

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON



THE TOURIST

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A Day at the Park

Dexter Gray and Alex Dalton take a walk through the park, discuss the future and the past, eat some ice-cream, and make an unusual new friend.

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron
The Tourist

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Boredom

Dexter Gray and Alexandra Dalton sat side by side on their favorite park bench and watched the people go by. It was another glorious day here on the jewel of the Serenity Sector, one tailor-made for playing hooky. Over the last few weeks, they'd spent endless hours gazing into each other's eyes over shared banana splits down at the malt shop, gone for long walks on the beach, sat through countless holoshows at the Cineplex munching popcorn, and paid regular visits to Makeout Point atop the hills overlooking Serenity City.

Alex sighed heavily. "Do you think Starfleet will keep the Banshee program?" she asked idly. "I've heard talk that the armed recon squads like ours might get shelved in favor of more science starships being sent to the sector now that most of the fighting is over.

"Sure Starfleet will keep the Banshees!" replied Dex as positively as he could. Inwardly though he had his doubts, and he found himself agreeing with Starfleet's reluctance in sending out a wing of one-man ships to do the job of a starship, even if it was the famous Banshee Squadron. It had been an interesting experiment in juggling precious resources way out here on the frontier, but it clearly hadn't worked out quite as planned. Their last scouting mission and subsequent side-adventure through the Black Gate had been a disaster in Starfleet's eyes, despite the significant scientific discoveries they had made.

"Really? You think?" asked Alex.

That caught Dexter a little by surprise. Normally, Alex was a bubbly optimist. For her to express doubts about the future was unheard of and tantamount to a fundamental shift in the very balance of the universe. "Don't you?" he asked.

She shrugged, but it was a gesture of frustration and not of indifference. "I'm not sure anymore. I'm not even sure I *want* them to," she replied. "I mean, I love flying and all. Ever since I was a little girl. It's just... Well, things have changed since we began. There was a war on then. Starfleet needed warriors. The Mullurans had to be stopped. But now..."

"We're not needed as warriors anymore," said Dexter, finishing her thought.

"Yeah. Starfleet doesn't know quite what to do with us now that peace has finally broken out. They tried sending us out as an exploration unit, but that sure didn't work out." She shuddered at the memory of events on the other side of

the Black Gate, only a few weeks behind them. "Things are shifting back to a peacetime mentality."

Dex thought in silence for a minute. "So what are you going to do?" he asked finally.

"I'm not sure," replied Alex. She turned her head and looked at Dexter. "Maybe we could request an assignment on an explorer ship," she suggested cautiously, trying to gauge his reaction.

"Uh, well... That would be a pretty big change, Alex. You sure that's what you want to do? It would mean no more starfighters. I know how important that is to you."

"No, I'm not sure," she admitted uneasily. "But it's something to think about. Starfleet isn't going to keep an entire wing of space-superiority starfighters just sitting on the tarmac for no reason. They're going to have to make a decision soon. And since the focus in this sector is returning to exploration..." She sighed heavily again.

Dexter pondered his girlfriend's words. He wasn't a starfighter pilot, so a switch to starship duty wouldn't be a big deal for him. But right now he had a much more immediate concern. He had to figure out some way to relieve his sweetheart's troubles. It was his solemn duty as a boyfriend. "How about we go shopping?" he suggested hopefully. Shopping always picked up Alex's spirits, though he would never understand in a million years why a woman needed forty-seven pairs of shoes and matching handbags.

To his relief, Alex shrugged indifferently, which was better than he had hoped for.

"Great!" he said, still trying to stay positive. He jumped up off the park bench and held out his hand. "Let's go!"

Alarm

The urban parkland, with its grass and trees and ponds, melded gradually into downtown Serenity City, with its traffic and businesses and mile-high towers. Where the two disparate quarters touched and intermingled, rows of quaint shops and residences lined peaceful avenues. Tourists and shoppers glided along the slidewalks, stopping whenever a window display caught their eye.

Dexter and Alex walked hand-in-hand across the lawn towards the closest group of stores. In the shade of a particularly large birch, Alex stopped and stared off across the field.

"What is it?" asked Dexter, craning his eyes in the same general direction Alex was looking.

She pointed. "There, you see it? That big animal."

"Animal? Here in the city?" Dexter looked where Alex was pointing and spotted the thing she'd seen. It was big,

brown, hairy, and walked on all fours. He also spotted a mother and two children playing near a pond, right in the path of the lumbering animal, and they hadn't noticed it yet!

"We have to do something!" he blurted in alarm, and sped off towards the unsuspecting people with Alex right on his heels.

Dexter tore across the park as fast as his legs would carry him. He cleared low hedges and a small dog like an Olympic hurdle runner. The hulking animal was approaching the playing children with deliberate stealthiness from behind the cover of some shrubbery and would be on them in a matter of seconds. Dexter could never cover the distance in time. He waved his arms frantically and yelled between huffs as he ran, but the youngsters and their mother were too engrossed in what they were doing to notice.

The huge animal stopped behind the shrubbery and stood on its hind legs. Its blunt snout parted revealing fangs like daggers and it reached up with one massive forepaw, and then...

...it snapped a picture with the tiny camera it held in its clawed fingers. It twisted its muzzle into another toothy smile and turned and shuffled off in the opposite direction looking for more photo ops.

The steam propelling Dexter in his mad dash fizzled and he slowed to a halt, his selfless heroism suddenly turned into embarrassing naiveté. Alex plowed into him from behind.

"That wasn't a wild animal," said Dexter. "It's just a tourist or something."

"What?" asked Alex, confused. She apparently hadn't seen what had transpired.

"It had a camera and took those people's pictures," explained Dexter pointing at the oblivious family.

Now that they were closer, Dexter and Alex could see that the being they had mistaken for a wild animal was indeed some sort of intelligent life form. It was strolling upright through a small grove of alders, looking up at something in the trees, maybe a bird or a squirrel. It wore something like Roman sandals on its feet, and had a belt around its waist from which hung several small pouches. In one hand it carried its tiny camera, while the other held a partially unfolded sheet of paper, possibly a city map.

"Huh," said Alex noncommittally. She shrugged, turned, and started walking back towards her interrupted shoe shopping. "I wonder what sort of alien it is," she said idly.

"Dunno," replied Dexter. "I've never seen anything like it before. Maybe it's a Sasquatch."

"Oh don't be such a doofus."

Horror

Dexter spent the next two hours happily following behind Alex as she made her way from one boutique to the next systematically building up the hopes of the sales clerks, but in the end always walking away without buying anything.

Several times throughout the afternoon Dexter or Alex would spot the strange alien tourist still contentedly wandering through Serenity Park, sometimes referring to the big sheet of paper it carried, sometimes pointing its tiny camera at things, but always with a happy, toothy grin on its hairy lips. Once they caught it lying on its back and dumping the contents of a public trashcan onto its chest. Once they spotted it sitting high up in a eucalyptus tree munching on an apple it had skewered on a wicked claw.

The two of them sat now on their favorite park bench again, side by side, eating ice cream cones. The warm

autumn sun was making a general mess of their confections, but they took it as a challenge.

Alex looked sideways at Dexter and made a face. "How come you always just get plain vanilla?" she asked. "That's so boring. It's like the boringest flavor in the universe."

Dexter shook his head. "Au contraire, madam," he replied. "Vanilla is all the rage here in the Serenity Sector."

"Oh go on," chided Alex. She took a bite of her strawberry cone just to prove that other flavors besides vanilla indeed existed.

"It's true," insisted Dexter. "With the Mulluran Empire so close by and Serenity being right on the edge of the Federation's borders between the dark unknown and the treacherous Briar Patch, what could be safer and more comfortable than good ol' vanilla?"

Alex smiled. "Is that why you eat it? To feel safe and comforted? Because you're afraid of what's out there?" She waved her free hand vaguely in the direction of the sky.

She was just teasing Dexter, but a shadow fell across his face and she instantly regretted her words. At the same time, though, she wondered what had triggered Dexter's mood change. She nudged him gently with her elbow. "Hey... What did I say?"

Dexter managed a reassuring smile, though the pain in his eyes was still there. "It's nothing," he said, and took a bite of ice cream.

"Come on. Tell me," prodded Alex. "Someone you know get killed or something?"

Dexter snorted. "If only it were that simple," he said.

"I'm gonna bug you about it until you tell me, you know," said Alex. "It's what girls do."

That elicited a smile from Dex. He took a deep breath. "It was before I was assigned to Banshee Squadron and met you," he began. "Me and Rico Cooper — he was my best friend from the Academy — were working on a small Starfleet supply transport that shuttled back and forth through the Briar Patch between Federation space and the archeological digs on Oo-oo-ah. We knew it was dangerous duty. Flying through the Briar Patch has never been safe, but what did we care? We were both just out of the Academy and wanted to take on the universe. We thought we were ready for anything that came our way."

Dex lowered his eyes. "But we weren't ready for what came looking for us that day. None of us were, not even the old hands. The captain was the first to go. He tried talking to them, but they wouldn't listen, didn't even bother to acknowledge our hail. They just came alongside and grappled their ship's hull to ours. We tried to resist, but they took control of our minds. My hands and legs suddenly weren't my own anymore. All we could do is look on in horror as they started feeding... waiting for our turn..." Dexter's voice cracked and faltered.

Alex was stricken and choked back an upsurge of bile. "You mean they ate the crew? That's awful, Dex! I'm so sorry! How did you manage to get away?"

Dex pulled himself together. "No, not 'ate'. Worse. They sucked their minds out until there was nothing left but an empty husk, the victims' blank eyes staring but not seeing, their life force stolen... their *souls*! I didn't get away. I was as helpless as everyone else. They just left before they got around to me. Guess they'd had their fill."

A cold chill froze Alex's spine. "Why does all this sound familiar?"

Dexter nodded. Alex had guessed correctly. "Because you've met those monsters too — one in the dilithium mines under Rostella and one at the bottom of Blue Lake. The Jelly Brains. They almost got you too."

Alex guessed the rest. "Your friend was killed, wasn't he?"

Dexter nodded. He raised the hand holding his ice cream cone to his mouth, but discovered that during his grisly story the ice cream had melted away. Half of it covered his hand and the other half was pooled in a yellow puddle on the ground between his feet. He laughed, more to dispel the heavy gloom that had descended over him and Alex than at the confectionary faux pas.

"Guess we better go for seconds!" he declared with forced chippiness. A few seconds later, his natural male bravado was fully back in place.

"Me too," said Alex, holding forth her own melted, pink mess. She felt bad about having made Dex remember such a horrible experience, but on the other hand she was glad he'd been able to share his feeling with her.

They got up from the bench in unison, intending to head back to the malt shop, but a rustling in the shrubbery behind them made them pause and take a closer look.'

A big, brown, hairy head poked up from the leaves. It lowered the tiny camera from its eye and smiled its toothy grin.

Curiosity

"Hello," said Dexter. "How are you? It's nice to meet a visitor to this planet."

The alien tourist rose to its full height. Dexter hadn't realized until just that moment how large it really was; it towered at least two feet above his head. It looked down on him and Alex and made snuffling noises with its big black nose.

Alex took a small, non-threatening step forwards. "My name's Alex," she said. "What's yours?"

The alien made a deep rumbling noise from somewhere inside its body. It sounded like the sound a purring cat would make, if the cat were the size of a Berengarian dragon. "Hrooooo," it rumbled at Alex.

Alex blinked. "Who? You, of course."

"My name is Hrooooo," rumbled the alien.

"Hrooooo," repeated Alex. She smiled. "Nice to meet you. This is Dex."

Hrooooo grinned and pointed at the communicator pin on Alex's chest. "Talking machine has funny accent," he rumbled.

"The universal translator? Well yeah, that's human technology for you..."

Hrooooo cocked his head quizzically at that statement.

Dex jumped into the conversation. "Say, Hrooooo... Where are you from? We've never seen another member of your species before. It must be from a long way away, right? Are you from the Gamma Quadrant?"



Hrooooo shook its shaggy head. "Outside." It raised a massive paw and turned it palm up. A three-dimensional jumble of lights and colors appeared in mid-air, swirled around in a tiny tornado, then settled into a pattern both Dex and Alex instantly recognized. A slowly rotating spiral

of a myriad tiny sparkles hung a few inches above Hrooooo's open palm, surrounded by several irregular blobs. One of the blobs was flashing on and off. "Home," growled Hrooooo.

Dexter was dumbstruck. "You live there? In the Sagittarius Dwarf Elliptical galaxy? But that's—" he tried to remember how far it was from Earth but couldn't "—that's far!"

Hrooooo shrugged and closed its fist. The magical star map vanished.

Dexter was warming up for another barrage of questions, but the big alien beat him to it. "What is that?" it asked and pointed to a nearby trashcan.

"It's garbage," replied Alex.

The tourist looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"It's uh... Garbage is refuse. Waste material we throw away because we don't need it anymore. Y'know what I mean?"

Hrooooo wrinkled its snout and rumbled disagreeably at the concept, but offered no other comment. "Thank you," it said to Alex. It reached into one of its pouches and withdrew a small rectangle, which it handed to her. Then without another word it turned and ambled off.

"Uh... bye," said Dex to the big hairy back.

Alex sniffed the little rectangle, raised an eyebrow, and popped it in her mouth.

"Wha—! Are you crazy?!?" sputtered Dexter.

"It's like strawberry ice cream!" she exclaimed around a huge ear-to-ear grin.

=^=

The next hour was spent window-shopping. Alex had actually made a purchase at the last shoe store they went into, so now they were hunting for matching clothes so she could wear them on her next date with Dex. They rounded a street corner and saw their alien tourist friend.

It was standing in the middle of the street, forcing the light vehicle traffic to detour around it, and staring intently at its city map. Drivers were shouting angry words and flashing even angrier gestures at it, but Hrooooo was oblivious.

Alex giggled. "Maybe they don't have sidewalks in the Sagittarius Galaxy," she joked.

The big alien looked up from its map and spotted the two Starfleet officers. It immediately strolled over, much to the relief of the delivery van driver who had been trying to squeeze around it, and held the map out to show Dex.

"Where is zoo?"

Dex showed it.

"Thank you," it said. It reached into its pouch and handed Dex a small rectangle, then ambled off in the direction Dexter had indicated.

Dexter smelled his gift, shrugged, and stuck it in his mouth.

"Vanilla," he declared to Alex's immeasurable delight.

Gratitude

Dex and Alex continued their stroll along the storefronts, and the afternoon passed quickly.

Every so often, the peculiar alien tourist would show up in the oddest places and invariably ask either Dexter or Alex directions to some other location in and around Serenity City, and each time would reward their answer with one of the ubiquitous treats from its never-empty pouch. No two morsels ever tasted the same, but all were good, and usually reminded Dexter of something he'd just been thinking about.

After a few hours of this, they began noticing police officers on street corners. The uniformed men always seemed to be doing something else, but whenever the alien tourist showed up their eyes followed it, and when the alien left, so did the police.

Dexter wondered how Hrooooo was able to get around so quickly; some of the destinations it had asked them about were clear across on the other side of the city. It would normally take a week to see all the sights this one alien tourist had visited in just one short afternoon.

His idle musings were interrupted by Alex.

"I'm getting a little hungry," she said. "How about we go to *El Taco* for dinner. We haven't been there in a while."

"Okay. It's just around the corner."

Of course, just as they rounded the street corner, there was their big alien friend. It was standing in the middle of the sidewalk holding a bunch of colorful helium balloons in its paw and staring skyward with a mixture of wonder and sadness on its fuzzy face. Alex shaded her eyes against the late afternoon sun and looked up, but couldn't see anything. Hrooooo spotted them and grinned. "A request?" it rumbled.

"Of course," replied Dexter.

Hrooooo's fearsome smile grew wider. "Good. Stand here. Take picture."

Dexter wasn't quite sure what the big alien meant, but Alex immediately skipped over to Hrooooo's side and struck a pose. Dex followed in a more dignified manner and took up a position on the opposite side of the big furry alien from Alex. He wondered who was going to take their picture if all three of them were standing here. He needn't have worried.

Hrooooo held out its hand, palm up. The tiny camera flew from its master's paw like a little blocky bumblebee. It came to a stop about five feet away and pivoted to face its subjects. Hrooooo placed a massive, furry arm around

Dex's and Alex's shoulders, being careful to keep a firm hold on the balloon strings.

A tiny pixie voice issued from the floating camera. "Say schplict!" it piped.



Dex and Alex smiled. Hroooou grinned. A light flashed in their eyes, and the tiny camera floated back to Hroooou's waiting hand.

"Thank you," it rumbled with its customary politeness. But no sooner had the words escapes its lips than the happy smile it wore turned upside down.

From around the corner, a squad of four police officers was approaching. All pretense was gone; their stride was purposeful, their course direct, and their intentions obvious. Alex spun, instinctively seeking escape even though she knew they weren't after her, but more police squads were converging from every direction. Not once did it enter her mind that maybe Hroooou was dangerous and that there

was a very good reason that every officer was armed with a stun baton.

Hrooooo rumbled a deep, soulful sigh that sounded like earth shifting. "This happens every time," it grumbled in disappointment. The big alien's sad eyes met Alex's and Dexter's briefly. "Well, goodbye."

As Dex and Alex watched, the eight-foot-tall alien floated straight up in the air. For a surreal moment, it seemed to Alex as if Hrooooo was being lifted by the colorful helium balloons it still clutched in its paw. Then it picked up speed, and less than two seconds later was out of sight and was gone.

Incredulity

"What was its name?"

"Hrooooo."

"Who? The alien! Who do you think?!?"

Dexter sighed. This was ridiculous. He and Alex hadn't done anything wrong, yet they'd been forced to sit here in this tiny, windowless room somewhere deep in the bowels of Serenity Police Headquarters answering questions about the strange alien tourist. An impressive collection of cameras, audio recorders, and psycho-tricorders were arrayed around them. It seemed someone was very intent on recording every word, gesture and brainwave that was spoken, gestured, and thought during the debriefing.

"For the forty-seventh time," said Dexter Gray with exaggerated patience, "His name was Hrooooo. We never saw him before this afternoon. He asked us a few directions and we told him. Can we go now?"

The tired police inspector on the opposite side of the well-worn table from Dexter ignored Dex's question. "What did the alien want to know?" he asked.

"A few different places around the city," replied Dexter. "I already told you. He wanted to see the zoo, the shopping district... Nothing even vaguely important."

"He asked us about trash," supplied Alex. She was taking this whole situation a little better than Dexter.

"Trash?" repeated the inspector, cocking a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yeah. He didn't seem to know what it was. I don't think they have any where he comes from."

"And where is that?"

"I already told you, Inspector," said Dexter. His patience had ended. "Look, unless you're planning on charging us with something, we're going home." He got up from his chair and nudged Alex to do the same. "You know where to find us if you think of any *new* questions."

The inspector didn't look pleased, but he knew he'd extracted as much as information as he was going to from these two examples of Starfleet's finest. It was no less and no more than anyone had *ever* gotten regarding the strange alien tourist.

"Yeah all right," he said. "Thanks for your cooperation. You can pick up your stuff at the front desk. Have a pleasant rest of the night."

As Dex and Alex left the police station, Dex whispered in Alex's ear. "I'm glad you didn't tell them about the little square treats Hrooooo kept giving us."

"Why?"

"Because they probably would have dissected us to find out what they were made of!"

=^=

Dexter and Alex made it back to the Starfleet Quarter of Serenity City without incident. They were standing on the front porch of Alex's place and saying their goodnights. Dex handed Alex her shopping bags of shoes and clothes.

"What an interesting day," mused Alex. She took the packages from Dex and tossed them in through the open front door, then swept into his arms. They kissed a final goodnight, and each headed for his and her own bed, to dream strawberry and vanilla dreams of each other.

