

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON

IN THE CLOSET

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In the Closet

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"Come on, quit lollygagging. I think it's in here. The two of us should be able to carry it."

Lieutenant Josephine Schmidt took a breath and spelunked into the depths of the spare equipment storage closet. After a moment's hesitation and a silent prayer to a random Andorian deity, her young assistant, Ensign Thule, followed his leader.

"Just don't let the door slide all the way—"

Click.

"—shut." she finished, realizing even as the word came out of her mouth that it was too late. "Oh, great. Well, I hope you're not claustrophobic, Ensign."

"Huh? Why, Lieutenant?" He turned, banged his elbow on a box of surplus 80-kiloquad Turing cores protruding from a shelf, muttered a curse in Andorian, and stepped up to the door.

It didn't open.

Thule squinted in the dim light and located the manual controls on the wall. He pressed the button.

The door continued to demonstrate its obduracy.

"I've been meaning to tell Doctor Lang about this door for a week so he could get one of his boys down here to fix it," said Jo. "Guess I should have made it a higher priority."

Thule spun and exclaimed, "We're locked in?! What are we going to do?" He thought a moment, then, with a shy grin, realized the obvious solution. Tapping the commbadge on his chest he said, "Ensign Thule to Engineering."

Static answered, and Jo shook her head knowingly. "We're directly underneath the main energizers, Ensign. There's no way you're going to get a signal through."

Thule spun again and started searching the wall around the door. "There's no comm panel in here!" he exclaimed.

"It's a *closet!*" replied Jo, a little more angrily than she'd meant to.

"What are we going to do?!?"

Jo turned her head this way and that, taking in the tiny, cramped space, searching amidst the clutter of overburdened shelves and packing crates for anything that might help them out of their present predicament, but nothing grabbed her eye as even vaguely useful. There was barely even room for two people to stand side by side.

"Looks like we're stuck with each other."

Thule's antennae stood erect and quivered strangely.

"Maybe this'll break you of that weird habit of always *volunteering* to work overtime, and *volunteering* to do any little menial task in the science lab, and always *volunteering* to help me with my projects," chided Jo good-naturedly. She insinuated her backside comfortably into a pile of old bioneural gel-packs for the coming wait. "I

mean, people might start thinking you liked me or something."

Thule's face darkened to cerulean, his antennae folded back against his head, and he suddenly developed a keen interest in the contents of the crate of self-sealing stembolts at his left elbow.

Realization came crashing down on Jo like a sack of wet tribbles.

"Oh. My. God."

The already tiny closet suddenly compressed forty-seven orders of magnitude, causing a gravitational time dilation that made the next five seconds seem like five eternities.

Neither spoke. Jo desperately tried coming to grips with this new development. Was she really so dense as not to notice what was right under her nose? Was she so completely preoccupied with her little world of science that she was blind to the bigger picture around her? Was this yet another of her alleged 'blonde moments'? Here she was, locked in a small closet down in the depths of the engineering section where no one would come to her rescue if she screamed, with an Andorian who had twice her physical strength and just happened to have the hots for her.

Or was she overreacting? So the guy liked her. That wasn't a crime. It was just that she didn't notice it happening to her all that often.

Now that she was actually noticing, she had to admit to herself that Thule *was* kind of cute. He had a chiseled jawline and strong Roman nose, unusual for an Andorian, piercing ice-blue eyes and that signature mop of silky white hair. His antennae protruded from the rear of his skull, and

she had always found that more attractive than the Andorians with the antennae on their foreheads.

And he was no slouch when it came to things like tertiary subspace manifold theory. The two of them had already enjoyed hours arguing about whether or not transient solar geodesics could be bent into deeper domains by passing gravitational point-sources.

He was so *young* though! Or was she just getting older? Naw... it had to be that first thing.

Still... she was his superior officer. It wasn't against Starfleet regulations, but it wouldn't be appropriate for them to have a romance, no matter how they felt about each other.

Would it?

She needn't have worried. Thule was busy desperately trying to wish himself out of existence, mortified beyond words that his little secret had been revealed.

Finally, Jo interrupted her internal debate and broke the silence. With forced calm, she asked, "Just how long have you felt this way, Ensign?"

For another few seconds, Thule continued his intense fascination with the stembolts, but finally he managed an uncomfortable glance in Jo's general compass direction. "I... well, uh... no, uh... well, since you came aboard. I guess."

Jo thought back to that day. Thule had indeed been in the transporter room when she and Commander Lee Carter had beamed aboard from Serenity City. He had been charmingly clumsy and flummoxed while escorting the two women to their cabins. At the time, she had chalked his giddiness up to youthful exuberance and professional

enthusiasm for all the groundbreaking science they would be doing aboard the *Eternity*, but now that she thought about it in this new light, he hadn't really paid too much attention to Carter or talked about science; most of his fawning had been directed at her personally.

"I'm... flattered, Ensign. But I, uh..." How could she let the kid down easily? She didn't want to break his heart with a blunt rebuff. But was that even the real issue? Maybe she didn't want to rebuff him at all. She was surprised to find herself confused by upwelling emotions the young man had stirred in her. He was good looking and smart, and she hadn't had a good roll in the hay in a long time...

No... An affair would disrupt their professional relationship and probably the smooth operation of the entire science department, and a more serious, long-term commitment was a biological impracticality.

"Humans and Andorians aren't... uh... compatible..." she began.

Thule was instantly on the defensive, and began sputtering acutely embarrassed, incoherent disclaimers, waving his hands and shaking his head emphatically.

"No no, Lieutenant. It was nothing, really. I know we could never have... ah... I mean, I just thought you were very ah... beautiful, that's all..."

Interestingly, now that he had begun talking about his favorite subject, his uncomfortable decrying segued to barely-contained passionate endorsement.

"I mean, *look* at you. How can anyone *not* fall in love? Skin the color of a pink sunset reflected off the Northern Wastes. Hair the color of your sun. Eyes the color of baby

ice beetles... Plus you're one of the smartest people I know. You're strong, yet so kind and considerate; you're—"

Thule choked off his last beatitude, suddenly and to his renewed horror realizing that he had been pouring out his innermost feelings, spilling his guts, saying all those things *out loud* — right in front of Jo Schmidt!

"What I mean is... oh... I mean, that is... Lieutenant... er... say, is it getting hot in here?"

Thule tugged at his collar, and wobbled drunkenly. His eyes had taken on a crazy tilt. He clutched a shelf support in a death-grip, threatening to topple the entire wall of surplus equipment on top of the two of them. If Jo had been able in the cramped quarters, she would have taken a step back.

"Are you all right, Thule?" she asked worriedly. The young Andorian had changed colors again, this time to a very pale watery blue, and his eyes darted feverishly around the tiny closet space.

As Chief Science Officer, she was an expert in half a dozen scientific disciplines, well-versed in a dozen more, and held a class-4 computer rating, but when it came to Andorian psychology, she was out of her element.

"Are you having some sort of anxiety attack?" she asked, risking a step towards Thule. A sudden wave of guilt crashed over her head. Her ill-conceived, brutal, cold-hearted, blatant rejection must have triggered this reaction. "Oh God, I'm sorry!"

Thule waved her off and made a brave attempt at standing up straight. "I'm fine," he managed to gasp.

"No you're not," snapped Jo. She caught him under the arm just as he slumped into her. "You are having some sort of Andorian version of a claustrophobia attack."

"Am not."

Jo harrumphed. "Men... You're all the same, no matter what planet you're from." She kicked aside some junk that lay on the closet floor. "You always have to pretend that nothing ever bothers you — that you're made of some indestructible material." She pulled Thule over and settled him onto the space she'd cleared, then sat down beside him. "All so you can pretend to some antiquated notion about appearing strong in front of the 'weaker sex' — to 'protect' us or some dumbass crap like that."



Thule started to protest, but Jo effectively shut him up by putting her arm around his shoulders and holding him while he pretended not to fight his claustrophobia for her benefit.

She decided that the best course of action was to keep him diverted. That way he wouldn't think about where he was. As far as she knew, that might well be complete bunk, but it was the only thing she could think of. She'd be adding a few courses in basic psychology to her résumé after this was all over.

Not that she *minded* sitting in the dark next to a handsome man who had just swooned into her arms. But she'd keep those thoughts to herself. No use encouraging the guy.

She tried to think of something heartening to say.

"Don't worry, Ensign. Someone will find us soon. My duty shift begins in about twenty minutes, and when I don't show up they'll come looking."

At her side, Thule twitched a fitful nod and pulled his knees tighter into their fetal position.

"Thanks, Lieutenant. And about that other stuff I said..."

Jo smiled in the dark. "We'll just let that be our little secret," she said.

Thule silently contemplated his situation. He was in a dark room, alone with the girl of his dreams who was sitting next to him with her arm around him. He was glad the Lieutenant wasn't a telepath.

Otherwise she'd know he was faking.

