

# STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON

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# RUNAWAY!

RICHARD ADALBERT MERK



## **Hang On!**

Starbase 901 - a frontier outpost where anything can happen, and usually does. Follow the misadventures of Kim Tycho, fighter pilot, when she runs into one of the most infamous names in recent Federation history.



# ***RUNAWAY!***

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron

Richard A. Merk



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**Timeframe:**

This story takes place in 2381, shortly after the Banshees were transferred from the *USS Knight* to Starbase 901, about three years before the events chronicled in 'Eidolon'.

It also happens to have the distinction of being the very first Banshee Squadron story I ever wrote.

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# 01 - Hearts and Triangles

"*What?!?*" cried Kimberly Tycho in shock and hurt disbelief. "Oh Lee! How could you? I thought we were friends!"

"It's not like I did it on purpose, Kimmie! It was just a dumb accident. It didn't mean a thing!" said Carter for the forty-seventh time. She was plainly nearing the limits of how much exasperation she could take.

"That's not what Kassia said," accused Kim.

Lee Carter sighed. It had become painfully obvious that recounting to her friends the evening's events at the new station commander's welcome dinner had been a mistake. Or at least, she probably shouldn't have begun her story with that particular anecdote. "Never mind about what Kassia says," she retorted, a little angrily, but then she decided to switch strategies. In a more conciliatory tone, she said, "You don't believe in all that psychic esper mumbo-jumbo anyway, do you?"

From off to the side where she'd been quietly retuning a phaser pistol and trying to mind her own business, Max Vasser harrumphed noisily and said, in her most corrosive voice, "Thanks for the vote of confidence, boss."

"You stay out of this," snapped Carter irritably. She knew that Max had very high esper ratings and her skills in that area had saved their butts on more than one occasion, but she just didn't need the distraction of her dark, acerbic humor right now.

"I need to get out of here," Kim was saying, turning toward the exit. Carter could see tears brimming in the normally perky young woman's eyes.

"Wait! Kimmie—" but it was no use. Kim was through the common room's doorway, and the automatic panels slid shut behind her with quiet finality.

Carter frowned darkly, though not in anger at Kim's over-reaction. She was concerned for the well-being of her flight team. This was not the best time for divisions to creep in, what with the entire trans-Briar Patch Sector crawling with Mullurans and who knows what else, and a brand new captain in charge of the station. She looked around the room at her other teammates, but as her gaze neared each one, they quickly looked away and desperately pretended to be busy with something else. It had been an uncomfortable incident for all of them. Finally, Jo Schmidt, who of all of them was closest in age and temperament to young Kimberly Tycho, ventured the obvious question.

"Lee, what in the world happened at that dinner?"

Carter walked over to the briefing table in the center of the room and sat down heavily in her customary chair. Resting her elbows on the tabletop, she just sat, rubbing her

temples with her knuckles for a few seconds. Jo walked over and sat down in the chair beside her. Max put down her phaser and came over, followed by quiet and shy Sam Beckett, who had until now been keeping to herself on the other side of the large room.

Carter finished rubbing, and looking up, saw the three of them sitting around the table in their usual spots, waiting expectantly. "What is this, a mission briefing?" she asked, trying to dispel the overhanging gloom.

"I suppose you could call it that," answered Max. "And you better not leave out any details." Her face held the suggestion of a smile, but her tone made it clear she wasn't leaving until the full story was told.

Carter saw identical determination on the other two faces. The bond between the five members of Banshee Squadron was tight; closer than she'd ever experienced in any other fighter group she'd ever served in. One of their number was in trouble, and the others wouldn't rest until the matter was resolved.

She leaned back in her chair and tilted her head back, organizing her recollections of the last few fateful hours, then began.

"I've already told pretty much everything. The welcome dinner for Starbase 901's new commanding officer went great. I was clumsy during dessert and spilled my wine. Is it my fault it spread across the white tablecloth in a giant heart-shaped stain pointing right at Garek Loran? Is it my fault the station's new Chief Counselor picked that moment to practice her 'psychic' powers and read romantic omens into everything?"

"No, it's your fault you couldn't figure out how much this would bug Tycho," replied Max. "You know how the kid feels about Garek."

"Yeah," chimed in Jo. "A heart-shaped stain pointing at Garek? C'mon, Lee."

"Yeah," agreed Sam.

"Yeah, well... Like I said, it was just a stupid accident no matter what you crazy espers say. Quit ganging up on me. It's not like I planned it or anything," complained Carter irritably. "Believe me, Garek felt as uncomfortable as I did." She drummed her fingers on the table top, thinking. "I better go see Garek and get this mess straightened out. I'm sure he can talk some sense into Kimmie."

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On the way down to the station's engineering levels, Carter mentally reviewed events. When she'd spilled the glass during dinner, she hadn't really placed any significance on it. Although, even at the time, she had wondered why she should feel so suddenly self-conscious and uncomfortable. And in that instant, when her eyes had met Garek's across the table, she'd seen the exact same feelings and thoughts mirrored there.

Could Kassia have been right? Was the heart stain an omen? Was there something between herself and Garek? Is that why she'd felt so abashed? Because somewhere deep down, her subconscious knew it? And is that why Kimmie had reacted so strongly to what was supposed to have been nothing more than an amusing anecdote? Because she too

had sensed something between her friend Lee and her boyfriend Garek?

Too many questions. And worse, no answers. But one thing was for sure, that this mess had to get straightened out. Banshee Squad would cease functioning as the well-oiled machine it was if all five team members weren't at one-hundred percent. But even more importantly than that, she didn't want anything to come between her and Kim's friendship.

Stepping out of the turbolift deep inside Starbase 901, Carter found Garek exactly where she knew he would be — in the heart of the Engineering sector, up to his waist in partially dismantled Mulluran weaponry. His hands and forearms were smeared with grime, and he'd even managed to get some on his forehead. Not for the first time, Carter wondered how, in an age of ODN conduits, isolar circuitry and EPS grids, he always managed to get so dirty, but decided that that was part of his charm.

But even as that stray thought slipped unbidden into her brain, Carter mentally recoiled in horror. *What am I thinking?* She angrily shook her head to banish all such fantasies. She swore a solemn oath to herself that that was the first and last time she'd ever think a thought like that about Garek. *He's not even my type*, she chided herself.

Erecting her best business expression on her face, she called out to get Garek's attention over the general engineering hubbub. "Commander!"

Garek looked up to see who was hollering. Carter thought she saw a strange expression make a fleeting appearance on his face, but it was gone so quickly she

couldn't be sure. He put down the self-sealing stembolt he'd been adjusting and walked over to where she stood.

"Hi there, Commander Carter," he said affably. "How kind of you to grace our humble engineering facilities with your inimitably beautiful presence. To what do I owe the superfluous pleasure of this visit?"

Carter winced. "Don't joke around like that, Garek."

Carter's reproach, and seeing that his jovial greeting had done nothing to lighten the serious expression on her face, made him decide to cool it. "Okay. Sure. Uh... what's up?"

Before Carter could elaborate, she was interrupted by a voice from directly behind her.

"I *knew* it! The two of you together! Garek, you son-of-a—" Kim had approached Carter and Garek from the other side of the dismantled Mulluran weaponry, out of their line of sight. Most likely, she'd come here seeking the truth from Garek on her own, but now found herself face to face with incontrovertible proof that her fears had been well-founded after all.

She took two angry strides forward and laid a round-house swing at Garek, wanging him hard across the face, then spun around and stormed out of the Engineering section.

Speechless, Garek rubbed his cheek, completely mystified by what had just happened.

Carter said, apologetically, "We have a little problem..."

## 02 - The Stranger

"You've got to be kidding!" Garek exclaimed. "Me and you? Together? That's nuts. That's laughable!" And to prove it, he laughed.

Carter had gone over the unlikely sequence of events that had led up to the current state of events, and all the while Garek's facial expression had become more and more incredulous.

"Yeah, laughable," repeated Carter. "Ha ha." She tried to laugh the whole thing off too, but her ha-ha's came out sounding forced. Knowing that, she quickly changed the subject, hoping Garek hadn't noticed. "Listen, it's not your fault," she said. "You know how she is." She looked in the direction in which Kim had left the bay. "I just don't know how I'm going to talk her down. I'll go after her—"

"Hold up, Commander," said Garek. "I think it'll be best if I talk to her first. Chances are, she won't want to believe a word you say."

Carter sighed, and eventually agreed. "All right. I'll check in with you later.

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Garek turned the corner into the main corridor of one of the lower Engineering decks after Lee left. He saw Kim leaning up against the corridor wall, her head in her hands. His heart went out to her. "Kim, we need to talk," he ventured hesitantly yet hopefully, taking a few steps toward her.

"I've got nothing to say to you, pig!" she replied, angry disdain distorting her voice.

"I know what you're thinking. You think I'm lying to you. You think I'm involved with Lee. You think Lee's been lying to you this entire time about her and my supposive relationship, and you're also asking yourself 'What does Garek see in her? I look much better in a bikini than she does.' Well, you're right. You do." Garek smiled, trying to get closer to her, hoping his attempt at humor would pave the way.

"Bastard!" Kim pushed Garek away with one arm, and wiped away some tears with the uniform sleeve of the other. "All men are bastards!"

Then, visibly forcing herself to calm down, she sniffled once, and then brought her eyes up to meet his. Garek was deeply troubled by what he saw in there. "I don't know if I can believe you," she said, her voice suddenly deadly composed. "I don't know if I can trust Lee either." She turned, and rushed down the corridor towards the turbolift.

"Kim, wait!" Garek called out, but it was no use. The turbolift doors were closed, and Kim was gone.

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Kim ran without conscious direction through the empty, clanging corridors of Starbase 901 away from Garek and all other bastards as fast as her legs would carry her. Her brain was all awchirl; feelings of anger, confusion, hurt, as well as her more tender feeling toward Garek were all mixed together in a hopeless tangle. They came and went so quickly in an endless circular procession that Kim hardly knew how she felt.

Finally her fleeing feet slowed and her rasping breath calmed enough for her to look around. She'd never been in this part of the station before, and wasn't really sure exactly where she was. By the slightly dingy look of things and the complete absence of any other people, it was one of the lesser-used areas, and judging by the massive double doors spaced at regular intervals down the extra-wide corridor, it was a bulk storage sector somewhere way down on the lower decks.

She heaved a ragged sigh and slumped against a wall. The adrenaline rush was wearing off now, leaving her physically and emotionally drained. Gravity dragged heavily at her limbs, and pulled her unresisting slowly to the deck, leaving a trail down the side of the wall where the back of her uniform wiped away a layer of dust.

Alone, crouching on the floor, lost, she hugged her legs tightly to her chest and let her forehead come to rest on her knees. Then the tears began to flow.

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Eventually, she woke from her stupor and spent a few puzzled moments looking around at the strange surroundings, wondering where she was and how she got there.

Then she remembered. All the hurt and bad feeling came rushing back to her, threatening to crash over her and drag her helpless and unstruggling out to sea again. "The big dumb jerk," she muttered sadly to the empty corridor.

To Kim's surprise, the corridor answered back. "He really must be a big dumb jerk to leave someone as pretty as you all alone down here."

Kim caught her breath and spun on her heels, and came face-to-face with a tall man. Somehow he had managed to come up right beside her without her noticing. Her Starfleet training automatically kicked in and she quickly sized him up.

He was tall and lean, rangy actually, and the muscles in his arms could be seen rippling under his shabby clothes when he moved. His hair was dark, turning gray at the temples, and was close-shorn, and he wore a ragged goatee. It was his eyes that struck Kim especially though. There was something compelling about them. They hinted at some deep secret of his soul, some terrible ordeal suffered in his past was lurking just below the surface. But for all that, they were kind, gentle eyes, and matched the reassuring smile he wore.

It took Kim several seconds to realize she'd been staring at the stranger's eyes, but the man's comment about Garek

being a big dumb jerk reasserted itself and shook Kim back to reality and prompted an automatic response: "Well, he's not—" but then she remembered she was mad at Garek and stopped short in her defense of him.

Suddenly remembering her duty and the fact she was a Starfleet officer, she tried to stand a little straighter and look as "official" as she could under the circumstances. Clearing her throat, she asked, "Who are you? What are you doing down here? This area is off-limits to civilians, you know." A sudden nagging feeling struck her just then, causing her to look at the stranger carefully for a few moments, then ask, "—and why do you look so familiar?"

The tall stranger raised his hands before him to ward off the onslaught of questions. He laughed charmingly and said, "Whoa. Slow down, miss." Now it was his turn to size up Kimmie. She felt a little self-conscious under his scrutiny, but strangely excited by it at the same time. His mind was quickly made up about her apparently, because he lowered his voice and whispered conspiratorially, "Can I trust you?"

Kim knew immediately that she was heading for trouble, but for some reason she didn't really care right now. If she had been in her right mind, she would have realized that she wasn't in her right mind. "Yes," she found herself answering this mysterious, yet familiar-looking stranger.

He smiled that charming smile at her again, and said, "Good. Follow me." Without another word, he walked off down the corridor, with Kim following close behind.

A voice in the back of her head was telling her that this guy shouldn't be here, that he was up to no good, but another voice told her that she could always call for help if

the situation turned ugly. Yet a third voice reassured her that the stranger could be trusted — he looked 'trustworthy'. A fourth voice sarcastically reminded her that there was no basis for this determination whatsoever. The third voice replied that he looked naggingly familiar somehow, which the fourth voice countered with the observation that the stranger had smoothly but deliberately avoided her questions about his identity.

Meanwhile, unaware of Kim's internal debate, the stranger reached the end of the main corridor, then turned left and proceeded down an even less used gangway. At the end of that, a metal ladder bolted to the wall led even further down, through the floor into the uninhabited bowels of the station. He slid down the ladder with practiced ease, and after a moment's hesitation during which her more cautious voices shouted urgent warnings, Kim followed him down into the darkness below.

They emerged into a vast machinery space. "Where are we?" asked Kim, shivering in the sudden cold. "We must be right next to the outer hull here." The temperature had dropped so much her breath steamed in the air.

"That's right," said the stranger, turning, his own words coming out in puffs of smoke. He had continued forward, and now stopped to beckon Kim to keep following.

Pushing her caution back, silencing the internal voices, she complied, but warily. They walked for a while more, ever deeper into the maze of machinery. Evidently, life support here was kept at a minimum, for the temperature dropped until Kim's teeth chattered, and as she followed this mysterious man deeper into unknown territory, she

began wondering if the chattering was because of the cold, or because of fright and nervousness.

The lighting was generally very dim here, with occasional pools of brighter illumination cast by overhead spots on various blocks of machinery. The ceiling was high above — at least twenty feet over their heads — to give the massive mechanisms here room, but even so some of them towered almost as high. The irregular walls of the machine blocks were crisscrossed with pipes and conduits and valves of all different sizes, many of which crossed from machine block to machine block high overhead or sometimes underfoot, forcing Kim and the stranger to constantly watch where they stepped. Some of the pipes and valves dribbled and oozed dark fluid, and indeed, most of the surfaces here were gray and grimy, not fit for human habitation. The entire effect was to give this place an eerie, cave-like, or dungeon-like atmosphere.

Her warning-voices were once again clamoring for her to just turn around and run, predicting all manners of grim outcomes from continuing forward after this obviously crazy person. But as they rounded the corner of a particularly massive and convoluted machine block, she saw that there was no trap waiting for her, rather the cheerfully flickering flames of a small campfire. It was carefully built inside a ring of broken concrete bricks burning what looked like pieces of old wooden packing crates as fuel. Overhead, the fire-suppression sensors and nozzles had all been smashed.

The tall stranger had rounded the campfire and hunkered down beside it and began warming his hands. A breath of

errant warmth caressed Kim's cheek, and she hurried to join him there and drive the bitter cold of space away.

After a few minutes of vigorous hand rubbing and waiting to see if the tall stranger would answer the questions she'd put to him up in the cargo area, Kim could stand it no longer. The man didn't seem interested in opening up to her, and she wondered why he'd asked her to come down here. He seemed contented to just hunch there before the fire warming himself. Thoughts of danger and of fleeing to safety began resurfacing.

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On a crowded, busy space station, the only place that Garek called his own (even more so than his own quarters) was his office in the Engineering department. The clean, mechanical-smelling air cycling through helped relax him. The day had not gone according to plan. The first real love of his life was convinced he was cheating on her with her boss, and the reverse-engineering of the Mulluran weaponry he'd been working on had hit snag after snag. It was all giving him a headache. He lay down on the ratty old sofa in the rear, closed his eyes, and dozed fitfully off.

Genuine rest eluded Garek though. His thoughts and feelings were too chaotic, and gave him no reprieve. He had to try again to talk to Kim; try and fix things between them. *Even though none of this is my fault*, he muttered irritably to himself.

Getting up, he stepped over to his work desk. Tapping a control on the desktop, he waited for the small, built-in

computer screen to indicate readiness, then said, "Computer, locate Lieutenant Kimberly Tycho."

*Lieutenant Kimberly Tycho is on deck 917, sector G, intersection 57-D.*

"What? That's impossible. That's just down the corridor!" exclaimed Garek. "Has she just been sitting there all day long?!"

*Please restate the inquiry,* replied the computer.

Irritated at the aggravating machine, Garek snapped off the control and rushed out of his office, headed for corridor 57-D.

Arriving moments later, he found exactly what he dreaded he'd find: Kim's communicator pin lying on the deck, knocked off or deliberately dropped during her hasty flight. Without the communicator's locator circuitry, there was no way for the station's sensors to find Kim among the thousands of other station residents. He sighed heavily and muttered, "Finding her is going to be harder than I thought..."

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Kim was tired of waiting for the stranger to speak. She mustered her nerve and asked him again, this time with a real edge of steel in her voice, "So, just who are you, mister?"

The man continued staring into the fire as if he hadn't heard her for long moments more, then slowly raised his head and turned those volume-speaking eyes toward her. In a calm voice, he said simply, "You can call me Tom."

Kim's jaw dropped and her eyes widened with shock and recognition. She knew she'd seen this person before, and now she remembered! After all these years... No wonder his eyes spoke of secret, unspeakable horrors. What abominations this man must have witnessed and experienced firsthand. Now he was here, hunched over a campfire not five feet in front of her.

*“Thomas Riker!”*

## 03 - The Whole Truth

"You're Thomas Riker!" squeaked Kim. She had suspected from the start that she knew the stranger's face from somewhere, but when he'd said 'Call me Tom,' full recollection had suddenly sprung forth.

Suddenly very nervous, Kim began edging slowly away from the warmth of the campfire and the man hunched down on the opposite side. Still, her natural curiosity kept her from running away outright. In part to bolster her courage, she asked, "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in a labor camp on Lazon II."

"*Supposed to?*" snarled Riker, sudden fury and hatred smoldering in those dark eyes. Kim could see his fists spasmodically clenching and unclenching, and the muscles beneath his shirt tense. "Yes, that was the thanks I got from Starfleet for exposing the Obsidian Order's secret shipyards in the Orias system. A life sentence in a Cardassian labor camp!" he shouted, fully enraged.

For a split second, Kim was sure he was going to completely lose control and kill her on the spot for what she'd said, but his wild eyes locked with hers and he snapped out of his frenzy with such suddenness it was as if he'd been slapped. Seeing Kim shrink away from him in fear, he made a visible show of calming himself: he unclenched his fists and laid his palms on his knees and took a few deep breaths.

"I'm sorry," he said, and looked guiltily into the fire. After a moment: "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You didn't," lied Kim. She decided to risk scooting a little closer to the fire again. "And I didn't mean anything by what I said either."

"I know," said Riker. He flashed her a reassuring smile. The wild man was gone, once again replaced by the charming stranger. "It's just that I've been through kind of a lot lately."

"I'll bet," said Kim, relaxing again now that Riker seemed once again in control of himself. She found herself strangely attracted to this enigmatic man, and wanted to draw him out. "I'm still curious, Tom—"

"—How I got here?" He looked her square in the eye and smiled a cock-sure smile. "I escaped!"

"Escaped? From a Cardassian labor camp? Wow! I've got to hear this story." She made herself more comfortable, crossing her legs under her, leaning forward with elbows on knees and chin in hands. She looked for all the world like a small child waiting to hear a story about Santa Claus.

"There's not much to tell," said Riker, but could see Kim would never be put off that easily. Sighing, he returned his

gaze to the fire once again, and his focus turned inward as he mentally prepared himself to relive those times.

"After the War — after Cardassia was destroyed by the Dominion — the Cardies' few remaining resources were spread thin. It didn't take long for all the outlying military garrisons to be recalled to Cardassia Prime. They had no more use for Lazon II, so they abandoned us.

"Those were difficult times. Scavenging and fighting amongst the former inmates was out of control. Food was scarce. More died during that time than when the Cardassians were still in charge. Myself and some of the other former-Maquis joined together and dug in at an old Cardassian guard outpost. We held off the other prisoners for years. Naturally they wanted our shelter for themselves. They were slowly wearing us down. We couldn't have held out much longer.

"Then, as luck would have it, (he said that with a sneer), a Cardassian civilian freighter landed near our compound. They were probably salvagers looking for scrap. I doubt they expected anyone to still be alive there. My Maquis companions attacked the freighter intending to steal it — there was nothing I could do to stop them — but they met more resistance than they'd planned on. They were all killed, but in the struggle, all of the small crew aboard the freighter were also killed.

"By this time, the rest of the prisoners realized that a ship had landed. If they got their hands on it, they'd tear it to shreds in their insanity. So I got on board and took off, and here I am."

"Wow," said Kim again, then suddenly brightened. "You're a hero!" she exclaimed. "We've got to tell everyone

you're here." Eager to start spreading the news right away, she moved to get up.

"NO!" barked Riker instantly, some of the uncontrollable wildness returning to his eyes. His hand whipped around the small campfire and locked her forearm in an iron grip. "You don't understand!" he shouted.

"Ow!" cried Kim, twisting and yanking, trying to wrest her arm from Riker's hold, but she had no hope. Wincing with the pain, she cried, "Let go! That hurts!"

Instantly, Riker released his grip and recoiled as if she'd actually slapped him. "I'm sorry— I didn't mean—"

Kim backed away from Riker as soon as he released her, and after making sure she wasn't seriously damaged and that he wasn't making any other moves to hurt her, she said, "Well, no harm done, I guess." Rubbing her arm, she muttered under her breath, "I'll bet that leaves a bruise."

After letting a few uneventful moments pass just to make sure, she returned to the campfire and hunched down again, renewing her study of the man opposite her. He was such an enigma: withdrawn and shell-shocked, yet cocky and self-confident — and prone to violent outbursts. Considering that he'd spent the last fifteen years in a brutal Cardassian labor camp, it was understandable that he'd be a little messed up.

Tom looked at her, the wild-eyed frenzy gone, some of his pleasant self-confidence having returned. "No one can know about me, but I do need your help."

"Why don't you want anyone to know you're here?"

"Well, I'm not exactly Starfleet anymore," he chuckled ruefully. "If you'll recall your history, I abandoned my post on the *USS Gandhi* and joined the Maquis. Then I stole the

*USS Defiant* from DS9, shot and kidnapped a Bajoran Major in the process, and foiled the secret Cardassian plot brewing at Orias. That means I'm wanted by Starfleet, the Bajoran Militia, the Cardassian military, the Obsidian Order, and God knows who else."

"Oh. I guess I can see how that might make you a little unpopular."

"I managed to get this far by running and hiding and ducking through places like the Badlands and the Briar Patch. I disabled the IFF transmitter on my stolen freighter and did some creative shield modulating, which let me slip close enough to this station to beam myself into an uninhabited section. All the machinery down here blocks the internal sensors from picking me up."

"That's all amazing," said Kim, interrupting. Thomas Riker's story was quickly becoming a little too much to take in all at once. "You seem to be doing pretty good so far. What do you need me for?"

Riker hesitated. Kim could see the indecision in the lines around his eyes. Could he trust her? Or would she turn him in? *This is it*, thought Kim. *He's got to come clean now if he wants me to help him.*

Riker decided. All traces of his former neuroses were washed away; he was once again the efficient, confident Starfleet officer he'd been what seemed to him a lifetime ago. "I abandoned my stolen freighter when I beamed off it," he said. "But I still need to get out of Federation space."

*Here it comes*, thought Kim. Sudden excitement thrilled up her spine unexpected, surprising her with its intensity.

"I want to steal your ship."



## 04 - Ambushed!

In a spectacular radial blast of transwarp particles, Banshee 5, the *Manticore*, exited warp burst mode and reentered normal space-time, the vessel's quantum capacitors fully drained.

A sharp intake of breath and a wheezing coughing fit came from the back seat of the small cockpit, along with a few muttered and half choked-off profanities. From her place in the forward position, Kim Tycho just smiled. She had had the same reaction the first time she experienced the radical warp burst maneuver.

"You okay back there?" she asked with a wry smile.

"What a rush!" huffed a recovering Thomas Riker. "Back in my day, we risked a warp core breach if we pushed our engines up to warp nine. We just did better than warp fifty!"

"Yeah. Starfleet's made a lot of progress in the last ten years," said Kim appreciatively, patting the console in front

of her affectionately. "It's an off-shoot of technology *Voyager* brought back from the Delta Quadrant."

Now that the immediate excitement was over, Riker turned once again serious. He asked, "Do you think anyone will come after us?"

"No way," said Kim confidently, partly to reassure her passenger, partly to reassure herself. "We're in gray mode. I'll be back on Starbase 901 before anyone notices I'm even gone."

"Hmmpf," grunted Riker. "More likely your captain will clap you in irons the second you set foot back there." Kim suddenly felt his hand on her shoulder, and felt an involuntary thrill. Riker said gently, "I appreciate your helping me like this. You're putting your career on the line for a total stranger."

Kim tried to shrug it off. "It's no big deal," she said as nonchalantly as she could.

She felt Riker's hand leave her shoulder and heard him settle back in his seat again. He said in a lighter tone, "So, just why are you throwing away a promising career to help a perfect stranger?"

"Uh..." Kim suddenly had no words. Riker's question had resurrected painful memories of the last few days. The lovers' conspiracy, a slap, angry words, then running, running through seeming miles of corridors until she found this man.

"Let me guess—" Riker was saying, still jovial, scratching his scruffy goatee in mock concentration. "—boyfriend troubles," he joked.

Kim gasped involuntarily. His guess had hit the nail right on the head. Suddenly angry at Riker for being so

smug, but mostly angry at herself for letting this insufferably smug man get under her skin, she lashed out. "Just shut up, Tom. You don't know anything."

Taken aback by the sudden unexpected outburst, he just said, "Okay, okay. Calm down, Lieutenant."

Kim sniffed, and fixed her attention on the flight controls.

The awkward silence that followed stretched into minutes, broken only by the irregular beeps and hums from the *Manticore's* nav-computer. Kim considered breaking the silence and apologizing to Tom for yelling, but just as she was about to turn around to face Riker, his low voice cut her off.

"I'm sorry for getting you into this, Kim," Riker said. "Right from the first, I could tell that there was something troubling you. I should've stayed hidden in the shadows, but I didn't. I took advantage of your vulnerable condition and convinced you to go AWOL. And now you're going to be in more trouble than you've ever been in before, and all because you just wanted to do what was right — to help a person in need."

"Kinda like what you did at Orias," she replied. "You did what you thought was right."

"Well—" he began, but decided to divert the conversation from that particular topic. "If you want, I'll come back with you to your space station," he offered. "I'll tell them I forced you into all this. You'll be off the hook."

"Absolutely not!" said Kim firmly. "I'll drop you off, then I'll go back and face the music." After a second's pause, she added, "And I'll try to patch things up with Garek."

"All right—" began Riker, but his next statement was chopped off by the wail of the *Manticore's* red alert siren in their helmet speakers.

Kim snapped into action, making full mental connection between her neuro-helmet and the Banshee's A.I. systems, tapping into the sensors. "Damn!" she hissed between clenched teeth.

"What is it?" demanded Riker from the back seat.

"I was so busy talking that I wasn't paying attention to flying," she said roughly, cursing her incompetence. "We've been spotted. Hang on!"

Riker gripped the sides of his seat and did his best to hang on as Kim sent the nimble Banshee into a series of wild evasive gyrations. Outside the cockpit, Riker could see explosions begin to blossom all around them as their adversary tried to zero in on its elusive target.

"Why don't we just go to warp burst again and outrun them?" he shouted above the whine of the straining impulse engines.

"The warp engines aren't available! The warp burst drained them. It'll take the quantum capacitors another eight minutes to recharge!" yelled Kim back. The blast from a particularly close miss rocked the plane, and Kim yanked the stick hard to the left in response. "Damn Mullurans," she cursed. "Where did they come from anyway? Those are small short-range fighters, and there's no bases around here."

"They must have a hidden base around here somewhere," concluded Riker from the rear of the cockpit. "They're probably planning a surprise attack on the starbase."

Kim picked up where Riker left off. "And we accidentally stumbled on them before they were totally ready."

"We have to go back and warn the station," concluded Riker.

"But you'll be caught!"

"This is more important."

"Right," said Kim after a moment's deliberation. "But first we have to dodge the Mullurans for another seven minutes until the warp engines get recharged."

"Can you do it?"

"Just watch me!" said Kim, but the slight quaver in her voice belied her confident words. "Now shut up and let me do my job."

"Yes ma'am." Riker renewed his grip on the seat and clamped his mouth shut. He wished he had something to do instead of just sit here like a piece of inanimate cargo, but their fate was totally in Lieutenant Tycho's hands.

Under Kim's skillful direction, the sleek Banshee fighter danced a deadly tango with its opponents, three in all. Spheres of rapidly expanding plasma and brilliant lances of coherent energy filled the night as the battle raged. At one point, a pair of crackling blue fireballs from the Banshee's quantum cannons connected with the exposed underside of one of the Mulluran ships, cracking its shell wide open and spilling its contents into the void. Seconds later, the wreck was engulfed by a massive fireball of its own, vaporizing what was left. The two remaining ships however, seemed to harden their resolve and attacked with more ferocity than ever.

"We're not going to make it!" shouted Kim over her shoulder to her passenger. Another violent explosion heaved the cockpit upward. Outside, the Banshee's shields sputtered pathetically under the continuous assault. Smelling blood, the Mullurans moved in for the kill.

"I'm going to have to ditch us somewhere! Program the automatic distress buoy to transmit the record of this battle," she told Riker. "Hopefully, the starbase will get the message in time to avoid the Mulluran attack no matter what happens to us."

Glad to finally have something to do, Riker began feeding the instructions into the Banshee's computer. A few seconds later, he shouted, "Done!"

Kim pushed the throttle full open and aimed her ship directly at a small planetoid about fifty-thousand miles distant. "Time to play 'follow the leader', boys," she muttered at the closing Mulluran ships.

The Mullurans took the bait. In a line, the three ships, one Banshee and two Mulluran pirate ships, hurled themselves at the craggy face of the planetoid. As the surface drew nearer, the Banshee made contact with the outer layers of the thin atmosphere. What shields remained sputtered brightly, then flashed out, finally overloaded, and the nose of the *Manticore* began to glow dully orange. The scream of the racing atmosphere outside hurt their ears, but Kim didn't dare let up.

Behind the fleeing Banshee, the Mulluran vessels were having a worse time of it. Not designed for atmospheric flight, their shields had also failed and their outer hulls were already glowing white hot from the atmospheric

friction. So intent were they to destroy their foe however, that they gave no heed to the danger they were in.

Without warning, the lead Mulluran ship began buckling. The engine pylons bent and twisted unnaturally, then gave way altogether, ripping jagged holes in the hull. Hot plasma and deuterium spewed out, leaving a glowing comet's tail behind the stricken craft. A blinding explosion from the power plant followed moments thereafter.

Seeing the fate of its companion and not wanting any part of that pie, the remaining pirate ship decided it had had enough, but it was too late. It tried to pull up, but its engines were no match for the atmospheric drag and the gravity of the planetoid, and the last Mulluran ship joined the other in subatomic oblivion.

Elated, Kim whooped a triumphant battle cry but her exhilaration quickly turned to near-panic when she tried to pull out of her own suicide dive. The controls fought her. "The atmospheric friction's melted the maneuvering thrusters!" she hollered back to her passenger. "I'm gonna have to use just the impulse engines! Hang on to your eyeballs!" She couldn't tell if Riker heard her over the scream of the wind outside.

The surface of the planetoid was coming up fast. Kim pulled on her stick as hard as she could, trying to level out their flight. If she failed, any search party the starbase sent out would have to look for pieces with a neutrino microscope. Ever so slowly, the *Manticore's* nose pulled up. Their flight leveled out, but they were still traveling at an impossible speed. Suddenly, from beyond the horizon in front of them, a long range of tall mountains rose perpendicular to their flight path, and there was no way

she'd be able to pull up in time to avoid them. At their speed — several thousand miles per hour — they'd impact in mere seconds. There was only one thing to do.

"We're punching out!" she yelled. Reaching back behind her head with both hands to the twin ejection handles, she braced herself and yanked as hard as she could.

Explosive bolts blasted away key points holding the Banshee's cockpit to the rest of the plane and emergency hydrazine thrusters boosted the entire cockpit upward and away from the stricken fighter. They were like a tiny bit of debris caught in the voracious grip of mighty hurricane winds, flung and spun around without mercy. The escape pod's inertial stabilizers howled in protest at the titanic g-forces they were contending against, and as the cacophony rose in pitch, Kim fervently hoped technology would prove the victor this time; otherwise the centrifugal forces being exerted on the wildly tumbling pod would smear its two occupants all across its insides like a thin layer of strawberry jelly.

Finally, the mechanical whining began to subside, and the pod steadied on a single orientation, affording Kim her first coherent look out the window. As the escape pod tumbled none-too-gently earthward, she watched stone-faced as her stricken starfighter plowed into the mountainside at better than Mach 20.

Their initial speed had been so high that they were still doing well over Mach 3 themselves, even with the hydrazine thrusters expending every last drop of fuel to slow them, so when the ground rushed up and connected with the falling escape pod, the touchdown was murderously rough. The streaking pod gouged out a brand

new scar in the barren landscape of the planetoid, arrow straight, deep, and almost three miles long. Somewhere in the midst of their long scraping tumble, the pod's canopy shattered, metal shrieked and tore, and human occupants were thrown around the inside like a couple of beans in a maraca.

Through all this, Kim's thoughts were of the emergency beacon, hoping it would survive and transmit their warning to the starbase, and her last thought before the darkness came was of how glad she'd be to get back to the station and see Garek again.



## 05 - Search and Rescue

Garek Loran's Personal Log.

Women... What the hell's wrong with them? Who would've thought that being in love could be so hard? The problem is, how does Kim feel? If the one you love doesn't understand she's the only one in your mind all the time, then where does that leave you? I don't know.

End Log.

Garek sat back in his chair and pushed the computer terminal screen down into the desk. He looked out into space momentarily and then shook his head as if reorienting himself back to the real world. Garek had searched the entire starbase after Kim's disappearance. He had finally given up, and headed back to his office in

Engineering to clear his mind. The time was now 0800 hours, and he had been on shift for what appeared to be ages.

*Commander Loran to Command please*, the intercom announced.

"On my way," Garek replied. He slowly rose from his seat, rubbing his eyes.

Minutes later, the lift dumped him onto the mighty starbase's expansive Operations Command Center.

On seeing the Engineer, the petty officer sitting at Operations brought up some data on a view screen. "Sir, we had an unauthorized launch at approximately 0645 this morning."

"Why wasn't I notified sooner?" Garek asked.

"I apologize, sir. I just discovered this now. The ship was able to hide its warp signature by piggy-backing on a freighter that left at the same time." The petty officer shifted in his seat uneasily, feeling he had failed and his career was on the line.

"Have you been able to identify the ship that left?"

"That's affirmative." He slid in his chair along the fixed rail on the floor to the right side control panel. The ship was a YF-6100 starfighter designated NX-6105." He looked up at Garek who was standing behind his seat.

*That's the Manticore's registry. That's Kim!* was all Garek could think. He stood quietly, mentally calculating if he would be able to locate a fighter with an hour-and-fifteen-minute head start. Coming to a decision, he dashed back into the turbolift and disappeared.

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The small Cat's-Eye class recon vessel *Longbow* accelerated quickly in the direction of the *Manticore's* almost-undetectable warp particle trail. Garek powered up the warp core and brought long-range sensors online. It was bad enough Kim was mad at him, it was worse that she decided to leave the station to go out by herself. He adjusted the tactical readout to superimpose the warp particle trail on top of the sector map, then plotted a course to follow it.

The *Longbow* dropped out of warp hours later into the midst of a debris field. Dread suddenly filled Garek's mind and the pit of his stomach; Kim's Banshee was nowhere to be seen. He pushed forward the throttle control, easing the *Longbow* into the field.

He didn't have the chance to worry though, because a klaxon then went off. The long-range sensors detected an incoming vessel — Mulluran configuration. It appeared to be a light cruiser, and would be arriving within the next half hour. Not great news.

Garek powered up the *Longbow's* impulse engines and moved the craft into a shallow orbit of a nearby planetoid. The atmosphere and Van Allen belts would offer some protection from the scanners of the pirate vessel, but it wouldn't do a lot to protect from the enemy's weaponry. His only hope would be to solve this mystery before they arrived, or he'd have problems.

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All was pitch blackness except for a barely discernible pinpoint of light far, far above. With agonizing slowness, the pinpoint grew brighter, and its edges expanded, pushing back the smothering dark. Awareness reawakened with equal sluggishness, pushing aside the fog of oblivion.

Kim felt as though she were floating upward toward the light. She tried to turn her head, to look around, but her muscles refused to obey her commands. From somewhere far, far away, she thought she heard someone speaking her name. She longed to respond to the call; it seemed to be drawing her further toward the light. She concentrated all her willpower on moving in that direction.

Now she became aware of another sound that quickly grew in volume. It enveloped her in a cacophonous roaring like blood rushing in her ears. The area of light before her eyes expanded until the surrounding darkness was completely dispelled off the edges of her vision, and began to resolve itself into shapes and objects. The roaring of the blood in her ears subsided, and she heard the voice clearly now. She thought she recognized it.

Suddenly-responsive muscles turned her head slightly toward the source of the voice and she blinked a few times in the suddenly bright sunlight.

"Garek?" she asked in a weak voice.

"No, it's Thomas," said Riker. "Don't worry. You're okay." He gently helped her up into a semi-sitting position, leaning her against a large boulder.

Kim winced with the motion, and a stabbing pain shot through her left arm causing her to cry out.

"Easy there," cautioned Riker. "Your arm's broken. I had to set it."

Kim looked down and saw that indeed her arm was encased in an emergency plastifoam splint from her downed fighter's first-aid kit. She raised her other arm and put her hand to her head, and felt the bandage there. "I have a headache that would kill a proto-Klingon," she mumbled.

"I'll bet," said Riker. "You took a nasty bump on the head. You've been out for about two hours."

"What?" Alarmed, Kim tried to stand up, but Riker held her down with a hand on her good shoulder. "Two hours!" she exclaimed. "The Mullurans might still be out there. We have to get moving!"

"I think you're forgetting one thing," said Riker. He pointed to a blackened heap about a hundred yards from where they were. Kim recognized it as the remains of the crashed cockpit of her Banshee fighter. "That wreck isn't going anywhere."

Kim slumped back against her boulder. "I guess you're right."

"You just stay put," ordered Riker. He stood and strode away toward the mangled wreckage that had been her starfighter. Kim was in no mood to argue, so she did as she was told and stayed put, but she took the opportunity to crane her neck and look around a little. The place was truly desolate. Not a single blade of grass was to be seen sticking out of the gravelly soil, craggy lunar mountains crouched on the near horizon, and the lavender sky above was devoid of clouds.

Presently, Riker returned carrying some supplies and a large silver case. He set it down next to her, and she recognized it as the automatic distress transmitter from her ship. It looked intact. Riker set about fiddling with the simple controls, and then sat back on his haunches looking satisfied.

"It still works," he announced. "Good thing these things are built to take a beating."

"Won't the Mullurans be able to home in on our signal too?" asked Kim, worried.

Riker looked serious. "I don't see as we have a choice. Hopefully a Starfleet vessel will respond before the Mullurans do. It's our only hope."

Kim nodded in agreement. At the mention of their rescue, she thought about Garek, and daydreamed how nice it would be if he was the one who rescued her.

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Another alert klaxon reverberated through the cockpit of the *Longbow*. Garek check the sensors and readied the small scout ship for battle or flight. As it turned out however, the alarm wasn't triggered by the proximity of a Mulluran cruiser, but rather by the signal from an emergency distress beacon. It was coming from the surface of the planetoid he was currently orbiting, and it carried a Starfleet transponder frequency.

*Kim!*

Heart racing, Garek powered up the impulse engines, and started the *Longbow* into a dive towards the surface of the planet.

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Kim and Riker had shifted position to the other side of the big boulder to try and keep out of the blistering sun as much as possible. For a full 360 degrees around and all the way to the too-near horizon of the small planetoid, not a single twig of plant life could be seen. All was sterile rocks and dirt.

Riker was flicking small flakes of shale around, while Kim was spending her time trying not to fall asleep. As it turned out, waiting to be rescued was a terribly dull business.

A loud thunderclap from the sky above brought both back to full wakefulness. Both Kim and Riker snapped their heads in the direction of the sound. There, clearly visible in the clear air was the contrail of a craft on atmospheric entry. As it descended and the air around it grew denser, the craft's vaporous tail billowed and thickened, then began to grow steadily fainter as it slowed its approach.

Instinctively, and without really being conscious of it, Kim crept closer to Tom for protection. "Who do you think it is?" she asked. "The Mullurans?"

"We'll find out in a minute, one way or the other," said Riker grimly, pointing.

Kim looked, and saw that the craft was turning. It was still too far away to tell what kind of ship it was, but whoever it was, they were heading right for them. She crouched in her place, watching, wishing she had a phaser cannon in her pocket.

Meanwhile, Riker had made a quick dash for the wrecked fighter, and now he returned with his hands full. He dropped the pile in front of Kim and began sorting it out. It was the contents of the small weapons locker. Kim reached out with her good arm and claimed one of the phasers for herself, and stuffed a few extra power packs into her flight suit's hip pockets. Riker took two phasers for himself as well as the rest of the power packs. Then, together, they positioned themselves behind the big boulder.

They didn't have to wait long. In just over a minute, the unknown craft was upon them. They remained hidden behind the rock in hopes they could catch whoever it was by surprise, but as she heard the ship's landing repulsors whine, she risked a peak around the edge of their cover.

The craft had kicked up tons of silt and debris into the air, obscuring it from view, but as it settled earthward again, the outline of the ship became reassuringly familiar. The belly hatch irised open and a lone figure dropped to the ground.

"Garek!" cried Kim. Ignoring her aches and pains and broken arm, she staggered from behind her refuge and made her lop-sided way in his direction.

Garek caught sight of her, and a big smile of relief washed over his face. He closed the rest of the distance between them and scooped her up in his arms, the arguments of the last few days completely forgotten, but instantly released her at her sharp outcry of pain.

"What is it?"

She indicated the splint around her arm. "I got a little tweaked, but that's okay now that you're here. Hug me again!"

Garek did gladly, but was careful with the arm. But again the hug was interrupted when he caught sight of Riker stepping out from behind a boulder and begin hesitantly walking toward them. He quickly released Kim and whipped out his phaser.

"Wait, Garek!" cried Kim, grabbing his phaser arm and spoiling his aim. "That's a friend."

"What do you mean, 'friend'?" asked Garek, suddenly very suspicious.

"Garek, this is Thomas Riker," Kim said, introducing the stranger. At the mention of the name, Garek's eyes widened in surprise and recognition. "Lieutenant Riker, this is Commander Garek Loran," finished Kim.

Riker stepped forward and offered his hand. "A pleasure," he said.

Garek took it. He'd been prepared for a fight and was somewhat taken aback by Riker's smooth manner. "Uh... likewise, Lieutenant." Then, putting aside for the moment this unexpected turn of events, he turned back to Kim and got back to the business at hand. "Kim, we've got to get out of here before that beacon of yours attracts the wrong kind of customers, if you know what I mean. Explanations about him—" he pointed at Riker "—are going to have to wait."

"He's right," said Riker. "Let's go." With that he bounded up into the hatch of the *Longbow* and disappeared from sight.

Garek watched him go, then threw Kim a wary, skeptical look. "I'm not going to believe a word of your explanation, am I?" he asked.

"Very likely," replied Kim. She patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, then bounded up through the hatch herself and disappeared after the mysterious man calling himself Thomas Riker.

Garek heaved a giant sigh of long-suffering and resigned himself to the improbability of the situation, then climbed back aboard the *Longbow* and prepared to take off.

## 06 - Reconciliation and Repercussions

In the end, the trio didn't return directly to Starbase 901. Kim spent the good part of an hour detailing everything that had happened to her for the last few days — how she'd accidentally met Thomas Riker back on the station, how he'd convinced her to help him leave Federation space, how they'd stolen her *Banshee* and then the desperate fight against the three Mulluran fighters, resulting in their marooning on the planetoid.

As she talked, Garek just sat, finding the whole thing a little hard to believe. He trusted Kim completely though, so he believed her, and he found Riker's story of his long incarceration and daring escape from the Cardassian labor camp heroic and inspiring. So in the end, it wasn't really very difficult for Kim and Thomas to talk him into taking the *Longbow* on a little detour to drop Riker off someplace safe.

"I've got just the place," Garek said cryptically, and began setting a new course into the nav-computer.

Kim and Riker looked at each other, and Kim just shrugged. She had no idea what Garek was up to, but as the *Longbow* aligned on its new heading straight into the heart of the Briar Patch, she suspected she might have a guess. A look at Garek was enough to confirm her suspicion. He smiled cleverly and winked at her.

A few hours later, the *Longbow* had set down near a small village on the Ba'ku Planet. The village leaders, Sojev and Anij, had come out to welcome their visitors, and had graciously agreed to shelter Thomas Riker for however long he wished to stay.

Twenty minutes after that, all good-byes having been said, the *Longbow* was off again, but this time with only two occupants. All record of Lieutenant Thomas Riker — former Starfleet officer, ex-Maquis, escaped Cardassian prisoner — were wiped from the ship's memory banks. His secret would be safe with Garek and Kim. When everything was taken care of, the two returned to the pilot seats. Garek finally broke the awkward silence that followed.

"You're gonna have a little explaining to do when we get back to the station," he said.

"I know," said Kim, a little dejected, dreading what had to come.

"Well, I'll help out if I can," said Garek. "I'm just glad you're back." He suddenly smiled. "I missed that little tushy of yours."

And with that simple sexist statement, Kim knew everything would be all right. She smiled that honey-sweet smile of hers, and reclined in her seat.

Garek stretched tiredly and said, "I'm going to go sit down in something more comfortable. I'll be in the back." He got up and kissed Kim on the forehead as he made his way aft into the living compartment of the ship. Sitting down in the big lounge chair, he reclined it, bringing up the foot rests. His eyes were just beginning to drift closed when he was awakened by the sudden downward pressure of extra weight on his chest. He opened his eyes to see Kim's eyes looking into his.

"It's too cold up front," she said simply, nodding her head in the direction of the cockpit. She rested her head on Garek's chest. Garek smiled and closed his eyes again. Everything was going to be fine.

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Most of Starbase 901 was still asleep, the corridors were still shrouded in nighttime illumination mode. Everywhere there was only quiet. Everywhere that is, except in the Banshee's ready room.

There, under full day-mode illumination, Lee Carter occupied her customary place at the head of the briefing table. The large tactical display screen on the wall behind her currently displayed a three-dimensional diagram of the space sector surrounding their mission objective: a secret Mulluran depot discovered five days ago in a neighboring star system.

Three of the four other chairs in the room were also occupied with their customary occupants. Max Vasser, Sam Beckett, and Jo Schmidt were paying close attention to the briefing, despite the early hour, and were taking notes on

their PADDs. The fourth chair at the table was empty this morning. Kim Tycho was grounded until further notice by order of the Captain and per the recommendation of Carter herself — the consequence of her little 'adventure' five days ago.

Carter paused in her dialog momentarily and looked at the empty chair for the hundredth time already this morning and sighed inwardly. She'd been sorely disappointed by Kim's actions. While she realized that Kim was still very young, what she'd done was inexcusably childish. Carter was sure there was more to the story than Kim was telling, but she was being tight-lipped about it. Kim was lucky she wasn't being court-martialed. Going absent-without-leave, theft of Starfleet property, destroying Starfleet property. Those were all serious charges.

Captain Mallory had been very lenient though. It would probably add a spot of tarnish to her credibility, but the Captain had a soft spot for other veterans of the Dominion War and felt it was worth it. Disciplinary action consisted of Kim being reduced in rank to Ensign and being banned from flying until further notice, which was completely academic of course, when you took into consideration the fact that her plane was in a billion subatomic pieces on a deserted planetoid lightyears away.

But enough daydreaming. The others were starting to look at her funny, wondering why she was just staring off into space. Carter cleared her throat and resumed the briefing.

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Kim Tycho sat on the deck of the Starbase 901's main hangar bay craning her neck up at an open hatch on the underside of the port wing of the *Longbow*. It was 3:30 in the morning, but she couldn't sleep — too much on her mind.

Yesterday she'd started helping Garek upgrade the couplings in the targeting sensors, so she thought she'd return to that task, in lieu of sleep. But instead of being a relaxing activity as she hoped it would be, the stupid self-sealing stembolt she was holding in her hand simply refused to adjust properly, and she was getting more and more frustrated by the second. Considering recent events, she hadn't been in the best of moods to begin with.

She set down the ornery appliance and tried to find something to wipe her hands on, then remembered painfully that she wasn't wearing her uniform and didn't have to be so careful. She hated the crewman's coverall she had on. In her mind it had become the symbol of her punishment, so she savagely smeared her greasy hands all over the front until the beige fabric had become mostly oily green and purple.

Strangely satisfied and suddenly in a much better mood, she smiled, and took up the stubborn stembolt once again. "I'm gonna adjust you right even if I have to take a hammer to you!"

"Now, now," a voice from behind her remonstrated. "What do I always say?"

Kim turned around and saw Garek standing there with his head ducked under the wing, hands gripping the wing edge.

"I know, I know," she said, smiling. "The right tool for the right job." she mimicked in a stern, lecturing voice.

"You got it."

"So I'll hit it with a hydro-spanner then," she laughed, standing up from her crouching position. Immediate she was in Garek's arms.

If it hadn't been for Garek, she didn't know how she could have dealt with this difficult time. Being reduced to Ensign was embarrassing enough, but to be denied flying time — that was almost too much to bear. He'd been there for her though. Eschewing the usual nonchalant, carefree facade that he perpetrated for everyone else, he had sat with her during long lonely nights and just listened to her troubles.

"Problems?" he asked.

"Hm? Oh, just the stembolt," she replied, and nudged the thing with the toe of her boot. But then she wondered if perhaps Garek had meant something more by his question. She decided to answer in the same vein. "I'm having a hard time with this adjustment."

Garek smiled. He understood. With his hand on the small of her back, he gently guided her back to the open panel on the underside of the wing. "All right. Let's see what we can do about that," he said.

