

STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON

The Mind Ripper

"They Only Want Her For Her Mind"



RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Working Vacation

In the aftermath of the Mulluran War and Jazz Phoenix's death, Banshee Squadron is in tatters. But while on their much-needed vacation, Sam Beckett turns up missing, plunging the others into the center of a galactic conspiracy of thievery, kidnapping and murder!

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron
The Mind Rippers

Richard A. Merk



An "Inimitably Superfluous" Publication
Temecula, California

Visit us on the web at: banshees.merknet.com

Table of Contents

The Mind Rippers	3
Table of Contents	4
Act One.....	7
New Job	7
Hope and Despair.....	10
Darkness.....	15
Doubts	22
Act Two.....	26
Nabbed On the Way To the Can	26
Another Brick In the Wall.....	32
Orders.....	36
Strange Invitation.....	40
Hyoo-mon, Play Dom-jot!	45
Penny For Your Thoughts.....	52

Act Three.....	57
Nobody Here But Us Chickens.....	57
Kronk Beats Sralk!.....	62
Short Honeymoon.....	68
Smiths vs. Smith.....	74
Abandonment.....	80
Out of the Frying Pan.....	83
Frontal Lobotomy.....	89
Act Four.....	94
The Face of Evil.....	94
Into the Fire.....	99
Head of the Serpent.....	106
All the Loose Ends.....	113

Act One

New Job

Location: Matthew Cross' office

"You wanted to see me, Captain?"

Matthew Cross looked up from yet another report. "Ah, Commander Carter. Have a seat."

Lee Carter took the proffered chair across the big desk from her commanding officer and waited for the bomb to drop. Captain Matthew Cross never called her into his office unless he had a bomb to drop.

Cross began without preamble. "Now that the Second Mulluran War is over, things in the Briar Patch sector will undoubtedly settle down and become almost peaceful, at least in the short term. Starfleet feels it's time the Banshees were given a different—" Cross searched for the right word "—focus... from a purely military one."

"Meaning?" asked Carter with a considerable measure of trepidation. She was having sudden flashbacks to the last time her squad was 'refocused' after the Dominion War. Less than a

year later, they were disbanded completely and thrown to the winds. It was only through the intervention of Admiral Jeffrey Pike at HQ that the Banshees were eventually reunited and sent back into action. But that didn't make sense. They had just gotten a brand new wing of starfighters. Starfleet wouldn't give them new hardware just to disband them a few months later.

"Meaning," replied Cross, disrupting Carter's errant thoughts, "your equipment is being upgraded. In addition to your Banshee-class planes, you'll be flying new Scorpion-class recon starfighters among other things, and your missions will have a decidedly more exploratory and scientific emphasis. Most of the surrounding systems in the Trans-Briar Patch sectors are still largely unexplored and probably dangerous, so an armed scouting force is the natural solution.

"Second of all, the entire squad is being relocated from the starbase down to the surface of planet Serenity. In a few days, we'll all be basking in the luxury of our brand new suites adjoining the Starfleet spaceport in Serenity City."

"And?" prodded Carter, knowing there was more. There was always more.

Cross let a tiny smile flicker across his face. "Believe it or not, 'and' nothing, Commander."

"Um, well... Okay." Carter let herself relax, relieved of anything to be nervous about. "Thank you, Capt—"

"There is one other thing, however, on a completely different topic," said Cross.

Carter tensed again.

"Do something about Vasser."

Carter frowned, automatically resenting being told how to deal with her wing mates.

"Max is dealing with Jazz's death in her own way. She'll snap out of it when the time is right."

"Are you sure?" asked Cross. "Do you really want to risk flying with a wingman who's not 100 percent? From everything

I've heard and seen, Max Vasser and Jasmine Phoenix were very close friends. It was hard enough on Max when she thought Jazz had been killed during the Dominion War ten years ago. To find her alive ten years later only to watch her die *again* right in front of her eyes might be too much."

"What are you suggesting?" demanded Carter, feeling a strong need to defend her friend against Cross' insinuations even though she knew he was making a very good point. "That Max has gone over the edge? That she might snap at any moment? That we should ground her and lock her up for psychiatric treatment?"

Cross shook his head, becoming a little annoyed at Carter's confrontational attitude. "Nothing quite so melodramatic, Commander," he snapped. "As you said, Commander Vasser is a unique individual and will deal with the loss on her own terms. Conventional treatment programs would probably have a negative effect on someone like her. No, I was thinking more along the lines of your wing taking a vacation."

Carter was momentarily stunned. Another vacation? The Banshees had been put on leave after they had destroyed their starfighters saving the New Canada star from a nova bomb. But the more she thought about it, the more she came to realize it was a good idea. This would be a real vacation, not just a period of tense inactivity like their last down-time had been. And it would be good for Max. A smile slowly spread across her lips.

Cross noticed the smile and interpreted it as acceptance of the plan. "Now, I suggest you collect your posse and start packing for your move to Serenity. And enjoy your time off," he finished with a flicker of a smile of his own.

Hope and Despair

Location: Galleria Mall, Serenity City

"What about that one?"

"Too short."

"Hmm... That one?"

"Too tall."

"Humm... Oo! That one!"

"Oh *God* no!"

"What's wrong with that one?"

"Too *everything!*"

"Jeez you're picky, Alex!" cried Lieutenant Josephine Schmidt.

Ensign Alexandra Dalton sighed moodily. "Somewhere in the universe there's the perfect man for me, Jo," she said, heaving another emotional sigh, "but he's not on this planet."

"What about Dexter?" asked Jo mischievously.

"Dex? Well, I suppose he's kinda cute and all. Why? What do you know?"

"Come on!" exclaimed Jo. "I see how you two look sideways at each other when you think the other one isn't looking."

"Do not!" cried Alex, laughing.

The two women had spent the morning window shopping in Serenity City's enormous shopping district, the Galleria, as the several bags of shoes and other miscellaneous clothing accessories attested, and after that had parked themselves on a bench along a major thoroughfare for some basic people-watching.

"It sure is nice to have the day off," commented Alex idly after a time.

"Hopefully it'll do Max some good. Too bad she was already out on patrol when the order came down for us to take some leave."

Alex shuddered imperceptibly at the mention of Max's name, recalling her many sessions in the training simulator under Max's stern tutelage. "What do you suppose Max does out there all alone?"

Jo shrugged, but a look of concern crossed her face. "She's been spending a lot of time alone since Jazz died."

=^=

Location: somewhere in the New Canada Oort Cloud...

Among the primeval ice crystals of New Canada's Oort Cloud, in the absolute cold a full lightyear out from the system's primary, a winged interloper built of metals and programmable alloys followed a hyperbolic course across the plane of the ecliptic. A single human occupied the pilot seat of the sleek, winged craft, physically present in the here-and-now, but mentally, completely lost in the past.

Max relived the events of ten years ago, at the height of the Dominion War, in the Cardassian Badlands. Banshee Squad had been ambushed by a dozen Jem'Hadar attack ships. Their Wing Commander, Jazz Phoenix, was cut off from the rest of her team, surrounded by circling battlebugs. Max could hear Jazz on her commlink, urgently shouting her name over and over, but there were just too many enemy ships in the intervening space.

One moment, Jazz's Banshee was on her scope, and the next it wasn't.

She had let her best friend die.

Only Jazz hadn't died. Ten years later, the Banshees, now under the command of Lee Carter, had discovered Jazz alive on the Cardassian prison planet Lazon II where she'd been sent after her capture and war trial. Jazz had rejoined the Banshees and she and Max were an unstoppable team once again.

Then the landscape of her mind changed. Max now found herself reliving the events on Rostella 4, deep inside the dilithium mines there and surrounded by the reanimated corpses of soldiers killed during the Second Mulluran War and now under the domination of a Jelly Brain. In the bowels of hell, far from the light of day, the Banshees found themselves on one side of a bottomless chasm while the army of darkness was on the other, and the only thing that stood in the way of their crossing over was Jazz Phoenix, single-handedly holding the bridge. The undead horrors attacked, Jazz went down, and Max could still see the look on Jazz's face as she pressed the trigger on the detonator she held in her hand. The planted explosives went off, the cavern collapsed, and Jazz, along with the army of darkness, was buried under a billion tons of solid rock, while Max and the others ran and made their cowardly escape to the surface.

She had let her friend die again.

Why do I deserve to live?

Outside the cockpit, a rare large cometary core loomed directly ahead of Max's plane, but Max's hand remained steady

on the flight stick while her unblinking eyes stared straight ahead out the cockpit canopy. *Why wasn't I killed along with Jazz? Twice she died so the rest of us would live! Justice demands payment!* The mountain of ice grew ever larger as the tiny fighter shot in an unwavering line towards it. Jazz stared at it as if mesmerized, unflinching, determined to play this cosmic game of chicken to then end knowing full well the inevitable outcome.

At the last split-second however, Max yanked the flight stick over, sending the plane careening aside and clear of danger; the nascent comet continued past, unheeding of the human drama in which it had participated.

"Dammit!" spat Max furiously. She pounded her clenched fists on the cockpit's control panel over and over in a fit of rage. "You're such a coward!" she cried in self-torment. Her blows to the control panel became weaker, and finally she sank back in her seat, dropping her arms to her sides, her rage spent and giving way to self-pity and loathing.

With no one at the helm, Max's Scorpion continued its tumbling trajectory unguided, drifting further out into the cold space between the stars.

=^=

Location: the Galleria, Serenity City...

"Hey, good lookin'. Your phaser is set to 'stunning'."

"Beat it, loser."

The loser sputtered momentarily, then collected his demolished dignity and slithered off back into the passing crowd from whence he came, leaving the two young women alone again. Evening was drawing close, and the sky was fading

quickly through its repertoire of sunset reds and oranges to the starry black of night.

Jo stretched expansively and began collecting her shopping bags in preparation for the long trek back to the apartment. "Well, that was fun," she told Alex. "It's been a long time since I've had a whole day to blow on shoe shopping and guy-ogling. Even if all I'm going home with is shoes!"

"Yeah," replied Alex absentmindedly, her thoughts a million miles away. "We'll have to do it again sometime."

Jo could tell her heart wasn't in it anymore. "Don't worry, Alex," she said consolingly. "There's always hope. One of these days soon you'll find that dream guy of yours. Even so, I'm sure we had more fun than Max did today."

Darkness

Location: New Canada's Oort Cloud

Max had no idea how long she lay in the pilot's couch of her starfighter, just drifting among the cold, dark tatters of New Canada's outermost domains. In her semi-delirious state, the passage of time had no clear meaning. Eventually however, she became aware of an insistent and irritating buzzing, which repeated itself at short intervals, forcing her out of her nightmares and back to the world of the living.

It took her a few moments to remember where she was. Max sat upright and quickly composed herself, all recent mental turmoil automatically relegated to the secret, back compartments of her mind for the time being. Impatiently stabbing at the alarm cutoff switch with outstretched index finger, and grabbing hold of the long-ignored flight stick, she righted her Scorpion from its slow tumble and set it back on its proper course.

A cursory glance of the long-range sensor scope showed a ship approaching the New Canada system at high warp speed – the reason for the alarm. By its prefix code, it was a Mulluran

corvette, last reported fleeing the Battle of Rostella. Probably another suicide run by a renegade Mulluran captain unable to accept that they'd lost the war...

"Well, I'm out here to patrol..." muttered Max. "Might as well get this over with." She banked her starfighter hard over and set off at full burn on an intercept course.

"Starfighter to Mulluran vessel. Respond please," repeated Max for the third time. She was losing her patience. "If you do not respond immediately, I will assume you have hostile intentions and take appropriate action." That should get their attention.

It did.

The explosion right outside her canopy was the Mulluran captain's answer. Fighting the buffeting, Max sent her Scorpion in a corkscrew evasive maneuver away from the belligerent Mulluran ship. "Fine, we'll play it that way if you want," ground from between her clenched teeth. A tight Immelmann sent her Scorpion careening back towards her adversary, and she let loose a volley of phaser bursts sure to cripple anything in their path.

Unfortunately and to Max's infinite surprise, the corvette was no longer where it was supposed to be. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. This was no rookie she was dealing with. And just to prove her right, another series of explosions, this time even closer, rocked her cockpit before she had a chance to dodge out of the way.

"Dammit!"

Where was her vaunted Esper ability? She had always been able to sense the intentions of her opponents in battle – known what they were going to do seconds before they knew themselves. It was impossible to outmaneuver Max or to surprise her. The Esper gift was what made her such a fearsome fighter, and had never failed her. Until now. She couldn't understand it.

She decided to put some distance between herself and the corvette, so she opened up the throttle all the way and poured on the gee's, burning back in the general direction of the heart of the New Canada system, but try as she might, the renegade Mulluran warship was attached to her tail like a shadow on the sidewalk at midday. None of her corkscrews and scissor maneuvers had the least effect. On the contrary, her gyrations were bleeding off speed, allowing the corvette to close slowly but surely.

When the first detonations from near hits began bursting outside her cockpit canopy again, she knew she was in trouble. Max suddenly realized that she might be granted her morbid wish to join Jazz in the afterlife after all. She wished she hadn't insisted quite so vehemently on going on patrol by herself, otherwise the other Banshees might have ignored her grouching and they'd be here now offering support.

In a heroic, last-ditch effort, Max flipped her Scorpion head-over-heels while still keeping her forward momentum, and lined up the corvette in her gun sights. "Hasta la vista, baby," she hissed, and squeezed the trigger, emptying all of her missile tubes in one devastating attack. Four smoky ion trails from the quartet of quantum missiles spiraled away from her fighter towards the oncoming ship, but a split second later they were detonated prematurely, struck by perfectly-aimed phaser blasts from the Mulluran warship.

The shockwave from the quadruple explosion slammed into Max's Scorpion, spinning it out of control. Max was smacked around inside her cockpit from the gee forces. She fought futilely to regain a grip on the joystick, but the universe was spinning insanely around her, and she found herself fighting to keep from throwing up. Alarms started wailing, and the starfighter's impassionate computer voice intoned, "Warning. Warning. Stress tolerance exceeded."

"Shut up, you damn machine!" grated Max in between gasps of air as she fought the controls. Smoke began seeping through

growing cracks in the control panel before her making her cough and starting her eyes watering. She slapped the activation control on her life support belt and felt the forcefield snap on and fresh air filter past her nose. Max breathed deeply, feeling much of the vertigo-induced nausea lifting. The smoke turned oily, and a shower of sparks burst from the dashboard. The life support field absorbed the shock, but she instinctively threw up her hands to ward her eyes from the fireworks anyway.

Max felt more internal explosions through the seat of her pants as her starfighter started breaking up around her. "Eject. Eject. Eject..." intoned the infuriating computer voice through the hailstorm of sparks and smoke.

Reaching behind her head with both hands, Max grasped the ejector handles and yanked with all her might. Explosive bolts blasted the cockpit section of her Scorpion free of the rest of the stricken craft, and small but powerful thrusters sent it rocketing up and away. The force of acceleration pressed Max down in her seat, but she managed to twist her neck around to get a last view of the fighter. As she watched, it exploded in an impressive incendiary cloud of debris and plasma. Of the Mulluran corvette there was no sign.

Who was piloting that corvette? The few remaining renegade Mulluran ships out there usually picked soft civilian targets to destroy, so why did they attack her? And of more immediate concern, why hadn't they finished her off yet? She was a sitting duck – controls dead, spinning out of control, sure to be caught in the gravity well of one of New Canada's planets very soon. And why hadn't she been able to anticipate their thoughts using her Esper ability? Too many questions without answers. She put them all out of her mind for now though, and focused on the immediate emergency.

The sensor readout, and almost everything else, on the control panel before her was dead and burnt-out, but she could see the bulk of a planetoid looming large right outside her canopy. Her

escape pod's autopilot was heading that way and would land her without any intervention from her, so she morosely just sat and waited.

Max doubted that whoever was flying the corvette had just forgotten about her, so there had to be some other explanation as to why she hadn't been blown to bits. There was one thing she knew for certain though – she no longer wanted to die; she had something to live for now. She would live long enough to get her revenge.

=^=

Max made sure her life support belt was functioning before she popped the canopy of her fighter's cockpit-turned-escape pod and hopped out onto the barren surface of the planetoid. A flurry of dust billowed upwards around her legs and trailed behind in a rising column of smoke as she walked away from the downed vehicle. At a hundred paces, she stopped and looked back.

Another crashed starfighter, she thought morosely. They really are going to start taking these things out of my paycheck.

She couldn't understand what had brought her to this situation. Never before had she been so helpless in the face of the enemy. She had single-handedly outfought a dozen Jem'Hadar battlebugs before and come out without a scratch, so she should certainly have been able to best a lone hulking Mulluran corvette!

Her Esper ability had failed her.

Why? It was the question that burned foremost in her mind. If her powers had indeed vanished, then her usefulness to Banshee Squad was at an end. Without her Esper gift – her prescience – she was just another pilot.



Around her, she could see the dusty earth being blown by a stiff wind, but cocooned inside her life support field she could feel none of it, just a gentle, filtered breeze blowing across the skin of her face and the warmth of artificially generated heat. She climbed atop a large boulder and sat down cross-legged, settling in for the long wait before someone came to collect her.

=^=

The high-pitched whine of a magnetic drive brought Max's brooding mental meandering back to the present just in time to see a Starfleet runabout scream by overhead. As it overflow her position, it did a 'wing waggle' maneuver, indicating the crew inside had spotted her, and as the craft banked around to come in for a landing, she caught sight of the Search & Rescue marking on the side.

"Well, at least they didn't send the other Banshees out to collect me," muttered Max glumly. "That puts off me having to face them for a little while longer." She hopped off her rock and strolled in the direction of the runabout.

"Thanks for picking me up," she said automatically to the crewman at the runabout's door, and mechanically accepted his outstretched hand up into the open hatch. She deactivated her life support belt and followed him into the craft's interior.

"You're welcome ma'am," said the man and gestured to the co-pilot's chair. "Have a seat."

Max slumped into the chair, too worn out and despondent to argue. All she wanted was to be back home, away from space, away from spaceships. She closed her eyes and rested her head back against the cushioned headrest. Around her, she could hear the runabout's crew going about their usual business. To them, she was just another rescue, one among hundreds they had performed. They had no inkling of the personal crisis unfolding in her mind, of the terrible debate over whether she was of any worth without her prescience.

A few hours later, Serenity came into view outside the front viewports and within a matter of minutes the runabout was entering orbit. "Okay, Commander, ready for transport when you are," the rescue crewman told her.

Max opened her eyes and nodded. Without a word, she stepped to the rear of the forward compartment and took her position on the transporter. As the beam enveloped her and she felt her body begin to dissolve, her last thoughts were that she'd almost rather never be reintegrated than have to face Commander Carter.

Doubts

Location: Banshee Squadron HQ, Serenity City

"You know, for an Esper, you sure get shot down a lot," quipped Jo Schmidt.

"I also have a kill record ten times as long as the rest of yours put together!" snapped Max Vasser. She was shouting angrily and advancing threateningly on Jo.

"At ease, Lieutenant Commander!" snapped Commander Lee Carter. "And you, button your lip, Lieutenant!" she barked at Jo, very clearly not in the mood for any attitude from either of her subordinates.

Jo suddenly realized that this situation was a lot more serious than she had first imagined, and did her best to wish herself invisible. Max just clamped her lips shut and stared stonily ahead. Sam and Alex very wisely fled the briefing room.

Carter shook her head in dismay and reached up to rub her temples. She could feel one of those headaches coming on – the kind she always got when her crew screwed up royally. "Max..." she began. "What am I going to do with you? We've only had

our new Scorpion planes for a few days and you've already lost one!" Carter shook her head again and sighed deeply. "It's my fault this happened."

That was the last thing Max expected to hear, but the only visible sign of her astonishment was a momentary raising of the eyebrows.

Carter continued, although she was talking not so much to Max as she was berating herself for her own irresponsibility. "I should never have let you talk me into letting you go on patrol alone, not this soon after Jazz..." Her voice faltered momentarily, but she recovered quickly and went staunchly on. "If the whole wing had been there this wouldn't have happened."

Max had no idea how to respond to her wing commander's sudden turn of mood. She had been fully prepared to suffer a stiff dressing down and even disciplinary action, but to be instead faced with Carter's self-recriminations was completely unexpected. "Lee, I..." she began, but found no words to continue. Suddenly she felt very guilty, and that was another emotion she wasn't prepared for and in fact had little experience with.

Her failed esper ability was already affecting the squadron! How could she continue flying with the others? "Lee, I..." she began again, but again the words caught in her throat. Firming her resolve this time though, she forced herself to press on. "I request permission to be grounded."

Carter looked at her XO as though she thought Max was insane. "Grounded?" she repeated, unsure of what Max was trying to get at. "Of course you're grounded until they ship us a new Scorpion."

But Max was shaking her head. "No, I mean grounded until further notice."

"What? What the hell are you talking about, Max?"

"Never mind," growled Max. "Just ground me, will you?"

"Not a chance. Not until you tell me what's going on." She stepped closer to her friend and asked, "What the hell happened out there in the Oort cloud yesterday?"

Max turned away angrily. She was never one for sharing her feelings – better to keep everything bottled up inside where it belonged. And she certainly didn't want to discuss her psychic esper troubles with anyone, not even Lee Carter. No, better she just remove herself from the Banshee equation. But when she glanced back, she saw that Carter hadn't budged, that she was still stubbornly waiting for an answer to her question.

Max knew her wing commander. One way or another, Carter would get a confession out of her.

She turned her back again and took a few steps away from Carter. In a low voice, she said, "It's my esper power..."

Carter waited for more, but when none was forthcoming, she prodded Max to continue. She knew how Max felt about these heart-to-heart talks, and didn't want to do anything to make her friend clam up even tighter, so as gently as she could, asked, "What about your esper power, Max?"

"It's gone."

"What do you mean, 'gone'?"

"Gone!" shouted Max, spinning about and facing Carter. "It's *gone!*" All her pent up anger was bursting forth now. "I fought a single Mulluran corvette and they beat the crap out of me! I couldn't *see!* The future was a blank! Do you understand what that's like?"

"As a matter of fact, Max, I do," replied Carter. "The rest of us fly like that all the time. We don't have your special prescience, and we get along just fine."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," retorted Max. "I'm just like the rest of you now!"

Carter tried to understand. In Max's eyes, she wasn't unique anymore; she felt she'd lost the one thing that made her special, and it was destroying her self-confidence.

"You've been through a rough time, Max," suggested Carter sympathetically. "You lost your best friend Jazz back on Rostella for the second time, and there was nothing you could do about it except watch it happen. That's bound to affect your performance. Give it a chance. Besides, while you were out on patrol yesterday afternoon, Banshee Squadron got put on leave. Orders from Captain Cross. I'm sure your esper sight will return and you'll be good as new."

Max didn't buy Carter's reasoning for a second, but she appreciated what Carter was trying to say.

"I hope you're right," she said finally.

Act Two

Nabbed On the Way To the Can

Location: Serenity City

"You guys go on ahead. I'll catch up in a few minutes," called Sam Beckett after her four comrades.

Lee Carter turned around and waved and said, "We'll be at the *El Taco*," (as if Sam didn't know – they *always* went to the El Taco) and walked on. With Carter in the lead, Max Vasser, Jo Schmidt and Alex Dalton made their way single file along the shady boulevard sidewalk, while Sam Beckett angled down a smaller side street.

Arriving at the popular Mexican fast food joint, they found their usual table unoccupied, and so seated themselves to wait for their friend before ordering.

This short vacation had been Captain Cross' idea, but Carter had agreed with his reasons completely. The plan was to give Max a little down-time in hopes that she would recover from her psychological trauma and regain her self-confidence. The nightmarish events deep under the surface of Rostella IV had

affected them all, of course, but Max, having been closest to Jazz Phoenix, had suffered the most damage, culminating with the loss of her esper prescience.

Alex broke the silence. "I sure am glad they opened an El Taco down here in the city, otherwise we'd have to beam up to the starbase every time we got a schplict craving. I wonder where that ruggedly handsome manager guy is – I don't see him back in the kitchen."

"Probably back in the storeroom sound asleep," sniggered Max.

"Maybe," said Carter, smiling herself. Over the years, the five women had come to know the ruggedly handsome manager of their favorite restaurant fairly well – they were in here almost every day – so they knew he wasn't one to overwork himself. Still, somehow he managed to run a tight ship, and he was always friendly towards his customers, especially the ladies... "On the other hand, he might actually be working in the back," she suggested.

The four women looked at each other for a moment, then in unison said, "Naaaaah!" and laughed.

Jo ventured, "So, what do you guys want to do? Captain Cross doesn't have any missions for us for the next few weeks."

"How 'bout Blue Lake?" volunteered Alex, referring to the beautiful yet mysterious inland sea, reputed to be the abode of a legendary sea monster.

"That might be interesting," opined Jo. "What do you think, Lee?"

Three heads turned towards their leader in search of confirmation for their plans, but Carter hadn't been listening. She seemed preoccupied by something.

"Lee?" repeated Jo, but still failed to get a response. She reached across the table and punched Carter in the arm. That got a reaction. "Just checking if you're still alive," said Jo as Carter rubbed her arm. "What's the matter?"

Carter shook her head and tried to dismiss her trepidation. "It's nothing. It's just that Sam's been gone a long time and I'm getting a little worried. You know how she can be in crowds..."

Her friends nodded. While Sam was a beautiful woman, she had suffered a horrible, maiming accident early in her career and as a result was almost one-quarter cybernetic. While it didn't show at all on the outside, it made her terribly self-conscious and shy, and sometimes she got a little intimidated and overwhelmed by large crowds of strangers.

"Maybe we should go look for her," suggested Alex.

Lee nodded assent, and the four of them stood and moved out. Retracing their steps back to where they'd last seen Sam, they spread out and began looking for their missing friend. She was most likely perfectly all right, but better safe than sorry.

=^/=

Meanwhile, Sam was wandering down a narrow side street muttering to herself. "I could'a' swore I saw a public restroom room around here somewhere..." She walked farther and farther down the street she'd chosen, peering around corners and through doorways, beginning to think that just maybe she'd taken a wrong turn. "I should just've waited until we got to El Taco."

The pressing crowd of downtown Serenity City had thinned considerably, for which she was grateful; she'd started getting a little edgy. But the farther she walked, the fewer the people were, until finally there were none at all and the surer she became that she was completely lost. She took a solemn vow that next time she'd go to the bathroom *before* she left her apartment.

"Well, I suppose if I walked backwards I should wind up back where I started," she figured. She did an about-face and started back. It took only a few seconds however, to make it

alarmingly obvious that she had no idea where 'back the way I came' was – she'd taken too many turns. Now she came to an intersection that seemed totally unfamiliar to her. At the edge of her vision, she thought she saw the fleeting form of a man down one of the intersecting branches, but when she turned her head to see who it was and hopefully ask directions, there was nobody there.

She shrugged, chose a random direction and went on. To her dismay, the street she chose didn't look like it was headed toward a popular section of the city; quite the opposite in fact. Things were looking darker, dingier and ever less lived-in. As she walked, once again she was sure she spied a shadowy figure darting through the shadows just on the edges of her peripheral vision, but when she looked down the alley, again there was no one there. This time though, she was positive she detected the faint, retreating sound of booted feet running. Her cybernetically enhanced hearing suggested in fact that the footfalls belonged to more than a single individual.

Sam started getting anxious again. Was she being stalked? Serenity was out on the frontier after all, with lawlessness leaking into Federation space from across the all-too-near border. Sam hurried her pace, and turned another random corner, then another. She imagined that the very minions of hell were snapping at her heels, could swear she felt their hot breath on the back of her neck, but when she dared chance a terrified glance over her shoulder there was nothing there. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her breath came in short gasps, and her eyes darted all about, searching for the unseen threat.

She slowed her stride then and stopped, feeling her heart racing, ready to explode. She looked both ways down the alleyway she was in – no one there – and forced herself to smile a strained smile. "Just my imagination," she sighed, and tried to laugh to reassure herself, but it sounded strained to her ears. Suddenly, she realized how silly she was being; she was just lost

and the dingy buildings around here were giving her the creeps – hardly a way for a hardened Starfleet combat veteran to behave! She shook her head, clearing away her silly misgivings. As her long, willowy blonde hair settled back onto her shoulders, her right hand came up to tap the commbadge on her uniform so she could call for directions.

Her hand never made it however. An instant before her fingers made contact, a pair of strong arms caught her around the waist from behind, pinning her own arms at her sides in an unbreakable bear hug and lifting her clear off the sidewalk. Another hand clamped tightly over her nose and mouth stifling the scream that was already rising in her throat.



Sam struggled fiercely, kicking and straining with all her might against the adamantine grip restraining her, trying to call out for help, but only for a few seconds. One of her assailants

slapped some sort of small, electronic device against her forehead. It was mind-numbingly cold, and she could feel the debilitating chill spreading quickly down the length of her entire body. Her arms went limp and fell to her sides, dead; her legs lost all strength to kick and just dangled uselessly; and a strange mist began drawing around her vision. As her world grew dim and vague, Sam's consciousness seemed to her as though it was falling down and down into a bottomless well. Perception receded, her last strength faded, and finally conscious thought closed off altogether, and Sam knew no more.

=^=

Lee, Max, Jo and Alex had regrouped after their search for Sam had proved fruitless. They were all very worried by now. Admittedly, Serenity City was a big place, with nearly a hundred-thousand inhabitants, but not so big that a person could get so lost as to never be heard from again. Besides, Sam had her commbadge, but they'd been unable to call her, neither had anyone received a call from Sam.

The four of them were in a semi-industrial portion of the city now, making their way back towards downtown through the gray, unfrequented streets here, when Jo spotted something shiny lying off to the side in the intersection just ahead. She took a few large steps to get ahead of her companions and bent down to pick it up. Straightening, she turned it over in her hand and inspected it closely.

Her voice filled with concern, she announced her findings to the rest: "It's a commbadge. It's Sam's."

Another Brick In the Wall

Location: Police Commissioner's office

"What do you mean you haven't found anything yet!?" exclaimed Carter angrily. "It's been three days! The security in this system is supposed to be impeccable – Beckett could be lying in a ditch somewhere or... or... stuffed up a laundry chute or something for all we know, and you haven't found a single clue yet!?" There were few things that could provoke Carter to such extreme emotional outbursts, but the safety and lives of her wingmates was definitely high on the list.

"Please calm down, Commander," implored Police Commissioner Gordon. Being chief of police in the city wasn't exactly a relaxing profession, but rarely had he been faced with such a loud, fixated complainant as the wing commander of the infamous Banshee Squadron. He tilted back his head, closed his eyes for a moment, and took several deep breaths to calm himself. "Please, won't you return to your seat?" he said, indicating the vacant chair on the opposite side of his desk. Hoping to set an example, he sat back down himself.

To Gordon's relief, Carter followed his example, gruffly planting herself back in the chair she occupied until she'd lost her temper.

Feeling in control of the situation once again, he tried explaining the situation to Carter once again. "This city has over two hundred police officers, Commander. I have a significant percentage of those searching for your missing officer. I assure you, if she's anywhere even near the city, we'll find her."

"That's what you said three days ago," countered Carter.

Gordon took another deep, calming breath. "It's all I can do, Commander." He sympathized with Carter – losing a crewmate like this...

Carter refused to be placated though. She angrily rose from her seat again. Gripping the edge of Gordon's desk, she leaned forward and said stonily, "It's not enough."

Gordon had no answer he could give Carter.

Realizing that something was up – that she would get no further with the police commissioner, Carter gave Gordon a look that promised retribution if anything bad happened because of his inaction, turned on her heel and left the office. The door swooshed shut behind her, leaving her standing on the edge of the hustle and bustle of a main thoroughfare. An auto-taxi kiosk was nearby, so she stepped to the curb and flagged down the next yellow-and-black-checked car to whirl by. "Spaceport," she told the robo-driver.

The machine responded with a muted *beep*, and the cab whizzed off.

The urban jumble passed quickly by outside the cab's passenger windows, but Carter was unheeding, preoccupied by her own thoughts. She couldn't understand what the problem was. There was a missing person in the city. The city was covered in a sensor net. Therefore, they should be able to find the missing person, dead or alive. Unless of course, Sam was no

longer in the city, in which case there were ship departure logs and transporter records that could be checked.

She was being deliberately stonewalled – she was sure. But why? She had gotten the distinct impression that Commissioner Gordon was withholding information. Why would the police purposely keep information from her about the disappearance of Sam? It was true that Sam had worked for Starfleet Intel; she'd spent a few years undercover on the wrong side of the Romulan Neutral Zone. But that was years ago. It couldn't have anything to do with that, could it? She didn't think so. Sam, and the rest of Banshee Squadron, had been in sensitive environments since then, during both Mulluran Wars. Starfleet Intel had never bothered them. She had no explanation other than that things were being deliberately kept from her.

So what to do now?

She had absolutely no idea. She had been so sure that the police would solve the problem right away that she hadn't thought this far ahead. Her own team had failed to turn up anything. Commissioner Gordon had failed to come through. Who else was there?

The auto-taxi deposited her not far from the Banshees' apartments. The accommodations were luxurious, and within seconds of their fighters' hangars. She walked through the main doors and was immediately accosted by a million questions.

"Have they found Sam?"

"What did Commissioner Gordon say?"

"Will Sam be okay?"

"Can the police help or not?"

"We should call in the SF Marines!"

Carter held up her hands to stave off the onslaught. "Whoa, whoa!" She had no good news – just the same news she'd been feeding her people for the last three days. "The police are doing their best," she said, not believing it herself. "They're closing in on Sam's whereabouts."

"You don't really expect us to believe that, do you?" asked Max. Her tone of voice and the expression on her face made it clear she didn't believe it for a second.

Carter shared the sentiment, still, it wouldn't do to admit defeat to the rest of the crew. "Don't worry; we'll find her."

Jo and Alex came over from where they'd been sitting. "It's been three days," said Jo, darkly. "What are the odds?" *The odds she was still alive.*

Carter had no answer.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "The police say they're working on it. I don't know what else to do."

Orders

Location: Banshees' apartments

The day after visiting the police chief, Carter received a 'Top Priority' mail via special courier, 'Confidential – Your Eyes Only'. She ripped the top seal and read the curt contents.

It was orders from Starfleet. 'Cease and desist from any further investigation into the disappearance of Lieutenant Samantha Beckett.' Period. No explanation.

Intolerable! And unconscionable. Someone high up must have gotten wind of their investigations. Damn Commissioner Gordon – he'd ratted them out!

No, that wasn't fair. Gordon was just doing his job.

She showed the email to the rest of her team, against orders.

"How can they do this to us?" exclaimed Alex, the youngest Banshee member. "We're all on the same side, aren't we?" She was still naïve about such things.

Jo remained silent. She was close friends with Sam, but had nothing constructive to add. Her specialty was science, but so far there was nothing concrete for her to analyze and quantify.

Max was silent too, although she understood the situation better. She scowled darkly. Something had happened that Starfleet was aware of, but that it was not ready to admit knowledge of. And their friend and wingmate was suffering because of it.

"The question is," said Carter, "what are we going to do about it?"

The four remaining Banshees stared at her, not knowing what to say. They were unanimous in their desire to do something, but what?

"We can't just leave Sam out there," said Alex. "Even if..." She left the morbid thought unspoken. Instead, she opted for the more positive. "There's got to be some clue as to where she is."

"We can't rely on Starfleet Intel or the police," said Max. "They obviously have their own agendas, and if they notice us snooping around now they'll probably hang us all from the yardarm for treason or something. We're on our own."

Carter silently agreed with that assessment. But they were a combat fighter squadron – they had no experience in undercover work, except for Sam, who was missing. Who in the world could they turn to?

They needed time to think.

=^=

The El Taco Restaurant had always provided comfort and solace when the Banshees needed it. It did so now. The four remaining wing members sat hunched around their usual table, half-buried in a pile of Mucho-Macho-Hasperat-Burrito wrappers and empty schplict cartons. They were trying to come up with a plan to find Sam, but were still waiting for that brilliant brainstorm to reveal itself.

Jo dropped the half-eaten remains of her breakfast burrito onto the table top, full, and looking a little green around the gills.

The ruggedly handsome El Taco manager guy walked up to the table with a plastic, orange tray in his hands and greeted the Banshees as usual.

Carter had been semi-dreading this moment. Sam and the ruggedly handsome manager, who went by the name Rick, were something of an item. Whenever within eye-shot of one another they flirted relentlessly, unusual in the extreme considering Sam's neurotically withdrawn personality, but for some reason she had made an exception in his case. Now Carter would have to break the news to him that the object of his desire had fallen off the face of the universe.

Rick surprised her however, by sitting down next to her at the table. "I understand that Lieutenant Beckett has been kidnapped," he said without preamble. He began gathering up discarded burrito wrappers, placing them in a neat pile on his orange tray, as if he had merely just commented on the weather instead of revealing he knew information about a subject that was supposedly classified.

"Kidnapped?" asked Max, ever suspicious. "Who said anything about a kidnapping? All we know is that she's missing. –And how do you know about it anyway?" she finished. Her dark eyes had acquired a hard, dangerous glint; it was clear what would be the fate of anyone who toyed with her at this point.

Rick was unconcerned by Max's threat however – which, in Carter's opinion, was a sure way of getting himself killed – in answer he just shrugged noncommittally and continued cleaning up the wrapper mess. "You'd be surprised what you hear customers talk about in a place like this," he commented offhand.

"What have you heard?" asked Carter, suddenly very interested in what this man had to say. She remembered back to years ago, before the War – to the first time she'd come in this restaurant and met the manager. Even then, something in the

back of her mind told her that there was more to him than met the eye. Now she was more sure of that than ever.

"Very little, to be honest," he admitted with a frown. "Which in itself is pretty significant." He didn't care to explain that statement any further, which only served to heighten the mystery surrounding him. "Still, I might be able to help..." He looked at Carter, trying to determine if he should continue.

Alex interrupted though. "How can you help us?" she exclaimed loudly. "No offense, mister, but you're just a fast-food manager!"

Rick glanced briefly at her, but quickly turned his gaze back to Carter. Pulling a rag out of his back pocket, he returned to his perfunctory cleaning, but never broke eye contact with the Banshee leader. A self-deprecating smile appeared on his lips and he answered Alex's question. "I know certain people."

"What? Who?" demanded Jo.

Instead of replying though, Rick stood up and stuffed the rag back in his back pocket. He gathered the orange, crumpled-wrapper-laden tray. "There, all clean now. Enjoy the rest of your day, ladies," he said brightly, all traces of cloak-and-dagger evaporated. He stuffed the trash, tray and all, in the recycler slot near the door and headed back into the kitchen, leaving the four women wondering what that had been all about.

Strange Invitation

Location: Banshees' apartment

The apartment seemed hollow and empty as the four women trooped single file in through the front door, Max in the lead, Carter bringing up the rear. The hardwood floor in the entryway clattered under their heels and echoed through the large living room until they reached the carpet ten feet inside.

The layout and decor of the rooms were designed for comfort – being a fighter pilot was a high-stress profession, after all. The downstairs served as a common living/dining/kitchen/recreation area. There were big chairs and sofas, reading spaces, a wet bar. A great place for throwing parties. Upstairs were game tables, more common seating, and the personal quarters for the individual Banshees.

It had been a nerve-wracking day and they all needed sleep desperately. Since Sam vanished, none of them had gotten much rest. Single file, they tramped up the spiral staircase to their bedrooms. Carter bid her friends good night and watched as they

disappeared, then she slipped silently into her own room, shutting the door behind her with a soft click.

Her own apartment was decorated in warm wood tones and beiges. A few pictures of nature scenes and shelves loaded with old books adorned the walls. A dim table lamp whose base was shaped like a duck lent its meager light to the area right around her bed, leaving the rest of the room in shadow, but at the moment, it was enough.

Carter went directly over to the bed, sat down, and pulled off her boots. She slapped the duck's off-switch with the palm of her hand, and fell back onto the pillow, never mind the rest of her uniform. Seconds later she was asleep.

=^=

She dreamed of dark alleyways, somewhere in the city, but somehow transformed, threatening, unfamiliar. Someone was chasing her but she couldn't see who. She ran through the strange byways trying frantically to escape her pursuer but knew beyond doubt that there was no escape. In seconds he'd be upon her.

The alley twisted around in impossible, warped contortions, but she ran on. No one else was anywhere to be seen – no one to turn to for help. Every shadow reached out to grab her as she ran past, every corner and hidden alcove ready to disgorge more enemies.

Then she heard the slithering noise, and thump-thump-thumping. There was something ahead of her...!

...She awoke with a strangled scream caught in her throat, soaked in sweat, and bolted to an upright sitting position! Her fists were clenched, ready to fight off the imagined attackers, her heart raced and pounded in her chest, thumping in her ears, and her breath came in short gulps.

Just a dream, she realized, trying but failing to relax her fists and calm her breathing and runaway heartbeat.

No – not all a dream! The slithering had been real. There it was again! It was coming from her bedroom door. As she looked on, a small slip of paper slid under the door, making a soft hissing sound as it rubbed across the carpet. Someone was out there!

She was across the bedroom in a single bound. The door swung open, but no one was there, just the darkness.

She stepped cautiously into the hallway and moved to the landing at the top of the stairs. Below, all was quiet and swathed in the night's shadows. Whoever was there couldn't have gotten away that quickly; must still be lurking in some particularly dark corner, ready to leap from his cover and kill her. She suddenly wished she had taken the time to grab her phaser from the nightstand.

"Lights," she commanded the room's A.I. Immediately, the shadows were dispelled, melting instantly away into the comforting familiarity of the Banshees' living area.

Still no one there.

Carter leaped down the steps in three bounds and dashed over to the front door. Ripping it open, she peered out into the cool night air. A pair of Starfleet engineering techs were sauntering by on their way home from a late shift, deep in a discussion about the proper use of self-sealing stembolts.

"Hey! You see anybody come out this door just now?" Carter blurted.

Startled out of their debate by Carter's unexpected appearance and query, they just stared for a second. Then one of them replied unhelpfully, "You mean aside from you?"

Carter frowned in annoyance and stepped back inside, letting the doors swing shut on the two perplexed engineers.

Impossible! How had the intruder gotten away so fast?

By this time, the ruckus had awakened the others, and they were coming out of their rooms, bleary-eyed and disheveled.

"What's going on out here?" demanded Jo crankily as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Carter ignored them for the moment though. Retracing her steps, she retrieved the small scrap of paper the intruder had slipped under her door upstairs. She unfolded it and read the contents. The others gathered around when she returned to the living room, and at Max's puzzled frown, she handed her the note.

"What does it say?" asked Alex, trying to get a look.

Max read the scribbling on the paper out loud:

*If you ever want to see Sam
Beckett alive again, meet me
at the Salty Spittoon in
Serenity City at midnight.
Don't be late.*

There were a few moments of stunned, disbelieving silence; the only sound was the ever-present almost-subliminal roar of distant spacecraft landing and taking off from the spaceport. Jo recovered first and stated the obvious. "We have to go."

"Sounds like a ransom note to me," said Alex. "You can almost hear the 'or else' after 'don't be late'."

"Sounds like a trap to me," stated Max darkly, automatically suspecting the worst.

"So you're sayin' we shouldn't go?!?" exclaimed Alex, the excitement bringing out her country accent. Sometimes she just

couldn't understand Max's coldness. "This is Sam we're talkin' about! You've known 'er longer than any of us."

"What I'm saying," interrupted Max forcefully before Alex could say something she'd really regret, "is that we have to be extra careful when we *do* go."

At the mention of going, three heads turned to their leader for direction.

Carter met their stare with resolute determination. Without flinching, she said, "What are you waiting for? Get dressed. We have an appointment to keep."

Hyoo-mon, Play Dom-jot!

Location: the Salty Spitoon

Half an hour after receiving the ransom note – at 11:30pm local time – four shapely, female figures hit the streets of the Starfleet Quarter of Serenity City. The night had turned out to be overcast and chilly, with the smell of rain in the air.

They'd left their uniforms back at the apartment. Jo was wearing blue denim pants and a khaki shirt, topped by a tough denim jacket. Alex had obviously taken her lead from Jo, and was dressed similarly, adding only a bright red bandana tied around her forehead to keep her long, blonde hair out of her eyes. Max was decked out all in dark leather – leather pants topped by a soft leather shirt and brown, leather bomber jacket, and her long, brown hair was back in a ponytail. She looked ready to take on the entire underworld. Carter wore beige cargo pants with pockets covering the front of her upper legs, and a blue button-down shirt with more pockets, while a brown leather bomber jacket completed the ensemble.

Dressed in civilian attire, they stuck out like four sore thumbs among the brightly-uniformed Starfleet personnel still going busily about their business despite the late hour, but where they were ultimately headed they'd blend right in. Or so Carter hoped.

They all had a hand phaser stashed somewhere, of course. Just in case. And Carter was pretty sure Max had a few other weapons concealed about her person as well, in case their phasers were scanned and confiscated somewhere along the line.

"So, where to?" asked Alex, impatient to get going.

"The 'Salty Spittoon'," replied Jo. "Wherever that is."

"Why don't you find out?" suggested Carter pointedly.

Jo cast about for a city directory and quickly spotted one just across the street. The ladies followed her over to the distinctive kiosk and watched as she worked the simple keypad. It didn't take Jo long to come up with the answer. "It's in the Warehouse District, down by the docks," she announced flatly.

"Of course it is..." sighed Max, rolling her eyes. "I think we all saw that coming. I'm sure it'll turn out to be in a dark alley too."

"All right, let's go," said Carter. She wasn't in the mood for Max's attitude. Stepping to the curb, she held up a hand, signaling for a taxi.

A yellow-and-black checkered vehicle drifted down from the leaden cloud deck above, and the four women piled in. Carter told the automated driver their destination. The door closed and the taxi rose on its magnetic lifts into the all-concealing fog above the rooftops, vanishing from the gaze of any onlookers. It pivoted to face in the direction of Serenity City's waterfront, then quickly accelerated through the murk.

=^=

The sky-cab deposited them at the end of a long, dark alley. Max cast a 'see-I-told-you-so' look at Carter, but otherwise kept her mouth shut.

Fog slithered across the ground like living tendrils, enfolding anything in its path in a smothering embrace. Its chill touch wrapped around the four women's legs, inviting them to step further into its domain. Ahead, the alley was darksome and sinister in a very cliché sort of way. A single, dim streetlamp could be vaguely discerned through the mist at the far end of the block, while about halfway down the street a flickering, dilapidated, red neon sign hung crookedly from a dirty wall demarking the entrance to the Salty Spittoon.

Jo and Alex looked at each other uncertainly. They'd been in their share of dive bars, but never one quite as rough-looking as this one looked. Max had put on her poker face, keeping her feelings to herself, while Carter remained resolute.

They cautiously made their way down the alley, trying their best to avoid the noisome puddles in the street. Carter nervously fingered the phaser in her pocket.

The entrance to the place was an open doorway, covered only by a ratty curtain, one low step up from street level, through which riotous shouting, raucous laughter and the occasional scream could be heard. Along with the noise, thin wisps of foul smelling smoke drifted into the night outside.

There was no point stalling, so Carter bravely plunged on inside. The others crowded close behind her.

The inside of the place was every bit as cliché as the outside. Acrid smoke tinged everything blue, and curls of haze swirled lazily around the two sluggish ceiling fans overhead. Half a dozen tables crowded the main floor, while a long bar could dimly be made out through the smoke along the back. A beat-up, old jukebox leaned against a wall, silent, out-of-order.

The clientele was also cliché. Huge, brawny men, tattooed every one of them, with arms the size of Klingon targ's. Dock

workers, loaders, cargo handlers, longshoremen, sailors. *Probably a fair share of murderers and cutthroats too*, thought Carter grimly. They were grimy, rough, hardworking men. Everyone had a mug of beer before him, and most were talking and boasting loudly with their comrades and anyone else who would listen about their exploits with women or about how they'd've given the Mullurans a good thrashing if only they'd been in charge of the war.

Surprisingly though, not many heads turned at the sudden appearance of four beautiful women in their midst. Given the crowd, Carter would have expected the opposite, and she felt strangely insulted by the lack of attention. She heard Max harrumph behind her, obviously thinking similar thoughts.

"Looks like a great place for a little R&R," commented Jo.

"Rest and Relaxation'?" asked Alex dubiously.

"I was thinking 'Rum and Regurgitation', but we can try yours," replied Jo dubiously.

Carter led her group over to a table in the shadows near the rear. A few leering, lecherous stares followed them, but no one bothered them. *They've probably never seen a woman in here before*, thought Carter. *It'll take them a few minutes to decide what to do about us*. She hoped whoever had left the ransom note in her quarters would show up soon. She scanned the faces around her, wondering if he wasn't here already, but her gaze was met everywhere by indifference and resentment.

"We're going to the bar," announced Jo. "It's too close in this corner. If something's gonna happen, I want some fightin' room." She grabbed Alex by the lapel and dragged her along. "Come on, kid."

The two weaved off between the tables. Someone at the other end of the room threw a poorly-aimed glass mug at someone else, and although it hadn't been aimed at them, they had to duck to avoid getting brained. The makeshift projectile brained someone else though, and it started a fight. Jo and Alex had to

rush out of the way or get trampled in the minor melee that ensued. Luckily, the fracas thrashed its way back to the far end of the room, leaving the denizens on this side to pick up their tipped tables and resume their drinking. No one bothered to clean up the broken glass shards.

Carter was a little worried about Alex – she doubted the young rookie had ever been in a place like this – but she knew Jo. Though a brainiac, she could take care of herself in a brawl, and would look out for the youngster.

That left Carter and Max sitting at the table. The lighting back in their corner was even dimmer than in the rest of the joint; dim enough so that to a passerby out in the main portion of the bar they would appear as nothing more than shadowy wraiths. Lee had chosen this spot for exactly that reason – to give them first look at anyone who approached, ransom or otherwise. But it was not a ransomer that swaggered unsteadily up to their table, rather, a gruesome gang of grizzly Nausicaans.

"Hyoo-mons play dom-jot!" their leader bellowed with typically odd Nausicaan pronunciation. He leaned his knobby knuckles heavily on their table and glared at them in turn, challenging them to take him up. Lee and Max returned the Nausicaan's glower with cool, steady expressions. *These morons aren't the ransomers; they're just looking for trouble.*

She could never understand the Nausicaans' strange fascination with such a stupid game like dom-jot, but every Nausicaan she'd ever met shared it. "No thanks," she said calmly but firmly, then turned her attention deliberately away.

Unfortunately, the Nausicaan was either too dimwitted to get the hint, or too drunk – probably both – and he wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer. He slammed his dom-jot stick down on the table with jarring force and bellowed even louder. "No!" He straightened to his full height, gnashed his mandibles and pointed at Carter. "You play!" Apparently he had decided she was the leader of this pair of humans.

Regardless of who was perceived as leader, it was Max who lost her temper first. She made to stand, and Lee tried to hold her down, fervently praying the situation didn't degenerate into another fight.

Unfortunately, the Nausicaans had the opposite feeling. If there was anything a Nausicaan liked more than dom-jot, it was a good knock-down-drag-out barroom brawl, and the Nausicaan leader was already eagerly peeling off his outer garment in anticipation of Max's attack. Carter knew Nausicaans had no qualms about fighting women, as long as they perceived them to be worthy adversaries. In an odd way, this made up for being ignored when they first entered the joint.

Just as the Nausicaan was about to bellow forth another challenge, someone's hand clamped an iron grip on his massive shoulder from behind, stopping the brute in mid-posturing. The Nausicaan spun in surprise, Max temporarily forgotten, to see who would dare such a blatantly suicidal act and to teach him the error of his ways, but when he caught sight of the face of the man who was spoiling his fun his eyes widened in recognition and fear and he froze.

Carter tried to peer around the massive Nausicaan to see for herself who could elicit such a reaction from the towering alien. It was a human man.

He was relatively average looking – about six feet tall – light brown hair that looked like it was permanently mussed. He was well-proportioned, and wore nondescript brown pants, a sky blue shirt, and cowboy boots. His skin was tanned and tough-looking, as though he spent a lot of his time out in the sun, and wrinkled around his eyes – but Carter could tell they were wrinkles from smiling, not frowning.

His eyes struck her though – they captured her gaze and wouldn't let go until she seemed to fall into them. Blue as ice and rock steady as they stared down the three Nausicaans, each one twice his size; they spoke of a quiet self-confidence, yet at the

same time hinted at a self-assured cockiness of the sort that would walk right up to Death and laugh in its face.

Unaware of the effect he was having on his rescues, the stranger removed his hand from the Nausicaan's shoulder, but remained standing in silence facing the three, staring them down, a titanic battle of wills. After what seemed like an eternity, the Nausicaan leader grunted and averted his gaze from the stranger's unblinking stare. He'd had enough. He retrieved his dom-jot stick and jacket and motioned his fellows to follow him. They departed, walking past the stranger without looking at him, and disappeared back into the smoky haze from whence they came. Carter found she'd been holding her breath, and now exhaled in relief.

The stranger sat down at the ladies' table as if nothing had happened and seemed not to notice their shocked and amazed stares. He looked at Carter, then Max, sizing them up, then addressed Carter. "Commander Carter, I presume."

He took their continued silence as confirmation and dropped his bomb. "I know what happened to Sam Beckett."

Penny For Your Thoughts

Location: the Salty Spittoon

"You know what happened to Sam?!?" exclaimed Max incredulously. The gall of this stranger! "You better know, after sending us that ransom note! Now spill it, buster, before I rip your lungs out and feed them to the Nausicaans before your dying eyes!" Max's eyes were two smoldering embers, promising a hideous, unspeakable death to this stranger if he didn't tell them where Sam was in the next few seconds.

"Easy, Max," ordered Carter calmly, placing a restraining hand on Max's shoulder.

Max angrily shrugged it off though. "Easy nothin'! This guy's got Sam and I'm gonna make him talk!"

"He's not going to tell us anything if you kill him," argued Carter. "Now sit down!" She pressed Max back toward her seat. Max relented enough (barely) to let herself be shoved back into her chair, but never took her eyes off the stranger.

After she was sure Max was once again under semi-control, Carter let out her breath, resealed herself, and turned her attention back to the stranger.

All through the exchange, the stranger hadn't made a move, either to flee or to defend himself against Max's threatened retribution. Instead, he was sitting peacefully, picking at a bit of dirt under his fingernail, ignoring the two women. It was his nonchalance that was infuriating Max as much as anything else. Carter decided that he was either crazy, or knew something that they didn't.

Finally, after a moment's more maddening silence, the stranger ceased manicuring himself, straightened up from his slouch and addressed Carter. All arrogance was suddenly gone from his carriage, replaced by a look of compassion and sincerity in his eyes. Carter was startled by the sudden transformation, and found herself suddenly and inexplicably wanting to trust this man.

"To begin with," said the stranger, "my name is West. More importantly though, I am not a ransomer." – this last remark was directed at Max.

"What about the note?" she demanded.

"The note never said anything about a ransom," countered West easily. "It just said to meet me here if you want to see your friend again. Don't blame me if you go and start making all sorts of crazy assumptions."

Max scowled, but realized the man had a point.

"Fine, so you're not holding Beckett for ransom," said Carter. "Just what do you want?"

West's eyebrows went up in genuine surprise at Carter's question. "To help, of course!" he replied matter-of-factly, as if the answer should have been self-evident.

"If you're not the one who kidnapped Sam, how come you know about this at all? It's supposed to be top secret," demanded Max, not willing to give up her suspicions quite so easily.

West smiled and said, "We have a mutual acquaintance – a man by the name of Rick. He runs a small restaurant in the Starfleet Quarter. He suggested I look into the situation and lend a hand if I could."

Carter thought back to the cryptic comments Rick the ruggedly handsome El Taco manager had made yesterday afternoon, about him 'knowing certain people' and promising to help them. Apparently, she and Max were meeting one of these mysterious 'people' now... Her patience had run out for mysteries and cryptic statements though, so she asked West straight out. "Maybe you'd better start at the top, mister." Her tone made it clear that anything short of the whole truth would not be tolerated.

West nodded in concurrence. He collected his thoughts for a second, leaned forward, folding his hands on the table before him, and began. "Sam Beckett has been kidnapped by a gang of information thieves."

That was as far as he got before Max interrupted him. "Information thieves?!?," she exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

West cast her an annoyed look before continuing. "As I was about to explain, these are no ordinary thieves, and the information they pilfer isn't ordinary information." Looking Carter straight in the eye, he said, "They have stolen the information contained in Miss Beckett's brain – they've stolen her mind!"

West was interrupted again by Max's derisive laughter. "You don't actually expect us to believe such a crazy story, do you?" she spat. "That Sam was kidnapped so some aliens could suck her brains out?" Turning to Carter, she said, "I've heard enough – let's get out of here. This clown's just wasting our time." She began to stand.

Carter wasn't so sure though. She'd seen the sincerity in the man's eyes – she wanted to hear more. She placed a restraining

hand on Max's shoulder and forced her back into her seat once again. To West she said, "Keep talking."

West was well aware how totally wacko his story sounded. He chose his words carefully and spoke as reasonably as he could manage. "In certain parts of the Galaxy, there's a high demand for the neural energy of other species, including humans, on the black market. The memories and experiences of someone like Lieutenant Beckett, with her years as fighter pilot and espionage agent, would fetch a high price. Wonderful entertainment value, you see..."

"Do you know where Sam is being held?"

"There's a small town a few hundred miles from here, across the Cairn Hills on the shores of Blue Lake. The Mind Thieves have a hideout there. If Lieutenant Beckett is to be found, that's where she'll be."

"If? What do you mean 'if'?" said Max. "I thought you knew where she was?"

West addressed his reply to Carter. "Blue Lake is the best bet we have of finding your missing friend." He sat back in his chair and awaited a response.

"We don't need this guy," said Max to Carter. "We can go in and get Sam ourselves."

West shook his head. "If you go in guns blazing you'll never see your friend again. The villains will blow up their base and everyone in it rather than risk having their operation exposed."

"We can notify Starfleet. They'll have—"

West interrupted her. "Starfleet knows."

That took both women by surprise. After a long moment, Carter said, "What do you mean? How can Starfleet know about this?" Somehow though, she knew that West was right. She remembered back to her confrontations with Commissioner Gordon about the ineffective search for Sam, and her suspicions that the police chief had been keeping something from her.

West explained. "Starfleet is aware of this illegal activity, but you'll never get them to come out and admit anything about it. They're keeping a tight lid clamped on the whole thing. If the general populace ever found out, there'd be mass panic! Imagine – aliens sneaking around sucking people's brains out! And if you keep stirring things up with Starfleet about this, you'll most likely find yourselves fighting both the Mind Thieves and Starfleet!"

"Well, that explains my orders to 'cease and desist'," muttered Carter.

"Your only choice is a covert rescue mission," concluded West, "with me."

Max looked at Carter skeptically. For some reason, she seemed to have taken an instant disliking to West, and just didn't want to let go of her distrust.

Carter said to West, "We'll have to talk it over and decide." – meaning herself and the other Banshees.

"I understand," said West. "But don't take too long. Every second you delay will make it that much harder to retrieve your friend. If you do decide to trust me, meet me at Blue Lake, at the Ogotogo Inn."

With that, West rose from the table, and after nodding a polite farewell to the two ladies and a crooked grin at Max, sauntered off. Passing the bar, he flashed a brief acknowledgement at Jo and Alex before disappearing through the bar's curtained entryway.

Act Three

Nobody Here But Us Chickens

Location: Commuter flight to Lake Town

The passenger cabin around Lee Carter rattled and creaked, and the seat under her bucked and lurched as the commercial shuttlebus passed through atmospheric reentry, dislodging her train of thought. Sighing, she looked out the side window, saw the curved horizon of Serenity slowly flattening out, and the black of space fading first to deep purple then blue as the shuttle descended towards its landing.

Last night, after returning to the apartment after their meeting with the mysterious Mr. West down in the docks district, the arguments had begun about whether or not to trust the man, whether or not they should go with him, and if they went, should they all go? Each member of the team wanted to go and help save Sam, of course, but West had made it clear that the less people were involved the better. In the end, it was grudgingly agreed upon by all that Carter would be the best choice to go –

Alex wasn't experienced enough, Jo was a scientist, and Max would probably just wind up killing the man.

So here she was, surrounded by unwashed farmers, smelly fishermen, and live poultry, holding on for dear life as the shuttlebus plummeted like a stone towards Blue Lake. It had seemed a good idea at the time – taking a non-Starfleet transport across the continent – but as yet another nervous and squawking bundle of feathers fluttered and flurried past her face, she was starting to have her doubts.

She brushed some stray feathers out of her hair and looked at her watch. Twenty minutes to touchdown. She started counting the seconds.

Glancing across the aisle, she noticed that the man sitting across the center aisle from her was staring at her. He was middle-aged, and by his garb he looked to be a local rancher, and a battered hat was pulled low over his eyes. When he realized she'd noticed him, he quickly turned away, ears reddening. After a few seconds though, he slowly turned his head around again, trying to peek out of the corner of his eye if Carter was still watching him. When he saw that she was, he squirmed around as far as his seat would let him to face her.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," he said apologetically in a rich baritone voice, pushing the hat back on his head. "Weren't intendin' no harm to ya."

"Don't worry about it," replied Carter, not really in the mood to get into a conversation.

"It's jes' I was noticin' how perty you was. You mus' be a tourist – we ain't got women as perty as you in Blue Lake."

"Uh, thanks, mister," replied Carter, not feeling particularly flattered, and hoping this bumpkin wasn't trying to make a pass at her. "No, I'm not a tourist. I'm looking for a friend of mine."

"Name's Big Ned." He stuck out a large paw and shook Carter's hand roughly. "Friend's gone missin', has he?"

"She," corrected Carter automatically.

"Hmmp," snorted Big Ned. "He or she – don't make no nevermind to ol' N'aahitka."

From a seat a few rows behind Carter and Ned, a grizzled old man interrupted at this point, interjecting his own opinion with a wheezing, unkind voice. "Not agin with the damn-fool boogieman stories, Ned! Don't you ever git tired o' makin' a damn fool o' yerself? Why don't you leave that poor girl alone?"

"Yeah!" grumbled yet another passenger, who was apparently also well acquainted with Ned.

"Shut yer pie-hole, Old Zeke!" shot back Ned, craning around to face his detractors. "You o' all people've got reason to believe, havin' lost yer own son to the beast!"

"Why you lyin' sack o'—" began Old Zeke. His face was red with anger, and he started rising from his seat and rolling up his sleeves in preparation for giving Big Ned a good thrashing, but the other passenger, the one who had agreed with him, pulled him back down, saying, "Take it easy Old Zeke. Ned's just a crazy ol' coot. Don't pay 'im no mind."

"What are you all talking about?" said Carter. "Who's this N'aahitka?"

"Heh! N'aahitka ain't a 'who', it's a 'what'," replied Ned, turning back to Carter, already having forgotten about Old Zeke. "The natives call it N'aahitka, but most folk roun' here jes' call it Ogopogo."

Now Carter knew what she'd gotten herself into here. Ogopogo was the local lake monster, named in honor of the mythical creature in Lake Okanagan on Earth – sort of a Canadian version of the Loch Ness Monster. No one had ever managed to produce hard evidence that Canada's Ogopogo existed, and she was pretty sure the same was true of Serenity's monster. "My friend disappeared while in Serenity City, so I really don't think she was eaten by your monster, Ned," she said, hoping that would end the matter.

But Big Ned was not that easily deterred. "Don't be so quick to dismiss the notion, missy," he said sagely. "Half the people o' Blue Lake know somebody, or else know somebody who knows somebody who's gone a-missin'. Sometimes they wash up on shore a few days later an' git rushed over to the hospital, but the docs can't do nothin' for 'em, y'see, 'cause they've had their brains sucked out!"

That got Carter's full attention. "What did you say?"

Ned put up his hands pleadingly, mistaking Carter's question for criticism. He was probably used to getting pelted with ridicule (and rocks) at this point in his story. "Now don't go gittin' all judgmental," he complained. "It sounds like a crazy story, but I ain't crazy," he continued. "I seen it with my own two eyes."

"You've seen the monster?" asked Carter. Normally she wouldn't have bought into a fantastic story like this, but the part about the victims having their brains sucked out sounded suspiciously like what West had said had happened to Sam.

"I seen it as plain as you're sittin' right there," said Ned. "I was settin' on the pier one night when it come. Two glowin' eyes, an evil shade o' green, an' a thick, black body jes' beneath the surface o' the lake, and then it was gone. Next mornin' two bodies washed up. They was still alive, but in a coma like all the rest, nuthin' left o' their minds."

Just then, a well-aimed in-flight magazine came sailing through the air from the rear of the cabin, smacking Big Ned in the back of the head and knocking his hat off, and putting an end to the conversation. Growling, Ned launched himself from his seat and stormed aftwards, aiming to teach Old Zeke and his friend some manners.

A scuffle started and stewardesses rushed in to separate the combatants, but Carter had ceased paying attention. Ned's story about a brain-sucking lake monster was far-fetched to say the least, and Sam had been nowhere near Blue Lake when she'd

been abducted, but still, there must be a connection. To be told two brain-sucking stories, first by the mysterious Mr. West, then by a local resident – two people who presumably had no connection to each other – was just too much of a coincidence. There had to be at least a kernel of truth in there somewhere. But where? She hoped West would have some answers.

Kronk Beats Sralk!

Location: Lake Town

At long last, Carter's shuttlebus settled to the spaceport tarmac with a rough jolt, thanks to the brilliantly mediocre flying skills of the pilot. The whine of the magnetic lift declined and faded out altogether and the pilot came over the intercom. In a tired voice that made it clear he had recited this spiel a thousand times before, he intoned, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Blue Lake, jewel of the Serene continent. Enjoy your stay, and thank you for flying Ogotogo Airlines." The intercom clicked off and the shuttlebus door cracked open.

Having been seated nearest the hatch, Carter was the first off the shuttle. She stepped down the debarkation ladder and onto the surface of the planet and took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air. After being cooped up with squabbling farmers, fishermen and chickens, it was better than ambrosia to her lungs.

She quickly got out of the way as the locals began herding their livestock out of the shuttle, making her way around the back to where the luggage was being offloaded. Picking her

duffel out from the pile where it had been carelessly flung by the cargo gorillas, thankful she'd had the foresight to not pack anything breakable, she slung the strap over her shoulder and began the hike towards the terminal building on the tarmac's edge. She briefly wondered what had become of Big Ned and Old Zeke, but the thought was no more than a passing distraction, and since the two men were nowhere to be seen, it was as quickly forgotten again.

As she walked she looked about – the scenery was delightfully breathtaking. Nestled beside the placid waters of Blue Lake beside the rugged Cairn Hills, the town of Blue Lake – at least the portion of it that was visible beyond the terminal building – was a picture postcard. Small cottages and stores stood in neat rows along tree-lined streets, along which strolled locals and tourists alike. Not visible from her vantage point she knew was Blue Lake itself, a deep, wide, cold, inland sea, and the town's many piers and docks thereon. Fishing was a prominent local industry, as was pleasure boating. It was an unlikely place to find the secret hideout of a villainous gang of interstellar brain suckers, (or a lake monster) but look closely at any sample of human civilization and you find evil lurking just beneath the surface.

Carter passed without incident through the small terminal and stepped out into the main street of Lake Town.

Up close, the place had a quaint but somewhat shabbier atmosphere about it than it had seemed from the distance of the spaceport. The street was dusty, and the footfalls of the many pedestrians and the wakes of wheeled vehicles threw up clouds of dust that hung in the still afternoon air. Still, it wasn't an unpleasant place, and most of the pedestrians looked like tourists happily going about the business of window shopping, while vendors loudly hawked their wares from sidewalk stands and carts.

Most of the buildings that lined the street were two stories tall above awning-covered sidewalks, the only exception being the particular establishment Carter happened to be looking for. The Ogopogo Inn was where West had told her to meet him if she decided to trust him, and there it towered, a full three stories high, a block to her right. A massive red brick building complete with requisite awning, it was clearly demarked by the gaily-painted sign of a grinning, serpent-shaped lake monster hoisting a tankard of ale above stylized lettering proclaiming that this was indeed the 'Ogopogo Inn'.

Carter hastened off, if only to get out of the hot, midday sun; she had no real desire to see West again. In her opinion, he was a necessary evil, a means to an end. As she approached the Inn, she recognized the lanky figure sprawled lazily in a cheap, plastic chair on the front porch under the awning. It was West. He, along with three other disreputable-looking beings, two porcine Tellarites and a disheveled, blue-skinned Andorian with a bent antenna, were squared off against each other across a lopsided card table. The three aliens were guarding hands of greasy, oval playing cards close to their faces, looking suspiciously across the table at the others through squinted eyes. West, on the other hand, was the very picture of sly confidence. He held his cards loosely, and wasn't even looking at them. Carter assumed that the aliens weren't very adept at reading human body language and facial expressions or else they would never have gotten into a card game with this scoundrel.

When West saw Carter walk up, he broke into a lopsided grin and offered a casual greeting. "Hi," he said, and looking her up and down, commented, "You look nice," before returning his attention to the game.

Carter replied with a small, insincere smile of her own. She tried to discern the cause for West's self-assurance. *He's probably cheating.*

West was eyeing each of his opponents in turn, gauging how much he'd be likely to get away with. Still without having bothered to look at his cards, he used his free hand to shove all the rest of his latinum strips into the not-small pile in the center of the table. One of the Tellarites and the Andorian cursed under their breath and folded, throwing their cards down in disgust. Addressing the remaining Tellarite, West said, "All right, Pog, I'm calling your bluff. Let's see your cards."

Pog grinned ferociously, making his pudgy snout curl upward even more than usual, confident in the strength of his hand, and slapped his cards down on the table. "Sralk, human!" he crowed. "I win!" He started reaching for the pile of latinum.

"Not so fast, bubba!" countered West. He made a big production of turning his own cards face up so Pog and the others could see. As far as Carter could tell from her vantage point, he had five unmatched cards, but she doubted that would deter him.

"Fizzbin!" said West triumphantly, reaching for the pile of money himself.

Unfortunately for West, Pog was not about to be that easily beaten. In a display of the famous Tellarite temper, he smashed his hairy paw down on the tabletop so hard that some of the latinum jumped and rattled clear off the surface and onto the dusty sidewalk in a noisy clatter. Pointing to West's cards, he growled, "That is not a fizzbin! That is not even a half-fizzbin! That is nothing!"

West regarded him with a look of such long-suffering patience that the poor Tellarite actually cringed. "How many times do I have to explain the rules to you boys before you get it?" he asked tiredly. "You're forgetting that today is, uh" –he quickly shot a glance at his wristwatch– "Thursday. On Thursday kronks are wild, right?" The Tellarites looked at each other hesitantly and nodded tentatively. West wasn't giving them time to think about it though; he pressed on. "And since today is

Thursday and" –he quickly looked at the sky– "mostly sunny with a few scattered clouds, 7's and 5's are kronks, spades are clubs and vice versa, and even-numbered cards get one added to their value unless the sum is divisible by three, in which case you add 11 and take the square root, and before you know it, you have a fizzbin!" He began gathering the latinum again while the Tellarites were occupied arguing about the 'rules'.

"You're lucky," he commented offhandedly as he stuffed his pockets with his ill-gotten booty. "If today was Friday I would have had an Electric Boogaloo and you'd all be my indentured servants now!" but his audience wasn't really listening, being too preoccupied with their debate. When his pockets were full he started handing the leftover latinum to Carter. Startled and at a loss for anything else to do, she mutely accepted the loot and began filling her own pockets.

When the table was almost bare of everything except the scattered playing cards, West stood and backed slowly away. The Tellarites and Andorian were still arguing amongst themselves and weren't paying nearly enough attention to the fact that their money was about to make a clean getaway. West said amiably, so as not to disturb them, "Thank you, gentlemen, for a most enjoyable game. We'll have to do this again sometime." Then, grabbing Carter's elbow, yanked her after him as he ducked around the side of the Ogotogo Inn.

The aliens finally decided that they still didn't understand the rules and wanted to ask West to explain them one more time, but it was too late – West was gone.

=^=

West and Carter ran for a few blocks, but when it was clear that no one was chasing them, they slowed and stopped beside

what looked (and smelled) like a small bait-&-tackle shop. Now that she had the chance, Carter dug the latinum strips out of her pockets and dumped them back into West's arms. "Are you nuts?" she berated angrily. "Cheating those poor people out of all this money?"

West looked at her crossly for a moment, but then proceeded to begin shuffling the latinum into order and counting it. "In the first place," he explained reasonably, "those guys weren't 'poor' – just stupid. In the second place, this is mostly just small change." He'd finished counting and was clearly disappointed that it wasn't more. "Well," he sighed at last, cheering up as he hefted the wad of money, "at least this means we won't have to sneak out of the hotel tonight!"

Short Honeymoon

Location: a disreputable hotel in Lake Town

West led the way farther into Lake Town, away from the spaceport, into what increasingly looked the seedier side of town. If there had been train tracks here, they'd be on the wrong side of them by now. Correctly interpreting the expression on Carter's face, he commented, "You didn't think an interstellar gang of criminals would set up their secret hideout right in the middle of the tourist sector, did you?"

Carter suddenly realized that she didn't really know what she had been expecting.

"But I'm glad you decided to trust me," he said with another of his trademark lopsided smiles.

"I wouldn't go that far," countered Carter, "but I didn't see how I had much choice."

West accepted her answer without further debate. Motioning that he wanted to relieve Carter of her duffel bag, he said, "Let me give you a hand there," but she waved off his attempted

chivalry and instead shrugged the luggage strap higher up on her shoulder.

"I've got it," she replied brusquely and continued walking. West just smiled and followed. "You're going to be an interesting traveling companion," he said.

"We're not *traveling* anywhere, bub," corrected Carter. "We're going to go in, get Sam, and get out. Clear? So don't get any funny ideas." West smiled again and kept walking, keeping any further opinions on the matter to himself.

After another ten minutes of walking, West finally stopped in front of a dilapidated old hotel. "Here we are," he proclaimed.

"Where?"

"Our flop for the night," he replied cheerfully, clearly relishing the horrified expression on Carter's face.

Carter was agape. The 'building' before them could barely be described as such. Most of the aluminum awning that had once stretched across the front was lying in a tangled and rusted heap off to the left, simply abandoned where it had fallen years ago. Several of the windows on the first floor were boarded up; whether because the glass panes were broken or for some other reason was not evident, while the windows decorating the upper story fared hardly better. Some of those still had their glass intact, while others were dark, yawning cavities. The right corner of the upper floor looked like it had been shot off by high explosives in the not-too-distant past, black scorch marks still visible across the decaying paint job, exposing the interior of the guest room there to the elements. The blasted remains of a bed frame and armoire could be seen inside leaning crazily against each other, crowded against the far inner wall, while severed pipes from the room's obliterated toilet facilities dangled askew and dripped onto the street below not far from Carter's feet.

While the Starfleet Commander looked on in dismay, West proceeded to enter the edifice through the oddly-skewed front doorway. She, however, resolutely refused to step foot in such a

disreputable-looking establishment, and planted her feet firmly on the dusty ground. She counted slowly to ten, but when West didn't emerge again by that time, Carter was forced to go in after him. Swearing under her breath, she braved the rickety boardwalk fronting the building and passed through the swinging half-door that would have been more appropriate in Earth's Ancient West than a modern Federation colony.

She found West standing at the front desk in the spacious hotel lobby signing the guest register. Behind the counter, a stocky middle-aged man wearing a red fez on his head had his back turned to West, and was busy scanning a pigeon-holed wall looking for West's room keycard.

Carter's Starfleet training was in full operation now; she gave the room a quick once-over and determined there were no immediate threats – at least not to body. Threats to the well-being of a person's will to live were overabundant however. Where the furniture had obviously once been exquisite and the envy of high society, that had been a long time ago. Today it was just shabby. Countless buttocks had worn away the fabric of the chair and sofa seats, leaving them shiny and threadbare, and the coffee and end tables were dinged and notched with a myriad deep marks. Any curtains and other finery that once might have graced this room was long gone, having been replaced by wooden shutters covering the windows (those that weren't broken and boarded up), and tacky beadwork curtains framing doorways. The chandelier that had probably once hung suspended from the vaulted ceiling had been replaced by an old glowglobe attached to a bare wire, and the grand staircase that wound up one wall was no longer quite so grand looking and sagged in the middle like an old horse's back.

One fixture that was well-maintained, however, was the enormous mirror that depended from the ceiling along the wall behind the front desk. It was framed in lustrous, cherry-colored wood, intricately carved in bass-relief serpents, undoubtedly the

ubiquitous Ogopogo, and harpoon-wielding hunters. Unlike all the rest of its kin in the room, the frame was quite obviously lovingly dusted and polished regularly, as was the mirror it embraced.

Catching her reflection in the big mirror, West saw Carter approach. He set down the old-fashioned pen he'd been using to enter his name in the register and turned to face her. "We're signed in," he announced.

"We'?" asked Carter. "Don't I have to sign in too?"

"Nope," smiled West roguishly. "Mister and Missus 'Smith'," he explained innocently, pointing first to himself then at her, all the while wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

"Dream on, chump!"

But West wasn't listening. He was already trekking up the long flight of stairs towards

their room. Carter sputtered futility at his audacity, but had no recourse but to follow. She renewed her grip on her duffel and trudged after him.

Down a short hallway, West paused at a doorway and checked the number scratched on the door to the one on his keycard. Satisfied, he turned the handle and walked in. "Ahh... The honeymoon suite," he proclaimed in satisfaction, and proceeded to make himself

at home on the bed.

Carter stood in the doorway and peered into the room. "There's no way I'm spending the night here with you," she announced.

West shrugged, apparently not caring one way or the other. "Suit yourself," he said, and proceeded to rummage through the nightstand.

Carter scowled darkly in annoyance. It had seemed like the best choice at the time, but she was now regretting very much her decision to accept West's help in retrieving Sam Beckett. The mysterious Mr. West was irritating and self-confident to an

absurd degree and Carter was beginning to wonder if she would be able to work with him even for the short amount of time this operation was likely to take. *Should have just let Max kill him back at the Salty Spittoon.*

Finally, having no other reasonable recourse, Carter stepped across the threshold into the room and dumped her duffel on the floor beside the door. "I don't suppose you have a plan..." she ventured doubtfully, casting a revolted glance around the grimy room.

West looked up from his idle rummaging. "Of course I have a plan!" he replied. "Rule number one – '*always* have a plan!'"

"Don't suppose you want to let me in on it, eh?" prodded Carter. She'd finished her cursory examination of the room and concluded that if it came to spending the night, she'd rather take her chances and camp out in the alley behind the building. Less vermin there.

"What's the matter?" asked West, feigning hurt. "Don't trust me?"

"No," was the blunt, unamused reply.

West's expression suddenly lost all its flippancy and became earnest. "Relax, Commander," he said, making a genuine effort to reassure Carter. "Everything's under control."

"Well... we'll see," replied Carter, partially mollified. She retrieved her duffel bag from where it lay beside the door and carried it over to the tiny alcove that served as their bathroom and began pulling out her toiletries, arranging the articles neatly on the dingy countertop beside the rusty sink. "So, what do we do now?" she called out into the main room.

Before West could answer however, the telephone on the nightstand rang. He reached over from where he sat on the bed and picked up the receiver and into the mouthpiece said, "Smith." Carter watched him listen intently a few seconds, then ask, "Where?" He listened to the reply, which was apparently to

his satisfaction, because he finally said, "We'll be there in fifteen minutes," and hung up the phone.

Carter emerged the rest of the way from the bathroom and regarded West quizzically, waiting for an explanation. Instead, however, West flashed her a smile and said, "We're going out, baby."

"Out? Now? Where are we going?" demanded Carter, once again growing suspicious of the man's motives.

"Ogopogo Bar & Grill," answered West. "Sounds kinda nice, doesn't it?" he finished smoothly as he got up from the bed and headed for the door.

Once again, Carter was relegated to following, but as she went, she firmly resolved to have a few words with Mr. West the first chance she got and explain once and for all who was in charge of this operation...

Smiths vs. Smith

Location: Ogopogo Bar & Grill

After receiving the mysterious phone call, ten minutes saw West and Lee Carter leave their luxurious motel suite and wind their way down the twisting backways of Lake Town to the Ogopogo Bar & Grill. West stopped outside the dilapidated front entrance and gave the building an appraising once-over. Turning to Carter, he said somewhat apologetically, "Well, it ain't the Tea Room on Risa, but it ain't all that bad."

Carter had a different opinion though. "This place makes the Salty Spittoon look like a ten-star restaurant."

Cacophonous, discordant Klingon rock and roll music pounded from within, making the very walls shake, dislodging fine dust from the patio beams overhead in time with music's rhythm and setting it drifting slowly to earth, but even over that noise, the occasional scream, shout and gunshot could be discerned.

West turned from his careful scrutiny of the edifice back to Carter and proceeded to examine her with the same intensity.

Carter felt acutely self-conscious under his inspection. "Almost perfect," West concluded finally. He reached across, and with a lightening quick and very expert flip of his fingers, undid the top two buttons of Carter's shirt. "There. Now that's perfection," he said.

"What the hell are you doing?!?" yelled Carter, reaching up to stop him but not being nearly fast enough. She immediately started rebuttoning her shirt.

"Leave it undone," ordered West in a tone that made it clear he would brook no argument, but seeing that he was about to get one anyway, he added, "Trust me," in that sincere, confidence-inspiring voice that always made Carter acquiesce to his lead.

Not for the first time since meeting this mysterious, aggravating, compelling, insane, brash, handsome, compassionate, infuriating man did she find herself thinking about him in a totally different way than just the man who was helping her to rescue Sam Beckett. She found herself almost daydreaming about him – how things might be like if the two of them had met under different circumstances. The moment didn't last however, and any romantic notions Carter may have secretly harbored were quickly shattered with West's next words.

"You don't want to hide those babies," observed West jauntily, pointing at Carter's breasts. He flashed her his trademark grin and sauntered off into the bar. Carter fumed at the sophomoric chauvinism and stomped after. West held the door open for her and she entered the dark building.

Carter's first impression outside did not belie what she thought of the inside. Dark and smoky, populated by a mixture of disreputable humans and even more disreputable looking aliens, the place was clearly a mecca for lowlife scum. To her relief, West seemed to know exactly where he was going and led the way quickly through the close-packed rabble in the bar proper to a set of worn stairs along the back wall leading up to the second story.

At the end of a narrow, smelly corridor was a small room containing an old table and four chairs, three of which were already occupied: two humans and a Cardassian. West and Carter were both patted down for concealed weapons by a thug at the door, after which West proceeded to take his place on the remaining chair. Lacking direction from him, Carter took up station just behind. The three other seated men leered at her with undisguised lechery. Carter studiously ignored them.

"Mr. Smith, I presume," stated the Cardassian, addressing West. "Let me introduce Mr. Smith and Mr. Smith," he went on, indicating the two humans. "And my name is Mr. Smith."

"Smith, Smith... Smith," said West, nodding to each in turn. "Shall we get down to business?" The other three nodded, clearly eager to commence, and West continued. "What am I bid?" he asked.

"Five hundred," offered Smith #1, looking at Carter with unpleasant interest.

West looked indignant, causing Smith #2 to jump in. "One thousand!" he declared.

"Fifteen hundred!" barked Smith #3, not wanting to be left out.

"Gentlemen! You insult me! We're not haggling over some used hovercar! Take a look at this prime specimen of human Starfleet breeding!" West's hand shot out and clasped a firm grip on Carter wrist, yanking her ungently out from behind his chair and into full view of the Smiths. "Just take a look at this beauty – the youthful vigor, the shapely curves–"

"*What?!?*" cried Carter, full realization hitting her like a ton of neutronium. "Why you son of a–" She swung a wild roundhouse punch at West's head but he managed to duck under just in the nick of time to avoid being beheaded. Staggering up from his chair, he grappled desperately with Carter, trying to pin her arms at her sides to avoid being brained.

"What fire!" shouted Smith #2, the avaricious gleam in his eyes burning brighter. "I like that! Five thousand!"

"Good!" shouted back West from where he was still wrestling with a fiercely struggling Carter, then looked expectantly at Smith #1.

Smith #1 didn't disappoint. "Twenty thousand!" he barked.

"Fifty thousand!" roared Smith #3, the Cardassian, rising halfway from his chair.

Carter couldn't believe what was happening – a merely annoying situation had suddenly turned into a living nightmare! *Betrayed!* She shuddered to think what would happen to her once in the clutches of one of the 'Smiths', but she knew one thing for certain – she had no intention of finding out. She tried to scream in rage, but West clamped his hand over her mouth. She bit down on his thumb and was rewarded with a howl of pain. "You bastard!" she spat now that her mouth was freed. "You said you'd help me find Sam Beckett! You're gonna die!!!"

West scrambled to clamp his bleeding hand back over Carter's mouth, but it was too late – the proverbial tribble was out of the bag.

"Huh?" grunted Smith #2. "What was that the skirt said?" He suddenly began eyeing West suspiciously. "What the hell is she talking about, Smith," he demanded gruffly. "Who's this Beckett? What are you trying to pull here?" Suddenly, there were three disruptors pointed at West's head. "Who the hell are you two?" snapped Cardassian Smith, making sure West saw him thumbing the power level on his weapon up to full.

West had ceased his overt struggles against Carter in the face of this new plot twist, but still held onto her tightly to keep her from squirming away. "Uh... I can explain, fellas," he began, but knew there would be no talking his way out of this one. That only left one option open.

"*Look!*" he shouted, pointing at the room's door and feigning great surprise. All three Smiths twisted their heads to look at

what was behind them, and West wasted no time. Releasing his deathgrip around Carter's waist, he grabbed her by the arm and dove for the window, hauling her after him, she too surprised to offer any resistance. They broke through the pane in an ear-shattering crash of glass and plummeted earthward from the second story window amidst a hailstorm of glittering shards.

It was an unlucky night for the pair of locals passing by underneath at that moment. West and Carter came screaming down on their necks, sending everyone to the ground. Shouts from above hastened West's and Carter's steps as they picked themselves up and ran away from the scene.

West led the way into the dimly lit alleys of nighttime Lake Town with Carter close on his heels, not because she trusted him to lead her to safety but because she still intended to kill him, or at least beat the crap out of him. They ducked behind a building and crouched in the shadows while West listened for pursuit. Satisfied that none was nearby, he let himself relax. When West turned to face her, Carter saw he was grinning from ear to ear like a little boy who had just swiped some candy from the candy store. "Whoa, you sure screwed up that plan, baby!" he said, laughing, in between his out-of-breath panting.

"What the hell are you talking about, West?" demanded Carter in between her own heavy breathing. *Why was he suddenly in such a good mood?* "What plan? All I saw was you trying to sell me to those... those..." She was at a loss for words.

"You bet!" retorted West. "That was the plan! One of the Smiths works for the same group that kidnapped Sam Beckett, so I sell you to them. Then I follow them and you to their secret hideout. Then I break you and Beckett out. Then we all escape. It was a good plan! Until you screwed it up!" he shouted.

"Me screw it up?!?" snapped Carter angrily. "Did it ever occur to you to let me in on your stupid plan?!?"

"Well, then it wouldn't have seemed very spontaneous, would it?" rejoined West.

"Why you son of a—" shouted Carter furiously, but she never got to finish her sentiment. The corner of the building above their heads suddenly exploded in a stinging shower of cement and rebar as a disruptor blast hit. Quickly they rose from the shadows and began running again in the opposite direction from the rough shouts and gunshots from their pursuers.

Carter couldn't tell how long they ran, zig-zagging in a seemingly random pattern through the alleyways and back streets of Lake Town, but slowly the shouted curses and threats hurled at them by the Smiths and their henchmen grew fainter and less frequent until finally they could no longer be heard at all. By this time, West had led them well beyond the town limits into the rugged hills above Blue Lake, and Carter's legs felt like jelly. Judging from the stars, she guessed it was around midnight.

"Hold up a second!" she called ahead to West, who was steadily picking his way through the jumble of boulders twenty yards farther up the hillside from her. "Time for a break."

West stopped and looked back. "We're almost there," he replied, some of the compassion returned to his voice. "Then we can rest. It's not safe here on the open hillside if they have night-vision equipment." With that he turned back towards the hillside and resumed his climb through the rocks.

Carter sighed and started again.

Five minutes later, Carter stepped out from behind a particularly large rock outcropping at the crest of the hill and beheld a small, ramshackle hut. It was no more than a flimsy wooden barn with half its boards missing, but to Carter it was the best thing she had ever seen. She followed West inside and swung the rickety door shut and collapsed on the nearest pile of hay, exhausted from the day's misadventures.

Abandonment

Location: old barn somewhere in the Cairn Hills

Lee Carter lay awake listening to West snore softly where he lay atop his pile of hay on the other side of the barn. It was almost 0300 hours. Outside, the stillness of the country night was broken only by the comforting trilling of night insects and the wind rustling through the branches of the surrounding chaparral.

Sleep remained elusive, her mind too full of confused thoughts and feelings. West had seemed so trustworthy, at least once you got past the scoundrel's facade he affected. She would have bet her life on that. In fact, she had! and had nearly lost it as a result. But he had betrayed her – tried to sell her to the very fiends that had kidnapped Sam Beckett, and then tried to cover it up with that ridiculous story about it all being part of some crazy plan.

The betrayal weighed heavily on Carter's mind, made all the more bitter by the fact that she had initially almost admired West. His brashness and courage and almost childlike attitude of indestructibility in the face of the Nausicaans back at the Salty

Spittoon had left a definite impression on Carter. Yes, dammit – she hated to admit it to herself, especially now, but she had *liked* the man!

But he had betrayed her.

Always her thoughts came back to that heart-rending fact. She could no longer trust West, no matter how often he flashed that confidence-inspiring smile of his or how many confabulations he plied her with.

She had to get away from him.

Quiet as a mouse, careful not to wake the still-snoring West, Carter rose from her haystack and slipped into her jacket, which she'd been using as a blanket. She tip-toed to the barn door and slipped outside. She cast one last look back at West's sleeping form, illuminated by a shaft of moonlight coming through a hole in the roof. A flood of conflicting emotions welled up in her, but she savagely beat them back. Whatever she might feel about the man – like, dislike, disappointment, respect, admiration, something more..., she knew she'd miss him.

Closing the door as quietly as she could, Carter slipped off into the night.

=^=

The morning sun peering over the crest of the hill shone in West's eyes and woke him. He shivered at the crisp morning air. Rising from his hay bed with a loud groan he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and stretched like a cat, then walked over to where Carter had made her bed, intending to wake her. Her haystack was empty though, barely looking slept in.

Frowning, West looked around the small barn, then went outside and circumnavigated the entire building looking in vain for the headstrong Starfleet officer. A short walk to the nearby

well yielded identical results. The worry lines on his forehead became more pronounced as it quickly became inescapably obvious she was nowhere in the vicinity.

"Oh Commander Carter," he pronounced softly to the air. "You've really gone and done it now..."

Out of the Frying Pan

Location: Road to Lake Town

Commander Lee Carter had crept from West's barn quietly and quickly, making a bee-line back to Lake Town. She was pretty sure the Smiths would have given up their search by now, and if she stayed away from the seedier side of town she should be safe enough. At West's insistence at the outset of this debacle, she'd left behind anything that could identify her as a Starfleet officer, meaning her communicator, so the first order of business was to get to a comm terminal and call Max Vasser and have her come pick her up. Then they'd have to come up with a new plan for finding Sam Beckett.

She cursed West again for wasting so much of her time. Time that would have been spent searching for Sam. Who knows if it wasn't already too late to save her!

The orange New Canada sun had come up a few minutes ago, lighting her footsteps and warming her back as she followed a dirt road back to Lake Town. She was feeling tired and footsore from yesterday's exertions and last night's lack of sleep, but as

luck would have it, a flatbed truck came rumbling up on the dirt road from behind her, and when it drew even with her, stopped. The driver, a wiry man with a shaved head leaned out the window and called to her in a friendly voice. "Need a ride, lady?" He unwrapped a stick of gum and stuck it in his mouth, and tossed the crumpled wrapper on the ground at Carter's feet.

Carter approached the truck cautiously, and replied, "Heading to Lake Town?"

The driver chuckled. "No place else to go 'round these parts. I'm heading for the spaceport."

"Perfect. Thanks!" She circled around the front of the truck and climbed into the passenger's seat. The driver smiled reassuringly at her as he put the truck in gear and drove off.

=^=

West trudged along the dirt road leading back to Lake Town. He reasoned that Commander Carter had to have gone this way – there simply was nowhere else to go in these parts. Not on foot, anyways. He was feeling uncharacteristically despondent. He knew he'd completely lost Carter's confidence and for some reason that bothered him a lot more than it should.

Why should he feel this way? The woman was bossy and loud, constantly belittling his efforts, and a major pain in the neck! He was better off rid of her! So why was he schlepping along this dusty dirt road after her like some abandoned puppy? West was forced to admit to himself that he missed her now that she was gone and he worried about her. Damn her! She'd gotten under his skin. It was the only explanation. There was something about her that attracted West – her fire, her compassion for her teammates, her strength of character and determination in the face of impossible odds.

Or maybe it was just that she had ta-ta's 'til Tuesday.

At about ten in the morning, West came upon an intersection in the road. He'd been following Carter's footprints, clearly visible in the loose dirt, but now tire tracks from a wheeled vehicle that had come up the other fork partly obliterated the trail. He studied the tracks and signs carefully. Carter's footsteps ended where they were intersected by the tire tracks, meaning she had gotten into the vehicle. A crumpled gum wrapper caught his eye. He picked it up and smelled it – still fresh. He wasn't too far behind.

=^=

The truck carrying Carter and the driver rumbled through the streets of Lake Town while Carter sat and looked out the window and brooded. The last three hours had been spent mostly in silence. Neither she nor, thankfully, her benefactor, were predisposed to making small talk.

The buildings rolled by, and Carter suddenly was roused from her idleness by something odd. "Hey, buddy," she said to the driver, turning to face him. "I think the spaceport's back that way." She pointed off to the right. "Where are you taking me?"

"Relax, Commander Carter," replied the driver. "You'll be with your friend Sam very soon now." His friendly smile had turned decidedly chilling, made all the more so by the disruptor pistol Carter suddenly found leveled against her.

She was momentarily speechless. How did the driver know her rank, or that she was even in Starfleet? She was wearing civilian attire and hadn't mentioned anything about her occupation during their brief introductions. But much more importantly, how did he know about Sam? There was only one way, of course.

Carter lunged for the driver's weapon, but the man was faster. He delivered a vicious punch to Carter's nose with the butt of the pistol, snapping her head back and causing her vision to explode in a thousand agonizing shards of light. The driver's sinister grimace intensified as he delivered another thunderous blow to his victim's head, not even bothering to use the weapon for its designed purpose but deriving more pleasure from a primitive pummeling.

Carter faintly felt the warmth of her blood flowing freely from her nose and tasted the saltiness in her mouth, but blackness overcame her senses with swift finality as the driver delivered the knock-out blow.

=^=

West heard the truck rumble up behind him long before he saw it, and so had time to run off the road and find some modest cover amongst the prickly chaparral. He sorely wished he had a weapon on him, but anything he carried would have been confiscated before he was let in to see the Smiths anyway. Which hadn't prevented *them* from bringing disruptors into the meeting, but that was another beef altogether...

To his dismay, the truck slowed and stopped just when it was even with his concealed position. An amplified voice said, "Hiding won't do you any good, West! Come out and no one'll get hurt!"

Except me, thought West wryly. He was fifty yards from the road. If he ran for it, the truck would never be able to follow him over the rough terrain, so he might actually have a chance of outrunning his pursuers on foot. It was either that or surrender. He peeked through the leaves of his bush and saw a single person standing beside the truck, scanning the terrain with a

small device. West scrounged around in the dirt beside him for a few moments, and selected a fist-sized rock.

Tensing every muscle, he took a few deep breaths and sprang out from the bushes and threw the rock with all his might at the man. The missile smashed into the side window of the truck, smashing it into oblivion with a piercing crash and throwing the man into a desperate dive for cover. In that instant of opportunity, West sprinted away from the road, pouring every ounce of energy he possessed into his legs.

It took the truck driver a few seconds to recover during which West gained precious ground, but all too soon the orange disruptor beams began sizzling past his head, and a few shots struck the ground around his pounding feet, blasting small craters into the countryside and showering him with dirt. He urged his feet on all the faster, knowing if he could get out of range he'd be safe.

Sure enough, the disruptor bolts stopped. Risking a quick glance back, West expected to see the frustrated truck driver reduced to hurtling ineffectual curses at him now that he was out of range of his weapon, but instead the man was hefting something large onto his shoulder. West's heart fell as he recognized the device. He saw the puff of white smoke from the barrel of the launcher and heard the whistle of the mortar as it arced towards him. He tried zigzagging, but knew in the pit of his stomach that it was too late.

The grenade landed less than three yards from West's fleeing feet and instantly burst into a blinding nova of light and sound and anti-neural energy, paralyzing every nerve of his body. His dead legs, stopped in mid-lunge, simply stopped working, propelling him face-first into the rough ground. His leaden arms were useless at his side, unable to break the fall. West took the full brunt of the impact on his chest and face, unable even to turn his head to spare his teeth. The last thing before the blackness

swallowed him up was the sound of running feet approaching from behind.

Frontal Lobotomy

Location: Max's apartment

I drink alone

Yeah, with nobody else

I drink alone

Yeah, with nobody else

Yeah, ya know when I drink alone

I prefer to be by myself

- George Thorogood and the Destroyers

An insistent buzzing woke Max Vasser from her stupor. She slid sideways along the table top she was slumped over and knocked a half-empty glass onto the floor, spilling the amber liquid it contained onto the carpet. She caught herself just before she fell off her chair and did her best to sit up straight, but failed spectacularly. She opened one bleary, bloodshot eye, and had to squint against the dim sunlight filtering through her bedroom's drawn curtains.

The clock on the nightstand read 1103 hours. *God, it's tomorrow already.*

Max groaned miserably and covered her eyes with her hands. The buzzing sounded again, and she winced painfully and shifted her hands to her ears. "Go 'way!" she tried to call, but it came out little more than a heavily-slurred hoarse croak. The door buzzer sounded again, and this time the door slid open, whoever was outside obviously tired of being ignored.

"Max?" said a hesitant voice. "You in here?"

Max cracked her eyes open again and saw three blurry Jo Schmidts standing a few feet inside her apartment looking around the dimly lit room.

"Get lost, Schmidt," she growled.

At the sound of her voice, Jo spotted her in the dark. "There you are! We've been looking all over for you. What are you doing in here?" She walked over to the curtains and drew them aside, letting in the brilliant daylight. Max cringed and hissed like a vampire from the sun and held up her hands to block the glare from her eyes. Jo noticed the empty bottle on the table.

Openmouthed, she said, "You've been in here drinking all night again, haven't you?" She picked up the bottle and sniffed the contents. "And it's not even synthahol! No wonder you look like the night of the living dead!"

"Leave me alone," grated Max, trying to get up from the table and stagger over to the bed. Jo clucked pityingly, shaking her head, but finally decided to help her friend. Grabbing hold of Max around the shoulder, she led her pickled pal to the safety of her bedroom.

"You can't keep doing this, Max," berated Jo.

"Shut up. You ain't my mother."

"No, I ain't! I'm your friend!" They had reached the bed and Jo now sat Max down on the edge, then sat down beside her. Steeling herself for what she had to do, she gripped Max's shoulders tightly and shook her hard. "You've got to snap out of

this funk, Max! Sam is gone, maybe dead! Lee hasn't been heard from in two days! Maybe she's dead too! You're in command now but you're a slobbering disgusting drunk! I know you miss Jazz and all, and you think you've lost your ESP, and you feel absolutely worthless, but if you keep up this behavior, you really *are* useless! Come on – me and Alex need you now more than ever if we're going to save our team!"

Max was fighting the shaking as forcefully as her condition allowed, which was to say, barely at all, but Jo's stinging words were like a slap in the face and got her attention better than all the shaking in the world could do.

"Leggo. Let go o' me!" She finally managed to wrench herself from Jo's grasp and lurched to her feet. Though her legs felt like putty and her knees threatened to buckle at any second, she stood there glaring down on her well-meaning friend. "Damn you, Schmidt! Why couldn't you just leave me to drown in my bottle? Why'd you have to come in here and make me feel all guilty? I was perfectly happy just the way it was..." She shook her head, feeling some of the alcohol-induced fuzziness lift. She felt guilty, yes, but much worse than that, she knew that everything Jo had said was absolutely correct. She'd been a shameful coward.

"Let's go talk to Cross and then go find Lee and Sam." She began wobbly weaving towards the front door, intent on storming Captain Cross' office right now, but Jo grabbed her by the elbow and swung her around and aimed her at the bathroom door instead.

"Whoa there, buckaroo! First things first, and first thing for you is a cold shower and a couple of sober-up pills. *Then* we go see Cross."

=^=

"No. Absolutely not," said Captain Matthew Cross. His arms were folded stubbornly across his chest and he was shaking his head resolutely. "I've already lost Lieutenant Beckett, and now you tell me Commander Carter has gone off with a *civilian* on some harebrained – and *unauthorized* – rescue operation, and that she's missing now too. There's no way I'm going to let the rest of you ladies take on another rescue mission. Before you know it, Dexter is the only one who's going to be left in the squadron!

"But Captain, we can't just leave them out there," said Max, now sufficiently recovered from her all-night bender to once again function as the Banshee's XO. Sam and Alex stood behind their leader and vigorously nodded their agreement with Max's statement.

But Cross was still shaking his head. "We went over this when Beckett disappeared, but I'll remind you again, since you seem to have forgotten." Looking Max straight in the face, he enunciated each word clearly and precisely, emphasizing the fact that he wouldn't brook any further argument on the matter. "Starfleet Intel is handling the situation. You—" he pointed to each of the three women in turn "—are *officially* ordered to stay out of it."

Max heard the qualifier in that statement and paid close attention to Cross' next words.

"You are still on leave status," he continued. His voice was as stern as before, but Max detected a sly glimmer in his eyes. "I recommend some fishing. I hear Blue Lake is nice this time of year."

"Aye aye, sir!" snapped Max. She spun on her heel and strode from Cross' office, an incredulous Jo and Alex in tow.

As soon as the door was shut behind them, Jo burst out in protest. "That's it?!? That's all you're going to do?!? I can't believe it!"

"Relax, Schmidt," said Max. "Cross gave us our 'official' orders, but he also told us exactly where to find Sam and the Commander."

"Blue Lake!" exclaimed Alex, proud she'd figured it out all by herself.

"Right. Let's go."

Act Four

The Face of Evil

Location: Lair of the bad guys

Lee Carter awoke to pain. Her head throbbed from the pummeling she had received from the evil truck driver, and every muscle in her back ached from lying on the cold, hard floor for she didn't know how long. She tried levering herself up on an elbow, but found her hands tied securely behind her back.

She opened her eyes to darkness. Only the faintest glimmer of light from the crack under the door shone in the chamber in which she found herself, an unused storage room by the looks of it. The air was chill and clammy, like a damp basement, forcing an involuntary shiver up her spine.

Footsteps echoed outside the door, and presently locks were disengaged and it creaked open on rusted hinges letting in a flood of sea-green light. Two burly men entered her prison and each grabbing a shoulder, hoisted her off the dank floor and led her away.

They passed through a maze of metal-lined corridors, most of which were only dimly-lit, but several had small portholes high on the rounded walls. Outside, Carter could only see murky blue-green, as though they were at the bottom of the ocean. *No, not the ocean – the bottom of Blue Lake!* she realized with a sudden flash of insight. *Maybe there is a connection between the mysterious disappearances and the brain sucking lake monster after all...*

The two ruffians finally deposited Carter in another chamber, roughly shoving her through the door so that she fell forward. She was able to twist her body though so that her shoulder took the brunt of the impact. Rolling over so she faced her captors, she prepared to give them a good tongue lashing, but the chamber's hatch slammed shut, sealing her inside all alone.

No– not alone! Carter took a moment to survey her new surroundings and discovered that the room was filled with slabs, and each slab held a body! She was in some kind of morgue! Carter felt irrational fear begin to well up from the core of her being like strangling vines threatening to close off her breathing, when she spotted one particular face among the dozens.

"*Sam!*" she gasped. She was about to rush over to her missing friend when the chamber's hatch squealed open again and the ruffians threw in another victim.

West staggered and ricocheted off Carter, then righted himself and tried to regain his dignity. Then he spotted the slab and body that Carter was staring at and a triumphant smile grew on his lips. "See?" he said. "I told you I'd find your friend!"

Carter spun and faced West, teeth bared, nostrils flaring and fire leaping from her eyes. West took an apprehensive step backwards. "I sense you're upset about something..."

"Upset?!?" cried Carter. "If my hands weren't tied I'd rip your head off and dropkick it into the next millennium, you colossal ignoramus! Then I'd chop you up into little tiny pieces and feed them to the voles in that motel you took me to, you inexcusable

charlatan! I'd throw you naked to the Nausicaans at the Salty Spittoon! I'd... I'd..." Carter was momentarily at a loss, but evil inspiration struck her. Her eyes narrowed and her next threat dripped with venom. "I'll unleash Max on your ass, you walking dead man."

"Oh I'd like to see that," said a new voice from the open doorway.

Carter and West turned as one at the intrusion, curtailing their discussion. The owner of the voice stepped through the hatch and into the dim light. Carter's lips curled in disgust, her eyes wrathful and hard. "I might have known I'd find you at the bottom of this. The galaxy's most nefarious villain, Vincent Kelly."

"Commander," acknowledged Kelly politely. "Always a pleasure to see you."

"The pleasure is all yours, I assure you."

Kelly ignored the comeback and proceeded on to West. "And the meddlesome Mr. West, once again poking his nose where it doesn't belong and getting in way over his head."

"That supposed to be some sort of 'bottom-of-the-lake' joke?"

"You know this guy?" asked Carter of West.

West shrugged. "We go way back, Vinny an' me..."

"Figures," said Carter, not the least surprised that a scoundrel like West should know a criminal like Kelly.

"Yes," said Vince Kelly. "This is a real family reunion, isn't it. Me and my old buddy West, the lovely Commander Carter and Lieutenant Beckett."

At the mention of Sam's name, Carter suddenly remembered why they were all here. "What have you done with Sam, you fiend?" she demanded.

"Same thing I've done to all these other people." Kelly waved his hand expansively at the dozens of motionless forms lying about. "The same thing I've done to countless others, and the same thing I'm going to do to you. I've stolen their minds." He

smiled evilly and strolled over to a bank of cabinets along the wall and opened the first. Inside were hundreds of small, glowing spheres, pulsing in steady rhythms with an inner light. Selecting one, he withdrew it and held it up before Carter's eyes. "Behold!" he said, insufferably pleased with his diabolical achievement. "This is Sam Beckett!"

Carter could only stare in horror. Vince Kelly, clearly enjoying playing the part of supervillain, continued his plot exposition. "All that she is, her essence, everything that makes her a unique personality – her *soul*, if you will – is stored in this tiny living crystal. All that is left in her body—" he indicated the still form lying on its slab "—is just enough neural energy to maintain her autonomic functions. Can't have all these people dying, after all," he finished, a sinister smirk twisting his features.

"You just make sure they wash up on the shore where the townspeople of Lake Town are sure to find them," said West, picking up the narrative thread, "ridding you of the necessity of killing them, while fueling the local legends of a brain-sucking lake monster, providing you with the perfect cover. I'm assuming your underwater base is shielded from sensors. Diabolically brilliant."

"Thank you," replied Vince Kelly. "But things are getting a little hot around here for my new... 'employer'. We'll be relocating to a safer hideout." Even as Kelly said that, workmen entered the chamber carrying antigravs. Working silently and quickly, they attached the devices to the cabinets containing the stolen life crystals and began hauling them out.

"You can't run far or fast enough, Kelly!" said Carter, straining against her binds. "I'll hunt you down for what you've done!" To herself though, she wondered who this mysterious 'employer' of Kelly's was. Perhaps the evil didn't end with Vincent Kelly. How deep did it go? Ridding the universe of

Kelly might not even solve the problem. No matter. She'd peel back the layers of this conspiracy until she got to the rotten core.

"You won't be doing any hunting, Commander," replied Kelly, the very essence of self-assurance. "For you see, your bodies will also shortly be found washed up on the shores of Blue Lake. Dead, I'm afraid. You've been worthy opponents, but I am the victor here." He motioned to the two goons standing guard at the door, who immediately jumped to action. Grabbing hold of the prisoners' arms, they led them from the chamber. "Farewell," said Kelly.

West cast a look back and smiled at Kelly. "Be seeing you," he said.

As the hatch closed behind them, Vince Kelly said, "Not likely."

Into the Fire

Location: Vincent Kelly's secret hideout

Lee Carter and West were shoved and prodded along the dank underwater hideout's metal-lined corridors by the two goons, headed for whatever grim and final fate awaited them, and it soon became apparent what that fate was to be when an airlock hove into view around a bend in the corridor. They would be expelled into the freezing depths of Blue Lake and drowned, to wash up on the shore, their bodies discovered by some local fishermen who would briefly lament the senseless deaths of yet two more victims of the dreaded but rarely-glimpsed Ogopogo lake monster, and then forgotten.

That was the *goons'* plan. It was not Carter's, and a quick sidelong glance at West confirmed that it wasn't his either. If they were going to make their escape, it was now or never. Another quick sidelong glance initiated their break.

Carter pretended to trip and stagger forward, forcing her guard to extend himself forward as well if he wanted to maintain his hold on her arm. At the same time, West twisted away from

his own captor and charged into the first, ramming his shoulder into the man's midsection with the force of a battering ram and slamming him back against the corridor's wall. His breath exploded in a mighty *WUMPH!*, paralyzing him, giving West the opportunity to deliver a solid knee-slam to the side of his head, finishing him off.

Carter meanwhile, spun around and delivered a vicious kick to the second goon's head, sending him spinning away, and followed up with a one-two kick to the chin. The goon went down on one knee, setting himself up perfectly for the knock-out blow, a devastating sideways kick of Carter's heavy boot.

"Nice high-kick, Commander!" said West. "Especially in those high heels!"

Pumped by the adrenaline rush, Carter found herself grinning madly. She rushed over to West and planted her lips against his and kissed him quick and hard. West was startled at first, but he quickly reciprocated with equal passion, all the while struggling against his bonds in his desire to grab and hold Carter to him. "Come on!" Carter said breathlessly after pulling away. "Untie me



so we can get out of here!" She and West reluctantly turned their backs to each other and began working on each other's tied wrists.

=^=

Vince Kelly supervised the loading of the last of the life crystals onto his private shuttle for transfer to the new base. He was just going through his office looking for any last-minute items he may have forgotten when the explosions started. From the sound of them, they were from *inside* the base.

"West and Carter!" he hissed, guessing the source. His new employer would not be happy about this turn of events. He grabbed his disruptor from the desk drawer and ran from the room.

=^=

After untying themselves and relieving the two unconscious guards of their weapons, West and Carter ran side by side back in the direction of the morgue, intending to somehow rescue Sam Beckett and the other comatose victims and liberate the life crystals from Vince Kelly for the purpose of reinstalling them in their proper bodies.

Along the way, they ran into a guard patrol and were forced to gun them down, but not before a stray shot from one of the fallen guards struck a pipe snaking along the wall behind Carter's head causing it to rupture. Inside was a plasma feed, which immediately began sputtering and moments later exploded. The explosion set off a series of chain reactions echoing from ever deeper inside the base. The floor plates under their boots began rumbling and the thick glass in the nearest porthole shivered, threatening to buckle under the terrific pressure exerted by the water at the lake bottom.

"This whole place is going to go," said West as he was forced to brace himself against the wall in response to a particularly violent detonation. Carter was tossed against him and he caught her around the waist and held her briefly before she disengaged herself. "Guess firing weapons in here wasn't such a hot idea," he said, covering over a sudden surge of emotion. This was neither the time nor the place for that sort of thing. *Later, when this is all over*, he promised himself.

"We need to find Kelly," said Carter, once again all business. She had her own unexpected feelings to cover over.

Choosing a direction, they ran on.

Careening around a corner in the corridor, they skidded to a halt when they saw a group of base personnel running towards them. West raised his disruptor, but Carter placed her hand on his arm and said, "Wait a sec." The running men all had frightened expressions on their faces, and ran past West and Carter without hardly even glancing at them. "I think they're just trying to get out of here," said Carter.

At the end of the corridor, they came to a large, thick door. It was open, and from the other side they heard a familiar voice shouting angry orders. They stepped across the threshold into a catastrophic scene. The room was obviously the control complex for the underwater base, with an array of control consoles arranged in a classroom layout, but there were bodies slumped over the stations and sprawled across the floor, all with charred disruptor burns on their chests and backs. And in the midst of the devastation stood Vincent Kelly, waving a pistol indiscriminately and shouting at the few terrified subordinates still standing.

"Hurry up, you sluggards! Secure the escape pod or you'll be joining the other incompetents!"

Kelly's lackey's cringed every time their master's nervously flailing disruptor swung in their direction, but they also

redoubled their efforts to load the last of the supplies and life crystals onto the escape pod.

Carter stepped fully into the room and leveled her own disruptor at Vince Kelly. She knew the weapon had no 'stun' setting, but found it difficult to care. "Hold it right there, Kelly!" she shouted. "You're under arrest!"

Kelly spun to face his accuser, and seeing it was indeed West and Carter, vented his rage in a primal, inchoate scream. "Why do you plague me?!?" he wailed, enraged past the point of reason. Demonstrating complete disregard for his own life or the lives of his workers, he fired wildly in Carter's direction, spraying disruptor fire all over the room, blowing out panels and circuits.

Men dove out of the way; some screamed and died. Carter lunged for the cover of the nearest control station and West ducked behind the doorframe. At the first break in Kelly's barrage, Carter popped out from her concealment and returned fire, forcing Kelly to dodge aside and find his own place to hide. West took the opportunity to dash from the doorway to what looked like a master control station. Braving the crisscrossing energy blasts, he scoured the myriad switches and dials with a keen eye. Carter did her best to keep West from getting killed by keeping Kelly pinned down with disruptor fire.

"What the hell are you doing?" she shouted over to West, wishing he would find a little cover for himself before he got his head blown off.

West spared a moment from his search to cast a glance back at Carter. "Looking for the emergency control to make this tub rise to the surface of the lake!" he shouted back. "Aha! This must be it!" He reached for a large red handle and pulled it.

From his crouch behind a console, Vincent Kelly saw what West was doing and shouted in outrage. "Nooo!!! You'll ruin everything!!!" He ran out from behind his cover, firing his disruptor wildly like a man with nothing left to lose. A blast

struck the master control console, causing it to explode and throwing West backwards. He skidded across the floor and thumped up against the far wall and lay still.

"West!" cried Carter. Clenching her teeth, she fired her disruptor at the still-onrushing Kelly, forcing him to duck for cover again.

Just then, the entire underwater base shook violently as never before, throwing everyone roughly to the deck. Carter had the queasy sensation of being in a high-speed elevator going up at incredible speed. She tried to crawl to West, but the acceleration pressed her downward making it difficult to move at all.

West's sacrifice hadn't been in vain. The sequence initiated by the lever was indeed propelling Vince Kelly's secret underwater base upwards to the surface, there to be exposed to the light of day and the scrutiny of everyone in Lake Town, not to mention the police and Starfleet Security. Vincent Kelly's days as a mind ripper were over, though his mysterious employer would still have to be discovered and dealt with.

The abrupt deceleration when the base finally reached the surface was bone-jarring in violence, but all throughout the wild ride, Carter had managed to keep her grip on her disruptor. She sprang to her feet as soon as the shaking subsided sufficiently and sought out Kelly, thinking to finish the game once and for all, but he was nowhere in sight. The few of Kelly's workers who were still conscious and alive did nothing to interfere with her, opting instead to stay as far out of the way as they could possibly contrive. As Carter stalked farther into the control room in search of her elusive quarry, they finally got up enough courage to bolt for the door and run away. That left just Carter and Kelly in here. Somewhere.

Carter spotted a door on the far side of the control room. She had missed it until now and suspected that Kelly had escaped in that direction. Suddenly, she felt the sharp jab of a disruptor

muzzle in the small of her back. She gasped involuntarily and began to turn, but another painful jab froze her in mid-motion.

"You have plagued me for the last time, Commander Carter," hissed Kelly. "You and your damned Banshee Squadron have been a thorn in my side for years. You thwarted my attempt to take over Serenity Starbase, then you thwarted my attempt to destroy it. You hounded me across the entire quadrant until I was forced to fake my own death on Nimbus III, but even that didn't throw you off my trail. When I tried to launch a nova bomb into this system's gas giant, you were there too – *but not this time!* The Mullurans were weak fools, but my new employer has a *winning* track record against your Banshees! Just ask your precious Commander Phoenix. What's that? You can't because she's dead? That's right! *And you're next! Prepare to meet your maker!*"

Head of the Serpent

Location: Control room of Vince Kelly's base

A triumphant Vincent Kelly had Commander Lee Carter at gunpoint. "My new employer has a winning track record against your Banshees!" he cried. "Just ask your precious Commander Phoenix. What's that? You can't because she's dead? That's right! *And you're next!*" He jabbed the disruptor pistol he held deeper into Carter's back. "Move towards that door."

Carter's blood froze in her veins at the mention of Jazz Phoenix. The horror of the events leading to the former Banshee Squadron Wing Commander's death were still agonizingly fresh in her mind: the Mulluran War, the dilithium mines on Rostella IV, the undead corpses of slain soldiers mindless pursuing them through the black tunnels, their rending claws always just barely out of reach... But worst of all was what they had found in the lowest pit of the mines – the only thing that had ever bested the Banshees. Jazz had sacrificed her own life to save the rest of them from its gruesome clutches.

The Jelly Brain.

At another impatient jab from Kelly, Carter was forced to start forward towards the door. Was Kelly's 'employer' another Jelly Brain?!? Madness! But then, Vincent Kelly *was* a madman. And it neatly explained his obsession with collecting stolen neural energy in his life crystals. If her guess was correct, she was pretty sure what chilling fate awaited her on the other side of that door. The Jelly Brain would extract her neural energy too, feasting on its living force, leaving her body an empty husk. Carter failed to suppress a violent shudder.

She had to break away from Kelly, but how? The villain held a gun at her back with his finger on the trigger. On the other hand, she had nothing to lose. She tensed her muscles, preparing for her desperation move, but never got the chance.

A deafening explosion rocked the control room as a gaping hole suddenly appeared in the high, domed ceiling. Billowing clouds of smoke filled the air and debris and sharp metal hailed down on their heads. Brilliant sunlight filtered through the new opening momentarily blinding Carter and Kelly, followed by streams of fresh sea air, dispelling the air of death permeating the chamber. Carter had no idea what was going on, but the distraction was all she needed.

She mercilessly rammed her elbow into Kelly's stomach, doubling him over, and ran towards the jagged wound in the ceiling. Three ropes snaked down from the blue sky above and three forms rappelled deckwards with military precision and swiftness. Phaser beams flashed from the figures, illuminating the smoke cloud from within, sweeping the room seeking a target, and amplified voices shouted orders. "Nobody move! We've got the place surrounded! Drop all weapons!"

A gust of wind swept through the blasted tear in the roof dispersing the acrid smoke, and Carter beheld her rescuers. Max Vasser was at the head of Jo Schmidt and Alex Dalton! Vince Kelly saw them as well.

"No! Not you! Damn you!" His voice bordered on the hysterical. Raising his disruptor, he fired several wild shots, and then fled for the far door in the control room, disappearing through it.

"Not so fast, dirtbag!" shouted Max, and immediately set off in pursuit, with Jo and Alex right on her heels.

"No, wait!" cried Carter, wanting to warn them about what she suspected lay on the other side of the door, but in their zeal none of the others heeded, leaving her no option but to run after.

The Banshees burst through the door, but none were prepared for the scene that slammed into their senses, not even Carter. Their momentum faltered and drained away, the very life sucked out of their limbs by the horrific manifestation lurking in the center of the new chamber beyond the control room. There, hovering above a noxious tank of bilious green slime was a thing out of their most primeval nightmares. *The Jelly Brain*.

"Oh dear God," whispered Max, horror-struck. "Not another one!" Jo just stood agape, while Alex took several staggering steps backwards, her lips trembling.

A wide pool sunk into the floor at the center of the circular, domed chamber was the nesting place of a Smelly Jelly. Glabrous tentacles extruded, whipped through the thick air, and were reabsorbed back into its mass in a never-ending cycle. A hellish radiance emanating from the Jelly bathed the chamber and all within in a sick, moldy shade of green, lending an aura of death and decay. Above it all though, levitated the object of the women's gaping stares – a huge, misshapen, disembodied BRAIN, sickly gray in color and dripping with green ooze. It pulsed and thrummed rhythmically and exuded an evil presence almost palpable in intensity, grabbing their eyes and refusing to let go.

On the far side of the suspended Brain, Carter spotted Vincent Kelly, face awash in the eerie green light, wringing his hands in unholy anticipation and cackling insanelly, but she

immediately felt her gaze forcefully ripped back to the Jelly Brain. She tried raising her disruptor, but discovered to her dismay that her arm no longer obeyed her will. The monstrous Brain in the center of the room filled her thoughts, crowding out all other considerations.



Seductive suggestions whispered softly in her mind. *Come closer. There is no need to fear.*

She tried pressing her eyes shut, but to no avail. Even through closed lids, she could still see the throbbing form of the Brain, felt sinuous tendrils reaching out for her and caressing her consciousness with their chilling touch.

Come to me. Embrace me, whispered the unspoken words.

Carter found it increasingly difficult to resist their temptation. She felt her feet shuffle forward. Try as she might, she couldn't stop herself. To her right and left, the other three women also jerked forwards like puppets on strings, glazed eyes staring unseeing ahead, arms hanging limply at their sides, phasers forgotten, helpless under the thrall of the powerful intellect.

Come to me. We will be one.

Carter was more than halfway to the Jelly Brain. Tentacles stretched and yearned for her like a lover reaching out for his long-lost paramour, ready to enfold her in their smothering embrace. Though utterly repulsed, she felt her arms rising to meet the questing limbs.

One more step. Do not deny your destiny.

Carter's fingers were inches away. She turned her head away and clenched her eyes and teeth in a titanic effort to fight the waking nightmare, but could feel the irresistible control of the Jelly Brain dragging her inexorably forward.

She heard and felt the sharp sizzle of a phaser beam set on its highest setting lance by her head, and moments later, the iron grip of the Jelly Brain released its hold on her will. Snapping her eyes open, she saw a charred hole blasted in the Brain's side. A second phaser beam burned another gash in the creature. The Jelly Brain faltered and sank onto the surface of the Jelly pool beneath it, its throbbing visibly diminishing, its wounds oozing viscous, black fluid in time with the pulsing. A keening wail issued from the mortally wounded monster as it sank, and was echoed suddenly by a more human shriek from the far side of the tank.

Vince Kelly screeched incoherently and clutched his head in obvious agony, then dropped to the floor, writhing spasmodically, as though he were linked to the Jelly Brain somehow and shared its pain.

At the same time, Max felt herself released from the creature's bondage. But even more significant than that. The black veil that had shrouded her mind ever since her encounter with the mysterious corvette out in the system's Oort Cloud lifted, and it was like drawing back the curtains and letting in the morning sunlight after a night a thousand years long. She knew she once again had her esper prescience back! She could feel it; that sense of almost being able to glimpse a few seconds into the future.

She instantly brought up her phaser and began firing into the gelatinous mass of wrinkled tissue. Jo and Alex, similarly freed, followed her lead, sending two more death-dealing energy beams licking across the fallen monster.

Carter flashed a look behind her to see where the phaser shots had come from that had crippled the Jelly Brain, and was astonished to see West propped up against the door frame with a phaser in his hand. His face was covered in blood from a jagged gash on his forehead, but smiled weakly and gave her the thumbs-up. Feeling suddenly rejuvenated and revitalized, Carter turned back to the Jelly Brain, and grinning fiercely, took aim with her own weapon and joined the others in blasting it.

The terrible alien keening rose in pitch as gray, folded tissue began sloughing off the stricken creature where the phasers hit. The Jelly Brain shuddered, its tentacles whipping about feebly, its viscous life-blood spreading across the deck, but it could do nothing to defend itself now that all its puppets were fled, incapacitated, or killed. It shuddered one last time, then the tentacles dropped to the floor and lay still, and the whole thing slouched momentarily before exploding in a grisly spray of fleshy chunks and globs of goo, splattering the chamber walls with slimy guts.

And then it was all over. Carter could hardly believe it. She let her phaser drop back to her side and took a couple of steps towards the crumpled Jelly Brain. It was clearly dead, and the Smelly Jelly in the vat had turned a dull, lifeless brown as well. The only motion in the room was the feebly-twitching form of Vincent Kelly lying on the floor and the slimy brain chunks slowly dribbling down the walls onto the deck. She looked across at her teammates and saw her own disbelieving relief mirrored on all three faces.

"Max, go take care of Kelly." She herself hurried back to the door where West was slumped. Wrapping an arm around his

shoulder, she gently propped him up and said, "Thanks, West. You saved the day."

West managed a weak smile. "Now that's what I call a 'mind blowing' experience!"

All the Loose Ends

Location: Captain Matthew Cross' office, Serenity City

"And that's how it happened, Captain. After we secured the base, which was by now bobbing on the surface of the lake, we called for aid and some boats from Lake Town towed the whole thing back to shore and anchored it just off the quays.

"A completely incoherent Vincent Kelly was taken into custody by Starfleet Security and will probably spend the rest of his life on Elba II. Seems that being a puppet of the Jelly Brain for so long turned him into a mental vegetable after it was destroyed. All of the personnel in the base were rounded up and hauled off as well, most of whom will also be spending the next few decades in penal colonies mining borite.

"As for the life crystals, they were all recovered, and as you can see, Lieutenant Beckett is back with us, body and mind."

Captain Matthew Cross sat coolly listening to Commander Lee Carter's report. Behind the Wing Commander stood all four Banshee members, including Sam Beckett, apparently no worse

for the wear. "Welcome back to the living, Lieutenant Beckett," he said impassively.

"Thank you, sir."

Turning back to Carter, Cross asked, "What about the rest of the life crystals and all the comatose bodies?"

"We've called in specialists from Vulcan – priests of Gol. They'll identify the life essences in the crystals so they can be matched back up with their own bodies. For the crystals whose original bodies have been lost, the Vulcans have generously offered to take them to the Halls of Ancient Thought on Mount Seleya and deposit the consciousnesses into a special wing, to be cared for by the adepts there."

"And the Jelly Brain?"

"Dead."

"I see. Anything else to add?"

"One other thing, sir. Lieutenant Commander Vasser has resolved her, um... issues. It seems the Jelly Brain had been clouding her mind, damping her esper ability to prevent her from discovering its plans."

Cross drew a deep breath and considered all he'd heard. "So to summarize, you solved a string of disappearances that has been plaguing the area for months and has had the local constabulary not to mention Starfleet Intelligence stumped, single-handedly apprehended the most wanted criminal in the entire quadrant after he successfully eluded Starfleet Security for months, put an end to a heinous black market smuggling ring dealing in human souls, rescued the missing Lieutenant Beckett after being ordered repeatedly to cease and desist, cured Lieutenant Commander Vasser of her parapsychological trauma, and even solved the age-old mystery of the brain-sucking Ogotogo lake monster. And all without destroying your starfighters for a change. That about cover it?"

Jo was about to remind the captain about Max's little accident battling the Jelly Brain's corvette in the asteroid belt, but Max

caught her and surreptitiously punched her in the gut, then snapped back to attention before Cross noticed.

Carter looked contrite. "Uh, yes sir."

Cross nodded and regarded them severely. "All right then. You're all officially reprimanded for disobeying direct orders." Then his expression softened and he actually smiled a little. "Unofficially – good work, ladies."

=^=

"So, what do you want to do today, Alex?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do today, Jo?"

"I dunno, whadda *you* wanna do today?"

"*I* dunno whadda *YOU* wanna do today?"

"Duhhh, I don't know, what do *YOU*–"

"Oh God, not this stupid comedy routine again..." said Max, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "If you two morons don't shut up I'm gonna kill you!" she shouted.

The five reunited friends had left Captain Cross' office high in the Starfleet tower and were now back at street level walking back to their apartment. They had the rest of the day to kill, before their normal duties resumed tomorrow. "So, how do you think we should spend the rest of our free time, Lee?" asked Jo. "We've got a few hours left in our so-called vacation."

Carter looked up. She'd been staring at the sidewalk as they walked along, her mind far away. "Hmm? What? Oh, I don't know."

Jo caught the faraway look in her friend's eyes and decided to tease her a little. "Mooning over a certain heroic rogue?"

"First of all," corrected Carter, "I do not 'moon'. And second, none of your business!"

"Uh-huh. Thought so. So, when is West being released from the hospital?"

Carter found herself smiling. "Tomorrow afternoon. I'm going to take some leave and we're gonna spend some time together. He said he wants to show me his ship."

"You sure he said 'ship'?"

"Very funny..."

"In honor of Sam's return, I think she should get to decide where we go tonight," suggested Alex.

"Here here," chimed in Max and Jo.

"Well, okay," said Sam. "As long as we don't have to walk through any dark alleys to get there!"

