

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON



VOICE OF A SILENT PLANET

RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Welcome to Paradise... Now Get Out!

While on a routine escort mission, the Banshees accidentally stumble across a previously unexplored planet. The surface is a dreamlike, idyllic Paradise, but unknown to the women, an ancient intellect is watching their every move with keen interest.

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron

**VOICE OF A
SILENT PLANET**

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Prologue - Winds of Fortune

Ensign Alexandra Dalton came downstairs and ambled sleepily into the common kitchen area of the large apartment shared by the members of Banshee Squadron. The sliding glass door to the small, enclosed backyard was open, letting in the sun's warm morning rays, as well as the sounds of chirping birds, the breeze rustling in the bushes, the hubbub of pedestrian traffic, and the ever-present rumble of the nearby spaceport — a typical urban symphony. Alex took a deep breath and smiled to herself. She liked this part of the day, when the world was just waking up.

Alex's wing commander, Lee Carter, was in the kitchen, but her disposition seemed anything but sunny. Despite the early morning hour, she was already haggard and frayed. She looked at the clock on the wall, then turned a sour face to Alex.

"Do you know what time it is?" she demanded.

Alex paused a moment from getting her morning cup of coffee and looked at the clock on the wall.

"7:45," she said helpfully, and resumed pouring her cup.

"I *know* what time it is!" exclaimed Carter. "I mean you're late! I just got off the comm with Captain Cross getting my butt chewed out because we're not at the hangar yet. We have a mission today, remember?"

"We do?" Alex sat down at the kitchen counter sipping her coffee and thumbed on the FNN newsfeed on her PADD.

"Yes, we do," replied Carter, trying very hard not to lose patience with the youngest member of her team. "We're escorting that convoy of robot cargo ships out to Polon II."

Alex made a face. "Oh yeah. How could I forget that?" She took a long sip from her coffee and continued reading the news, giving no indication that she had any intention of getting herself ready for the mission.



Carter was floored. Clearly her squadron's extended leave had been *too* extended — discipline had gone completely out the window and was in imminent danger of degenerating into outright insubordination. Something had to be done, and quick. But before she could give Ensign Dalton a stiff dressing-down, Lieutenant Josephine Schmidt staggered into the kitchen and headed straight for the coffee. She took her cup and plunked herself down next to Alex and yawned expansively before turning her attention to the morning newsfeed Alex was reading.

"Do you know what time it is?" demanded Carter of her still-groggy science specialist.

Jo craned her neck and peered at the clock on the kitchen wall behind her.

"7:47," she replied.

Carter threw up her hands and gave up. "Fine. Have it your way, you clowns. Maybe a brisk court-martial will shape you up."

Jo turned to Alex. "What's with her?"

Alex shrugged. "We've got a mission today. Escorting some robot ships or something. Guess Cross has been on her case this morning about it."

Jo made a face. "Oh yeah, that. How could I forget such an important mission like that?"

"I just don't understand you two," said Carter, genuinely perplexed. "The colonization of Polon II is the first big outward push in this sector since the end of the war. And the fact that it's a joint venture between the Federation and the G'kra makes it even more important. You two should be honored that we're involved, not kvetching around the house like a couple of old housewives."

Jo set down her coffee cup. "Oh come on, Lee, give us a break will you? The colony on Polon II is already pretty well established. All we're supposed to do is baby-sit a couple of automated hundred-year-old Sherman-class barges while they drag a few megatons of cryo-suspended bio-mass across a few lightyears from here to the G'kra border at the breakneck pace of warp 3."

"Thanks for the plot exposition," said Carter sarcastically, but before she could continue, the sound of the front door of their apartment slamming open and shut reached their ears, and a few seconds later, Lieutenant Commander Maxine Vasser came barreling around the corner into the kitchen.

Carter breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God at least someone is up and ready to go-- Hey, why aren't you in uniform, Max?"

"Because I quit."

At the kitchen counter, Jo and Alex spit out their coffee in a double-barreled spray of brown liquid, while Carter just stood staring open-mouthed at her second-in-command.

Max impatiently waited out the shock, and finally Carter recovered enough to speak. "You've always had a real strange sense of humor, Max, but there better be one helluva punch-line to this joke."

It was the response Max had expected. "If I was joking I would've said, 'A duck walks into a bar'."

From her spot at the kitchen counter, Alex chortled, but quickly choked it back at a dirty look from Carter.

"I resigned from Starfleet this morning. I've sent official notice to Commodore Hunter, Captain Cross, and now I'm telling you," said Max.

Carter still didn't know what to say. She was surprised, angry, and hurt all at the same time and it was overwhelming. To buy her spinning brain time to assimilate, she stalled. "What the hell are you talking about, Max? You can't leave; you're my XO. You've been with this wing since the beginning—"

But then a new thought struck Carter. "Does this have anything to do with that month you spent inside that quantum pocket universe? Does this have anything to do with your father?"

"No, of course not," replied Max, but she didn't sound entirely convinced, even to her own ears.

"You sure?" asked Carter, concern tinting her words. "You've been through a helluva lot in the last year, Max. A lot more than the rest of us. You found your old best friend Jazz Phoenix alive on a prison planet after thinking she'd been killed during the Dominion War. But then she really was killed a few weeks later defending our lives against the Jelly Brain on Rostella. Then you thought for a while you had lost your esper ability and your usefulness to the team when we went up against the evil Vince Kelly and the Jelly Brain that stole Sam's mind. And to top it all off, a month ago you found your father after twenty years of thinking he was dead only to have him taken away from you again in a quantum universe implosion. It's enough to make anyone crack. Maybe you just need some more time off..."

"No." This time Max was resolute. "I've thought about it a lot. What happened inside the quantum wormhole made

me question a lot of things — the direction my life was going." Max broke into one of her rare smiles. It was meant to reassure her friends. "This is the right decision for me, trust me."

"Well... But still...," hemmed Carter. "This is way short notice, Max. I mean, we have a mission today. What am I supposed to do without my XO? With just these two clowns flying my wing?"

"I'm sorry, Lee," replied Max. She took a step closer to Carter. "I meant to break it to you guys a lot differently than this. I hope there's no bad feelings here — it's nothing personal. The last thirteen years have been the best of my life and you all have been the best friends anyone could want. It's just that I only found out an hour ago that I have to leave *now*. West and me are gonna—"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Carter, convinced she couldn't possibly have heard Max right. "What did you say? *West* and you? I thought you hated West!"

"I do. I mean... I *did*... I mean — oh hell. The guy kinda grows on you, y'know?"

Carter knew. She and West had had their own little adventure several months before, and she knew she'd never forget it, or him. She put her hand on Max's shoulder and said, "If this is what you think is the right thing to do right now, then you should do it. But we'll miss you around here."

From their spot on the sideline, Jo and Alex nodded vigorously. But then they were off their stools and crowding around Max. Hugs were given all around and well-wishes were expressed, until Max finally managed to extricate herself from the others.

"Knock it off, you guys. This isn't goodbye forever. You'll be seeing plenty of me around the system. And who knows... I'll probably wind up killing West, and then I'll be back bucking for my old job again."

"Things won't be the same without you, Max," said Alex.

Max smiled warmly at the rookie pilot. Not too many months ago, Alex had been a green recruit straight out of the Academy, but the war had changed her — as wars tend to do — and she had grown up into a full-fledged member of the team.

But now she had just one last duty to perform. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her closed fist and held it out to her former wing commander. When Carter held her palm under Max's fist, Max placed something in her hand.

"See you around, Commander," she said.

"Goodbye, Max," replied Carter.

Max turned on her heel and walked out of the kitchen without looking back. Three seconds later, Carter, Jo and Alex heard the front door close.

"Guess she needed some R&R after all," said Jo.

"She said she didn't want any more rest and relaxation," replied Alex.

"Resign and relocation."

"Oh."

Jo turned to her wing commander. "What are we going to do now, Lee?"

Carter opened her hand and looked at what Max had given her. In her palm rested two gold rank pips and one

black one. Carter realized then that Max was never coming back.

"We go on with our mission," she said.

Chapter 1 - Approaching Storm

One Cat's Eye class scout and only three Banshee class starfighters lifted into orbit above the planet Serenity. Captain Matthew Cross had not been a happy man when Carter and her two remaining squad members finally arrived in the Banshees' hangar, partly because of their tardiness and partly because of Max's abrupt departure.

His steely voice clicked over the open comm channel. "The *Baris* and *Lurry* are already half a lightyear ahead of us." His voice still sounded somewhat accusatory. "Set course to 147 mark 3 — warp 5. Engage!"

Safely removed from their commanding officer's ire in their starfighter cockpits, Lee Carter and the two other Banshees set the nav coordinates and punched their throttles at Cross' command.

As the stars outside her canopy smeared rearwards in a tachyonic rainbow, Carter pitied Ensign Dexter Gray for

having to sit in the same ship as Cross, but then remembered that the young man was the only one among them who *hadn't* irritated Cross lately.

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At warp five, it took only fifteen minutes to cover the half lightyear to the two Sherman-class cargo drones, which had automatically slowed to sublight at their approach. As the four Banshee vessels burst from subspace in another rainbow display, Carter made a quick check of her tactical display. She could relax. Aside from their own blips and those of the *Lurry* and *Baris*, the scope was clear.

Captain Cross' voice buzzed in her ear again. "Commander, keep in tight formation with the convoy. I'll take the *Crockett* out ahead to make sure the way is clear. Lock your tactical maps into our sensor feed."

"Aye aye."

Carter watched her tactical display as the blip representing the Cat's Eye ship *Crockett* sped ahead of the lumbering cargo vessels. As soon as everyone was in place, she gave the order to resume warp speed.

At the robot freighters' top speed of warp 3, it would normally take just under 40 hours to cross the 15 lightyears to the Polon system, but the proximity of the Briar Patch, with all its subspace instabilities and hidden sandbars would stretch that out to more than triple. That meant five days of crawling along at a snail's pace with nothing to do but sit and stare out at the unchanging stars. In a few hours,

Carter's team would begin rotating in shifts, two Banshees remaining on patrol around the convoy while the third slept and relaxed inside the *Crockett* while the empty fighter flew alongside on autopilot.

Until then, Carter settled herself more comfortably in her seat and prepared for the long haul.



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Time marched on... It was the middle of the afternoon on the second day out from Serenity. Carter and Jo were keeping themselves amused by trying to see who could fly their Banshee closest to the robot ship's subspace transceiver antennae without clipping them with their wings. Inside the Cat's Eye ship *Crockett*, Dexter Gray and Alex Dalton were alone in the rear crew module doing

whatever it was that a young couple did when left all alone... That left Captain Cross up on the control deck, occupied with his own thoughts.

The helm of his ship had been acting strangely all morning. At first it had been nothing serious, just a minor curiosity, a slight tendency for the ship to drift off its programmed course towards the fringes of the Briar Patch. Over the last twenty minutes however, it had become pronounced enough that he was beginning to worry about it.

He thumbed the intercom switch.

"Cross to Ensign Gray. Report to the cockpit immediately."

When Dexter Gray's startled voice came back over the intercom, he sounded like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Right away, Captain!"

Seconds later, a flushed Ensign Gray burst into the cockpit followed by Ensign Alex Dalton. Dexter dropped into the copilot seat and busied himself with pushing buttons and peering intently at readouts... anything to avoid his captain's stern gaze.

Cross noted that Dalton's uniform was on crooked. He allowed himself a tiny inward smile, but on the outside kept his 'mean' face on. He addressed the perky, blonde fighter pilot. "Ensign, you might want to return to your Banshee and rejoin your wing commander. Something unexplained is happening and I want everyone ready for action."

"Aye, Captain," replied Alex smartly, and after flashing Dexter a parting smile and wink, darted back out the cockpit door heading for the *Crockett's* transporter room.

Cross's index finger was inches from the ship-to-ship comm switch when Commander Lee Carter's voice crackled through the speaker grille.

"*Griffon to Crockett, come in.*"

"What is it, Commander?" replied Cross, but he already knew why Carter was calling. She had detected the same anomaly he had been watching.

"Sir, Lieutenant Schmidt has been monitoring a persistent course error for the last few hours, but it's gotten a lot worse in the last few minutes. It seems to be especially affecting the two robot cargo ships. They're becoming more and more resistant to the course corrections we feed them. It's almost like something's trying to pull them and us into the Briar Patch."

"Stand by," he said into the comm. Then, turning to Dexter, he snapped, "Scan the nebula in the direction we're being pulled. I want to know what's there."

Dexter worked his console for a few seconds, turning the Cat's Eye vessel's impressive suite of sensors in the direction of the anomalous attraction. It didn't take long to gather preliminary results.

"I'm reading a planet in a small solar system just inside the edge of the Briar Patch, sir," he reported. "It's not on any of our charts. There's some very unusual subspace waves around it, and some of them are being projected in our direction. They could be deforming with our warp fields, making us veer off course like this."

Another uncharted solar system, thought Cross. There were plenty of those within the bounds of the Briar Patch — the twisted subspace folds and radiation pockets of the area meant Starfleet would be discovering new planets here

for decades to come. But this strange subspace interference was something completely new, and it threatened his mission.

"Relay the data to the Banshees," Cross ordered. "Then prepare for a course change. I'm taking us directly away from this new planet. It'll mean the convoy will be late arriving at the Polon colony, but that's better than never arriving at all."

"Aye," replied Dexter, but even as he moved to comply with the captain's orders, the *Crockett* was wracked by severe tremors which grew steadily worse. Around him, the metals and polymers of the bulkheads began groaning in protest.



Cross' fist pounded on the comm switch and he shouted to be heard above the rising din. "Report, Commander Carter! What's happening to the robot ships?"

Carter's voice came back over the radio. "They're definitely under the influence of something! They're starting to shake!"

Jo interjected her own observation across the open channel. "They're starting to shimmy!"

Determined not to be left out, Alex added her own synonym. "They're starting to, uh... shudder!"

Any annoyed retort Captain Cross might have made was cut off by a sudden, violent lurch of the deck under his feet as his ship was unmistakably and ungently yanked from its programmed heading towards the Briar Patch.

Behind the *Crockett*, the two robot cargo drones and the three tiny Banshee starfighters rolled and tumbled, but were all equally powerless to fight the irresistible force that was drawing them at warp speed towards the uncharted planet.

Chapter 2 - Partly Sunny

Lee Carter strode across the green grass. Each step stirred up a flurry of seed spores which wafted lazily aloft and then just hung suspended in the sparkling air like a snapshot of a light winter snowfall. Her boots left wet prints in the dew-covered lawn, and seemed an almost sacrilegious defilement in this virgin paradise.

The crisp air was laden with the smells of wet grass and green, living things. The breeze caressed her face and gently tousled her short brown hair, causing a few unruly strands to drift back and forth across her eyes. She finished pulling off her flight gloves and brushed the locks aside.

The last rational memory she had was of her Banshee and all the other ships in the little convoy barreling out of control straight for the surface of a planet at warp 3. But now, instead of finding herself at the bottom of a smoking impact crater, she was strolling across a manicured lawn

under pristine skies. She considered for a fleeting moment that this place was Eden — that popular old staple of space legend, the mythical planet where everything was beautiful and perfect and life was eternally peaceful and untroubled. She dismissed the notion almost as soon as it entered her mind though.

A place like Eden would never go unexploited for this long. As soon as word got out that there was a magical planet where life was perfect, people would start swarming in by the millions, all wanting a share in the promise of peace, love, and security. The mega-resort hotels, luxury condos, and souvenir shops would follow hard on their heels, and that would be the end of paradise.

Human nature was a real bitch.

As far as Carter could tell, there was no sign that anyone had ever been here before. There was a distinctive silence about this planet. No bird or animal noises — not even the buzz of insects. She found it somehow disconcerting.

Ahead another hundred paces was the Cat's Eye ship *Crockett*. Captain Cross was just lowering himself down out of the ship's belly hatch. His facial expression was stony as always, yet Carter detected definite traces of anger and annoyance. Behind him, Dexter Gray dropped to the ground, but his expression was much more positive. The young man seemed entranced by their idyllic surroundings. Alex Dalton and Jo Schmidt came strolling around the bulk of the Cat's Eye, and that completed the ensemble.

"Looks like everyone's alive," said Cross when everyone had gathered, "though I can't understand why."

That was everyone's cue to turn their eyes towards Jo. She typically had all the answers. This time she would disappoint, however.

"Beats me what happened," she said. "The same force that yinked us so hard in this direction was very gentle when it set us down. Even the cargo drones landed intact, and they were never even designed for atmospheric reentry or planetary landings."

"Where are the drones?" asked Carter.

"The *Lurry* is about two miles that way on the other side of those low hills," replied Dexter, pointing at a line of rounded hummocks in the otherwise flat landscape. "The *Baris* was heading for the opposite side of the planet when the sensors lost contact."

Cross turned to Carter. "I assume you tried restarting your Banshee's engines after you landed."

Carter nodded. "Dead. The quantum capacitor won't hold enough charge to power a flashlight, never mind a warp drive."

"The *Crockett's* warp core is cold," said Cross. "The intermix chamber is frozen."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Jo. "How is that possible? The Banshees are powered by a zero-point energy extractor and the Cat's Eye has a matter/antimatter reactor. Those are completely dissimilar systems. How can they both be affected?"

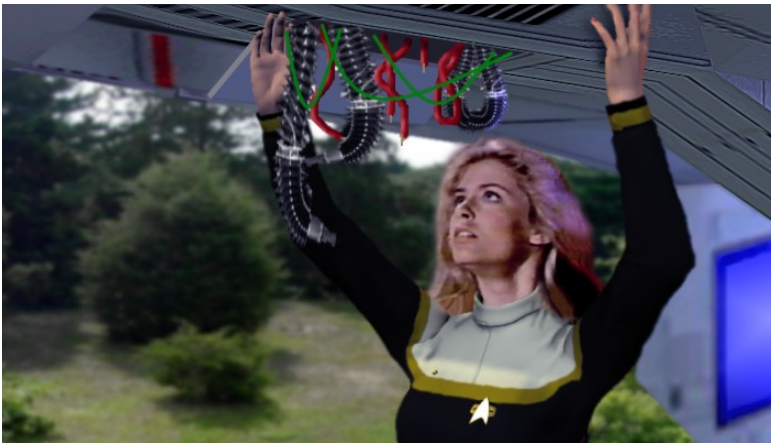
"Maybe something's draining *all* power," suggested Alex.

Cross drew his phaser and Jo pulled her tricorder out of her suit pouch to check the power cells. The verdict was unanimous.

"Our equipment is still working," announced Jo. She made an adjustment to her tricorder's controls, then waved the device in the air. "I'm not detecting anything out of the ordinary," was her authoritative conclusion.

Cross thought a moment, then said, "This is getting us nowhere. We need answers." Turning to Dexter and Alex, he continued. "You two see if you can get the power systems going again on the ships." He turned to Carter and Jo. "The rest of us will reconnoiter the area and check out where the *Lurry* landed."

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Alex Dalton sat back on her haunches and scratched her head. She looked up into the open access panel on the underside of her Banshee fighter, frowned, and scratched

her head again. Beside her, Dexter Gray looked on with mild interest, though his attention was focused mostly on the girl and not the mechanical problems with the plane.

"I just don't understand it," the young woman complained. "Everything seems to be in perfect working order, yet nothing works."

She picked up the PADD she'd been using for technical reference, shook it as though trying to make useful information rattle out of it that way, then tossed it in disgust to the grass when nothing was forthcoming.

The small device beeped and pages began flying by on the small screen until they finally settled on one. Curious and a little worried that she'd damaged it, Alex picked it up and examined it, but when she saw what was on the screen, her eyebrows went up.

"Well color me green and call me an Orion!" she exclaimed. "Look what page it stopped on." She held the PADD out for Dexter to see.

Dex read the page caption out loud. "Subspace Dampening Fields." He thought a moment, then flipped open his tricorder. After a few seconds of scanning, he said. "There *is* a dampening field in operation here. Interesting coincidence."

"Why didn't we detect it before?" asked Alex.

Dexter didn't have a good explanation. "It's almost like we were deliberately kept from detecting it, and now we're deliberately being shown. I know that doesn't make sense..."

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The trio of Starfleet officers topped the small rise and looked down into a broad valley. At the bottom lay the robot cargo drone *Lurry* partially submerged in a small lake. Its buoyancy upon the water was the only thing keeping it upright; its shape was not designed to enable it to land on solid ground. It was apparently no worse for the wear after having traversed the atmosphere. Some of the upper loading doors were open, as well as some of the personnel hatches just above the level of the waterline.

"Looks like someone's been snooping around," commented Lee Carter.

Jo Schmidt shook her head. "My tricorder still isn't picking up any signs of life aside from the plants."

"Maybe they're plant people," suggested Carter with a slight grin.

"Yeah, a lost colony of Phyllosians," harrumphed Jo, not thinking much of Carter's theory.

"In the water?"

"Okay then — a lost colony of Aquans."

"Maybe we should go find out," said Matthew Cross pointedly.

He drew his phaser and Carter did the same, Jo kept a close eye on her tricorder, and in this manner did the trio make their way down the gentle slope of the hillock towards the edge of the lake and the downed cargo ship.

A dark rain cloud drifted in front of the sun plunging the landscape into shadow. Carter had to suppress a sudden shiver, though she wasn't sure if it was caused by the sudden temperature change or the eerie silence of this planet, which had really been getting on her nerves.



Nothing had challenged them so far. No plant people or long-lost Phylosians or Aquans had jumped out of the shadows to ambush them. They cautiously waded out into the shallows near the shore until the water was up to their knees, but the ship was still fifty yards farther out in deeper water.

"Looks like we're getting wet," said Cross, clearly not relishing the thought.

The three holstered their weapons and equipment and waded out until their feet finally left the sandy lake bottom, then swam the rest of the way to the nearest open personnel hatch. Carter was the first to reach it, and she hoisted herself up with her arms over the door's lip. Cross helped by placing his hand firmly on her butt and giving her a shove.

Carter's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't say anything until she was safely inside the hatch. Then she turned and said with a suggestive eyebrow wiggle, "Was it

as good for you as it was for me?" She knew Cross had only been trying to be helpful but the opportunity to tease him couldn't go unexploited. She smiled gently at his sudden intense discomfort and decided to go easy on him. Letting the matter drop, she drew her phaser and peered down the dark cavity, then made room for Cross and Jo to haul themselves up out of the lake. A smile played across her lips as she heard Jo saying to Cross, 'Wait, Captain! Aren't you going to help *me* out of the water too...?'

The light panels lining the corridor in which they found themselves lit automatically upon detecting the presence of three people. When still nothing jumped out to attack them, Carter and Cross finally relaxed and lowered their phasers.

Jo consulted her tricorder and confirmed what all three of them could see with their eyes. "Some of the power systems in this ship are still charged, including the stasis systems keeping the bio-material alive. The engines seem inert, however."

Cross decided on a course of action. "Lieutenant, check out the engine room. See if you can find any clues as to what might be causing the power drain. Commander Carter and I will check out the stasis holds and make sure the bio samples are intact. We'll meet back here in half an hour."

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Alex Dalton and Dexter Gray had finished reading the article on dampening fields and had come to the conclusion that nothing could be done for their ships' engines until the

source of the subspace dampening field was discovered and deactivated. Alex had buttoned up the service hatches on her Banshee starfighter and she, together with Dex, were sitting with their backs against the trunk of a fruit tree waiting for the others to return from their expedition.

Alex cocked an ear. "What was that horrible noise?" she asked.

"My stomach," replied Dexter. "I'm hungry."

"Yeah, me too. Too bad the replicators on the *Crockett* aren't working."

No sooner were those words out of Alex's mouth than a big, bright purple globe dropped from the branches of the tree above their heads onto the springy turf below. The fruit bounced and rolled and came to a rest against Alex's knee.

The young woman picked it up, sniffed it, smiled, and took a bite.

Dexter arched an eyebrow in a very Vulcanlike manner, thought a moment, then said, "Interesting coincidence."

Watching Alex eat was making his stomach rumble louder than ever. "I think I'll get me one of those too," he decided once he couldn't stand it anymore. But no sooner were those words out of his mouth than another shiny, purple fruit dislodged from the leafy canopy above and dropped almost into his lap.

Dexter and Alex looked at each other in surprise. There was no thought of distrust or wariness in their minds, just a growing sense of delight at how their every wish was seemingly being fulfilled simply by asking.

Twenty minutes later, all was once again blissful silence underneath the benevolent fruit tree. Dexter's stomach was

no longer rumbling, and the half dozen fruit pits that lay strewn about the lawn testified as to the reason for that.

"I'm kinda thirsty now," said Alex.

Neither she nor Dexter were the least bit surprised when a big, yellow globe dropped to the ground from one of the other nearby trees. Dexter went to retrieve the new fruit.

It was about six inches across and nearly spherical except for the dimple where the stem attached. The skin felt rubbery and pliant, and was semi-transparent. The inside seemed hollow, and was filled with shimmering, clear liquid. Dexter examined it carefully, turning it over and over in his hands, but try as he might, the rubbery skin proved remarkably resilient and impossible to split open with his fingers. He was about to try smashing it with a rock when Alex grabbed it from his hands.

"Men...!" she muttered. She held the fruit up before her nose and examined it critically for a few seconds, then proceeded to grab firm hold of the stem and jab it into the fruit body. It plunged in with a sharp *plopping* sound, and a stream of juice squirted out from inside the fruit through the stem, which turned out to be hollow like a straw, almost hitting Dexter in the face. She held it out to him with a triumphant smile on her face. "Sometimes it just takes a woman's touch."

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Alex and Dexter were dozing, their appetite and thirst sated, still awaiting the return of Captain Cross and the others.

Above, light rain clouds were closing off the last few gaps of blue sky, but the temperature remained pleasant.

"Think it's gonna rain?" asked Alex.

Dexter cocked an eye at the sky, and after a moment, said, "Yup."

Chapter 3 - Partly Cloudy

Matthew Cross, Lee Carter and Jo Schmidt suffered another cold, wet, and miserable lake crossing after their explorations of the cargo ship *Lurry* were completed, but their misery didn't end there. By the time their feet once again touched shore, the bruised and sullen storm clouds overhead had completely obscured the light of day, and a steady rain had begun falling, and continued for most of the two-mile hike back to the spot where their ships had landed.

When the trio topped the last low rise, the sunlight angled down through openings in the clouds in glorious pillars of silver making the valley below look like some kind of faerie wonderland, but that only served to darken their sodden moods. What they found when they arrived at the glade just made matters worse.



Dexter and Alex were dry.

"Looks like you spent the afternoon in the Cat's Eye where it was nice and warm instead of trying to fix the engines," accused Jo with uncharacteristic grumpiness.

Alex looked surprised and a little insulted. "No, we were out here the whole time, but the engines are definitely a no-go."

Now it was Jo's turn to look surprised. "Didn't it rain here? The ground is wet... Why are you two dry?"

Alex shrugged. "We were sitting under that tree, and the leaves protected us. Then the sun came out and warmed us up again."

"And I suppose the breeze even fluffed up your hair after it had gotten damp."

Alex shrugged again and smiled. "I guess this place just likes us," she said.

"Yeah, well in that case it hates us," replied Jo, shaking the water from her short blonde locks like a wet dog. At her

sides, Cross and Carter flinched at the unwelcome spray of water.

"You mentioned about the engines, Ensign," said the Captain after flashing Jo a dirty look. "What did you find?"

"There's a dampening field in operation here, sir," replied Alex.

"We weren't able to locate the source," added Dexter. "All the systems on all our ships are dead."

"Not *all* our ships, Ensign Gray," said Carter. "The stasis system on the cargo drone is still running, and not only that, but it looks like someone has been tampering with it. The bio-material is in a state of flux right now. If we don't get ourselves and the drones off this planet, the entire shipment of plant and animal specimens will thaw and be released into the wild here and the Polon Colony will have to wait another year to get another biodiversity shipment."

"Something really weird is going on here," said Jo.

Cross looked unhappy at the news. "We'll have to find the dampening field generator and shut it off if we ever want to leave this planet." He looked at the sky. "It'll be dark in an hour, so we'll save that for tomorrow. Let's set up camp over by those trees. We've got enough daylight left to get the survival gear out of the *Crockett*."

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Nighttime had swept across the land with unexpected swiftness, but the Banshees' glade was lit by the soft glow of countless radiation clouds that stretched through this part

of the Briar Patch like so many orange and yellow party streamers. The sheltering branches of the fruit trees were also lit from below by a dancing campfire, yet the scene was anything but warm and inviting. A spooky aura permeated the entire campsite, though no one could put their finger on what exactly was amiss. Perhaps it was the relentless silence that held this planet in its thrall and pounded on their ears, or maybe it was the way the tree branches seemed to literally cringe away from the fire. Maybe it was the uncomfortable expressions on the faces of Alex and Dexter as they fidgeted, constantly looked over their shoulders, and furtively darted their eyes around in the evening's darkness.

"Will you two cut that out!" exclaimed Jo when she finally couldn't stand it any longer. "You're driving me crazy!"

"I think we should move the campfire farther away from the trees," said Dexter.

Alex nodded in vigorous agreement.

"Why?" asked Carter. "We just got it set up here. Besides, the trees will provide a little shelter if it rains again."

"The trees don't like the open flames," replied Alex nervously.

Carter and Jo looked at each other quizzically for a moment, then turned back to Alex. "What makes you think that?" asked Carter.

"Uh..." Alex grew more nervous. "Why do I think that?"

"That's what I just said."

"Right. You just said that."

"Right. So why do we have to move the camp?"

"Why do we have to move the camp?"

"Stop repeating everything I say."

"Am I repeating everything you say?"

"Yes, you're repeating everything I say."

"So you're saying I'm repeating everything you say."

Carter frowned. "Now you're just stalling."

"What makes you think I'm stalling?" asked Alex innocently.

"Because you always repeat everything I say when you're stalling."

"I repeat what you say when I'm stalling?"

"Alex!"

That effectively derailed the never-ending cycle of evasion. Alex suddenly looked helpless and guilt-ridden, and Carter suddenly became very much more worried that something was genuinely wrong here.

Captain Cross noticed too. Up until now he'd been studiously ignoring the ladies' latest leap into linguistic ludicrousness, but now he became very interested in the conversation. He stepped over beside Carter. "Is there something you need to tell us, Ensign?" he asked, though by his tone it was clear his question was intended as nothing less than a direct order.

"Uh, well...", stammered Alex. She looked to Dexter for aid, which the young man dutifully provided.

"It's just a feeling we're getting," he explained lamely.

Cross looked pained. "I think you two had better start from the very beginning," he said, but at Alex's and Dexter's stricken looks, added, "after we move the camp away from the trees."

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After the campfire and all their equipment had been moved far enough away from the trees to satisfy Dexter's and Alex's strange anxiety attacks, Captain Cross made them give a full, official report of everything that had happened to them that afternoon while he, Carter, and Jo were away reconnoitering the drowned cargo ship.

Alex and Dexter took turns finishing each other's sentences as they related events as they had experienced them. From the conveniently malfunctioning PADD when Alex had been at a loss explain what was wrong with their ships to their sudden detection of the dampening field when Jo had been unable to detect one before, from the way the terrible rainstorm had mostly bypassed them to how the leaves of the trees had deflected what little rain did fall, from the sun and warm breeze drying them afterwards to the fruit falling from the trees practically begging to be eaten, they left out no detail. The other three listened with disbelieving ears as the two youngest Banshees spun a tale of wonder and magic more befitting cheesy sci-fi fanfic than real life.

When they were finished, they sat and waited expectantly for a reply from anyone, but it was a long time in coming.

Finally Jo looked up thoughtfully and asked the group in general, "Ever hear of the Gaia Hypothesis?"

Carter's forehead creased in concentration. "That was one of those pseudo-scientific fringe theories from the mid-

twentieth century, wasn't it?" she asked. "It said that the Earth was actually a living entity in itself, or some other such nonsense. Named after the Greek Earth goddess."

Jo wrinkled her nose at Carter's attempt. "Not quite, but thanks for playing," she replied, to Carter's vexation. "The *real* hypothesis put forth by a scientist named James Lovelock suggested that the physical and chemical condition of the surface, atmosphere and oceans of a planet are actively made fit and comfortable by the presence of life itself. That's in contrast to the conventional theory which held that life adapts to planetary conditions as it and they evolve separately.

"It was actually the detractors of Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis who misunderstood and came up with the idea that the Earth was a living, teleological being, that it acted with an intelligent purpose. Unfortunately, it was this incorrect version that captured the public's attention, which is why we think of it as a fringe, crackpot idea."

Captain Cross had had enough of Jo's overly complicated lectures, and cut her off before she could further perpetrate her sesquipedalian elucidation. "What's your point, Lieutenant? In English."

For a split second, Jo's face registered irritation at being denied the opportunity to show off in front of everyone, but she automatically acquiesced. She was used to not being understood, so she spelled it out as plain as she could. "I think maybe the fringe crackpots were right, sir."

Carter sputtered in derision. "Give me a break. Planets are not living entities," she stated defiantly. "There has to be some other explanation." She searched her memory. "Maybe... maybe this is another Amusement Park Planet

like the one discovered 120 years ago by the *USS Enterprise*."

Behind the group, a sudden breeze sighed through the tree branches and hissed across the grass. For a second, Carter would have sworn she heard whispering voices in the air. A shiver ran up her spine. She pulled her thermal blanket closer about her shoulders and leaned in towards the fire a few more inches, instinctively seeking refuge in the glowing embers.

Jo shook her head. "No, I thought of that." She hefted her tricorder. "I'm not reading any power generation whatsoever either above ground or below like there is on the Amusement Park Planet. Plus, the things that happened to Alex and Dexter are unlike what you'd expect on the Amusement Park Planet. There, objects are manufactured in huge underground manufactories in response to thoughts picked up by a network of aboveground receivers, whether good or bad, for better or for worse. If you accidentally think of a Capellan powercat, that's too damn bad. You're about to get fried by a manufactured android replica of a Capellan powercat. Here, it's more like nature itself is deliberately trying to make life as pleasant and comfortable as possible for Alex and Dex."

The cold wind around the group picked up velocity and began whipping the branches of the trees back and forth. The formerly placid copse that had so gently sheltered Alex and Dex that afternoon was transformed into a threatening tangle of sharp angles and flailing lashes. The campfire that had been innocuously minding its own business until now cracking and popping cheerily inside its ring of small rocks turned into a raving, flaming monster, driven by the wind,

clearly intent on lashing out and singeing everything within reach of its darting orange fingers.

Strangely, though in complete agreement with Jo's theory, the wind was having little effect on Alex and Dexter. The powerful gusts were literally going *around* them, leaving the two youths in a cocoon of calm air.

"So you're saying that the reason we were drawn off course and forced to land here is because this planet wanted us here for some reason? " said Cross. "Why? And what does this all have to do with you two?" he asked of Alex and Dexter.

"We don't know, Captain," replied Ensign Gray helplessly. "All I know is that we—" he looked to Alex for confirmation and received it "—we feel at home here. I can't really explain it." The howling wind reached a hand into his bubble of calm air and playfully tousled his hair.

"Well, I can't say I feel the same, Ensign," said Lee Carter. "In fact, I'm starting to feel genuinely *un-welcome*."



The sonorous rumbling of distant thunder reached their ears, and overhead, dark clouds were quickly closing off the starry skies. A particularly violent gust of wind tore the thermal blanket from Carter's fingers and whipped it away into the impenetrable night. A brilliant flash of lightning split the sky in half and hit the ground less than a hundred yards from where they were.

"Back to the ships!" shouted Cross, but he needn't have wasted his breath — the others were already running.

Cross stopped just underneath the leading edge of the *Crockett's* port engine pod intending to make sure everyone got inside safely. "We'll ride out the storm inside the ship!" he shouted to be heard above the screaming wind and the crashing thunder.

Carter and Schmidt flew past him on their way to the Cat's Eye's underbelly hatch, but when he turned to see about hurrying the other two along, he saw that they had stopped running and were just standing there, still ten feet short of safety. A bolt of lightning struck the ground between the *Crockett* and the nearest Banshee starfighter, charging the air with 1.21 gigawatts of static electricity. Every hair on Cross' body stood on end, but Dalton and Gray seemed unfazed by the near-miss.

"Come on!" shouted Cross. "What the hell are you waiting for?!?"

Hearing the Captain's shout, Carter and Jo turned to see what was going on. Seeing that their two youngest team members were still out in the storm for some reason, they hopped off the ladder leading up into the ship and ran back to rejoin Cross.

"What's going on?" shouted Carter, but before anyone could answer, another blinding lightning bolt shot from the black and angry clouds, and this time it didn't miss.

The searing bolt struck Ensigns Dalton and Gray, and they disappeared from view in a flash of blinding light.

Chapter 4 - Gaia

When their blinded eyes recovered from the near miss of the lightning bolt, Matthew Cross, Lee Carter and Jo Schmidt were horrified at the sight they beheld. A blackened, smoking pit was newly blasted in the earth ten feet in front of them, but as the smoke and falling dirt cleared, they saw to their relief that Alex Dalton and Dexter Gray were still standing on the other side of the crater. Their eyes were closed and their entire bodies were suffused in an electric glow.

For long seconds no one spoke or moved, so incapacitating had been the shock of the lightning strike and so unearthly the appearance of the two young people, but finally, Alex and Dexter opened their eyes. In that instant, the others knew for a certainty that they were no longer dealing with the normal.

Their eyes were lit from within by the same electric glow that surrounded their bodies and shone like lanterns. Their transformed appearance was frightening, but the immense power they now exuded was more so; it seemed to burst from the very pores of their skin. It made Carter's own skin crawl just watching.

In perfect unison, Dexter and Alex intoned, "YOU MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE!" in booming voices that were simultaneously both male and female, yet at the same time somehow neither. Overhead, lightning flashes punctuated the commandment.



"Looks like this silent planet has found its voice," muttered Jo, guessing what had happened.

Captain Cross took one step forward out from underneath the shelter of the *Crockett's* hull. Carter was right beside him.

"I'm not leaving without my officers," said Cross. "Who are you, and what have you done to them?"

"THIS ONE IS THAT WHICH GIVES LIFE!" boomed the multi-gender voice from both Dexter and Alex's throats. "THIS ONE HAS BEEN GIVEN USE OF THE BODIES OF THE TWO PROTEIN-BASED ENTITIES YOU KNOW AS ALEXANDRA DALTON AND DEXTER GRAY! THEY HAVE TAUGHT THIS ONE YOUR LANGUAGE! YOU MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE!"

"Given use?" demanded Carter.

Suddenly, Alex took another step forward, closed her eyes and lowered her head, and when she looked up again a second later her eyes were completely normal; the alien, electric fire had left them. Behind her, Dexter underwent the same transformation, and the young man stepped forward to join his girl. The roiling clouds overhead calmed their frenetic churning, and the near-constant lightning flashes subsided.

"Alex? Dexter?" was Carter's tentative query.

"Yes, Lee. It's me," replied Alex.

Carter noted the use of her first name with a mixture of mild displeasure and concern. Ensign Dalton would never have used her first name under normal circumstances; to the youngest Banshee officer, Carter had always been either 'Commander' or 'Boss'. She decided not to voice any objection however. They had bigger problems right now than Starfleet protocol.

"What's going on, Alex?" she asked instead.

"You need to leave this planet."

Carter scowled. "Yeah, I kinda got that part, big scary lightning bolts and all. Mind explaining what this is all

about, Ensign? And why the welcome mat has suddenly been rolled up?"

"This planet chose us to come here," explained Alex, meaning herself and Dexter. "That's why we were pulled off course and forced down here."

From her place beside Captain Cross, Jo exclaimed happily, "I was right! This *is* a living planet."

But Carter wasn't buying it so easily. "Come off it. There's no such thing and you know it. Planets cannot be living, sentient entities. I can barely wrap my brain around androids and holograms being living entities — how can I accept a 8000-mile-diameter ball of rock as a living thing?"

"There's more to planets like this one than just rock, Lee," said Alex. "They have complex magnetic fields within which memes can propagate and evolve, they have subspace geodesics and extended geometries that allow them to influence their surroundings, they have internal geological mechanisms to circulate raw materials just like we have circulatory systems."

Dexter picked up the thread. "Like any other life form, the planet takes in food and gives off waste in the forms of light and heat. The atmosphere and hydrosphere pump and distribute and regulate and recycle, and are in turn regulated by the biosphere."

"That's where we come in," said Alex, meaning herself and Dexter again.

Dexter continued. "The planet needs greater biodiversity to maintain these ideal environmental conditions. The plants and primitive animals that live here aren't evolving quickly enough and things are starting go fall out of equilibrium."

"In other words, it's sick," said Alex.

"The oxygen and carbon-dioxide cycles, just to name a few, are out of control. The abundant plants make too much oxygen for the relatively few animals. Soon the animals will begin dying of oxygen poisoning. Once they're all dead, carbon-dioxide production will drop and then the plants will start dying. In a few thousand years nothing will be left but a barren class-K rock or a toxic class-N hell smothered by its own greenhouse gasses. This paradise will be lost forever."

"The cargo drones...", muttered Captain Cross.

Carter and Jo turned to look at him. Alex and Dexter smiled knowingly.

"Of course!" exclaimed Jo, catching on. "The cargo ships are filled with enough suspended biomaterial to populate an entire planet with all the plant and animal species you need for a self-sustaining, thriving ecosystem. We were taking them to Polon II because that colony has the same problem as this planet — not enough diversity to keep things from spiraling out of control over the very long term."

"Exactly, Lieutenant," said Dexter. "The drones are better than Noah's Ark. They've got enough genetic material and suspended embryos for thousands and thousands of species. They are the perfect solution to this planet's problems. A couple of humans are needed to run the machinery, so you can understand why we were brought here," meaning himself and Alex.

"No, I don't understand!" burst Carter. "You can't seriously expect us to just leave here without the cargo

ships, do you? Or without you. Why does this planet all of a sudden want to get rid of us so badly anyway?"

"You have to go," pleaded Alex. "The planet... Gaia... only needs the two of us to stay and oversee the seeding of the lifeforms from the cargo ships. It doesn't want any other higher lifeforms around. It wants life here to develop naturally to the greatest extent possible. Aside from lifeforms from the cargo ships, it doesn't want any outside contamination. It only wants us and the cargo ships because it'll die otherwise.

"Besides... we *want* to stay here." She glanced at Dexter and smiled, knowing they shared a common conviction. "We're not needed in Banshee Squad anymore. The wars are over. We've been talking a lot lately about what we should do with our lives now, and this is the perfect solution. This is what we want to do."

"But—"

Alex's face took on an almost apologetic cast, and when she spoke next, some of the booming thunder had returned to her voice. "The planet... Gaia... has the power to enforce its wishes, Lee. Please. Leave while things are still amicable."

"I'm sorry... I can't—" began Carter, but she was cut off.

The entity that had borrowed Alex and Dexter's bodies had apparently had enough talk and had decided that it was time for action. Alex and Dexter blinked their eyes, and Carter saw that they were once again infused with the brilliant, inner electric fire that meant they were under the control of the entity claiming to be the very planet they stood on — Gaia. Overhead, the menacing clouds began

churning again, eerily lit from the inside by renewed electrical activity.

Again, the booming, neither-male-nor-female-yet-both voice issued from their mouths, though this time Carter thought she detected a hint of compassion in the tone. "YOU MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE! YOUR COMPANIONS WILL BE CARED FOR AND LOVED BY THIS ONE!"

With upturned face and heedless of the fat raindrops that were beginning to fall again, Carter shouted at the angry storm above. "What gives you the right to bring us here against our will?" She felt Captain Cross at her side and drew strength and courage from his presence. He seemed content to let her do the talking, and that was just fine with her. She summoned all her righteous indignation and continued. "We came in peace! What gives you the right to claim our cargo ships as your own? Or the right to usurp control of the bodies of my two officers?"

"THE SAME RIGHT ANY PARENT HAS TO PROTECT HER CHILDREN!" was the immediate response from Alex/Dexter/Gaia, and was the one thing Carter hadn't been prepared for. She felt some of the fervor drain from her conviction.

"THIS ONE THANKS YOU FOR THE GIFT OF LIFE YOU HAVE BROUGHT IN YOUR SPACE VESSELS, BUT NOW THIS ONE MUST HEAL! GO NOW, AND DO NOT RETURN! PERHAPS IN ONE OR TWO HUNDRED YEARS YOUR KIND MAY RETURN HERE!" A barrage of lightning bolts punctuated every sentence and turned the night into day while the display lasted.

Carter was about to launch another volley of objections, but Captain Cross took firm hold of her elbow and tugged her after him in the direction of their ships. "Come on, Commander," he growled. "Time to go."

"We can't just leave Alex and Dexter here," snapped Carter, outraged that Cross would abandon his people so easily. She yanked her arm from Cross' grasp and drew her phaser, determined to blast this damned planet apart one rock at a time if that's what it took to rescue her people. She took a threatening step towards Alex/Dexter/Gaia, and in response, the storm clouds overhead flashed menacingly. A killing arc of electricity hit the ground less than fifty feet away.

"Commander!" barked the Captain. "Stand down and put that weapon away!"

Carter stopped in her tracks and looked at the Captain incredulously, and seemed on the brink of disobeying his orders. Slowly though, and with clenched teeth, she placed the phaser back in its place on her hip. The expression on Cross' face was twice as cold and stony as she had ever seen it, but something in the man's eyes told her it was all a front. With sudden insight, she realized that being forced into this situation was just as difficult for him as it was for her and it was tearing him up inside. She also saw in his eyes that he knew she understood now.

After a last meaningful look at Carter to make sure they understood one another, Cross addressed the being that had taken up temporary residence in Alex and Dexter's bodies. "Gaia, it is the custom of my people to make every effort to achieve a peaceful first contact with any new life forms we encounter. So, in the interest of peace and hopefully a

mutually beneficial relationship between yourself and the Federation in the future, we will leave and not return. We will leave our cargo ships behind, and the two people who have volunteered to stay with you may do so. However, if anything happens to them, I will hold you personally responsible. Is my meaning clear?"

Alex/Gaia dipped her head in regal acceptance of Captain Cross' terms.

Satisfied, Cross turned his attention to Ensign Gray. "Dexter, I'm going to hold *you* personally responsible if anything happens to Ensign Dalton."

Dexter smiled and nodded.

"And the same goes for you, Alex," said Carter. "It'll be up to you now to keep Dex out of trouble."

"Remember that little talk we had about the birds and the bees," added Jo, not knowing what else to say. She and Alex had been good friends, and to lose her like this so suddenly and unexpectedly was a shock. She hurriedly wiped a telltale tear from her cheek before anyone saw it.

Alex smiled. Dexter walked over and they took up each other's hands. The electrical fire faded from their eyes returning them to normal, and the hellish clouds overhead broke apart and fled on the wind like a forgotten nightmare upon waking. The midnight starlight shone down on the land once again.

"Goodbye!" they called and waved as their three *former* team members made their way back to their respective ships. Minutes later, the blades of grass around their feet were bent and their hair and clothing fluttered in the wind kicked up by the thrusters as the ships of Banshee Squadron lifted off and soared away into the night.

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As her starfighter rose above the atmosphere, Commander Lee Carter sighed thoughtfully. She barely saw the controls in front of her as her fingers automatically went through the motions of making sure Alex's pilot-less Banshee was properly slaved to her flight computer. She barely heard Captain Cross' orders to set a course for the New Canada system and engage at warp five.

She switched one of the display screens in her cockpit to show a reverse angle. The planet Gaia flickered into view, blue and green and white, safely tucked away into this forgotten corner of the Briar Patch. It would be a long time before anyone visited here again.

Her finger was poised over the warp initiator switch, but she hesitated for one last moment. "Have a nice life, you two," she said, then let her finger make contact.

Three Banshees and one Cat's Eye ship stretched away and disappeared in a flash of warp particles, bound for home.

Epilogue - Paradise

*Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven.*

- William Shakespeare

Helena, All's Well That Ends Well

Jo wandered down the hallway from the locker room on her way to her bedroom upstairs. Her booted feet echoed on the hardwood floor. The place seemed so quiet. No one was enjoying the fireplace in the living room as she passed through, or the cool evening air out on the back patio deck, and the lights were out in the kitchen.

She proceeded up the spiral staircase, but she knew things were just as dead quiet upstairs. As her feet made the ascent, her mind wandered down the back roads of her

mind, amongst memories of friends and teammates of days and years past.

The loss of her friend Alex Dalton was still too painful to think about, but the sunny blonde rookie automatically brought to mind the young woman she had replaced, Kim Tycho. Another young rookie, Kim had fought with them during the First and Second Mulluran Wars, but then had fallen in love with Garek Loran, the Chief Engineer of Starbase 901, and the two of them had gotten married. Kim left the squad, and she and her husband went on to new assignments on Starbase 94, on the other side of the Federation.

Sam Beckett on the other hand had left the Banshees under much more mundane circumstances. She had returned to Earth several months ago to further her Starfleet training. The tall, willowy blonde, part cyborg but all human, had always been shy to the point of incapacity around strangers. Now she was studying to enter the medical profession where she'd have to be around strangers all the time. Still, Sam had always had a big heart, and Jo had no doubt that she would be able to conquer her neurosis and be the best damn doctor to come out of Starfleet Medical in years.

Max Vasser's departure only last week had been a complete surprise to everyone, but it probably shouldn't have been. Of all the Banshees, Max had been the most gifted thanks to her esper powers, but had also been the most troubled. She had watched her best friend get killed. Twice. And each time Max had blamed herself. She had been robbed of her vaunted esper ability by the evil Jelly Brains. She had found her father after twenty years of

thinking him dead only to watch him get killed too in a quantum universe implosion. It was no wonder she had finally snapped. Jo hoped Max was happy with West; that she'd found what she'd been looking for.

Then there was Jazz Phoenix, Wing Commander of Banshee Squadron during the early days of the Dominion War and Max's best friend. Killed in the line of duty. Twice. Jo hadn't known the fiery Wing Commander very long, but even in that short time had grown to respect her as much as she now respected Lee Carter.

The lights were turned down in the big upstairs common room except for the area right in front of the big wall screen. She saw Lee Carter sitting on the couch also apparently lost in thought. There was a lot of that going around these days it seemed.

Jo dropped her carcass heavily onto the couch beside Carter and with forced joviality said, "So... what's the good word?"

Carter looked up from her mental meandering and ventured a small smile. "I just got finished packing up Alex's stuff so it can be sent back home to her parents on Earth."

Jo sighed, then shrugged at a stray thought. "Maybe we'll see them again some day."

Carter shook her head. "After Captain Cross' official report on our little misadventure, Starfleet decided to string up a line of warning buoys around Gaia marking it as an officially quarantined world. No one's going there for a long time. Looks like Gaia got her wish."

Jo harrumphed.

Carter looked sideways at Jo. "Jeez, you look down," she said.



"I just never thought it would end this way," explained Jo. "One by one, or in a couple of cases by twos, the Banshees have all gone their separate ways. We're the only ones left." Jo mulled over her feeling for a few seconds, then added, "I hope Alex and Dexter have found the paradise they were looking for."

Carter thought it over a while, then replied. "I think we all have, Jo."

In response to her friend's quizzical and dubious expression, Carter explained. "Paradise isn't a specific place, and as nice as Gaia was, it's not the blue skies and green grass that makes it Paradise. Paradise is being happy with where you are in life, no matter where in the universe that happens to be or who you're with, and knowing that there's hope for a wonderful future. You can live on Gaia,

or in the zenite mines of Ardana, as long as you're with the ones you love and are content, well... that can be Paradise for you."

Jo turned what Carter had said over in her mind. "Alex and Dexter are happy introducing new life to the planet Gaia, Kimmy and Garek are happy on Starbase 94, Sam's happy back at school, Max is happy traipsing across the Galaxy on her quest to stick a thumb in the eye of evil, and if there's an afterlife, Jazz should be happy that her warrior's sacrifice wasn't in vain... Maybe you're right, Lee... But what about us?"

Carter smiled, and with firm conviction said, "Something will turn up."

