win." Carter was pretty sure the man had no honor though, and would without hesitation kill them all if things didn't go his way.



His false assurance made, Nergal advanced, fists clenched ready to deliver incapacitating blows. Carter stood her ground and fell into a fighting stance, her own fists raised in a classic defensive position. Nergal lunged at Carter and swung his arms in what should have been a devastating swipe, that would have

been such had it connected. But Carter little more than shrugged and the meaty fist missed her left ear by considerably more than the thickness of a coat of paint. And then she was on him, her own fists pummeling his chest and belly.

He roared with rage and tried to throw his thick arms around her, to crush her into submission. She danced back and he embraced empty air. She followed up with a nasty round-house kick to his side and a one-two punch right in the nose. Nergal staggered back, stunned and disbelieving. Behind him, the crowd brayed in anger that their leader had taken hits from this comparatively tiny woman. Someone flung a rock at Carter and it hit the back of her right knee, causing her to stumble. Nergal was instantly on her, and this time his sweeping arms connected. He locked them around her waist, pinning her arms to her sides. The veins on his forearms popped out and his biceps rippled as he slowly squeezed.

"No fair!" cried Alex. She and the other Banshees struggled against their captors, outraged at the blatant cheating, but the knives at their throats kept them from breaking away and helping their wing commander.

Carter struggled valiantly, but Nergal's arms were like two iron boa constrictors, coiling ever tighter around her. She gasped for air, feeling the blackness of oblivion creep into the tattered edges of her consciousness. If she could only get her arms free, she could gouge his eyes or box his ears, but they were held fast. Sensing victory, Nergal roared in triumph and tightened his grip yet more, lifting Carter clear off the ground so that her feet dangled and kicked feebly. She groaned with the pain and saw stars swim before her vision as the darkness encroached. She couldn't draw breath anymore, and with her fading consciousness knew it was over.

Just as all hope was lost, a new voice echoed throughout the cavern. It was a commanding woman's voice, and it cut through

the din of the bloodthirsty crowd. "Release the newcomers, Nergal!"

If Nergal heard the command, he paid no heed, instead shaking a feebly twitching Carter up and down in his deadly bear hug.

The owner of the voice stepped through the crowd, an old woman. She wore the same tattered clothing as the rest of the denizens, but she held her head high and had a regal bearing that brooked no disobedience to her demands. "Nergal, obey me!"

Nergal turned his head partway to address the old woman but didn't relax his death grip on Carter. "This is none of your concern, Ereshkigal!" he growled between his clenched teeth. "This is between me and the newcomers."

"Everything that happens in Kurnugi is my concern. Now release the woman or suffer the consequences!"

Nergal screamed his rage at the old woman's ill-timed intervention, but grudgingly succumbed to her will. He dropped Carter to the ground where she lay panting and wheezing, unable to stand after nearly being asphyxiated. He nodded to the thugs who were holding Cross and the others, and the daggers keeping them prisoner were lowered. Sam and Max rushed over to their commander and helped her up. Nergal cast one last venomous glare at Carter, a look which promised revenge, then turned to the old woman. "This is not finished, Ereshkigal," he snarled. "One day you will go too far and then I will kill you and take your place."

"That day is not today, Nergal," replied the old woman steadfastly. "Now take your minions and go!"

With one final growl, Nergal stomped from the cavern, knocking aside several of the crowd which had made the mistake of getting too close. Nergal's thugs collected their master's discarded armor and weapons and hurried after him, but they also carried away the Banshees' confiscated weapons and equipment.

"Hey wait! They're taking our stuff!" yelled Dexter. He started to go after them, but Cross grabbed his arm and held him back.

"We'll get it back later," he said. "Right now you'd just start another fight." He went over to where Carter was standing, mostly on her own by now, and said, "You all right?" Carter nodded.

"She's fine," said Max. "And she would'a won if that giant lummoX hadn't cheated!" The pride in her wing commander was obvious in her voice.

Satisfied, Cross next turned to the old woman, Ereshkigal, who had been waiting patiently. "Thank you for intervening," he said sincerely. "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't shown up when you did."

Ereshkigal shrugged dismissively. "Nergal would have crushed to death the one he was fighting, had you and the young man killed, and added the three remaining females to his harem... or had them killed too, since I don't get the impression they would have gone willingly into that kind of servitude." That last was said after noting the fiercely indignant look on Max's face at her mention of a harem. "But come. You must be tired after your long journey. Let me show you what little hospitality we can afford."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied Cross politely, "but we're not planning on staying long. We're just looking for someone to show us a way to leave."

At that, Ereshkigal laughed, though her laugh was sympathetic and not cruel and mean-spirited like Nergal's was. A look of great sadness came over her face as she beheld the hopeful faces of the six newcomers. "This place is Kurnugi," she said as if that simple pronouncement explained everything, but their uncomprehending expressions told her they needed more. "The 'Place of No Return'," she added. "No one leaves here. Ever."

10 - The Sting of Death

Location: Kurnugi

"Where is Jo Schmidt?" demanded Captain Matthew Cross for the third time.

He and the other Banshees, minus the missing Schmidt, had been escorted through the maze of tunnels and caverns that comprised the city of Kurnugi, past the unfriendly and unwashed stares of the city's denizens, past giant mushroom farms and giant insect ranches, to a quarter of the underground metropolis that could almost be described as comfortable. It was a broad, tall cavern whose walls were riddled with black cave openings its entire length and height, all interconnected by narrow catwalks and stairs carved directly into the rock face. It looked almost like ancient Anasazi cliff dwellings on Earth, except underground. Ereshkigal had led them to a cluster of neatly carved caves halfway up the cavern wall and told them that these rooms were theirs for as long as they wished.

"Ereshkigal, we appreciate your hospitality, but we have to find our missing person," said Cross, trying hard not to lose his

patience with their benefactor. Carter and the others stood by at his sides bursting with impatience as well, anxious to fly to the rescue of their friend, but he kept them in check with a stern look. He had to admire their self-control in the matter.

Ereshkigal turned her craggy old face towards the group, and the look of profound sadness that Cross saw there worried him. She opened her mouth to answer, but struggled for the right words. "Your companion...."



Carter could contain herself no longer. Stepping forward and ignoring Cross' warning glare, she demanded, "What? What's happened? Tell us!"

Ereshkigal looked Carter in the eye, and as with the weight of the universe pressing down on her said, "Your friend is dead."

The old woman's blunt statement was met by stunned and disbelieving silence. Finally, Alex's tiny voice could be heard from the back of the room. "Dead? Jo can't be dead, she just can't!" Alex spun and buried her face in Dexter Gray's chest. The young man put his arms around her and did his best to console her.

Cross was maintaining his composure with the skill of a Vulcan. "Tell us what happened," he said.

"One of the Aqrabu had wandered into the city, which they do every now and then, and caught scent of your group. They are absolutely silent when they wish to be, and are excellent hunters. Your companion was straggling a bit behind the group, and the creature simply picked her off."

"As simple as that?" said Carter angrily, not willing to accept the old woman's story. "Jo wouldn't go without a fight! And what the hell is an 'Aqrabu'?"

"A race of beings from a dark corner of the known universe. Huge, half man, half scorpion."

"Like the carvings on the stone door outside," said Sam, remembering their revulsion at first seeing the hideous carved representations. "Those monsters are real?"

Ereshkigal nodded. "They were once worshipped, ages ago. Their stings are poisonous, instantly lethal. I assure you, your friend died quickly."

"You'll forgive me if that doesn't make me feel the slightest bit better," said Max. Her voice was low and calm, but a murderous intensity seethed just underneath the surface, and though her head was bowed, her face hidden by the shadow cast by her long brown hair, two angry embers glowed within the darkness. She lifted her head now and turned to face her wing commander. Carter saw the iron control Max was exercising in the lines on her face and almost felt sorry for whoever or whatever was on the receiving end of her wrath when it was finally unleashed. "We have to go after it, this Aqrabu thing, and kill it!" said Max.

"And find out if Jo is really dead," added Sam.

"Or at least recover the body," finished Max.

But Ereshkigal put a damper on that plan before Cross could jump in with his standard plea for thinking things through rationally and calmly. "There are no remains to recover after an

Aqrabu attack," she said, leaving the Banshees to envision on their own the grisly meaning of that claim. "And my own hunters have already pursued the beast to its lair and dealt with it. The creature will be killing no more innocent people, I assure you."

It was clear her neat explanations and assurances weren't sitting well with the men and women before her, but she ignored it and pressed on, a tone of imperiousness beginning to color her words now that the bad news had been delivered and the issue put to rest, as least as far as she was concerned. She walked back to the domicile's entrance and stepped halfway through, then turned back. "You will be called for supper soon. In the meantime, make yourselves at home, but please don't wander around too far. As you've already discovered, this place can be dangerous, especially to newcomers who are not aware of the pitfalls." And with that warning hanging in the air, she left.

Carter turned to Cross. "Well, what do you make of that?"

"I'm not entirely sure," the captain replied, but the frown creasing his forehead told Carter more. He wasn't at all happy about how this mission was turning out, and though he didn't show it, he considered Jo his friend too, and was deeply hurt by her tragic loss.

"Well *I'm* sure!" said Max. "Someone's going to pay for Jo's death before we leave this place, and as far as I'm concerned, it can just as well be that old woman!"

Carter sighed. She needed time to think, to sort out everything that had happened in the last few hours. This bizarre place and its inhabitants, the unprovoked fight with Nergal, Ereshkigal's fortuitous arrival and intervention, Jo's gruesome death – all were pieces of the greater puzzle, but Carter had no idea how they fit together, or even what the picture looked like! She had a hunch though, that they would have to solve the mystery in order to escape.

11 - Dining On Ashes

Location: Kurnugi

Each member of Banshee Squadron took the news of the death of Jo Schmidt in his or her own way. Captain Matthew Cross retreated behind the impenetrable walls of his stoicism, unreachable, his face granite, while Dexter Gray was kept busy consoling and comforting the terribly distraught Alex Dalton. Sam Beckett sat alone brooding after having shed some private tears. Max paced the floor and quietly simmered, harboring black thoughts of bloody revenge and other mayhem. Lee Carter wandered off to be alone for a while. In the end though, they all decided to put their grief on hold for the time being and concentrate on getting themselves out of this horrible place before anything else bad happened. A thorough exploration of the city of Kurnugi seemed the logical place to start.

"The old woman told us not to wander too far," said Sam. "There might be more of those things out there."

"I remember," replied Carter, "but somehow I don't think our safety was her main concern."

"What do you mean?" asked Cross, taking more interest in the conversation now that someone else had suggested what he'd been thinking all along.

Carter shrugged. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but I don't get the feeling she was telling us the whole story of what happened to Jo. I think Ereshkigal doesn't want us snooping around so that we don't discover the real truth on our own."

"And that truth would be?"

Carter shrugged again. "If I knew that we wouldn't have to go out and snoop around!"

Max stepped forward now. "So what are we waiting for?" She was anxious to do *something* – anything but sit around waiting.

Carter shared the sentiment and nodded acceptance of Max's suggestion, but then her eyes fell on Alex. The youngest Banshee member was still holding on to Dexter, who was doing his best to be supportive. Jo Schmidt had befriended Alex when the rookie had joined the squad, and the two of them had often gone on shopping sprees and guy-watching expeditions together, and had become inseparable friends; Alex was taking her sudden death especially hard. Addressing Max but still looking at Alex, Carter said as emphatically as she could, "But this time we stick together! That way we'll stay safe."

"We should make a priority of finding our phasers and life support belts," said Cross, always thinking of the big picture. "Then we'll be even safer."

"Right," said Carter. "Let's go."

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The tunnels and caverns of the underworld city wound on forever, an endless warren of torch-lit corridors and sudden, unexpected dead ends. Nor was the maze merely two-dimensional. Stone stairs and rickety ladders wound up and down to whole new levels above and below the one they were

on. Fortunately, Sam's cybernetic eye implants were capable of recording images, so there was little danger of getting lost; it was an electronic trail of breadcrumbs they could follow back home. Everywhere they went however, they met with the same general reactions. Men glowered at them from beneath lowered brows and turned away, refusing to acknowledge their presence, women rushed children inside their stone-carved hovels and slammed the doors behind them, then peered out from behind the ratty window coverings. Everyone's faces displayed obvious distrust and even fear in some cases.

"Sheesh! And I thought Sam was neurotic!" commented Max, receiving a frown from the maligned Lieutenant Beckett. "It's going to be hard finding someone to talk to at this rate."

"They've probably just never seen anyone as clean as you four," said Matthew Cross.

Carter stopped in mid-step. "Was that a compliment?" She turned to Max looking incredulous. "Did he just compliment us?"

"I'm not sure. He said we were 'clean'," said Max. "Does that count?"

"Guess not. Oh well."

Cross smiled indulgently at their ribbing, but any comeback he might have had was quashed by a deafening gong ringing throughout the undercity in a thousand echoes until it was impossible to tell from which direction it was coming. Instantly however, all the doors that had just been slammed in their faces were flung open and young and old alike streamed from their homes and joined the growing throng in the corridors.

"What's going on?" asked Sam. She had pressed her back against the nearest stone wall and was nervously watching the masses of people swarm around her. Crowds made her acutely uncomfortable.

Carter stepped over and put her hand on the tall blonde's shoulder. "Take it easy, Sam," she said. "I know you don't like

crowds, but we've got to follow them to see what's going on, so just grit your teeth, okay?" Sam nodded uneasily and did her best to comply.



Following Carter's lead, the Banshees waded out into the stream of people and were immediately swept away by the irresistible flow. They were jostled and herded along until they finally broke out of the wide tunnels into another large torch-lit cavern where the throngs broke up and stood milling restlessly around rows of tables and benches. Carter suddenly noticed that most of the people were holding large bowls in their hands, and concluded that this must be some sort of communal mess hall.

The crowd at the far end of the cavern parted respectfully, allowing an old woman to pass through. It was Ereshkigal, also carrying a bowl, though hers was considerably more ornate and

clean than those carried by the general populace. She stopped before a large wooden vat.

Then, from a different area of the cavern, a new commotion arose. Again the crowd was parting, but this time in a hurried, desperate scramble to get out of the way. Nergal and a dozen of his cronies were pushing their way through the press, shoving aside or trampling anyone who didn't get out of the way quickly enough. They passed close by where the Banshees were standing, and Nergal took the time to spare them a menacing glower and implied threat. "You eat last," he growled at Carter before moving on. He and his gang took up position behind Ereshkigal.

An officious-looking character wearing scorpion symbol encrusted robes and miter emerged from behind the giant vat now, and taking Ereshkigal's bowl, held it under a large spigot in the side of the vat, turned a valve, and dispensed a brownish-gray slop into the dish. When it was almost full, he shut off the tap and with a slight bow handed the bowl back to the old woman, who took it in both hands and disappeared back into the crowd without a word.

Nergal now came forward and thrust his own considerably-larger bowl into the waiting hands of the priest, who filled it to the top before handing it back. Nergal's thugs were next, though their bowls were again of the smaller variety – being toadies of the top dog didn't grant them all privileges – and once they were all cleared out and the priest had once more disappeared behind the vat, the free-for-all began.

The tide of people surged forward, everyone clamoring for their turn at the tap. The din was tremendous! As each got his own bowl filled, he fought his way back out against the multitude still pressing inward and quickly found an empty seat at a table. Then he'd start shoveling the gray slop into his mouth with a voracity that defied description.

Hunched over their bowls, the people ate as though they were afraid someone would steal their food right out of their mouths, which probably happened all too often here, thought Carter.

"We better get down there if we want something to eat," suggested Matthew Cross.

"My olfactory system can smell it from here," said Sam wrinkling her nose. "I think I'd rather starve."

"That's exactly what we don't want," said Cross. "Come on." He started towards the food vat and the others followed. By the time they got there, the crowd had dissipated; the last straggler was just scurrying off with his bowl clutched tightly in his hands.

"How are we supposed to eat this stuff?" asked Max. "With our bare hands?"

"Here, try this," said Dexter. The young man had found a small discarded bowl lying partway underneath the low platform on which stood the food vat, and handed it to Max.

She took it over to the tap and turned the valve expecting a torrent of gray goo to issue forth, but was rewarded with no more than a tiny dollop of the viscous foodstuff. The tap sputtered and hissed for a few seconds, but relinquished no more of the vile-smelling brew.

"Looks like we're in luck," said Max sarcastically, tossing down the empty bowl. "The well's gone dry."

"What do we do now?" asked Alex.

"We should go back outside to our ships and raid the replicator on the *Longbow*," said Cross. "Besides, it might be safer spending the night in the Cat's Eye than in the cave Ereshkigal loaned us, especially with your buddy Nergal prowling around." He said this looking at Lee Carter, who frowned in distaste at the mention of the hulking bully's name and unconsciously rubbed her still-sore neck. "We can come back tomorrow, *rearmed*, and resume our search for what happened to Jo."

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The trip back through the maze of tunnels to the first chamber with the huge stone carved door leading to the outside world took about a half hour. When they got there they found the door pushed closed again.

"Let's get this thing open," said Cross, and immediately set about looking for a handle or something else to pull on. The others joined in the search, but after a few moments they all came to the same terrible conclusion. Not only was the inside of the huge stone door free from the intricate carvings that adorned the outside, but was equally free of doorknobs or handles or anything else for that matter. There was nothing to grab hold of and pull it open, no indication that it was even meant to be opened from the inside. The seams between the door and the walls were a near perfect seal, fitting too tightly to slip so much as a piece of paper between them much less fingers or a crowbar.

"We're trapped!" exclaimed Alex.

Carter stepped away from the door back into the entry chamber and caught sight of the large alien text carved prominently on the far wall and recalled with chilling new insight its translation – "Welcome to the Land of No Return."

12 - Unorthodox Summons

Location: Kurnugi

Alex Dalton was awakened early the next morning by small, furtive, scraping sounds coming from the direction of their cave's doorway. As she watched, the rough wooden door swung a few inches inward and tiny yellow eyes that shone in the near-darkness and were no more than two feet off the ground peered inside.

"Eep!" she squeaked, startled by their unexpected appearance.

The eyes widened in fear, realizing they'd been spotted by someone inside, and vanished from the doorway, but their disappearance was immediately followed by the sounds of a brief struggle. Alex sat upright on her cot and was about to get up to see what was going on when the door swung open all the way and in walked Sam Beckett, holding a dirty little urchin of a child by the collar of his ragged tunic.

"Ah, I see you caught our little snooper," said Matthew Cross.

"Yes," replied Sam, setting the street urchin down in the center of the cave floor but keeping a firm grip on his collar to

keep him from fleeing. The youth flinched nervously every time someone moved, but did his best to act brave in the face of the overwhelming odds he perceived himself to be facing.

"What's going on?" asked Alex in bewilderment. Looking around the small room, she saw that everyone else was already awake and suddenly felt a little embarrassed for being the late sleeper. "Why didn't anyone wake me up?" she complained.

"We needed you for bait," replied Max.

"Bait?!?"

"To make this little Peeping-Tom think we were still sleeping so he'd try to sneak in. He's been at it for hours. Sam snuck around back and nabbed him in the act." Max took a menacing step towards the urchin and glared down at him with her patented Glower-of-Doom. "So what's your story, you little perv? Spill it, or else!"

Unfortunately, Max's approach worked all too well. The urchin cringed in fear and tried to back away from Max, only to bump into Sam's leg, which was as far as he could go. He twittered incoherently and tried to pry Sam's grip loose from his clothes but to no avail.

"Come on, you guys!" exclaimed Alex, outraged. "You're scaring the poor little guy. Look, he's just a kid. He was probably just scrounging for some food or something." She got up and took a few deliberately non-threatening steps towards the kid, and then knelt down so she was at eye level with him.

From behind her, Dexter Gray called, "Be careful, Alex. He might be dangerous."

Alex scrunched her face in complete contempt of such a ridiculous notion. "Men..." She turned towards the urchin and in a soothing voice said, "Hi there. My name is Alex. What's yours?"

The urchin's terrified shaking subsided somewhat under the influence of Alex's calming voice and compassionate nearness, and he stopped struggling against Sam's hold. His large

luminescent eyes looked deep into Alex's, and for a split second she had the odd sensation that she was not facing a mere child, but rather a lifeform of incalculable antiquity who was gazing deeply into her very soul. She felt naked before his scrutiny, powerless to resist as the levels of her consciousness were stripped away layer by layer until no secret was left unexposed no matter how deeply buried it had been. She was not afraid however, helpless as she was in his grip, but instead was upheld by a feeling of warmth and comfort and kind benevolence. The urchin's tiny contralto voice broke the spell however, and Alex found herself back in the Banshees' cave facing a dirty little child.

"Enki," the urchin said.

Alex smiled warmly. "Hello Enki." She looked up at Sam and said, "I think you can let Enki go now, Sam." After a quick confirming glance in Carter's direction, Sam did so. Enki took a step away from Sam, glad to get away from the one who had caught him, straightened his rumpled collar with exaggerated meticulousness, then smiled at Alex with renewed bravery.



"So tell me, Enki," said Alex gently. "What were you doing at our door, hmm?"

Enki's bright eyes glinted mischievously. "You're pretty," he said in lieu of answering Alex's question.

"Well thanks, but– Hey!"

The little urchin's hand had flashed out as quick as lightning and snatched Alex's communicator pin right from her uniform, and before Sam or anyone else could catch him he was out the front door and halfway down the winding stairs leading from the Banshees' cave to the main cavern floor a hundred feet below. Alex sprang to her feet and bounded after him, yelling, "Come back here, you little criminal!"

"Alex, wait!" shouted Carter, but it was no use. The headstrong rookie pilot was already out of earshot. "We better go after her," she said to the others, so out the door they all ran, Carter, Max, and Sam, with Matthew Cross and Dexter Gray bringing up the rear. Startled citizens scrambled to get out of their way as they ran through the city's torch-lit streets. Enki zipped and dodged through the crowds with practiced ease, but never left Alex's sight. Whenever he drew too far ahead, he would stop and taunt his struggling pursuers with his infinite youthful stamina, then run off again when they got close enough. In this way they were led through the city, ever deeper into its bowels.

Finally Carter and the others burst through a low tunnel opening into a relatively well-lit cavern about thirty feet in diameter. Before them stood Alex, breathing hard, faced off against the young Enki and an old woman.

"Ereshkigal!" exclaimed Carter in surprise.

Ereshkigal favored them all with a regal yet matronly smile and addressed the youth at her side. "Thank you for bringing them, Enki. You have done very well." She patted him gently on the head and Enki beamed at the praise.

He stepped towards Alex and dug in his pockets until he found what he was looking for. Holding her communicator pin out before him, he said, "Here."

Alex took it and reattached it to her breast, then stepped back to rejoin the rest of the Banshees. As she fell into line, Matthew Cross said, "We're going to have to have a little talk about running off by ourselves and ignoring orders to stop, Ensign." Alex looked properly chastened, and kept her silence, eyes downcast. Now that the heat of the moment had passed, she realized with growing embarrassment how foolish and immature her actions really were, especially in light of the deadly dangers all around them. She could easily have ended up like Jo – killed by giant scorpion men.

Meanwhile, Lee Carter had closed the distance between herself and Ereshkigal. She pointed at Enki, who had returned to Ereshkigal's side, and said accusingly, "You sent him to get us? We just ran a marathon chasing this little kleptomaniac through your city. Couldn't you just have sent someone to ask us to come?"

Ereshkigal smiled benignly. "Enki can be quite the little mischief-maker at times, but he accomplished what I sent him out to do." Carter was about to object, but Ereshkigal cut her off with an imperious wave of her hand and continued, "But let us not talk of unimportant matters. I called you all here because I may have something you desperately want."

"And what would that be?" asked Max, automatically suspicious.

The old woman's expression turned to one of puzzlement, as if the answer to Max's question should have been obvious. "Why, the same thing that *all* here in this hellish place want.

"I know a way to escape!"

13 - Mysteries of the Ages

Location: Ereshkigal's dwelling

"I know a way to escape," Ereshkigal stated.

"Then what are you still doing here?" demanded Max Vasser, unwilling to trust the old woman. She still blamed her at least partly for Jo Schmidt's gruesome death at the hands of the Aqrabu, the monstrous scorpion beings that inhabited some of the caverns here on Kurnugi. "Or do you just like the food here?"

"Yes, I heard of your misfortune at dinner last night," replied Ereshkigal sympathetically.

"Hardly misfortune!" barked Max, becoming more agitated by the second. "We were *lucky* to arrive too late to get any of that gray slime you people call food!"

"Max! Calm down. That's an order," said Lee Carter before Max got completely out of control. To her relief, the hot-headed XO of Banshee Squadron clamped her mouth shut and folded her arms across her chest, resigning herself to merely stew quietly for the time being.

Apparently, Ereshkigal had not taken offense at Max's remarks however, for there was a hint of joviality in her voice as she said, "The food we have here isn't what any of us were used to before we wound up in this place, but on a planet orbiting a black star instead of a bright yellow sun, it is hard to grow anything besides fungi and insects. Despite that, I manage to cultivate a few spices for myself and a select other few, and they are quite effective at masking the unpleasant flavor..." She motioned for Carter and the others to follow her through a low doorway into the next room where a long table awaited them. There were eight place settings, one for each Banshee, herself, and the boy Enki, and at each place was a bowl of the ubiquitous gray porridge.



"I think you'll find these a little more to your liking," said Ereshkigal. "You must be very hungry after not having eaten for so long."

"Starved!" said Sam fervently and immediately moved to take a seat before one of the bowls. She stuck her index finger into the gray, lumpy contents and pulled out a generous dollop and stuck it in her mouth. While Sam chewed, the others held their breath, anxiously waiting to hear the verdict or to catch her if she fell stricken out of her chair, whichever came first. Finally, she swallowed and declared, "I didn't even have to switch off my olfactory system!"

"Good enough for me!" said Max, elbowing her way to one of the other bowls and digging in with both hands. Alex and Dexter followed Max's example, though with more dignity and restraint. Captain Cross gallantly seated Carter, which caused eyebrows to rise in delighted surprise and curiosity all around the table, before sitting down himself. Ereshkigal smiled and took her own place at the head of the table, with Enki parking himself at her left.

For a few minutes, they just ate in silence, the business of soothing their rumbling stomachs taking precedence over everything else, even escape, but finally Matthew Cross reopened the subject. Around a mouthful of thick fungi-and-insect porridge, he said, "Tell us about your way to escape, Ereshkigal. Do you mean the Black Gate?"

At the old woman's uncomprehending stare, Dexter Gray attempted a clarification. "The spatial disturbance in the center of the three planetoids at the edge of this system."

"Ah— you are speaking of the 21-dimensional space-time-thought discontinuity."

This time it was Dexter's turn to stare blankly, but Max came to his rescue. "I think it's clear you're both talking about the same thing. Let's just pick a name and move on, shall we?"

"Alas, the Black Gate does not flow in both directions," continued Ereshkigal, taking Max's cranky but practical advice. "The Black Gate has no entrance leading away from here, as you no doubt discovered on your own, else you would not have been forced to land here seeking another route."

"Who would build a one-way wormhole?" asked Sam. "And why?"

Ereshkigal shrugged. "This place is ancient beyond imagination. Some say it is older than the universe itself, though that is no doubt merely superstition. Who the builders were has been lost to the ages, as has the purpose of this place. For us, however, it is a prison. Most of those who live here are the descendants of spacefarers who were pulled through discontinuities and deposited here with no way to return to their own worlds and loved ones. A few of us, like yourselves, are more recent arrivals."

"You say 'discontinuities', plural," commented Cross. "There is more than one Black Gate?"

"Oh yes," replied Ereshkigal, a touch of awe coloring her inflection. "The universe is criss-crossed by a great net, tying the farthest corners of existence together, and not just this universe, but everything else as well."

"What else is there besides the universe?" asked Alex from her place at the table.

Ereshkigal smiled as with parental indulgence of a loved but slow-witted child. "Other universes, other dimensions, other planes of consciousness. Realms where space, time and thought are as interchangeable and as easily traversed as left and right are to you."

Cross noted that the old woman said 'you' and not 'us', and wondered again who she really was. Her seeming understanding of 21-dimensional discontinuities belied her ragged, primitive appearance. Aloud though, he said, "All this is very interesting,

but if the Black Gate has no opening on this side, then it can't be the avenue of escape you mentioned. Let's talk about that."

"There is another way," said Ereshkigal. "A dangerous way, which is why I have not been able to use it to escape. One must open the Mountain Gates, defeat the Guardians, and climb the Stairway to Heaven. It is a perilous journey; one which only the strongest, smartest, and bravest can even hope to accomplish."

"This is all starting to sound rather epic," commented Max impatiently.

"So where are these gates, guardians and stairways?" asked Carter.

"The Gates are deep in the territory of Nergal," replied Ereshkigal.

Carter groaned and rolled her eyes. "Of course. Like we didn't all see that coming."

Ereshkigal continued. "Nevertheless, you will have to defeat him and his minions somehow to get through the Gates. Once beyond the Gates, you will face the next challenge – the Guardians."

"And they are?" asked Carter.

"They are a race of beings that came through the Black Gate ages ago from an unknown, dark corner of the multiverse. They are the Aqrabu, the same creatures that slew your unfortunate comrade, Lieutenant Jo Schmidt."

"Yeah, we didn't see that one coming either," grouched Max.

"They are superstitious creatures, though, and are held in thrall by an ancient relic called the Heart of Tiamat. Nergal holds the Heart, so you would be well advised to obtain it before confronting the Aqrabu. Only with it will you be able to defeat them."

"Or we could defeat them with our phasers and shield belts," said Max pointedly.

"Nergal also still has possession of your devices," replied Ereshkigal. "You will have to rely on your wits."

"In that case, we're half-way there," quipped Max.

Ereshkigal ignored Max's flippancy. "Finally, you will need to activate the Stairway to Heaven."

"How do we do that?" asked Cross.

"Once you have cleared the path of all other obstacles, I myself will be able to accomplish that last task," replied Ereshkigal mysteriously. "I have studied many years, searching for the correct code sequence that will activate the Stairway. I am confident I will have it before much longer. Once I have the codes, you may commence your portion of our undertaking."

"Whoa there!" interjected Carter. "We haven't agreed to anything yet, Ereshkigal." Captain Cross nodded his agreement with Carter's statement.

But Ereshkigal displayed a complete lack of concern over their objection. Instead, a mirthless smile grew on her craggy and weathered face and she said, "You will. You have no choice. If you ever want to leave Kurnugi, you must do as I have asked. It is the only way."

Act 3

14 - Awakening to Darkness

Location: Somewhere in Kurnugi

She opened her eyes, but saw nothing. Was she blind? She tried to remember, but her thoughts were clouded. She raised her hand from her side and held it in front of her face. Yes, she could make out the faint outlines of her wriggling fingers. She sighed in relief.

A brilliant light flared suddenly to life nearby. It took her eyes a few seconds to adjust to the long-absent illumination, but she eventually discerned an old woman holding a smoking taper beside a small oil lamp atop a dresser on the opposite wall of a rock-hewn chamber. The old woman approached.

"I am relieved to see you finally awake," said the old woman in a kindly voice. "Can you remember your name?"

"Y- Yes. I am Lieutenant Josephine Schmidt of Banshee Squadron."

The old woman smiled with relief. "Good, then the poison has not damaged your memory."

Jo struggled to sit up on the cot on which she lay, but quickly realized how weak she was. Her arm gave way and she flopped back to the thin mattress. "What happened? Why do I feel so weak? How long have I been here?" she asked. "Where are the others? Are they all right? And who are you?"

The old woman's smile grew wider. "I see your curiosity is strong, despite your physical weakness. To answer your questions, I am Ereshkigal. Some of the citizens here look to me for guidance and leadership. As for what happened to you, you are indeed a very lucky girl. Vile creatures known as Aqrabu attacked you just inside the underground entrance and would have killed you, but a passing hunting party intervened, fought off the beasts, and brought you to me. I removed as much of the Aqrabu poison as I could, but you have been unconscious for two days."

"And my friends? Where are—" began Jo, but her vocal exertions sent her into a fit of coughing.

Ereshkigal stepped over to the dresser and returned with a wooden cup filled with water, but when she turned to face Jo again, her smile was gone, replaced by lines of pain and grief mixed with trepidation. "I am afraid that I am the bearer of very bad tidings," she said heavily. "Your friends were not as fortunate as you during the Aqrabu attack." She paused a moment to give Jo time to brace herself. "They fought bravely against the Aqrabu, but in the end..."

"No! I don't believe it!" said Jo as forcefully as her condition allowed. She struggled to sit up again, but the old woman placed a restraining hand on her shoulder.

The lines of pain on Ereshkigal's face deepened. "It grieves me to have to tell you this, but your friends are dead. There was nothing I could do."

"No, no!" repeated Jo desperately. "They can't be dead! I don't believe you! You're lying!" she shouted, then lapsed into another long fit of coughing. Ereshkigal waited patiently for Jo

to recover. When the coughing finally subsided, Jo was no longer hysterical. She sagged back against the chamber's rock wall, her face drained of vitality, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Are they truly gone?" she whispered forlornly, her eyes silently begging the old woman to tell her that this was all some kind of horrible joke.

But that was something Ereshkigal could not do. Instead, she placed a comforting hand on Jo's forearm. "I am truly sorry, Josephine Schmidt. I wish there was something I could have done to save your companions, but you are the last of your group. You must be strong."

Jo sniffed and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I want to see their bodies," she said.

Ereshkigal shook her head sadly. "There is nothing left after an Aqrabu attack," was her grim reply. "Besides, you must rest and regain your strength."

Jo exhaled in a great ragged sigh and closed her eyes for a few moments. She felt utterly spent; the terrible news had leached away all her volition. In her innermost being, she still couldn't accept what the old woman had told her; all her friends dead? Lee, Sam, Max, and Alex. Even Captain Cross and the kid-genius Dexter. All dead. Eaten by some sort of horrible monsters? Only she was still alive. Why? Why her? This entire nightmare had started as a simple space survey mission. How could events have degenerated so quickly and completely that she now found herself the sole survivor of her entire squadron, stranded on a benighted planet on the other side of the known universe with no way of getting home? It was too much for her mind to accept; her injured psyche would not allow it.

She opened her eyes again and saw the old woman still sitting by her bedside watching her. Whatever else may have happened, Jo owed her a debt of gratitude at least. "Thank you for saving my life," Jo said. "I don't know how I can ever repay you."

The old woman smiled, and for a fleeting moment, Jo thought she could see a hint of something lurking behind the carefully constructed facade of sympathy and compassion in her eyes; something sinister. In less than a heartbeat it was gone however, and Jo couldn't tell if she had actually seen it or just imagined it. Ereshkigal smiled and said, "I am sure I will be able to think of some way you can repay me."

15 - Idle Hands

Location: Jo's room in Kurnugi

Jo Schmidt shuffled listlessly around her small room, drowned in a deadly mire of self-torture and recriminations. Ereshkigal's news that all the other Banshees had been horribly killed still weighed heavily on her mind, and there was nothing here to distract her from her morbid thoughts; there was nothing with which she could busy herself. Her equipment had been gone when she had awakened yesterday; there was nothing to read; there weren't even any windows or scenery in this lightless netherworld realm. All she had in abundance was time. Time to blame herself for everything that had happened. If she hadn't backtracked into that dark tunnel, she would have been with her wingmates when the Aqrabu attacked. She would have fought alongside her friends. It would have made a difference. Or at least that was what she had convinced herself was the truth. The blood of six innocent people was on her hands.

Yet the scientist in her was restless, refusing to blindly accept everything she'd been told by the old woman Ereshkigal without

hard physical proof. The scientist in her found it hard to believe that there was absolutely nothing left of her friends after the Aqrabu had finished with them. And her own presence here raised a few questions as well. She had a vague memory of being carried in the arms of rough men, but no recollection of being attacked by a giant scorpion-man creature. Something didn't quite add up.

And the scientist wasn't the only internal voice demanding to be heard. The warrior in her warned her it was an unbelievable coincidence that all her equipment had been lost during the scuffle that had rendered her comatose. Even if her phaser and communicator had been dropped, surely her life support belt would have remained fastened around her waist. The only way to remove it was to undo the magnatomic buckle, a difficult feat for a killer man-scorpion creature with pincers for hands.

Unfortunately, the dominant voice, the terminally depressed, self-torturing voice, was the loudest and held the others at bay, chased them away with a big stick whenever they grew too boisterous in their demands for Jo's attention. And so she sulked, pacing aimlessly back and forth in her room, a prisoner of her own guilt.

She heard a small sound behind her and turned to see Ereshkigal standing in the doorway.

"You look ten times better than you did yesterday, girl," said the old woman. "The color has returned to your cheeks. How do you feel?"

Jo shrugged. "I'm okay," she replied without too much conviction. "A little restless, I guess."

"Then maybe we should find something for you to do," said Ereshkigal. She held out her hand, beckoning Jo to follow her. After a moment's hesitation, she did.

Together, the two women walked slowly through the rock-hewn corridors and open caverns of the underground city. As Ereshkigal passed by, citizens stopped whatever they were doing

and just followed her with their eyes until she was out of sight. The warrior voice inside Jo was shouting again. Something seemed odd; there was something out of place in the citizens' expressions. Ereshkigal had told Jo that the city's denizens looked up to her as a leader and protector, but the expressions she saw on most of the people's faces were colored by veiled fear and resentment.

Finally, the pair passed into a quieter sector where the underlying hubbub of the city was only a faint echo. "Where are we?" asked Jo, peering into the large cavern into which she had been led. Inside she saw endless rows of shelves disappearing away into the haze of distance. All bent under the weight of countless thousands of rectangular cases. Stations that looked like computer consoles of some sort were interspersed at even intervals throughout. The high ceiling arched away into shadow and was upheld by widely spaced and intricately carved columns. The walls were adorned by baroque scrollwork in the inescapable half-man-half-scorpion motif. Torches in wall sconces and braziers on freestanding pedestals cast ruddy, dancing shadows everywhere. The huge cavity had something of the air of an ancient cathedral about it. All that was missing were stained glass windows and statues of deities wearing beatific expressions on their marble faces.

Ereshkigal stepped into the chamber and in a reverent hush explained. "This is the Great Library," she said, gazing at the walls of information. "It was left by the Builders and is ancient beyond imagining. The keys to the universe lie within these walls."

Jo stepped across the threshold into the library, reluctant to disturb the holy place, yet at the same time irresistibly drawn in by the promise of an inexhaustible treasure trove of knowledge. She moved forward as if in a dream, gazing in wonder at the arcane terminals and dusty tomes on the shelves, a smile inching across her face.

Ereshkigal watched the young human scientist closely and with growing satisfaction. Yes, she had chosen the right one; her designs were unfolding as planned. "Do you think you would be interested in spending some time here?" she asked, though she knew what the answer would be and was in fact counting on it.

Jo turned from her inspection of one of the ancient computer terminals with an almost-happy face. The deep pain of the recent loss of her friends was still evident in her eyes, but there was also renewed hope for herself, something that had been conspicuously missing since she had awakened from her coma. "Oh yes, Ereshkigal. I'd be honored if you gave me access to this. Just think of the knowledge I could take back to the Federation with me!" No sooner were those words out of her mouth, of course, than she remembered where she was and that there was no way back home and her face fell again. But then a new thought occurred. "Well, maybe I can find a way out of here buried somewhere in the records," she said.

Ereshkigal smiled mirthlessly. "I am sure you can, girl."

16 - Connections

Location: the Great Library

Lieutenant Jo Schmidt was in intellectual heaven. If it weren't for the fact that she was sealed inside an underground city with no exits, as her brief explorations clearly demonstrated, stranded on a dead planet orbiting an impossible 50-billion-year-old sun more than 500 million parsecs from home she could almost have been happy – and then of course there were the recurring nightmares. Nightmares wherein her friends were gruesomely dismembered and killed by horrible scorpion monsters while she herself stood by, muscles locked in place by sheer terror, compelled to watch, unable to tear her eyes away from the bloody carnage, helpless to do anything but scream in impotent rage and pain.

While she was in the Library it was different though. The ghosts didn't haunt her here nearly as much; there was a wealth of information in the ancient records to keep her mind distracted and busy.

It had been a week since the old woman Ereshkigal had first brought her to this place. 'Perhaps you will discover a way out of this place,' she had said, and that was precisely what had been occupying Jo's every waking moment. Finding a way out of this forgotten realm, away from the monsters both real and in her head. And not just for herself, but for everyone else consigned to this purgatory. Banshee Squadron may be no more, but she had found a new mission for herself.

One of the things that had amazed her when she started working was the incredible ease with which she was able to operate the computer equipment. Though completely alien, she seemed intuitively able to discern how everything worked, and she wondered why that would be so. Even the information found in the library records seemed easy to understand. She couldn't understand the language of course, but the many pictograms and diagrams spoke volumes all by themselves, and she was able to piece together a lot just by looking at the pictures. It was almost as though it was deliberately designed to be easily read by beings other than the builders.

The twisted, alien text crudely etched into the control surfaces was a different story however, but even so it seemed vaguely familiar somehow. It looked almost like... Jo's forehead creased in concentration as she struggled to remember her archeology schooling. ...*Sanskrit!* The writing on the computer looked like Sanskrit!

She looked closer and ran her fingers across the markings. Upon careful inspection, it was clear that the Sanskrit was etched on top of older text of the same style as the pictograms in the records. Jo now recalled the 'welcome' message carved into the wall back out by the city's entrance. It too had looked familiar at the time and she realized now that it had been Sanskrit as well.

What was ancient Sanskrit writing doing on a planet halfway across the known universe? There must be a connection between this place and Earth, or at least a connection between Earth and

whoever had made the carvings. Everything here was ancient beyond the extreme, but the Sanskrit was carved on top of the older text meaning it was newer. It might be only a few thousand years old. Could it have been carved during the same time period Sanskrit flourished on Earth?

The more she thought about it, the more connections she made. The name of this city, 'Kurnugi', was the name of the Sumerian underworld, a place of darkness and ash from which no one could ever exit. The old woman Ereshkigal was the namesake of the queen of the underworld, somewhat fitting given her role here. Even the Aqrabu fit into the puzzle. In Babylonian mythology, the Aqrabuamelu were scorpion men who guarded the gates of the underworld.

There *must* be a connection! It was unthinkable that so many similarities could be simple blind coincidence. That meant there was a way to travel between this place and Earth! Jo's heart raced as this astounding revelation hit her with its full import. *A way home!* She had to find it, and was certain the secret lay within the library. She just needed time to find it.

Jo heard a slight noise behind her, the soft scrape of leather on stone, and then a light touch on her shoulder. She jumped with a violent start and spun in her seat, her overworked imagination conjuring all manner of ravening monsters poised to devour her, but when she saw who it was she exhaled slowly, forcing her heart back down her throat, and smiled. It was only the precocious lad Enki with her lunch.

She took the wooden bowl filled with the ubiquitous gray sludge these people called food and set it on the desktop beside the computer terminal at which she sat. "Thanks, Enki," she said to the youth and watched his eager face light up at her kind words. She realized that even young Enki's name hearkened back to Babylonian origins.

The youth had been her unshakable shadow for the last six days, bringing her food and water plus the occasional

archaeological trinket, but mostly he just sat beside her and watched her as she worked. Jo wondered how much someone so young could understand about the material she was researching, but Enki never seemed to get bored or restless the way a typical human child would if confined to a library for a week.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he hopped up on a chair behind Jo.

"I just realized that some of the writing here is just like writing used on my home planet," Jo replied.

"Oh."

"It's carved in the wall near the city gate and on the computer controls here on top of some older writing."

"Can you read it?"

"A little."

"Oh."

"I just have to figure out how the people got from here to my planet."

"Maybe they used the Stairway to Heaven," suggested Enki indifferently. He picked up a bent spoon and started poking at the bowl of sludge he had brought Jo.

"The what?" asked Jo. "What did you say?" She had seen pictograms of something that might be considered a 'Stairway to Heaven' in the library, but had passed them by as mere local superstitions or a religion of some sort.

"The Stairway to Heaven," repeated Enki. He had finally decided that if Jo wasn't going to eat her lunch then he might as well, and dug his spoon into the porridge. "I saw it in the library once," he said around a mouthful.

"Can you show me?" asked Jo, excitement growing again.

"Sure!" Enki set down the spoon, hopped off his chair and headed off into the depths of the library with Jo right on his heels.

17 - Ancient Voice

Location: the Great Library

Jo Schmidt examined the data source Enki had located for her, the one supposedly containing information about something called the 'Stairway to Heaven'. If her theory was correct, the Stairway, whatever form it actually took, was the method by which people from this planet had traveled to Earth several thousand years ago and influenced the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. It was also the means by which she and everyone else could escape this place.

On her own, she would never have found this file, and judging from the thick coating of grime and dust encrusted on the casing, no one else had disturbed it for thousands, perhaps millions of years. It had been hidden atop a tall shelf unit in one of the far rear corners of the Great Library, out of sight from anyone walking past on the floor below, yet the boy Enki had threaded his way unerringly through the maze of shelves and workspaces until he stopped and pointed. 'Up there,' he had said.

He and Jo had spent the next half hour pulling and shoving a dozen heavy tables and chairs over and stacking them in a precarious makeshift ladder until Jo could clamber up and retrieve the precious file. She had wondered how the boy had known the file was there, but Enki would only say that he had had plenty of time to explore the place, then added with a clever grin that he knew lots of secrets.

Like all the other data records in the library, the one she now held in her hands was a ring of some sort of white, smooth, ceramic-like material about as thick as her thumb and five inches across. Unlike all the others she'd rummaged through until now however, this ring was not marked with Sanskrit etchings on its surface. Instead, pictograms and a completely alien alphabet adorned its otherwise smooth exterior. It was the same language in which the files themselves were recorded. At some point in the past, someone – Jo had started thinking of them as Babylonians – had scribed their own language on top of the alien markings, probably for their own reference, but they had missed this one.

"Do you think that's what you were looking for?" asked Enki, who had once again parked himself on a chair beside Jo. His young face betrayed his eager anticipation.

"Let's find out," replied Jo.

She took the data ring out of its dusty case, and as she had countless times since beginning her work in the library, lay the ceramic hoop into a circular indentation on the ancient computer's work surface and sat back. The holographic unit activated and began playback of the data contained in the ring. The empty air above the terminal was suddenly awash with dancing pictograms and alien text, all slowly rotating and shifting in an endless holographic parade of diagrams and technical-looking schematics. The wide-eyed faces of the two onlookers were bathed in the glow of the light show.

Jo's smile grew in steady increments until it stretched nearly from ear to ear. She had found it! The data contained on this ring were instructions for the operation of a machine called the Stairway to Heaven. She was elated! Turning to Enki, she grabbed him in an impulsive hug and exclaimed, "This is it, Enki! We found a way home! I could kiss you!" and that's just what she did, planting a big peck on the boy's cheek.

Caught by surprise, Enki squirmed in Jo's embrace, like any young boy trying desperately to get away from being kissed by a girl, and finally managed to wriggle free. He immediately hopped off the chair to put some distance between himself and the crazy girl and stood wiping his cheek.

Jo laughed and turned back to watch the hologram. It would take a while to learn exactly what the information was talking about, but even this first glance told her a lot.

Somewhere on this planet was a device capable of instantaneous transport across great distances – perhaps a wormhole generator. It was similar to the Black Gate which brought them all here and part of the same overall system, but smaller, assuming she was reading the pictograms correctly.

Behind her, Enki had finished wiping the kooties from his face and was edging closer to Jo and the holographic display again, mesmerized by the swirling, kaleidoscopic lights. "What's that?" he asked, clearly in awe.

"You're 'Stairway to Heaven'," replied Jo.

Enki sniffed diffidently. "Doesn't look like a stairway," he complained.

Jo laughed. "That's true, but it'll get us home anyway."

Suddenly, the slideshow of technical diagrams ended and the holographic field flickered as though someone was jiggling the power connection, but a few moments later it came back on. This time however, the schematics and equations were replaced by a humanoid figure. Its head was hairless, its eyes deep-set, and a simple white robe covered a vaguely female body.

Jo's eyes widened in recognition of the diminutive holographic figure hovering in the air before her. "By the Great Bird of the Galaxy...!" she whispered in surprise and wonder. She knew of this race of beings, though had never actually met one. In fact, as far as she knew, no one had encountered a member of this race for the last five billion years. Suspended in the holographic field before her was the image of an *Ancient!*



At her side, the young Enki was somewhat less impressed. To him the Ancient was just another bald grown-up, but of some minor interest nevertheless since Jo seemed so thrilled by its appearance. "Who's that?" he asked.

Jo was surprised at first by his question, but then remembered she was dealing with a ten-year-old. "This is an Ancient. Say hello to your distant ancestor, Enki. Billions of years ago this race flew all around the Galaxy, planting the seeds of life on millions of planets. The Ancients are long gone, but we're all

their descendants, and that's why we all kind of look like one another."

The holographic Ancient began speaking. In a resonant voice, it narrated fantastic tales of wonder and mystery of the days when the universe was much younger. Jo couldn't understand a word of it, of course – the Ancient was speaking in its own tongue – but Jo imagined what marvelous secrets it was expounding, and she longed to be able to understand it. "Oh if I only had my tricorder or even the universal translator," she lamented, then realized something. "The Black Gate was built by the Ancients! This whole city must be an ancient Ancient city!"

"They lived here?" asked Enki dubiously. "They couldn't have been too smart then."

"Well, I'm sure it was much nicer a few billion years ago... And maybe not even underground. It could have gotten buried over time."

After twenty minutes of talking, the Ancient's image was replaced by more of the technical diagrams and elaborate equations, though the voice continued its narration. The pictograms switched from detailing the Stairway itself to what Jo guessed was some sort of control unit.

"This must be the key to how the thing works," she muttered to herself. "No wonder no one's ever been able to leave this place!"

"Why not?" asked Enki.

"I think this data ring contains the instructions for how the Stairway works, but judging from the amount of dust and grime on the case, no one has *ever* found it," reasoned Jo, thinking out loud. "And no one's been able to get it to work without these instructions."

"What are you going to do?"

"Translate everything and figure it out! But first we have to tell Ereshkigal."

18 - Plans for the Future

Location: Banshees' domicile

Ensign Dexter Gray came rushing into the main living space of the Banshees' cliff dwelling deep in the underground city of Kurnugi. His face was flushed and he was breathing hard. He'd obviously run all the way up the hundreds of stairs from the cavern floor to their level halfway up the towering cavern wall. Once inside, he headed straight for one of the large, semi-comfortable chairs and collapsed into it.

"Dex! What's wrong?" asked Alex Dalton, her sunny face showing concern.

"Nothing!" huffed Dex. "I just figured out a way home if we can somehow get back outside to the surface and our ships!"

That got everyone's attention.

"What?" demanded Max. "What are you talking about, Poindexter?" She took two steps towards the young Cat's Eye copilot and looked like she was about to literally wring the information out of him.

Luckily for Dexter, Matthew Cross put out a restraining hand and stopped Max in mid-lunge, then turned to Dex and said, "What have you come up with, Ensign?"

"Well," replied the youth slowly, "I've been thinking about it a lot since we got here – it's not like I have anything else to do I mean, aside from hanging out with Alex... er... I mean Ensign Dalton... it's been pretty boring, you know?"

"Get to the point, Dex," said Cross, growing impatient, "or I'll let Max have her way with you."

Dexter gulped and hurried his story along. "The Scorpion class starfighter and the Cat's Eye class recon ship can sustain a continual sublight thrust of 10 gees for one month before their fuel is exhausted. If we set up static warp shells to reduce our mass to near zero, at 10 gees thrust we would quickly accelerate to within a tiny fraction of the speed of light. At 99.99999 et-cetera percent the speed of light, the relativistic time dilation effect would be enormous!"

"Enormous, huh? That's what all men say," said Max straight-faced.

Cross threw Max a dark look and said, "How enormous?"

"We would be able to fly all the way back home to Earth inside of a month, subjective time," replied Dex.

"Dex! You did it! You saved us!" cried Alex, beaming at her boyfriend.

"Not so fast," said Cross. "To us it would seem like only a month had passed because of the time dilation, but how much *objective* time would pass in the rest of the universe and on Earth?"

"Uh well, since we're 500 million parsecs from earth, that means, uh..." he did a quick mental calculation, "...1.63 billion light years, so the trip would take 1.63 billion years more or less, objectively."

"1.63 billion years.... What will we find 1.63 billion years from now when we finally get home?" asked Cross. "Will there be any humans left on Earth?"

"Uh, well... probably not," replied Dexter, some of his enthusiasm beginning to drain away. "But we'd be home. I'm sure there's be *someone* there to greet us when we got back."

"In almost 2 billion years, humans will have evolved into something unrecognizable, and Earth, assuming it's even still there and hasn't been burned up or flung out of the solar system by a passing gravity source or some other cosmic catastrophe, will be just as unrecognizable, populated by totally alien creatures we couldn't even begin to imagine. We wouldn't be arriving home and welcomed back as long-lost relatives, we'd be shot down as invading aliens trespassing on someone else's turf."

Cross could see that Dexter hadn't thought his plan all the way through and that these points fairly blew it out of the water. Dexter's countenance fell, his hopes dashed on the rocks of immutable physics and evolution, and Cross felt a pang of sympathy for the young man. He placed a fatherly hand on Dex's shoulder. "Still, it was a good plan, Dex. And if we don't find some other way out of this trap we may have to try it. Even an alien Earth 2 billion years in the future is better than staying in this godforsaken place."

19 - Fade To White

Location: Banshees' cliff dwelling

It was mid-afternoon in the underground city of Kurnugi the day after Dexter had explained his impractical escape plan, thought it was difficult to tell time in that lightless realm. In the main cavern where the food distribution center was, robed priests would bang an enormous gong signaling key points in the day: time to wake up, lunch time, time to stop working and go home, dinner time, time to go to sleep.... How the priests knew when to ring their gong though was a jealously guarded secret.

Ensign Alex Dalton sat on a bench in the Banshees' underground domicile with a thoroughly unhappy frown on her normally cheerful face. She had her uniform sleeves rolled up and was examining her arms with great distaste and shaking her head.

Dexter Gray wandered into the room and noticed Alex's funk. "What's wrong?"

At the sound of his voice, Alex looked up from her self-inspection. "Look at this!" she exclaimed while thrusting her bare arms out to Dex.

Dexter looked, but couldn't really see anything out of the ordinary. He shrugged in helpless confusion.

Alex put her arms down and pulled up her pants leg, revealing her shapely calf. "What about this?" she demanded.

"Umm... It's very nice?" suggested Dexter hopefully, but still not comprehending.

Alex frowned at the answer. "'Nice'?!?" Could Dexter be this dense? Yes – he was a guy. If he wanted to be her boyfriend he was going to have to do a lot better than this! She decided to try one last time to get through to him. In one swift motion, she ran her thumb down the magnatomic seal on the front of her uniform and yanked the halves apart, exposing her bra and bare stomach down to her belly button. "Well? Take a look at this!" she cried.

Dexter's jaw dropped, and if he'd been a cartoon his eyes would have popped right out of his head with boingy noises and made *Aoooga* sounds like an old jalopy horn. He stared at Alex's perfect body, the perky breasts underneath the tiny brazier, the washboard abs, the slender waist. His mouth worked for a few seconds before anything came out of it, and even then it was mostly incoherent babbling: "Ah... I, uh... that is, um... what uh... you, ah, oh my... Alex, you, those..." and so on.

Alex endured Dexter's meltdown, all the while staring at him defiantly with squared jaw and tapping her foot impatiently. She was unaware of the effect she was having on the helpless young man. Irritation and impatience became incrementally more pronounced on her face. "What the hell are you babbling about, you nimwit!?" she finally exclaimed, unable to contain her vexation any longer. "Just look at this!"

"I am!" returned Dex, though somewhat less enthusiastically than before. He couldn't understand the reason for Alex's angry face. "I think you look great!"



"What do you mean 'great'? My skin is as white as a sheet! We spent so much time and effort back at the apartment on Serenity working up awesome suntans and now two weeks in this sunless *hole* has made me whiter than the left side of a Cheronian!"

Dexter smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Is that what this has been about?" he asked incredulously. "I don't think you look bad at all! Besides, in this dark, flickering torchlight who can tell?" Dexter instantly clamped his mouth shut because he knew he'd made a fatal mistake, but it was too

late – the words were out. He cringed and awaited Alex's wrath, but the Fates were in a good mood and intervened on his behalf, for just at that moment, the door to the inner room opened and out walked Max. She was carrying an empty pitcher, but when she saw Alex standing half-undressed in front of Dexter, she skidded to a halt, eyes wide.

"What in blazes is going on out here?!?" she exclaimed. "We leave you two alone for ten minutes and you start playing Show & Tell? At least go down into the city and find a cheap motel or something, for crying out loud!"

"But Commander–!" began both Dexter and Alex, desperate to explain the truth, but Max would have none of it.

"Save it!" she barked. "Zip that up, Ensign!" she ordered Alex, who scrambled to reseal her uniform. Turning to Dexter, Max thrust the pitcher she carried into his arms. "Go fill that up down at the well, Ensign. You can go help him, Dalton."

"But–"

"No buts! Move out!"

"Yes, ma'am," the two Ensigns replied glumly, hanging their heads.

As soon as the two youngest members of Banshee Squadron were out the front door on their errand, a wicked smile appeared on Max's face and a few low chuckles escaped her lips.

Sam came into the room and notices Max's unaccustomed mirth. "What's so funny?" she asked the Banshee Squadron normally grim XO.

"Alex was complaining about her fading tan again, this time to Poindexter," replied Max between chuckles. "I was just giving them a hard time about it, that's all. It'll keep them out of trouble for a few days..."

20 - Cold Shoulder

Location: the streets of Kurnugi

Ensign Alex Dalton plowed her way through the crowded streets of the great underground city of Kurnugi, her fierce facial expression being more than enough to part the throngs in her way like the waters of the Red Sea before the Breath of God.

The reason for the young woman's holy wrath followed at what he hoped was a relatively safe distance. Ensign Dexter Gray tried to keep up, but the parted crowds came crashing together again as soon as Alex had passed, often leaving him swamped in clumps of pedestrians like the Egyptian chariots that had tried to follow the Israelites across the Red Sea. In his hands he carried the empty pitcher Max Vasser had ordered them to refill.

"Alex! Slow down!" he called over the heads of the crowd for the forty-seventh time, but the angry blonde ignored him and instead hastened her steps even more. He sighed in resignation. One stupid slip of the tongue had ruined his chances with Alex

forever. Oh if only he'd been born a mute he'd still be in the lovely Alex's good graces!

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After Dexter and Alex had departed with their pitcher, Sam and Max went back inside the inner room of the Banshees' temporary dwelling. They rejoined Lee Carter, Matthew Cross and the leader of Kurnugi, Ereshkigal, seated at the table. Cross looked at Max questioningly while shaking his empty cup. She answered his unvoiced query. "I sent the kiddies out to fetch the water. I put the fear of God into them, so it won't take them more than a few minutes." Satisfied, Cross turned his attention back to the discussion.

As Max and Sam sat down, Lee Carter filled them in. "Ereshkigal was just telling us that it will take a few more days before we can move against Nergal and his gang."

"What's the delay?" asked Max, frowning. "It's been almost two weeks since we hatched this harebrained escape plan."

"You must have patience, girl," replied Ereshkigal calmly and with great self-assurance. "All must be in readiness before you confront Nergal before the Gates of the Stairway to Heaven or else all will be for naught. Even if you defeat Nergal and take the Heart of Tiamat from him with which to control the Aqrabu guarding the Stairway, without the key to the Stairway there is still no escape."

"Fine," grumbled Max, not mollified in the least by the old woman's pat explanations. Ereshkigal's subtle yet constant attitude of smug superiority, the way she always called everyone 'girl' or 'boy', the way the pathetic citizens of this dark city revered her almost like a god severely offended Max's sense of propriety. Plus, she simply didn't trust the old bat, and was about to voice another comment in that general vein but Cross spoke up before she had the chance. To Max's surprise, Captain Cross

was apparently thinking along the same lines as she was, and her opinion of the man accordingly went up several big notches.

"I've been wondering," began Cross with deliberate thoughtfulness, "about how the present political situation in Kurnugi came to be. It seems an odd balance of power, not to mention completely counterproductive. Nergal's faction controls the section of the city that houses the Stairway to Heaven, and he controls the Aqrabu, who guard the gates, with the Heart of Tiamat device. Yet he can't use the Stairway because he doesn't know how. You, on the other hand, know how the Stairway operates, but you can't use it because Nergal and his gang keep you from it. You each have something the other needs to make the escape work. It seems to me that if only you and Nergal cooperated, you all could have left a long time ago."

For a moment, a look of deep hatred and irritation blackened Ereshkigal's craggy face, but it came and went so quickly it was impossible to say for sure. Her voice when she answered betrayed no hint of any malignant feelings.

"Most of the people living on this planet are the descendants of travelers who were trapped here hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Myself and Nergal however, are more recent arrivals. We came in ships through the dimensional discontinuity – your 'Black Gate'."

"Why?" prodded Cross.

"Nergal is a wanted criminal on my homeworld," replied Ereshkigal. "I was hunting him to bring him to justice. He fled through the Black Gate and I followed. Once within the city, he quickly formed a new gang and discovered the means of controlling the Aqrabu with the Heart of Tiamat, forcing me to enlist the support of the more honest citizens." A distant look entered Ereshkigal's eyes. "That was almost fifty years ago..." she said wistfully, but the mood quickly dissipated. "He has spent the intervening years inflicting his reign of terror on the people, while I have spent them trying to help his victims and to

find a way out of this place. After all these years, I almost have the answer – the key to the Stairway. Very soon now."

Ereshkigal looked directly into Cross' eyes with her usual haughty beligerance. "Does that answer your question, Mr. Cross?"

Matthew Cross returned the old woman's stare. "For now. Thank you."

"In that case, I have business to attend to elsewhere," said Ereshkigal, standing from the table. With a slight bow, she swept from the room and closed the door behind her.

Max turned to Cross and asked, "You buy any of that?"

Cross reflected thoughtfully for a few seconds, then repeated, "For now."

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Eventually, Alex Dalton and Dexter Gray reached the enormous dining cavern wherein stood the huge food vats and huge dinner gong. The place was deserted at this hour in the day, so they had no difficulty making their way through the closely-packed tables and benches to the carven rill that ran all along the rear wall of the cavern. A ribbon of water about a foot deep and two wide trickled sluggishly at the bottom of the cut channel, entering the dining cavern through a gated culvert in the stone wall at one end and exiting through another at the far end. This was this section of Kurnugi's water supply.

Alex approached the stone trough slowly and peered down into it. Her face wrinkled in disgust at the brackish water. "It's a miracle these people haven't all died from cholera or something," she said. "I suppose we can boil it or something when we get back to the cliff dwelling.

"Gimme that," she said, reaching over and snatching the pitcher Max had given them from Dexter's hands. She made it a point not to look at his face, making it clear she was still mad at

him for his careless, accidental 'You look good in the dark' comment earlier.

The young man, for his part, was determined to get back on Alex's good side, so he was on the lookout for any chance to be helpful. "Maybe we can find a spot where the water isn't so stagnant," he suggested.

Alex studiously ignored him and dipped the neck of the pitcher below the water's surface. The oily liquid swirled around the pitcher and clung to her skin in a thoroughly disgusting manner, and the odor that arose was something you'd expect from a sewer, not a fresh water supply. After a few seconds, Alex withdrew the pitcher and muttered, "Maybe you're right..." She dumped out the contents and began walking downstream looking for a better spot.

Dexter set off after her. "Um... Y'know, there's an ancient Vulcan proverb..." he ventured cautiously. There was no response from Alex, so he continued. "...It goes something like this – 'Always drink upstream from the herd'."

From behind, Dexter could see Alex's shoulders shake, and she emitted an abrupt sound like a choked-back laugh. The girl stopped, turned, and began walking the other way up the rill. Her face was still an inflexible mask of unfriendliness, but Dexter thought he could detect a slight upward curl of her lips that wasn't there five seconds ago. With renewed hope, he trotted after.

They reached the culvert through which the water flowed without finding any clean spots in the stream.

"Well, I guess we don't have any choice," said Alex, preparing to fill the pitcher again. "But I'm going to make *you* give it to Max. Consider it payback."

"Wait a sec," said Dexter, peering thoughtfully into the dark culvert opening. The cavern's torchlight didn't extend more than a couple of feet into the small orifice; all the rest was black. "I wonder where this water comes from. I wish I had my tricorder."

He set off following the wall beyond where the rill started, running his hands on the stone surface, obviously looking for something.

Alex was caught in a terrible dilemma. She didn't want to follow Dex because she was still supposed to be mad at him, but on the other hand, she didn't want to be left all alone in this dark and scary cave. The internal fight was quick – irrational fear clobbers ego every time – and she scurried after Dex who was already almost out of sight in the dim lighting.

"What are you looking for?" she asked as she caught up to him.

"Maybe there's another cavern where the stream runs through," was the reply. Dexter suddenly stopped. "Aha!" He snaked around a sharp corner in the rock where the shadows were the deepest and entered a narrow crack in the dining cavern's wall. Alex hadn't even seen it. After a second, his arm popped out of the crevice and waved to Alex. "Come on," said his disembodied voice from within the crack's gloom. "I can hear water running!" Taking a deep breath and clutching the pitcher to her chest, Alex stepped through the crack into whatever was beyond.

A short but very narrow and winding natural passage opened onto a medium-sized cave. The floor was fairly flat and worn, and the ceiling twenty feet above their heads was an inverted forest of stalactites. At the rear, a crack in the floor was the source of the rushing water sound. Alex rushed over and looked down. She sniffed the air tentatively, and smiled. Bending down, she began filling the pitcher.

Dexter had hung back near the entrance, and wore a troubled expression. "Alex, would you say the Kurnugians used this cave?"

"Doesn't look like it."

Dex nodded in agreement. "I think so too. So why is there a lit torch in the wall over there?"

As soon as those words were out of Dexter's mouth, the air all around the cave shimmered, and suddenly the space was filled with a dozen armored figures. Two of the helmeted soldiers grappled Alex while several more pounced on Dexter.

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"What's keeping those kids?" asked Lee Carter. "They should have been back half an hour ago. I'm getting worried."

"Knowing them, they probably got into trouble," said Max.

"We should go find out," suggested Sam.

Carter looked at Captain Cross, who nodded his agreement, and the four of them immediately set out in search of their missing companions.

21 - Cold Feet

Location: a small cave near the dining cavern in Kurnugi

"Dex! Help!" screamed Alex as she struggled fiercely against the armored figures that had grabbed hold of her arms, all thoughts of her earlier petty anger against Dexter forgotten.

"What the—!" said Dexter, momentarily stunned by the sudden appearance of a dozen armed beings out of thin air. "The Breen! We completely forgot about them!" Ever since the brief space battle above Kurnugi where the Banshees forced the retreat of the Breen probe ship, the Breen had stayed out of sight. No one had known what had become of them, or if they were even in the city – until now. But this was no time to be analytical. His girlfriend was in trouble!

Summoning courage he had no idea was even there, Dexter roared a challenge and launched himself bodily through the air at the two Breen holding Alex. He collided with one of them, tearing him away from the girl, and they went down in a heap with Dexter somehow on top. The Breen struggled, but Dexter

grabbed the man's helmeted head and slammed it down against the stone floor, and the Breen lay still.

Meanwhile, Alex shattered her filled pitcher against the helmet of the other Breen holding her. It would have been more effective against an unprotected cranium, but the force of the impact of that much water and crockery was enough to dislodge his hold on her, and he staggered back against the cave wall. A quick follow-up with a knee to his stomach was enough to drop him to the floor right next to his companion.

Dexter and Alex flashed triumphant grins at each other, but these quickly vanished when the ten remaining Breen rushed them. The two young Banshees fought bravely, but were overwhelmed by sheer weight. In the end, both Dexter and Alex were held fast by a pair of Breen while another pointed a disruptor at their heads.

One of the Breen approached and looked them over, then spoke in his indecipherable, metallic-sounding language to the others. Dexter and Alex found themselves shoved and prodded towards the cave's exit.

"What are they going to do with us?" whispered Alex, fear betraying her voice.

"I don't know," admitted Dexter. "Maybe they'll use us as hostages."

"But why— oof!" grunted Alex and doubled over. One of the Breen shoving her along had had enough of the humans' whispering and had explained his preference with a punch in the gut.

"You bastard!" shouted Dexter and struggled to break free from the two soldiers holding him, but a vicious punch in the kidney put a stop to that. Dexter gritted his teeth and silently vowed revenge, but even through the haze of pain, he heard the beginnings of some sort of commotion outside, and wondered what was going on now. Once he was shoved through the narrow crevice back out into the main dining cavern, it all became clear.

Four black-and-white clad figures were ducking in and out amongst the Breen, delivering blows and causing general mayhem. The Banshees had come to the rescue!

One of the Breen was already down, and Cross, Carter, Max and Sam each had another engaged. Apparently, their first attack had effectively disarmed their opponents, for several disruptor pistols littered the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, Dexter saw the Breen on his right draw his disruptor and aim it at Captain Cross.

"Captain, look out!" yelled Dexter just as the Breen fired.

Matthew Cross managed to duck under the Breen's aim and the blast hit the cavern wall instead causing an explosion and spray of sharp rocks. One large piece hit Cross just below the left temple, opening a bloody gash. The distraction gave Cross' opponent the opening he needed to connect with several telling blows to the midsection. Cross staggered back, wheezing. The Breen followed up with a solid punch to the face, and Cross' nose exploded in a gush of blood.

The Breen to Dexter's right was taking aim once again, but Dexter stomped on the foot of the Breen still holding him and lunged forward, breaking free and bowling into the shooter, spoiling his shot. His momentum carried them both into the two Breen holding Alex, and moments later all were a hopeless tangle of arms and legs on the floor. Alex quickly squirmed free of her captors and leapt to her feet and started kicking their heads with all her might, shouting, "Take that, you stupid Breen! How do you like it, huh? Hurts, doesn't it?" and so forth.

Meanwhile, Carter and Sam were grappling with their opponents. Carter had a bloody cut on her forehead, and Sam's uniform sleeve was torn and she had a bloody lip. Cross was still standing, though not for much longer. It was impossible to tell how the Breen fared because of their all-concealing cold-suits. Max meanwhile, was doing better than her teammates. She had

smashed a chair across the back of her opponent knocking him flat and was sprinting across the cavern floor to help Cross.

Dexter scrambled to get to his feet as were the Breen he had knocked down. His hand touched something cold and metal, and he realized that he had found one of the Breen weapons. His fingers curled around the hilt and he brought it to bear on the nearest alien. He wished he could have seen the Breen's expression as it realized it was about to be gunned down with its own weapon. A green flash and sizzling sound filled the space between Dexter's outstretched hand and his target, and then the Breen slumped to the stone floor.

Dexter shifted his aim and pulled the trigger again, and another Breen hit the dirt.

By this time, the other Breen had realized what was going on, and several of them made desperate scrambles for some of the other pistols lying discarded, but a resolute and very angry Banshee blocked each attempt. Seeing there was no way they were going to win this encounter, the Breen who had been fighting Sam – presumably the leader – touched a control on his gauntlet and shimmered out of sight. A split second later the others followed him into the ether, including the ones that were lying unconscious on the cavern floor. The Banshees were suddenly alone.

Carter went over to where Cross stood wobbling and put her shoulder under his arm before he fell over and let him lean his full weight on her. "Let's get you out of here before they decide to bring reinforcements," she said gently.

"I won't argue with that," replied Cross through the blood covering his face. He managed a weak smile. "Guess I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Nonsense," said Carter, returning his smile.

Dexter walked over to Alex. "You okay?" he asked tentatively. He still wasn't quite sure where he stood with her.

"Yes," she said timidly and turned her head so her long, golden hair hid her eyes. A moment later though, she looked up and said, "Thanks for coming to my rescue." Her sweet smile and the unmistakable admiration in her eyes was the best thing Dexter had ever seen. He smiled. Together, they followed after Carter and Cross.

By now, a few Kurnugi citizens were arriving in the dining cavern, either drawn by the noise of the battle or just early for dinner. Sam and Max hastily looked about for the dropped Breen disruptors, but apparently with the exception of the one in Dexter's hands, the weapons had vanished at the same time as their owners, so they hurried after the others back to their cliff dwelling.

22 - The Shadow of Death

Location: near the Banshees' cliff dwelling in Kurnugi

The Banshees were almost back to their cliffside dwelling deep in the underground city of Kurnugi. Lee Carter was still helping Matthew Cross walk; the man had taken quite a beating from the Breen soldier he'd been fighting. He had lost a lot of blood from all the cuts and contusions on his head and seemed to be drifting in and out of delirium. She was beginning to seriously worry about him, but wasn't looking forward to lugging him up the thousand narrow steps that wound their way up the cavern wall to their domicile.

She motioned with her head for Sam to come over and help her. Sam slipped her shoulder under Cross' other arm, and together she and Carter practically carried him along.

They were in the massive residential cavern now and had almost reached the bottom of the winding stair that led up to their dwelling. Carter was beginning to think that they'd actually make it without anything else bad happening, but her hopes were dashed to smithereens when a hulking shadow detached itself

from the pervading gloom of a dark alleyway between two rows of ramshackle buildings on the cavern floor.

She recognized the brute's face instantly. It was the one face she least wanted to see again in this dismal place.

"Get out of our way, Nergal," she said. "We don't have time to play your stupid game right now; we've got a hurt man here."

Predictably, Nergal ignored Carter's implied threat, and instead stomped forward another few steps on legs like tree trunks. "You and I have unfinished business," he rumbled. "Ereshkigal kept me from killing you the last time, but no one will save you this time." He took another thunderous step forward.

"Come, woman. I will spread your entrails all over the walls."

Carter sighed. She really didn't have time for this. Cross was slumping heavily against her, and it was clear he wouldn't stay conscious much longer. They had to get him to a place where he could lie down and find some help for him.

Max stepped around Carter and Cross and glared at Nergal. "You want to fight?" she snarled. "You might find me more of a challenge, caveman!" Her hands were clenched in fists and her teeth bared.

"No, Max," ordered Carter. "Not now. Later. I promise." She adjusted her hold on Cross so she could turn around and look at Dexter, who was bringing up the rear with Alex. "Let me have that, Ensign," she said, indicating the object clutched in the young man's hand. He tossed it to her without comment and she deftly caught it with her free hand.

Carter swung back around to face Nergal, brought up the Breen disruptor and shot him point-blank.

Nergal snarled and convulsed spasmodically, and succumbed to the weapon's neural paralyzing effects. His muscles all failed simultaneously, and he toppled forward like a felled redwood, landing square on his nose. He twitched a few times, then lay still.

Max cringed at the impact. "That's gotta hurt falling on your nose like that," she commented unsympathetically.

"Max," said Carter. "Take Sam and go find Ereshkigal. Tell her Cross needs medical attention. Dex and Alex will help me get him up to our place. Here, take this." She tossed the Breen disruptor to Max. "Hurry."

"Right."

Sam relinquished her place at Cross' side to Dexter and together with Max hurried off. Carter and the two young Banshees began the long, arduous climb up the winding stairs.

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It had taken them nearly twenty minutes and a couple of close calls where they'd come close to slipping off the narrow switchbacks leading up the towering cavern wall, but Carter, Dex and Alex had finally managed to drag Matthew Cross through the door of their dwelling and deposit him on one of the cots in the back room. They collapsed on the floor beside him, exhausted.

"I could use some water," groaned Dexter.

"That's how this whole mess got started in the first place," replied Alex.

Carter forced herself back to her feet and stepped over to Cross. His eyes were closed, his breathing was shallow, and his skin pale and clammy. The deep cut on his face just below the left temple was red and swollen.

"He's got an infection on one of his cuts. There must be some really nasty alien microbes around here that really like humans. He looks like he's gone into shock. One of the rocks blasted free by that Breen's wild disruptor shot during the fight must have given him a concussion." said Carter, clearly worried. "I wish we hadn't lost Jo. She was the medic. I simply don't have the training to deal with this."

"What's taking Max and Sam so long?" said Alex. She stood. "Come on, Dex. Let's go see if we can spot them." Dexter rose and followed her out, leaving Carter alone with Matthew Cross.

"Don't you die, Cross," she whispered. "I don't want to lose you too."

She lay a rough blanket over his weakly shivering form and pulled one of the room's brazier over next to the cot for a little extra warmth, but there was little else she could do. They didn't even have any water handy with which to clean his wounds. She needed to get some. Where? The neighbors were sure to have water. She doubted they'd open their doors for her and give her any, but she was prepared to kick the doors in and take it if need be.

After one last look at Cross to make sure he was all right for the time being, she left the room.

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Matthew Cross spun in a weightless, dizzying world of mad colors and sounds. He understood none of what he saw and heard, had no idea where he was or what was happening. He felt like he was falling. He felt hot and cold at the same time. There was a distant pain in his head, throbbing rhythmically. There was no way of telling how long he fell through this nightmare realm, but it lasted forever.

Then the colors faded and receded into the distance, replaced by smothering cocoon of darkness and silence. He didn't know which he liked worse.

There was a face before him. Worried eyes framed by tousled, short brown hair. Was it Commander Carter? Was she was whispering something to him? He couldn't hear.

Her face wavered and altered, and the dreamscape shifted again. Another face regarded him with kindly eyes. Whose were

they? He thought maybe they belonged to the young street urchin they had befriended, Enki.

"Do not be afraid," the youth intoned tranquilly, and his words had an instant calming effect on Cross. "You will be all right."



Cross watched as the dreamland Enki reached out and placed his hand over Cross' heart. There was a moment of intense warmth and a rosy glow that spread until it covered his entire vision. Suddenly his pain was gone, and he was no longer falling through the nightmare. He took a deep breath and fell asleep.

The door to Cross' room burst open and in rushed Max dragging a very perturbed-looking Ereshkigal behind her. Carter and the others were close behind.

"He's in here," said Max. "He's in pretty bad shape. You're probably the only one who can help him."

Ereshkigal scowled and wrenched her arm free of Max's grip. "Let go of me, girl!" she demanded. She made a big production of straightening her robes and cloak, and when she was finally done, looked down at the cot and its sleeping occupant.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded angrily. "Why have you dragged me all the way here?"

"What are you talking about?" replied Carter, but when she got a look at Cross, she froze. "What the--? What happened here?"

Matthew Cross lay peacefully sleeping on the crude cot. He was no longer shivering, his skin was a healthy shade of pink, and there wasn't a scratch on his face.

"This is impossible!" said Carter. "Cross was near death not ten minutes ago!"

Ereshkigal scowled and groused in annoyance at having been hauled up a thousand stairs for absolutely no reason, but Carter could see the fear and suspicion in her eyes behind the cantankerous front she was putting up. "This has been known to happen before, on very rare occasions," she explained reluctantly. "We have no explanation, but if your friend was as close to death as you claim, then you can thank your gods he has been healed."

With that, she gathered her robes about her and swept past Alex and Dexter out the door and was gone.

Carter was still dumbstruck at Matthew Cross' miraculous recovery, and it was no less than a miracle, but she was glad. As

she looked on, Cross' eyes fluttered open and his eyes found hers. Puzzlement creased his forehead, and he said, "What's going on? What are you all looking at me for?"

"You almost died," answered Carter. "I was... *We* were worried."

"You were worried about me, huh?" replied Cross with the barest hint of upturned lip. Carter had learned to read that expression as mischievous.

"Yeah, well... I was just worried we'd have to break in a new captain," she said and smiled.

23 - Common Frame of Reference

Location: Banshee cliff dwelling, Kurnugi

"So what did it feel like?" asked Lee Carter. She and Captain Matthew Cross were sitting at the small table in the front room of the Banshees' underground domicile the day after Cross' brush with death at the hands of the Breen and his genuinely miraculous recovery.

Matthew Cross struggled to articulate his thoughts, but no words fit well enough to even begin to describe his experience. Finally, he was forced to throw up his hands in defeat. "It's impossible to describe, Commander," he said. Carter looked terribly disappointed, so Cross made an effort. "At first I was falling – that was probably the shock from the concussion and fever from the infection. But then suddenly I was surrounded by a golden light and I wasn't afraid anymore. It was—" he searched for the right word, couldn't find it and settled on "—warm, all over, like being wrapped in a blanket. The next thing I knew I was looking up at all your worried faces. I was touched," he finished wryly.

"Fascinating," responded Carter.

"There was one other thing, now that I think about it," continued Cross. His brow creased in thought as he fought to recall more details of the experience. "There was a face... Yours at first."

"Hey! I can't help it if you dream about me in your delirium," said Carter, covering her discomfort at the confession with brash flippancy.

"Not just you," said Cross. "There was someone else there too."

"Should I be jealous?" said Carter, a mischievous smile curling the corner of her lips.

"No," replied Cross thoughtfully. "I think it was Enki."

Carter blinked in surprise. "That kid we caught peeping in the windows? Why?"

Cross struggled to remember, but was clearly frustrated by his inability to conjure up more than vague tidbits. "This is going to sound crazy, but I think he might be the one who healed me."

"The kid?" exclaimed Carter incredulously, but then reconsidered her initial reaction. "Well, I suppose anything's possible in this crazy place," she said. "We fall through a Black Gate and wind up on the other side of the known universe, there's a 50 billion year old black dwarf star in a universe that's only 12 billion years old, we find an ancient underground city on a rogue planetoid inhabited by beings from all across the universe and run by an old woman, there are huge half man half scorpion monsters, and somewhere here there supposedly is a magical gateway that will take us all back home and all we have to do is click our heels together three times and say 'There's no place like home'. A kid with healing powers is probably the *least* weird thing in this entire ridiculous story!"

She lapsed into silence and her eyes glazed over in a faraway look.

Cross noticed and said, "What is it?"

Carter's reply wasn't immediate, but finally, she turned to Cross and folded her hands on the tabletop, then sighed and said, "I just wish Enki was around when the Aqrabu attacked. Jo might still be with us.

Matthew Cross smiled in sympathy and reached across the table and patted Carter's hands reassuringly.

Act 4

24 - In the Library With the Candlestick

Location: the Great Library, Kurnugi

Deep inside the Great Library, amidst the ordered rows of data reels, was one particular computer terminal. The workspace around it was littered with a week's worth of hastily scribbled notes and intricately carved alien artifacts covered in samples of archaic text, and at the epicenter of this chaos was a blonde woman who looked like she hadn't slept in days.

Lieutenant Jo Schmidt sat in front of the holographic computer terminal deep inside the Great Library just as she had been doing for the last few weeks. Fortunately, the library builders had apparently wanted alien visitors to be able to share in the knowledge and so had specifically designed the library computer system to allow easy comprehension and translation of the information it contained, so Jo had programmed it for Standard English.

The ancient data ring she and Enki had found hidden in an unvisited corner of the library was playing for the forty-seventh time, and Jo was on the verge of understanding it. If she could just figure out the meanings of a few more key symbols... *Wait a minute! Could it be?*

She adjusted the display, experimentally shuffling around mathematical operators in the place of the stubbornly enigmatic alien symbols. *Not quite... Maybe this way... Yes!* She had it! Her ticket home!

"Enki!"

The native Kurnugian youth appeared at her elbow as if by magic. "Yes, Jo Schmidt?" he piped. He set down the stack of data rings he was carrying on the desktop beside the holographic display and turned to Jo expectantly.

"I figured it out!" she exclaimed. "I know how to work the Stairway to Heaven! It was so simple once I realized that the whole thing was based on basic 21-dimensional geometry. We can all go home! Isn't that great?"

Enki's face lit up. "Many people will be very happy," he said.

That statement struck Jo as a little odd. "What about you, Enki? Doesn't that make you happy too?"

The boy shrugged. "This is my home," he said simply. "But I'm happy you will get to go home."

Jo hadn't thought about that. Of course many, if not most, of the Kurnugians would have been born on this planet, descendants of unlucky space travelers who had fallen through the Black Gate countless generations ago. How many of them would even know where their home planet was or even what it was called? Still, anyplace was better than here, wasn't it?

"Don't you want to leave here, Enki?"

The boy shrugged again. "I guess so. But where would I go? I don't know anyplace else."

Jo's heart went out in sympathy to the little urchin. She smiled and said, "You can come home with me. Would you like that?"

Enki's face lit up again. "Okay!" he replied cheerfully.

"Good!" said Jo, feeling a deep sense of satisfaction now that her little helper's welfare had been guaranteed. "We should let Ereshkigal know."

"I'll go find her," offered Enki quickly. "Here, you can read these so you don't get bored," he said, pointing at the stack of rings he had brought. Before Jo could reply, he was away, running to find the old woman.

Jo chuckled to herself. "Kids."

She turned back to the holographic display showing the fully translated instructions for operating the Stairway to Heaven, thinking to go over things one more time just to make sure she had everything right before she presented her results to Ereshkigal, but realized how mind-numbingly tired she was of looking at schematics of 21-dimensional discontinuities and the mechanics of manipulating them.

The data rings Enki had left her caught her eye. They looked brand new – no dust, scratches, or superimposed Sanskrit lettering atop the Ancient writing – and that was unusual. Intrigued, Jo picked up the top ring and dropped it into the depression on the computer top.

A new holographic display sprang to life, and as it began cycling through the information it contained, Jo's eyes widened ever further the longer she watched. There were images of planets, stars, systems, sectors, star maps detailing a particular spiral arm of a particular galaxy, all recognizable. There were images of starships, most with saucer-shaped hulls in front of twin cylinders, labeled with names like Constitution, Constellation, Ambassador, Galaxy, Sovereign, Intrepid... all recognizable. There were images of faces – mostly human wearing familiar uniforms – many of them familiar to Jo. The

slideshow went on through topic after topic, archaeology to xenobiology, much of it familiar.

"Oh my..." whispered Jo as she watched the parade of images. "This is the entire Starfleet database... Star charts, ships, officers, everything... But how did-?" Then it came to her. "The computer system here must have downloaded it from the *Longbow* when we entered orbit. She continued to watch the data scroll by for another few seconds, but then another thought struck her.

"I wonder who else's data got downloaded."

Popping the Starfleet data ring out of the player, she selected another one from the pile Enki had left her and slipped it into place. The holographic system whirred to life and a different set of data began playing. Again, Jo's eyes widened at what she was seeing.

She saw worlds beset by war. Entire continents were aflame with unquenchable fire.

The scene changed. Bodies were everywhere, piled higher than buildings. The black sky above was filled with flashes of light that could only be ships in orbit raining down aerial bombardments.

The scene changed. Armies marched across dusty plains beneath an otherworldly sky lit by purple and crimson auroras. The warriors were clad in plate armor and carried spears and shields, and in the vanguard was a horsed warrior. He was huge in girth, with bulging muscles rippling beneath his armor plates, and he held aloft a huge jewel that shone like the heart of a miniature sun. Tiny captions appeared superimposed on the image at various points. The flaming jewel was the 'Heart of Tiamat', and the enormous warrior was 'Nergal'.

The army crested a hill and looked down at the opposing army, and Jo gasped when she got a good look at them. They were not men, but hideous creatures straight from someone's twisted nightmare vision of hell itself. Grotesque parodies of men from the waist up except for their arms which ended in huge

claws, they were enormous scorpions from the waist down, complete with deadly, barbed stinger tails.

Aqrabu!

But if Jo thought that the sight of an entire army of those hideous creatures was shocking, her jaw dropped in complete disbelief and denial when she saw who rode at the head of the Aqrabu army.

In a sudden near-panic, she snatched the data ring from the player and replaced it with another random ring from Enki's pile. Then she tucked the data ring containing the instructions for the Stairway to Heaven into her flightsuit and zipped up the front.

She was about to stand up from the computer console when a heavy blow fell on the back of her head, slamming her forward into the terminal. She groaned and tried to turn around, but another shattering blow from her unseen assailant struck, and darkness swallowed her whole.

Ereshkigal watched the young blonde genius slump across the computer terminal unconscious. There was a growing red stain discoloring the back of her head, but she didn't care. She had what she needed. Dropping the heavy, metal, bloodstained candleholder she held in her hand, she shoved Jo sideways, causing her to slide off her chair and crumple to the floor. Reaching down, the old woman unzipped the front of her flightsuit enough to retrieve the hidden data ring.

"Thank you, girl," she said softly while gazing down at the unmoving body of her victim. A pool of red was slowly growing under Jo's head. "You have no idea how long I've been looking for this, and now, thanks to your brilliant mind, I'll be able to return home and finish my work. I'm truly sorry you won't be able to share in the fruits of your discovery."

Ereshkigal secreted the precious data ring in an inner pocket of her robes, then gathered the folds of her cloak about her and swept from the Library, never to return.

25 - The Mountain Gates

Location: Banshees' underground domicile in Kurnugi

Lee Carter sat sprawled in one of the large chairs in the main room of the Banshees' cave dwelling, making herself as comfortable as the crude wood and canvas furniture permitted, which is to say, not very. Max Vasser and Sam Beckett were having equal success in two more chairs, while Alex Dalton and Dexter Gray were talking softly across the room's small table, oblivious to everything else.

Yesterday, they had tried breaking through the city's front gate using their captured Breen disruptor to get back outside to their spaceships, but whoever had designed this place had done a good job at making it escape-proof. The stonework around the gate was laced with some sort of energy absorbing mineral that had rendered their energy weapon impotent.

All they had left to do was wait for Ereshkigal to get the key that operated the Stairway to Heaven. Then they could begin the assault on Nergal's stronghold, but until then, they were condemned to a life of slow calcification. Living in this

underground prison for two weeks had taken its toll on their spirits, and their morale was as faded as Alex's suntan.

The sound of booted feet pounding up the narrow winding stairway outside roused Carter and the others from their ennui. The door slammed open revealing Captain Matthew Cross. He was out of breath from running up hundreds of steps, so he leaned against the doorframe to rest.

"I just came from Ereshkigal," he said after recovering. "She claims to finally being able to activate the Stairway to Heaven."

"Finally!" said Carter, rising from her chair and straightening her uniform. Looking at her teammates, she said, "Let's go!"

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"I'm assuming you have a plan," said Carter in a sideways whisper to Matthew Cross. The two of them were crouched behind a jumble of boulders which had broken loose from the ceiling high above eons ago and now lay scattered all around the edge of this particular large cavern, the home of Nergal and the route to the Mountain Gates.

"I always have a plan," replied Cross. "We open the Mountain Gates and let the Aqrabu out."

Carter had no reply to that for several seconds, then decided she must have heard wrong. "You wanna run that by me again? You want to let that horde of murderous monsters loose *before* we get the Heart of Tiamat from Nergal?"

Cross turned around and motioned for Sam Beckett to join them. "I'll explain..."

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Sam Beckett slunk at the edges of the huge cavern that was the abode of Nergal, keeping to the shadows as much as she could. The Kurnugian's stronghold was a series of free-standing

stonework buildings inside a circular stone bulwark, but Sam's objective, the Mountain Gate, luckily lay outside the fortifications. It was a towering, twenty-foot tall stone portal set in the cavern wall separating this cavern from the next. It was boldly emblazoned with a carved image of a winged scorpion, but as far as she could tell the only thing keeping it shut was a massive iron bar across its width at about shoulder height.



She used her cybernetic eyes to scan for sentries patrolling the walls and found a few, waited until they were facing in other directions, then made a dash across the open ground in front of the Gates and reached their base. She placed her shoulder against the butt end of the iron brace barring the door and grunted as she heaved. Even with her cybernetically-enhanced strength, the bar barely budged, encrusted in place by ages of non-use.

Sam paused for a second and gathered her strength, then shoved with all her might against the stubborn lock, and with a loud splintering of caked-on dirt and grime, it moved! Quickly, she pushed the bar all the way across the Mountain Gates until it was clear.

A narrow split appeared down the middle of the doors and quickly widened as the halves swung groaning outward, blown apart by a gale-force expulsion of musty, humid air, like a leviathan exhaling after holding its breath for a thousand years.

The guards on the battlements of Nergal's stronghold finally realized something was amiss and ran to look, but they were too late to stop what was happening. From the darkness within the cavern beyond the Mountain Gates, a terrible clicking, skittering noise had started, like a thousand tap dancers on a hardwood floor, and moments later the first of the Aqrabu appeared.

The beast leaned its humanoid torso out the door and took its first look at the world without, and laid eyes on the wall sentries. A horrible grimace twisted its inhuman face and it snapped its enormous pincers in unholy anticipation, then lunged through the Mountain Gates, followed by a horde of others. The rock of Nergal's cavern shook with the echoes of the Aqrabus' fierce bellows. Freed from their protracted prison sentence, they attacked anyone they saw with long-pent rage and hatred, ripping people apart with their pincers and trampling them beneath their many steel-shod insect legs.

The air was quickly filled with the clash of weapons, the roars of the escaped beasts, and the screams of the dying.

Sam ran for her life.

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A small figure flicked through the shadows inside the Great Library, furtive, darting quicker than the eye could follow. It approached the motionless figure lying in a pool of blood beside

one of the Ancient computer terminals, and when it did so it stepped into the light cast by a nearby brazier. It was the young urchin, Enki.

As he looked down at the body of his friend, a look of deep sorrow overcame the young, innocent face and a single tear slowly carved a channel down one cheek. He knelt by Jo Schmidt's side and placed his hand over her heart and closed his eyes.

A look of intense concentration crinkled his smooth forehead, and suddenly a golden luminescence emanated from inside Jo's prone body and quickly spread to fill the entire library cavern until everything else was washed out in the brilliant dazzle. The light faded quickly to black and Enki rocked back on his heels and waited.

Presently, Jo's eyelids fluttered and a low groan escaped her lips. She opened her eyes and looked up at the library cavern's rocky ceiling. She wondered why she was lying on her back on the floor, then she noticed Enki crouching by her side. She sat up.

"Enki," she said frowning. "What are you doing here? What happened? Why am I sitting on the floor?" She rubbed the back of her head. She had a vague memory of... something... Something bad. Then she remembered.

"I found the key to the Stairway to Heaven!" she exclaimed. "Then... after you left I found a download record from the computer on the ship that brought Ereshkigal to this planet." Jo trembled as the memory returned. "Oh, it was terrible, Enki! The things I saw... The things that Ereshkigal did on her homeworld. Then someone hit me..." She fought to calm herself lest she frighten the ingenuous child beside her. A new realization dawned on her. She felt around the front of her uniform for the bulge of the data ring she had tucked there but discovered it missing.

Jo took hold of the boy by the shoulders, looked directly into his face and said, "Enki, this is very important. Have you seen Ereshkigal? Do you know where she is?"

"I think she went to the Mountain Gates," he replied.

"Where are the Mountain Gates? Are they outside on the surface?"

"No, they're in Nergal's cavern. They keep the Aqrabu locked in. They lead to the Stairway to Heaven."

It was just as Jo feared. It had been Ereshkigal who had clubbed her over the head. Then she had stolen the data ring containing the instructions for operating the Stairway and was now trying to make her escape. If she got possession of the Heart of Tiamat, which was in Nergal's cavern, she could once again enthrall the Aqrabu and wreak havoc across the stars.

"I have to try and stop her," said Jo resolutely. "You stay here where it's safe. Don't worry. I'll come back for you after the danger is gone. I won't leave without you."

"Okay, I trust you," said Enki.

"Good boy," said Jo, trying to reassure the lad with a smile. She stood and ran from the Ancient Library, determined to do whatever it took to stop the madwoman.

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All around men were dying as the Aqrabu swarmed through the Mountain Gates, indiscriminately hacking apart everyone within reach in their insane desire for revenge for their long imprisonment. Nergal's followers swarmed out of their stronghold in response to the invasion, doing their best to stem the flood of scorpion creatures. Some of them had spotted the Banshees in their distinctive black-and-white uniforms and were fighting their way through the Aqrabu to get at the team on the (correct) assumption that they were behind all this.

"Wonderful plan!" yelled Lee Carter at Matthew Cross. The two of them were standing back-to-back fending off anyone and anything that came too close, Carter with their captured Breen disruptor, Cross with a pointed stick. Max, Alex and Dexter were a few yards away in similar formation.

"Give it time!" shouted Cross back. He ducked under a swipe made by one of Nergal's followers and followed up with a quick jab of his makeshift spear. Behind him, Carter was picking off anything that made itself a target.

"There!" shouted Cross, pointing at the entrance of Nergal's stronghold. "He *had* to show up!"

Nergal himself strode forth from his domain, armor clad and accompanied by a score of fearsome, mailed warriors. Brandishing wicked, barbed swords, they plunged into the fray, and to Carter's astonishment, the Aqrabu actually gave before their wild abandon. Nergal followed behind, grasping something small tightly in one fist.

"That's got to be the Heart of Tiamat," said Cross. "Let's get it!" he shouted to his team.

26 - Heart of Tiamat

Location: Nergal's cavern

Ereshkigal heard the sounds of battle as she neared Nergal's cavern and knew that the end of all things had begun. If she succeeded in wresting the Heart of Tiamat from her nemesis Nergal, then the Aqrabu would be hers to command and all her enemies would fall before her. If she failed, the Aqrabu were loose and would kill everyone anyway.

She burst from the tunnel into Nergal's cavern and total chaos, but in the midst of it she saw her target, Nergal himself. *Yes, he has the Heart of Tiamat in his hands!* A short distance away from the hulking warrior but rapidly closing the distance ran six black-and-white-clad figures.

Ereshkigal moved stealthily forward to place herself in position to strike when the critical moment came.

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"Nergal!" yelled Carter as she and the five Banshees behind her bore down on the giant warrior's position.

Nergal spun at the sound of his name and his face contorted in a feral snarl when he saw Carter. "You again!" he roared. "You will not stop me!" He spun defiantly to face the Aqrabu and raised the fist that held the Heart of Tiamat.

Carter could see it more clearly now. It was a huge hunk of crystal the size of her fist and the color of blood. The thing pulsed rhythmically with an inner fire – like a heartbeat – and put out waves and waves of visible energy that bathed everything a macabre, sanguinary hue. Whenever the energy from the Heart struck an Aqrabu, the creature would recoil as if burned by flame, but it would also cease its deadly rampage.

Carter couldn't let Nergal gain control of the Aqrabu. There was no telling what he would do with an army like that at his back. She raised her Breen disruptor and fired.

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Ereshkigal jumped from her hiding place. She was closer to Nergal than the humans, and so reached the Heart of Tiamat first. While the giant warrior was still dazed from the weapon blast that had exploded the cavern floor under his feet, the old woman pulled a long dagger from within the folds of her robes and plunged the tip between his armor plates deep into his chest. A look of surprise came over his face, and he toppled forward. As he fell, she wrenched the glowing jewel from his limp hand.

She held it aloft, her face twisted into a hideous leer of triumph, and crowed. "Now all shall know my name and fear it!" she cried. The nearest Aqrabu were slowly approaching the holder of the artifact which held them in thrall, snapping their pincers in submission.

Carter and the others ran up. "The scorpion men are being held back," said Carter. She hadn't seen the old woman murder

Nergal. "Now let's go find this Stairway to Heaven and get out of here like we planned."

Ereshkigal turned her regard towards Lee Carter and her friends. The ruddy light pulsing from the Heart of Tiamat transformed her face into that of a demon. She leered at Carter and replied in a voice that had become a chilling cackle. "The plan has *changed*, foolish girl!"

She thrust forward the Heart, clearly intending to use its power on Carter. The Banshee wing commander tensed herself, confused, but before Ereshkigal could do anything, another black-and-white-clad body hurled itself from out of the shadows and plowed into the old woman with a flying body tackle. Ereshkigal was flung forward and collided with Carter, and all three went down in a tangle. The Heart of Tiamat was shaken loose from the old woman's grasp and went clattering across the stone cavern floor.

"Nooo!!!" cried Ereshkigal.

Carter threw the old woman from off of her and struggled to regain her feet, but then laid eyes on the newcomer.

"Jo!" she exclaimed, stunned beyond all reason.

"Lee!" cried Jo Schmidt, equally flabbergasted. "Ereshkigal told me you had all been killed!"

"She told us *you'd* been killed!" returned Carter, an irrepressible smile at seeing her dead friend alive quickly cracking the grim battle-hardened expression she wore.

There was no time for happy reunions however. Freed from the restraining force imposed by the Heart of Tiamat, the Aqrabu went wild. The closest scorpion-man rushed up behind Jo and raised an enormous pincer. As the crushing blow came crashing down, a small figure darted from out of the shadows and bowled into Jo, knocking her aside. The Aqrabu's claw missed her by a hair's-breadth. The small figure wasn't so lucky though, and went flying a dozen feet through the air.

"Enki!" cried Jo. She ran over to the fallen lad and cradled him in her arms. The brave youth's eyelids fluttered briefly and then closed forever.

"Oh my God! They killed Enki!" cried Jo, tears threatening to start.

"You bastards!" shouted Carter at the murderous creatures. She frantically looked around for the Heart of Tiamat and saw Ereshkigal running towards the jewel intent on retrieving it for herself.

One of the giant scorpion-men skittered across the cavern floor on its insect legs to block the old woman's path. Ereshkigal screamed in frustration and then in pain as the maddened creature grabbed her in its pincers and lifted her clear off the ground. "Help me!" she cried, desperation plain on her face.

Carter brought up her disruptor to shoot the Aqrabu. No one deserved to die like that, not even the treacherous old woman. The creature was making itself a difficult target however. It skittered and darted about with its screaming and struggling victim clutched in its claws, making it impossible for Carter to get a clean shot.

The Aqrabu shook Ereshkigal like a toy doll, then ripped her body apart like a screaming, bloody rag. It tossed the halves aside without a second thought. So ended Ereshkigal's grand plans for domination. The creature turned its evil eyes towards Carter.

Lee Carter knew she only had one chance. If this Aqrabu didn't get her, the thousands behind it would. She sprinted for the Heart of Tiamat.

The Aqrabu was faster. It reached the pulsating jewel a split-second before Carter and blocked her path. With a lightening-quick thrust of its mighty pincer, it slapped the disruptor from her hand leaving her entire arm numb from the tremendous shock, then prepared to send Carter to the same gruesome fate it had sent its previous victim.

Carter knew defeat when she saw it. She closed her eyes and waited for the killing blow.

Instead, she heard the sizzle of disruptor blasts and the screech of anguished Aqrabu. She opened her eyes to mayhem. Behind her, she heard Alex exclaim, "What the—! It's the Breen!"

It was true. Dozens of refrigeration-suited, helmeted soldiers were crawling out of the rocks at the edges of the huge cavern firing their disruptors indiscriminately at Aqrabu and Kurnugians alike. Carter looked to Cross, who shrugged.

"Guess they decided helping us was their best hope for getting out of here!" he shouted through the noise of energy discharges.

Still, there were just too many Aqrabu. They still had but one hope. Carter skipped around a dodging Kurnugian warrior and dove for the forgotten Heart of Tiamat. Finally, her fingers closed around the throbbing jewel.

It felt warm, almost hot in her hand, and though she knew it was made of diamond-hard crystal, it felt disconcertingly pliable and wet, almost as though it were actually a living heart beating rhythmically in her hand.

Fighting back a surge of revulsion and a powerful urge to throw the vile thing as far from her as she could, she raised her fist into the air. The rosy light from the gem's core flared bright and rays shot in all directions until they seemed to fill the entire cavern.

She could feel the warmth of the Heart suffuse throughout her arm and into her body, filling her with a sense of untapped power deep in her bones. It seemed like magic to her and the modern Starfleet officer bristled at the mere thought, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Drunk with the raw power surging down her arm from the Heart of Tiamat, she shouted to her teammates. "Everybody! Get behind me!"

She advanced on the milling Aqrabu, heading in the direction of the Mountain Gates. Now that she was in direct contact with it, Carter realized the power of the Heart. It was a psionic resonator tuned to the thoughts of the Aqrabu! She sent mental commands through the flaming jewel. *Stand aside! Make way! Do not harm the people! Cease fighting!* The scorpion-men snapped their pincers in agitation, but gave way before the woman who held the fiery gem.



Matthew Cross had gathered the Banshees together and they were warily following their wing commander through the corridor opened up for them by the Aqrabu. "Come on, Schmidt!" he shouted to Jo, who was still kneeling by the side of Enki.

Jo lay the brave boy back down on the hard cavern floor and stood. "I'm sorry, Enki," she said quietly. "Looks like you won't

get to see Earth like I promised. I'll never forget you." She turned and ran to catch up with her team.

Let us pass, crooned Carter through the crystal. Let us pass and we will free you from this prison. We will send you home.

Behind her Jo caught up to Matthew Cross. "Even once we get past the Aqrabu," he said to her in a low voice, "we still don't know how to access the Stairway to Heaven. The secret of that died with Ereshkigal."

"Who do you think gave her those secrets?" replied Jo.

"We might live through this yet!"

27 - Stairway to Heaven

Location: surface of Kurnugi

Lee Carter had never been so frightened in her life. If it hadn't been for the incredible, rampant euphoria caused by the Heart of Tiamat surging through her body she might have run for it, but under the influence of the mysterious living jewel she would dare anything, even the endless ranks of the dreaded Aqrabu through which she now strode.

Behind her, the rest of the Banshees followed, though with considerable more wariness and trepidation on their faces. Behind them marched the Breen with disruptors drawn, but their emotions, assuming they had any, were hidden behind their refrigeration masks.

Carter led the procession through the Mountain Gates, past countless now-docile Aqrabu, into the enormous cavern beyond. This new cavern had been the domain of the Aqrabu, but Carter's feet led her not into the main cavern but off to the side where a smaller tunnel bore into the cavern wall. A stairway could be seen angling steeply upward into darkness.

With growing hope, Carter ascended the stairs, and after what seemed like hours but was only minutes, emerged into the utter blackness of the Kurnugian surface. A chill, sulfurous wind blew across her face and tousled her short brown hair, but after two weeks in the fetid dungeon below, it was the best thing she'd ever felt.

Carter looked up. The black dwarf star still hung impossibly close and dark over their heads, like an enormous hole in the starless sky, and the nearby super-volcano still spewed molten fire, dimly illuminating the rocky plain on which they stood in its inferno light, but anything was better than solid rock overhead.

There was a faint trail under her feet leading off across the plain. "This way," she said.

After hiking another hour, they rounded a tall rock outcropping and stopped dead in their tracks by what suddenly lay before them. Dexter Gray was the first to regain his voice.

"It's the Guardian of Forever!" he exclaimed.



Jo Schmidt stepped forward. "Not quite, but it's part of the same huge network both the Guardian of Forever and the Black Gate are part of," she explained.

"Who cares!" said Max. "It's our ticket out of here!"

Matthew Cross turned to Jo and said, "Time to put your knowledge to work, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir," replied Jo. She resumed walking towards the upright, lopsided, stone ring that was the 'Stairway to Heaven', but as an afterthought, turned back and called, "Dex, I could use your help."

The youth smiled and jogged ahead to catch up with Jo.

Carter stepped over to where Matthew Cross stood and said. "I'm glad to see that Jo seems to have worked out whatever problem she was having with Dexter."

Cross nodded. "Seems like dying lends a person wisdom and maturity."

"You oughta know," replied Carter, smiling sideways at Cross.

"All right, knock it off, you two," grumbled Max as she walked past them. "Schmidt is waving us over."

Carter and Cross joined the other Banshees near the Guardian. Jo and Dexter were standing beside a broad pedestal with slanted top adorned with carvings and four large glowing hemispheres, three smaller ones set into a grooved track encircling the fourth, larger, central hemisphere.

"What have you got?" asked Cross as he stopped beside Dexter.

Jo answered. "This is the control device for the Stairway to Heaven." She pointed to the upright torus behind them. "It sets the destination of the wormhole."

"Why can't you just tell it where you want to go?" asked Alex.

Dexter answered. "This gate works differently than the one on the Time Planet, though they were obviously both built by the

same ancient people billions of years ago. This one uses a control device." He pointed at the pedestal.

Jo took up the narrative. "These orange hemispheres slide around the big one in the middle, and also rotate in place. That's how you set it. I learned how while I was in the Library – while you all thought I was dead, and vice versa."

"The arrangement is just like the Trojan planetoids back in the Serenity system," interjected Dexter. "Three hemispheres around a fourth – three planetoids in orbit around the Black Gate. Their positions determines the gate's destination. We were just unlucky enough to fall through when the destination was this place."

"Never mind the science lesson!" yelled Max. "Just dial the stupid thing so we can go home!"

Jo looked apologetically at Carter. "This gate has to have a destination gate in order to work, and I only know one other gate we can use."

"The Guardian of Forever on the Time Planet," guessed Carter. "That's fine. There's a Federation science team permanently stationed there."

"One of us better go through first," suggested Max. "No telling what they'd do if a bunch of armed Breen suddenly showed up in the middle of their camp with no explanation."

"Good idea," said Cross. "And as soon as we're sure everything works, we can start bringing the Kurnugians through. The Aqrabu too, unless they know the dialing coordinates for their own part of the universe. Now that they're no longer under the control of Ereshkigal or held prisoner by Nergal, I'm sure they'll be wanting to go home too." He addressed Jo. "Start dialing."

Jo began sliding and turning the orange hemispheres around the top surface of the control device.

Cross noticed that Lee Carter had a frown on her face. "What's the matter?" he asked. "This is a happy occasion."

"Oh I know," replied Carter with a sigh. "It's just that I realized that the gate is only about a dozen feet across."

"So?"

"So I'm dreading all the paperwork I'll have to do for losing another entire squadron of starfighters!"

Epilogue

Several weeks later...

A small, lone figure stood high on the slopes of the perpetually erupting super-volcano on the benighted world of Kurnugi, but the searing heat from the lava didn't affect him. He was looking down into the sheltered valley where the ancient wormhole gate, the Stairway to Heaven, stood, and at the continual stream of people passing through it to brighter destinations. There was a contented smile on his deceptively young face and the soulful eyes beneath his mop of brown hair sparkled with deep satisfaction.

For the past several weeks, the Starfleet people from the galaxy they called the Milky Way had been busy searching the warren of caverns and tunnels below and evacuating everyone they could find. He was gratified to learn that this universe had produced such compassionate beings as these.

He thought especially of the one called Jo Schmidt, and remembered with great fondness the way she had cared for him and promised to take him home with her when the time came for her to make her escape. Things hadn't quite worked out that way, but everything had turned out for the best. She would mourn his loss, but would forget in time, as was the nature of a linear corporeal existence.



The others of the youth's kind would be very eager to learn of the events here... whenever he got around to returning to their realm and telling them about it.

For now, he would continue to wait and watch.

