

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON

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RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Naked Attraction

A First Contact situation is never easy even under ideal conditions, but while trying to negotiate peaceful relations with a strange new species on the borders of Federation space, Commander Lee Carter must overcome not only cultural differences, but her own intractable foibles.

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron

BLUE

Richard A. Merk



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for cartoon nudity

Captain's Log, stardate 61402.5: The *USS Eternity* has been dispatched to the Polon system on the borders of Ferengi space in response to the first contact between a freelance trader out of Serenity and an alien race identified so far simply as the "Blue". Our orders are to determine the reason for the Blue's arrival in Federation space, and if possible, to open peaceful relations. We will arrive in 20.1 hours.

Captain Nathan J. Cross finished dictating and leaned back in his command chair. At his side, Commander Lee Carter sat with a quizzical expression on her face.

"Blue?" she asked. "As in the color?"

"Apparently."

"That's a rather odd name for a species."

"We'll wait until we see the Blue with our own eyes before we make final judgment on that issue," said Cross.

"Of course, sir." She kept forgetting that Captain Cross wasn't normally one for idle chit-chat like she'd gotten used to serving so long with Banshee Squadron. She returned her focus to business. "It won't *technically* be a first contact situation, but close enough so that the same rules will apply."

Cross nodded. "Their only contact with the Federation so far has been a brief exchange with a local freelance cargo ship owned by a man named West. Hopefully they didn't get too bad a first impression of humanity. It'll be our job to introduce them to the Federation properly. We'll be going in with full discretionary authority.

"Very good, sir." Carter rose from her chair and walked across the bridge to the main science station where her long-time friend Josephine Schmidt was busy compiling data.

"What do we know about the Blue, Lieutenant?"

Jo swiveled in her chair to face the XO.

"Not as much as I'd like," she replied. "According to West's report, the Blue's actual name for their race is almost 200,000 words long and would take almost two days of nonstop talking to pronounce."

"What?"

"That's the English translation of their actual name anyway. In their own language, it's two syllables. It's just that the Blue language, which is unpronounceable to us by the way, is *so* precise that it takes almost 200,000 words to say *exactly* the same thing in English."

"What are they? Some sort of hyper-intelligent race?"

Jo shrugged. "Could be. West suggested the nickname 'Blue' to them, and they didn't have a problem with it." She checked her databank before continuing on with the next point.

"The second thing we know about them is that they exist only partially in our dimensions."

"They're non-corporeal?"

"No, they have physical bodies that inhabit three spatial dimensions just like we do, only it's a different combination of three dimensions."

"Meaning?" prodded Carter. Jo sometimes enjoyed her science lectures a little too much, and needed the occasional reminder to get to the point.

"Meaning that they will look extremely strange to us," replied Jo. "As the dimensional intersection shifts, their appearance will shift and waver. They'll be solid, transparent, translucent, distorted, contorted, distended, and even inside-out, and all at the same time."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Well, that's non-Euclidean 21-dimensional hyperspatial physics for you. Presumably, we'll look as strange to them."

"Anything else?"

"West mentioned one other item of importance. Their society is strongly matriarchal. Females are the leaders and thinkers of Blue society, while the males are the muscle and get all the dangerous jobs. The Blue West talked to was a male, who explained that we wouldn't get to meet their leaders until they decided it was safe."

Carter arched a bemused eyebrow. "That can't have sat well with West."

Carter and Schmidt both knew West from their days in Banshee Squadron. The ladies had run into the scoundrel a number of times. He was supremely self-confident, cocky, brash, sure of himself, and abundantly male. Her thoughts echoed Captain Cross' hope that West hadn't royally screwed up their chance of ever being friends with the Blue.

From his place in the command chair where he'd sat listening to Jo's report, Captain Cross said, "I have some additional orders from Starfleet regarding those last two points, Commander." Carter turned to face him and he continued. "Because of their strong matriarchal bias, we'll need a female officer to deal with their representative."

"No problem, Captain. I'll volunteer. I've dealt with plenty of alien cultures. Even some blue ones."

"Good," said Cross. "I knew you'd step forward." Hints of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and a mischievous twinkle entered his eyes. Carter wondered at the reason. "The second thing is about the dimensional difference. As it turns out, the Blue find our other-dimensional appearance absolutely hideous to the point of causing physical illness. Nothing personal, Commander. They've requested— no, *required*— that anyone they meet be attired in a special garment they've developed to mitigate the adverse effects."

"Okay. Special clothes. No problem."

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"I am *not* wearing that!"

"Come now, Commander. A minute ago you were all gung-ho about meeting the Blue and putting the Federation's best foot forward."

Captain Cross and Commander Carter had moved their conversation to the Captain's ready room just off the bridge, and it was a good thing.

"Yes, but I assumed the foot would have a shoe on it!" Carter looked again at the object in Cross' hand: a clothes hanger. An apparently *empty* clothes hanger. Yet something shimmered just on the edge of perception, just a tickle at the corners of her vision, an impossibly gossamer sheen suspended in midair below the hanger. Carter had *felt* the delicate garments with her own fingers... but...

"It's *invisible!*" she cried. "I can't go out on the bridge wearing an invisible uniform! My authority on this ship will be ruined if I go out there naked!"

"You will *not* be naked," returned Cross. "You will be fully clothed all the way from your neck down to your, uh..." His gaze flicked down her body before returning to

eye-level. "Feet." He didn't quite succeed in keeping the amusement from showing on his face.

Carter frowned and put her fists on her hips. She knew it was just a little good-natured teasing on his part, but as far as she was concerned right at this moment, Cross was enjoying her predicament far too much. Well, she only had herself to blame. She volunteered, after all. Years from now, she'll probably look back on this incident and laugh about it... while she sat in prison for having murdered Cross for putting her through this.

"The cloth is fully opaque to the Blue's eyes—" Cross was saying.



"I guess we just have to take their word for that, huh?" grumbled Carter.

"—since it's made from matter from their dimension," continued Cross, ignoring his XO's grouching. "It has special

properties that block the worst of the dimensional distortion making it possible for them to look at us without getting sick. Here is a picture of what it looks like to their eyes." He tapped a contact on his desktop and a hologram shimmered into existence around Carter's body, giving her the illusion she was wearing the alien outfit.

Carter's displeasure was not alleviated in the least. She held her arms out and inspected herself with mounting distaste. "This is their idea of diplomatic finery? It's a skin-tight catsuit that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. It's barely better than a coat of paint."

"Unfortunately, it has to be skin-tight, or else the dimensional effects won't work."

"That means I can't even wear underwear!"

Cross smiled, but it was no longer with amusement but with genuine sympathy. He switched off the hologram and took a step closer to Carter.

"Not even a fig leaf, Commander. It won't be so bad. The Blue aren't human or even *humanoid* as far as we can tell, so they probably wouldn't be affected by naked human beauty anyway, even if they did see you naked, which they won't. And I'll have the bridge cleared while you conduct the meeting. We'll set up a temporary control center surrounding the computer core on deck 2 and monitor from there, audio only. Far enough away to give you complete privacy, yet near enough to respond if some unforeseen disaster strikes, which it won't. You'll be covered from all angles."

Except the ones that count. Carter sighed. She knew she was just being unprofessional. Nudity wasn't quite the

taboo it had once been on Earth, but there was still such a thing as modesty. Above all, however, her duty was clear.

"All right, I'll do it."

"Cross nodded with satisfaction. "I knew I could count on you."

Carter felt her natural confidence and good spirits returning as they filed out of the ready room. "So, Captain, did you mean it when you said I was beautiful...?"

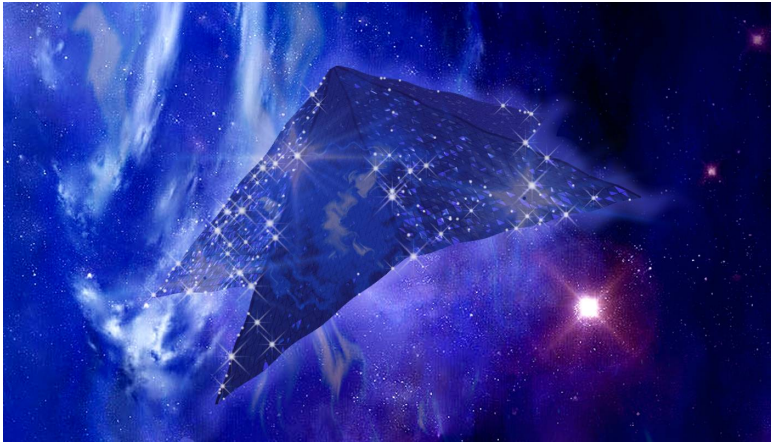
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Twenty hours later, Carter was standing in the center of the bridge. She was acutely conscious of her surroundings now that she had the floor to herself. Without other people in the room, the humming of the duty stations was annoyingly loud. She felt horribly conspicuous and unaccustomedly vulnerable dressed in what was to her eyes nothing. She knew everyone else was right at the bottom of the stairs ready to back her up if needed, but that knowledge did little to alleviate the anxiety she was feeling — the normal anxiety she felt before any important mission, and the added anxiety caused by her exposure, irrational as that was.

Her friend Jo Schmidt's voice came over the bridge speakers from where she monitored the ship's sensors on deck 2. "Blue ship coming into visual range... Slowing to sublight... Blue ship has come to a full stop five hundred meters off our bow."

The giant holotank at the front of the bridge came to life centered on the alien vessel. Carter's reaction was a sharp intake of breath. The thing was at once scintillatingly

beautiful with an indescribable ethereal quality, and at the same time deeply disturbing the way it seemed to be both there and not there at the same time. The ultra-reality of the holotank only exacerbated the effects.



It was a starship in the literal sense of the word; it had the graceful shape of a five-pointed star. Gem-like windows sparkled its entire length and breadth. There were no visible engines or sensors or weapons or anything else Carter could identify, which suggested to her that Blue technology was either very advanced or very different. Probably both.

It was the ship's strange warping effect that held her attention and churned her stomach though. The way it rippled like a desert mirage, and shimmered and faded in sections. Saint Elmo's fire races along the edges outlining the ship against the Briar Patch, while towards the center of

the huge hull, Carter swore she could see stars and nebulae in a flaming sky, as though the Blue ship were a star-shaped puncture in the boundaries of nature giving her a disquieting and thoroughly *unnatural* glimpse of what lay beyond.

Heaven and hell in one package, thought Carter. She wondered if the Blue had haloes or horns.

She suddenly noticed that without even realizing it she had folded her arms across her chest in an unconscious defensive position. Dropping her arms back to her sides was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. Uttering her next words were the second hardest. "Open hailing frequency."

The unsettling image of the Blue ship wavered and was replaced by an interior scene that was surprisingly normal, though still a bit wavery. *For my benefit? Or is this the way their ship really looks on the inside?* And centered on the screen was a fuzzy, translucent splotch of color. A Blue. *Well, now I know why West called them 'Blues'...*

The Blue was an ovoid of color hovering in midair. Extrusions of blue flicked in and out from the main body in time with an alien heartbeat. Limbs? There was little distortion, and it certainly didn't look inside-out as Jo had said it would. A spot in the center of the ovoid was much more difficult to look at though, and made Carter queasy. Something that looked like an eye, or a mouth, or... a sloppily dissected biology experiment... hovered there. She suddenly realized that the Blue must be wearing the same sort of cross-dimensional clothing as she was, and that the nightmarish spot in the middle was exposed the same way

her own head was exposed to plain unaltered view. She wondered briefly what she looked like to the Blue's eyes. Did she also appear as a glowing blue blob?

Thinking about her appearance reminded Carter of her sartorial situation. She somehow resisted a surge of panicked desperation to strategically place her hands over parts of her anatomy.

After taking a calming breath, she put on a smile and hoped her voice didn't crack. "On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, allow me to extend our greetings and welcome you to the Briar Patch sector. My name is Commander Lee Carter of the Starfleet vessel *USS Eternity*, and I will be your liaison."

Fleeg, declared the color Blue.

Carter was poised to go on with her speech, but that brought her up short. She had no ready response for 'fleeg'.

The computer hummed and cut in a moment later, sparing her any more confusion. Using an approximation of the Blue's own voice, the computer translated: "I am expressing the quality of being grateful for your having and showing good manners in expressing a kindly greeting or reception, as to one whose arrival gives pleasure, officer ranking Commander designated Lee Carter. My word by which a body is designated is—" here the computer issued a brief buzzing click. "We are they who originate from—" Another squawk issued from the speakers.

Wow. All that from 'fleeg'?

The computer had used a male voice. Carter suddenly felt extremely naked again, felt the warm flush of her cheeks and the trickle of sweat down her back. The

holotank made it seem like the Blue was actually standing ten feet in front of her, not in another room 500 meters away across the vacuum of space. *I'm losing it. Pull it together, Lee, or this really is going to be the embarrassment you're already imagining it is.*

"A pleasure to meet you, uh..." Carter tried to imitate the squawk the computer had made when translating the Blue's name and failed spectacularly.

The Blue twinkled like a galaxy of sapphire stars. Carter wondered if he was chuckling or if he was insulted. "We grasp the significance, implications, and importance that it is not easily or readily done, requiring much labor, skill, or planning to be performed successfully by animalia-chordata-vertebrata-mammalia-theria-eutheria-primate-hominidae-homo-sapiens, to use our system of formalized sounds, gestures, and the like as a means of communicating thought and emotion. The person bearing an X and Y chromosome pair in the cell nuclei designated 'West' offered for consideration or action 'Ceruleus'. Lee Carter may designate me Ceruleus."

West and his crazy sense of humor... She could almost see Schmidt rolling her eyes and slapping her forehead down on deck two.

"Very good, Ceruleus. If you like, we can escort your ship to the planet Serenity where a formal welcome has been—"

Carter's invitation was interrupted by an explosion. The deck bucked violently under her feet, forcing her to clutch the edge of the navigation station to keep from being thrown down. The ship's red alert started blaring.

What the—?

Another concussion rattled her teeth and eardrums, and this time the lights flickered until the backup systems cut in. In the holotank, Ceruleus was pulsating with what Carter presumed was agitation.

"Report!" she yelled into the air.

"A starship just came out of warp five-hundred-thousand kilometers from us," answered Jo's disembodied voice. "It's shooting at us. Those were low-yield proximity blast torpedoes."

"Put it on screen," ordered Carter.

The image in the holotank split in two. Ceruleus shrank to fill the left half, while the right half changed to a view of space centered on the enemy vessel. Carter instantly recognized the predatory design.

"Ferengi," she hissed.

The image of the Ferengi marauder wavered and was replaced by the equally sinister visage of the Ferengi captain. His broad lobes and bulbous nose filled his side of the holotank from end to end, and his high, gravelly voice grated in her ears. "Federation vessel NCC-127194 Eternity. Those were warning shots. We have scanned your vessel and know your defenses and weapons are inferior to ours. Do not attempt to arm your weapons or we will destroy you. I, DaiMon Poks, claim the alien vessel behind you and all its technologies as a prize for the Ferengi Alliance!"

Carter heard the bridge doors hiss open and the bridge crew rush back into the room to take their stations. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced her bare feet to remain

rooted to the deck as her nightmares came true. Her breaths came quick and shallow. She could feel a dozen eyes on her bare bottom.

She opened her eyes to the image of the Blue in the holotank. In the brief firefight between the Ferengi and the *Eternity*, the Blue vessel had done nothing to defend itself, attack, or even flee. Somehow she got the impression Ceruleus was expectantly waiting to see what would happen next. Waiting to see how *the Federation* would respond to aggression.

Jeez, like I didn't have enough pressure on me already...

Making a good impression with the Blue was paramount, and since the Blue were so exclusively matriarchal, *she* was the one who had to do it. Nothing else would suffice. Her duty was clear, and it made her next act easier. Thrusting aside her panic, she turned to face the bridge crew and held up her hand. "Wait, Captain. I can handle this."

Captain Cross froze in mid-stride halfway to the command chair. "Commander? There's a hostile vessel attacking my ship."

"Trust me, sir."

"What about you're... uh..." Cross waved his hand in her general direction, clearly meaning her nudity. His gaze went all over the bridge as he awkwardly tried to avoid looking at Carter.

Carter spared half a second to let herself be amused by Cross' embarrassment. Twenty hours ago in his ready room, he had chastened her for her prudishness in not wanting to appear naked in front of the crew, but now the

tables were turned. Now that he was confronted by a naked woman on his bridge, he didn't quite know how to behave. To her surprise, she found that charming.

"I have a plan, sir."

Carter could see the continued objections on the Captain's face, but he bit them back and held his place. His trust heartened her and made up for the earlier teasing.

She positioned herself squarely between the conn and ops stations and motioned for Miki Chen and Jo Schmidt to take the two seats — a unified female front against the Ferengi for the Blue to observe, if that was indeed their game.

"Transmit a *visual* signal to the Ferengi vessel."

It was obvious when the vid-link was established, because the Ferengi captain's jaw hit the deck like it was made of neutronium, and if his eyes could have popped out of his head they would have ricocheted off the walls.

"I am Commander Lee Carter of the starship *Eternity*." She stuck out her chest as much for posturing as for the effect she knew it would have on Poks. "You have attacked a Federation vessel without provocation. I demand an explanation."

The Ferengi's mouth moved but no sounds came out at first. "A... an unclothed female...!" he finally managed to blurt. "But the barbaric hyoo-mons don't..." Again, naked lechery had overcome intelligible oration.

How predictable, thought Carter. *So far so good*.

"What you have done is an act of war. I demand you withdraw from this sector immediately or I will be forced to—"

Poks had regained a small fraction of his wits, at least enough to form short cohesive sentences. He sprawled back in his gaudy command chair and snapped his fingers imperiously. "Silence, female."

Good. He's still not thinking straight. He's treating me like a Ferengi female.

"We monitored the alien vessel's appearance as out of nowhere. We claim its fantastic technologies for our own. This is neutral space. Your Federation has no authority here. Stand aside, female, so your master can take his prize."

Carter cocked her head quizzically and pretended not to understand. "Well, gosh, Captain—"

"DaiMon."

"Sorry. 'Day-munn'. Y'know, I could'a sworn that all the trans-Briar Patch governments signed that big peace treaty after the Second Mullurian War." She absentmindedly chewed on her fingernail. "You know, the one where the Federation and the Mullurans and the G'Kra and the Breen and the Ferengi all divided up the zone." She made a point to swing her hips and give Poks a good view of her profile while she talked. "Now, I think that might give us... what did you call it... some 'authority' here." She punctuated that last with a particularly seductive pelvic thrust.

"Nonsense." Poks left eye was twitching while his fingers spasmodically stroked his lobes. Carter's performance was keeping him reeling. He obviously wasn't accustomed to arguing his demands with unclothed females.

Now that Carter was "in the moment", she had almost forgotten about the bridge crew quietly standing in the background watching her gyrate for the lecherous Ferengi. Her only thoughts were on achieving her goals — saving the ship, saving the Blue, and saving the Federation/Blue relationship. The luxury of saving her dignity had to be sacrificed for the greater good.

"You will deactivate your engines and prepare to be boarded," Poks was saying.

"Oh my," cooed Carter. "You want to 'board' me? But we just met..."



Poks' twitching became more pronounced.

"That's not what I meant, you stupid female!" He was becoming exasperated. At Carter's pouty uncomprehending look, Poks began angrily explaining what he wanted.

All the while she was keeping Poks' attention riveted with her scatterbrained and confused objections and naked body, Carter kept one hand on the ops console, surreptitiously tapping out silent commands for Jo and Miki. A raised eyebrow from Miki and an evil smirk from Jo were her signs that her intent had been understood. The two women hastily programmed Carter's orders into the navigation computer.

Poks was finishing up his explanations. "...So when my ship pulls alongside yours, you will drop your shields so we can beam our troops over to your vessel. Understand now, you empty-headed fen grub?"

Carter took a step closer to the holotank. Suddenly gone were the saccharin smile and vacuous stance of a dimwitted bimbo, replaced by the confident and competent demeanor of a true Starfleet officer. "You want the Blue ship, Poks? You give me no choice but to *let you have it*. Now!"

Poks leered in oblivious triumph even as Miki Chen engaged the attack program.

The *Eternity's* warp engines pulsed brilliantly for a fraction of a second, and the ship flashed instantaneously forward half-a-million kilometers to come to a stop right on the Ferengi Marauder's nose. Phaser beams flicked out with pinpoint accuracy, and at such a short distance, even the *Eternity's* modest weapons were devastatingly effective. Before the time dilation effects of the *Eternity's* warp maneuver even caught up to the startled crew of the Marauder, their disruptors and shield emitters had already been taken out. The *Eternity* dipped smoothly around her

opponent, and moments later, the Ferengi's warp capability was nullified just as effectively.

And as quickly as that, the battle was over. The Ferengi ship was disabled with no casualties, the *Eternity* was safe, the Blue ship was unharmed, and Ceruleus had his demonstration of Starfleet and Federation morals.

A triumphant whoop rang from Jo Schmidt, but it was drowned out by the enraged racket coming from the holotank.

"What are you doing!?" screamed Poks over the chaos of small explosions and his own crew's shouting.

Carter smiled. "Catching you with your pants down."

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"I must admit, you had me worried there for a while," said Captain Cross. He and Carter were relaxing in his ready room late that evening sipping coffee. The Blue had been successfully escorted the remainder of the way to planet Serenity, and the formal planetside reception had gone off without a hitch, though not without a few surprises of its own.

Carter brushed aside the compliment. "It was nothing, sir. The Ferengi fall for the Picard Maneuver every time."

"Still... I'm sure it took more than a small bit of courage to stand up to the Ferengi wearing nothing but the emperor's new clothes. You handled a bizarre, unexpected situation with imagination and professionalism."

Carter chuckled. She turned her head and gazed out the window at the slowly turning planet below. Somewhere down there, the Blue were still meeting with Federation delegates who were no doubt dressed in invisible blue uniforms and feeling keenly embarrassed. Or maybe not. Maybe her shame *was* outdated.



"It's just good to know that I was able to put aside my personal issues and do my job," she said. "Speaking of which, may I say you were in fine form yourself this evening."

"Yes, well..." Cross became a little embarrassed again. "Remind me to visit the ship's gym a little more often. Who would have thought that the Blue would request the presence of the ship's entire command staff at the formal reception. Which reminds me, how is Doctor Beckett doing?"

Carter smiled. "Recovering slowly. Jo's been with her in her quarters ever since she called for her emergency beam-out." She chuckled gently at the plight of her friend. "I can't imagine how traumatic the experience must have been to someone as introverted and repressed as Sam. It'll be a week before she's able to step foot outside her room again."

Cross frowned a little. "Well, considering how far she's come since the days she couldn't even look someone in the eye with her clothes *on*, I guess even showing up in the transporter room wearing the Blue outfit was a major feat of willpower."

Carter nodded sympathetically and sipped her coffee.

Cross thought a moment. "I think the only one of us that didn't seem affected by his or her apparent nudity was our Chief Science Officer."

Carter chuckled again. "Jo was so busy arguing non-Euclidean 21-dimensional hyperspatial physics with her Blue counterpart that it probably completely slipped her mind."

Cross rolled his eyes. "You know... when Admiral Pike gave me command of this ship, I couldn't believe my good luck. Since then, of course, I've come to realize the full extent of the cruel joke he was actually playing on me, giving me a ship full of loonies."

Carter's smile broadened. "And that's the naked truth."

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