

Star Trek: Bounty - 104 - "It's Not Easy Being Green"

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1364) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1364>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandom:	Expanded Universes (General)
Character:	Original Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Action/Adventure
Language:	English
Series:	Part 4 of Star Trek: Bounty
Stats:	Published: 2024-02-17 Completed: 2024-04-23 Words: 38,101 Chapters: 18/18

Star Trek: Bounty - 104 - "It's Not Easy Being Green"

by [BountyTrek](#)

Summary

Denella must confront her past when she goes rogue in order to track down a ruthless kingpin in the Orion Syndicate and save a childhood friend, while the Bounty and her crew run into peril trying to help her.

Prologue

Prologue

She danced. Because that was what they wanted.

Her appreciative audience sat around stout wooden tables and watched as she glided around a long elevated platform strategically positioned in the middle of the dank, smoke-filled venue.

While her stage was spotlighted for all to see, the miserably low lighting around the rest of the venue kept most of her admirers in shadow, as they often preferred to be. But she could make out those at the tables nearest to her.

There was a gang of grizzled Orion merchants, sinking row after row of ales on the table in front of them. A sole Ferengi, who was failing to keep the drool from running down his chin as he stared at her. And a couple of Pakleds, who seemed more bemused by their surroundings than anything else.

They may have claimed to be visiting the bar for drinks, or food, or simple relaxation. But really, they were all here to see her. The main event.

She felt every set of eyes in the room burrowing into her skin, even those she couldn't see, as she writhed and swayed, clothed in a flimsy outfit consisting of little more than a couple of strategically placed sheer silk scarves.

But she had been well trained. She didn't flinch or try to run. She was here to serve them. She was theirs.

Or at least, her body was. Her mind they couldn't control, or force to do anything.

Her mind was elsewhere.

* * * * *

Orpheus IV was a peaceful place, as Orion colonies went.

It was an established base for the Orion Free Traders, a collective of businesses and commerce which had been set up to be the antithesis of everything the Syndicate represented. A peaceable, fair and prosperous organisation for all involved.

And it was where Rayo had built a home for his family.

On the face of it, it wasn't all that much to look at. A modest residence, set on the fringes of one of the larger towns on the planet's main continent.

But to Rayo, it offered the best of both worlds. It was close enough to the town to give them easy access to all the facilities it provided, and the friends that lived there. But it was far enough out into the surrounding countryside that it gave him plenty of open space for his pet projects, repairing and restoring classic shuttles.

His latest project was an especially rare model. A limited edition 23rd century Orion racing shuttle whose sleek lines and compact warp nacelles slung underneath the main body had always been one of Rayo's favourite designs. It was an old and run-down example, but it was definitely salvageable with a lot of hard work. And once he'd fixed it up, he'd turn a tidy profit as soon as he found the right collector.

Although, in truth, the latinum wasn't all that important to him. The joy of working on such a classic ship was payment enough for Rayo.

As he lay on the dusty ground underneath the main hull of the shuttle, finishing the job of replacing the port-side impulse relay, he heard footsteps approaching.

"What are you doing, daddy?"

He smiled as he crawled out into the evening gloom, his green face flecked with dirt and grime, to see his eight year old daughter standing next to the shuttle, watching him intently.

"I thought you were helping with dinner?" he asked as he stood back up.

She scrunched her face up and kicked the dust under her feet. "Cooking's boring," she whined, "I want to help you."

Rayo sighed patiently and wiped his hands on a cloth hanging from his belt, before crouching down to talk to his daughter on her level.

"I don't think your mother would like that now, do you? Bad enough that she's already got one filthy engineer to deal with, never mind two."

The Orion girl stomped her feet on the ground and wailed plaintively. She knew exactly how to get her father to change her mind.

"But I want to help you!"

Rayo winced at seeing his daughter getting upset. He put a hand on her shoulder to calm her as she looked back at him with big, pleading eyes.

"Ok, ok," he replied with a smile, "Tell you what, how'd you like to help me replace the plasma manifold?"

She considered this question for a moment, her face contorting into a deadly serious look that her father couldn't help but be amused by.

"What's a...plasma faminold?" she asked eventually.

He took her hand and led the inquisitive girl to the rear of the shuttle.

A large access panel was already removed from the hull, revealing a collection of bulky components inside. He pointed to one particular component with a stubby green finger. This visual identification of the shuttle's plasma manifold didn't seem to clear the situation up, and merely elicited another round of deeply thoughtful face scrunching from his daughter.

"Fair enough," Rayo nodded, "Let's work this all out together."

With a patient smile, he turned back to his toolbox and picked up the relevant piece of equipment for the task at hand. He handed her the stocky twin-pronged device, which she looked at with childlike wonder.

"Now, this is a coil spanner. And what you're gonna need to do is run that slowly up and down the seal just here..."

He pointed to one side of the plasma manifold. She awkwardly manoeuvred the tool over and followed his instructions as best she could. After a moment, she paused and wiped her face, leaving a streak of grime behind on her dark green skin.

As dusk drew in on the main continent of Orpheus IV, the father and daughter team continued to work.

* * * * *

She allowed herself a moment of comfort as she recalled that happy scene from her past. All the while, her body had been obediently dancing.

As she looked around, she noticed that there were two new customers next to the stage eyeing her up. A burly, angry-looking Klingon sat with a scruffy Trill on one of the tables at the far end of the stage from where she was. The Trill stood up and placed a few slips of latinum on the stage. It was a signal for when a customer wanted some closer attention, usually in one of the side rooms. Anything went in there.

Just as she had been trained, she made her way over. Her body was on autopilot as she dropped to all fours and demurely crawled the final few feet across the stage to where he stood.

In her mind, she was busy re-aligning the thruster controls of a Denobulan transport pod.

As she arrived at the modest pile of latinum, the Trill leaned in and whispered in her ear.

"Wanna get out of here?"

It was a question she had heard hundreds of times. She no longer had to suppress any revulsion when she heard it. Her training saw to that. She knew what was expected of her.

If she hadn't been so completely running on autopilot, she may have picked up on the fact that, unlike the previous hundreds of occasions, this time the question had been entirely bereft of undertones of lechery or desire. It had, in fact, been nothing more than a simple enquiry asking whether or not she wanted to leave the premises.

But she missed all of that entirely. And she responded as her training had told her to always respond, by giving a practised seductive smile and nodding.

The Trill smiled back. Not a smile of lust, but one of relief.

"Good."

Before she had time to realise what was happening, he pulled out a small disruptor pistol and fired across the room.

The shot impacted on the venue's main power relay, destroying it in a shower of sparks and plunging the already dingy room into complete darkness. All around, chaos erupted.

She felt a hand grab her arm and pull her off the stage. Somewhere next to her, she heard the Trill call out.

"Klath, we're leaving!"

An alarm flared up, soaking part of the room in a thin red half-light. All around her she heard confused and angry shouts. Some coming from the other customers, but many more coming from the venue's staff, all perplexed at having been so unceremoniously blinded.

Whoever had a hold of her arm seemed to have an idea of where they were going, at least. She was dragged along in the blackness, through a side door at the edge of the room. Behind her, the dark void of the main bar area of the venue was now occasionally illuminated with the flare of desperate and directionless weapons fire, and angry cries of frustration. But they left all that behind.

They entered a corridor, and as her vision adjusted to the darkness she caught the outline of a large bladed weapon being swung gracefully around by the Klingon in front of them. Seconds later, she heard a dull impact sound and a cry of pain.

They rounded a corner, and she felt herself being pushed to the ground, moments before everything was illuminated by the deadly glow of dozens of disruptor blasts, coming from the guards that were positioned ahead of them in the corridor.

Her would-be rescuers desperately took cover, and the Trill returned fire with his own weapon. But she just crawled backwards into the darkness, trying to melt into the shadows themselves, and shaking from a combination of the cold ground on her skin and the fear that she felt inside.

She heard the disruptors getting nearer as the guards closed on their location, then the Klingon let out a guttural roar as he burst forth, weapon raised, and felled two of the guards, as the Trill provided covering fire.

From her vantage point in the darkness, she was the only one who saw the bartender as he crept up on the strangers from behind. Both the Trill and the Klingon were still focused on finishing off the guards further off the corridor, and the noise of the disruptor fire meant that even his footsteps on the metal floor below couldn't tip them off to the danger.

She watched in horror as the ugly, scaly-faced alien approached the Trill, holding a dirty blade in his hand.

And then she felt herself moving. Moving forwards.

She jumped out from the shadows with a furious growl of her own.

It wasn't an entirely instinctive act, more a piece of desperate improvisation, but it came from somewhere deep inside of her. Something that she had been taught, many years ago. Before her training.

The bartender turned immediately, his face contorting in disbelief as he saw who had got the better of him. The exotic dancer wrapped in a couple of silk scarves.

She thundered into his midriff with all of her might, sending them both tumbling to the floor and causing the bartender to drop the blade. She landed on top of him, knocking the air clean out of his lungs in a strangled cry of pain. She wasn't even thinking as she reached out and grabbed the weapon from where it had landed. The bartender's face, one that she was more used to seeing ogling her from afar every night with a chilling leer, was now a picture of terrified shock.

Without pausing, she drove the dagger down into his chest. The bartender bucked and twitched for a moment. And then he was still.

Before she had time to process what she had done, she felt a familiar hand grab her arm. She looked up to see the Trill smiling at her.

"Thanks," he said, "I owe you one."

She didn't have time to reply, or react, before the Trill dragged her back to her feet, pointed his disruptor at the end of the now-cleared corridor and fired, obliterating the bulky rear door of the venue. She allowed herself to be led through the gap that was left behind, and into the harsh coldness of the outside air.

The Klingon whirled around, scanning the immediate area for more danger, as the Trill grabbed a stocky communicator from his belt with clear urgency.

"Ok, we're clear of the dampening field! Any time you like!"

Just as three more guards burst through the gaping hole where the rear door to the venue had once been and brought their weapons to bear, she felt the transporter beam take effect.

* * * * *

She rematerialised in a small, stuffy transporter room on a dishevelled looking ship. The air around her smelled faintly musty, there was rust and dirt on every surface, and one of the panels on the wall was flickering on and off. Even to an entirely untrained eye, it was clear that the vessel had seen better days.

To her eye, it looked like the interior of a small raider-class vessel. Possibly Ju'Day-type.

Looking around, she saw the Trill and the Klingon standing either side of her, and a smiling Vulcan standing at the transporter controls.

"Well, hello there," the Vulcan said cheerily.

Her two companions stepped down from the transporter pad. She followed warily, still not entirely sure which rival Syndicate operation had just sprung her from her previous owner. By the looks of things, not an especially well equipped one.

The Trill took off his dusty jacket and wrapped it around her, in an attempt to afford her a modicum of dignity. But the gesture didn't bring her any relief, or comfort.

"Hey," he said gently, "It's ok. You're safe now. What's your name?"

Whatever the state of the operation that now had possession of her, it seemed clear that he was the leader. As such, her training kicked in again. Her body switched back to autopilot. She knew the drill from here.

"Yes, master, I do feel safe," she lied without a second thought, as she ran her nails down his chest, "Now, please, let me thank you..."

The Trill jumped back as if he'd been electrocuted. Not the reaction she was expecting.

"Woah—Hey, no, ok. I mean, you're very—But you don't need to..."

Confused, she turned to the burly Klingon and kept up her seductive smile. She took a single step towards him.

“That will not be necessary,” he boomed out immediately.

She paused again. Behind the transporter controls, the grinning Vulcan shrugged.

“I mean, I’m always up for—”

“Nope. Back to the cockpit,” the Trill barked, “Get us out of here before anyone down there gets a trace on the transport.”

The Vulcan let out a sigh and walked out of the room. She scanned the faces of her kidnappers again, at a loss as to what was happening to her.

“I—I don’t understand. You own me now. I must—”

“Hey, no, nobody owns anybody, right?” the Trill replied awkwardly, “This isn’t a kidnapping. It’s a rescue.”

“It was a proud battle,” the Klingon added, unnecessarily.

Her eyes darted around as she mentally processed what she was being told.

After a few moments, she smiled. But this was a different smile to her usual one. There was no practised seduction or trained flirtation to be seen. For the first time since she had left Orpheus IV, this was a genuine smile of happiness.

“Denella,” she whispered, “My name...is Denella.”

She was free.

Part 1A

Part One

She was trapped.

The rush of claustrophobia wasn't entirely unexpected, but it was sudden enough to cause her to jerk her head up, where it impacted with some force on the metal surface above her.

A stream of choice Orion expletives filled the previously silent cockpit of the Bounty as Denella angrily crawled back out from underneath the forward helm console, rubbing her throbbing forehead as she did so.

"Problem?" Sunek grinned, the rangy Vulcan pilot standing over her with his arms folded.

The nausea she already felt from the bang on the head only increased when she was reacquainted with the sight of Sunek's choice of clothing for today. A brightly patterned Hawaiian shirt depicting a particularly colourful, and partially obscene, beach panorama on Risa.

When asked about his attire earlier, after it had put the rest of the crew off their breakfasts, he had simply explained that he was trying something new. He didn't mention that his reasons for trying something new were partly connected with the aftereffects of his recent run-in with a group of fellow members of the V'tosh ka'tur, which had left him even more emotionally troubled than usual. He was keeping the finer details, and the unease he felt, to himself. Sunek didn't like serious discussions.

Denella forced herself back to her feet, still rubbing her head with one hand and dusting down her faded blue overalls with the other. Her face, as it always seemed to be, was streaked with grime.

"Every time!" she fired back with a face like thunder, "Every time I do any repairs under there, I hit my head on that power coupler!"

"I'll get the medkit," Natasha Kinsen, the Bounty's human doctor, chimed in from the rear of the cockpit, disappearing down the rear steps in the direction of the ship's small medical bay.

From the centre chair, Jirel, the unjoined Trill and the de facto captain of the Bounty, smiled in amusement and glanced over at Klath, the Bounty's Klingon tactical officer.

"You know what they say. Bang your head on a power coupler once, shame on the power coupler. Bang your head on a power coupler twice, shame on—"

"Shut up," Denella griped.

They were cruising along at low warp, on a regulation delivery to a Talarian mining colony that they had managed to wrangle from one of Jirel's contacts in the sector. As such, with little else to do, Denella had decided to get on with some maintenance. A decision she was now regretting.

"Anyway," she continued, gesturing to the pilot's console, "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Nuh-huh," Sunek insisted with a shake of his head, "I'm telling you, the navigation system has been playing up ever since we put in for those repairs last week. It's not my fault that, as the greatest pilot in the galaxy, I demand perfection from my instruments."

She ignored the dozen sarcastic replies that sprang to mind at the Vulcan's latest vainglorious ramblings. She was too annoyed to get into a bickering contest right now.

"Sunek, I've run four full diagnostics, I've realigned the navigational deflector twice, and I've just checked and double checked every single control circuit under there. It's fine."

"It's not fine."

"Why? What exactly makes you think there's something wrong with it?"

Sunek shrugged his lanky shoulders. "It pulls to the left."

Denella stared back at the tousle-haired Vulcan, who for once in his inherently contradictory life actually appeared deadly serious, despite his choice of shirt.

"It...pulls to the left?"

"Yes! As soon as we go past warp four, we start to drift off course, no matter what I key into the navigation computer. And I need to correct it. Every time, just a little bit back over to the right. Cos it's pulling to the left!"

She shook her head and shot an exasperated glance at Jirel, who just offered her a flat shrug in return. With no backup forthcoming, she let out a long sigh. "Well, I don't know what to tell you," she replied, "It all checks out."

"It never used to do that, is all," the Vulcan grumbled unhappily.

Natasha returned to the cockpit and made a beeline for the Orion woman, waving a small scanner over her head.

"I'm fine," Denella insisted, trying to swat her hand away, "Pretty sure the cause of the headache is right there."

She gestured at the indignant Sunek, who wasn't giving up his hopes of a bickering contest without a fight.

"Hey!" he snapped, "Your repairs messed the ship up, ok?"

The green-skinned woman glanced at Natasha as she continued to work, her irritation level clear in her expression. "On the other hand, if you've got a sedative handy, I think I can find a good home for it."

Natasha stifled a smile as she finished her work and checked the results. "Well, nothing's broken," she reported, "Although, you are showing several signs of severe fatigue."

"Nothing new there," Denella shrugged as she started to pack up the collection of engineering tools strewn across the deck from her repair efforts on Sunek's console.

"I'm serious. You really should get some rest—"

Before she could go any further, Denella had finished with her tools and was walking back over to her engineering console at the rear of the cockpit, silently blanking the medical advice being offered. Natasha caught Jirel's eye and gave a subtle but firm nod in the Orion engineer's direction, with a look of concern that wasn't lost on the man in the centre seat. The Trill nodded in understanding and coughed awkwardly.

"Um, you know, Denella, you might wanna listen to her."

"Sure, yeah, I'll get right on that," the Orion woman snorted, "Let me just use some of my vast savings to book a spa weekend on Casperia Prime."

Natasha sighed and gestured to her scanner. "I don't mean—Look, you are showing all the classic signals for stress and fatigue. Low endorphin count, high heart rate, clear irritability—"

"In her defence," Jirel couldn't help but chip in, "We all get like that after working with Sunek."

"Um, I'm still in the room?"

Natasha ignored the squabbling and walked over to where Denella was now sat checking over her console, seemingly in a concerted effort to continue to ignore her. "Plus, you're grinding your teeth a lot."

Denella's jaw paused in the middle of a particularly intense grind, and she attempted to casually play it off as a complete coincidence, ignoring the slightly smug look from the medical professional in front of her.

"I'm not asking you to spend a fortnight at a meditation retreat on Betazed," Natasha continued, "I'm just saying, nothing's happening here right now. So, get some rest. Go to your cabin, listen to some music, read a book, paint a picture, I dunno. Whatever you do when you're not fixing the ship."

Denella finally looked up and acknowledged the persistent woman looming over her console and managed a wry smile.

She didn't want to admit it, but she was feeling fatigued. As usual, she had insisted on carrying out the majority of the repair work herself last week, and she was now using their gentle cruise to the Talarian colony to work through her ever-present list of minor issues around the ship. The sort of stuff that never really got fixed because she was too busy with more pressing repairs from their last misadventure.

She had actually been looking forward to working her way through them, despite how exhausted she was feeling. Because fixing things made her happy. Even if it also made her tired. But she had a sneaking suspicion that particular argument wouldn't wash with Natasha.

"Are all doctors trained to be this annoying?" she replied eventually.

"Took advanced classes at medical school," Natasha grinned back, "Trust me, this is only me on about a three or a four."

"She's also right," Jirel piped up, "Not much going on here right now."

"We are still 2.7 days away from our destination," Klath added with a tap of his console.

"It's still doing it, you know!" Sunek chimed in from the pilot's console, gesturing to the navigation computer with an annoyed point of his finger having singularly failed to read the room.

Denella sighed and shook her head, a rueful grimace on her face.

"I've got plenty to do," she persisted, gesturing to the maintenance schedule on a dusty padd in front of her, "Plus, by the sounds of it, I need to run a fifth diagnostic on Sunek's console."

Jirel jumped out of his seat and walked over to glance at the padd. "All that stuff has needed doing for months. An extra few days isn't gonna make a difference. And Sunek's probably just messing with you—"

"Am not!"

"—So either listen to the doc, or we'll have to drag you kicking and screaming back to your cabin."

The Orion woman looked from the kind smile of the Trill, to the determined face of the human and the knowing glare of the Klingon off to one side. It was becoming clear that she wasn't going to win this particular battle.

“Ok. Fine. I guess I’ll go...relax.”

She began tapping her console, eliciting a sharper look from Natasha. “Just gonna set that diagnostic running, and then—”

“Hey,” Natasha barked, pointing to the exit, “Now. Relax. Rest. Sleep. In any order.”

Like a petulant child being sent to their room, Denella reluctantly abandoned her work and shuffled towards the rear steps of the cockpit.

“And don’t worry,” Jirel added, grabbing the padd from her console, “We can do some of—”

“Don’t you dare do any of it. You’ll screw it all up,” she called back, “I’m the engineer, this ship is my baby, and I won’t let you hurt her.”

She gently patted the metal wall next to her for effect. Jirel rolled his eyes.

“You know, I kept the Bounty perfectly shipshape before you got here.”

“No,” Denella smiled knowingly, “You didn’t.”

* * * * *

Tap. Tap. Tap.

She sat alone in the ship’s dining area, a half-finished meal in front of her. It was the first proper meal she’d eaten in some time. But her attention wasn’t on the food, she was focused on the sound she could hear.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It was coming from inside the far wall of the room. She had never studied this specific class of ship in any detail before, but when you had worked on as many ships and shuttles as she had, you began to understand that, under the surface, one was much the same as the others.

Which meant that she could work on diagnosing the source of the tapping.

As she sat in silence, her ear cocked towards the source of the noise, the door to the dining area suddenly snapped open, causing her to gasp in fright.

“Hey, it’s alright, it’s only me,” Jirel smiled as he stepped through the doorway.

It had been several hours since the Trill and his colleagues had so unceremoniously rescued her from her former owners, and she was still struggling to put together the truth of her new situation. The feeling of freedom was one that she was having trouble getting used to.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Jirel tentatively walked over to the replicator, as if not wanting to startle a wild animal on the other side of the room, and ordered a mug of jumja tea with four sugars. Taking the mug from the replicator, he tried to broach the awkward silence.

“Sorry we didn’t have anything in your size in storage, by the way,” he offered, pointing back at the replicator, “This old thing only does food, y’know?”

Denella looked down at the grubby, oversized overalls she’d been given to wear. Jirel had admitted to not even knowing where they had come from, or how long they had been onboard. They smelt musky, and despite her standing nearly six feet tall, she was dwarfed by them.

But despite the smell, and the scratchy fabric, and the fact that they appeared to have been designed to fit a grossly overweight Hupyrian, she couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so comfortable.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

She looked back at the Trill and managed a thankful smile, in lieu of a more verbose response. It was enough to relax Jirel slightly, and he felt comfortable enough to approach the table and sit down, albeit at the opposite end to her.

Another moment of silence. In her mind, Denella had whittled down the possible sources of the tapping to a shortlist of five.

“So,” Jirel managed eventually, swirling his tea around in the mug, “I was—We were wondering if there was anywhere we could take—I mean, anywhere you wanted to go?”

This distracted her from her diagnosis. Truth be told, she hadn’t really thought about it. She’d never considered that she’d ever again have the chance to actually choose her own destiny.

She thought about going back to Orpheus IV, but soon sadly realised there was nothing left there. Not now. She considered one of the other colonies set up by the Orion Free Traders. But she didn’t even know if they still existed, or if the Syndicate had overwhelmed them all.

She also knew that it probably didn’t matter all that much what she wanted to do. She was aware of the likelihood that she wouldn’t be free for long enough for it to matter.

“No,” she replied, her voice sounding quieter than she’d been expecting.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Oh,” Jirel nodded, feeling the awkwardness in the room rising once again, “Well, y’know, there’s plenty of neutral spaceports around here. We could always drop you off, and—”

“He’ll be looking for you,” she said, causing Jirel to pause in confusion.

“Who?”

“Rilen Dar,” she replied, suppressing the shudder that even saying his name caused, “He was the one who...He owns me.”

“Hey, we’ve been through this. Nobody owns you now.”

“He’ll be looking for you. And for me. And he won’t stop until he finds us. So...I don’t think it really matters where I go.”

Jirel set his mug down on the table and called up one of his more confident swashbuckling space captain looks. It felt like the situation called for it.

“Heh. You know, if I had a bar of latinum for every galactic creep that was out there trying to find us, I’d...well, I’d have traded the Bounty in for a better ship years ago.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Besides,” he continued, “We masked our transporter pattern, and our warp signature. I think. And we’re not planning any vacations in Syndicate space any time soon, so he’ll be waiting a while.”

She considered pushing the matter further, explaining to the Trill precisely how much danger was now hanging over his ship, regardless of how much time might pass or how much bravado he might have in reserve. But she didn’t want to dwell on that too much. And not telling him the full truth about Rilen Dar’s merciless personality was probably an act of kindness. Best he didn’t know too much.

“So, just think about it,” Jirel added, “No rush, you’re welcome to stay here as long as you want. But we can take you anywhere you wanna go, ok? No questions asked.”

She nodded slightly as he finished his tea and stood up, walking back over to the door.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Actually,” she blurted out, causing the Trill to pause and turn back, “I was thinking I could...do something for you. To...thank you?”

“Um, I thought we’d been over that as well,” Jirel squirmed uncomfortably, “That isn’t why we—”

“There’s a faulty plasma circuit behind that wall,” she said, pointing across the room to the source of the tapping, having narrowed her shortlist to one culprit, “That tapping sound? Those things can be pretty dangerous, could explode without warning. But...I could fix it?”

Jirel stared at the Orion woman for a moment, open-mouthed.

“You could...?”

Emboldened by her offer, Denella reeled off the full list she had put together in her head.

“Also, I think I spotted the start of a nasty hull fracture in your cargo bay. And there was a whirring sound coming from the air circulators which is definitely a sign of a loose connection somewhere. Plus the sonic shower in my cabin was stuck on a low setting, and I think your Klingon friend mentioned that the phaser cannons were offline—?”

“What is happening right now?” a mystified Jirel managed, as the Orion slave girl who had barely managed two words to him since she had come onboard continued.

“—And I definitely heard a whine from the impulse drive when we broke orbit. That’s a miscalibration of the primary injectors.”

She paused for a moment, then remembered something new, gesturing at the replicator.

“And I think that’s a Ferengi design, right? The Replipad Mini XS? You can easily reprogram those to make just about anything. The Ferengi just throttle the software so that people need to pay extra for an upgrade.”

Jirel’s open mouth formed a smile. Denella puffed out her cheeks, her worries temporarily forgotten.

“So, can I get started?”

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

Relaxation was easier said than done, as it turned out.

Denella had returned to her cabin, just as she had been ordered to by Natasha. But the rest of her instructions were proving more difficult.

She had tried music, calling up a playlist of Deltan symphonies that she occasionally listened to when she was working in engineering. With the gentle lilting sounds of the music filling her cabin, she had closed her eyes to enjoy a relaxing moment.

Except, as the music had continued, she started to hear a minor, but distinctive crackle in the audio that suggested that one of the speakers in her cabin needed rewiring.

So she abandoned that plan, and tried to relax through reading. But Denella had never been much of a reader, and the ship's limited database wasn't exactly full of options for even the least discerning bookworm.

There was a bunch of 20th century comic books from Earth that Jirel insisted he was going to get around to reading one day and couldn't possibly be deleted to free up space, a few volumes of Klingon philosophy that were impenetrably dense for anyone lacking advanced qualifications in both philosophy and the Klingon language, and a large number of trashy romance novels that likely belonged to either Natasha or Sunek. Denella couldn't tell which was more likely.

She reluctantly selected one particular tome titled 'Forbidden Passions of Bajor', complete with a cover image that depicted a pale, generously-bosomed human woman melting into the arms of a muscular, shirtless Bajoran Vedek. And although her lack of reading experience perhaps meant that she didn't have an appropriate amount of context to make such a claim, it didn't take long for her to wonder if it might have been the worst work of fiction ever committed to print.

Eventually, frustrated by the third nonsensical plot twist in as many chapters, and idly wondering why the Vedek had been chopping wood with an axe in the middle of a forest like that, why the heroine seemed incapable of taking more than half a dozen steps in any direction without finding herself in some sort of peril, and why a member of a strict Bajoran religious sect spent so much of his time with his shirt off, she gave up.

Then, a spark of inspiration hit her. She re-checked the ship's database and found another set of files that she could read.

But, a few pages into the technical manual for a Klingon Tok'cha-class shuttlepod, just as she was reaching an especially gripping section that extensively detailed the wiring diagram for the shuttle's secondary sensor array, the padd's screen went dark. With a grimace, she remembered that she'd been meaning to replace the power cell in it for some time.

Admitting defeat, she flung the useless padd away and lay back in her bed, trying to simply get some sleep.

Several minutes later, she was no nearer to falling asleep, but she had at least successfully stripped down and realigned the thruster assembly on a Markalian transport barge in her mind.

And then she was distracted again, by the telltale chirp of an alert from the console on her cabin's desk.

She stood up and padded over to the desk, wondering which of the Bounty's overworked systems was due for maintenance this time.

But it was nothing like that.

It was a message. A simple few lines of text. And, if she was being honest, not a message that was in any way meant for her. But, one of the first things she had done after deciding that her future lay onboard the Bounty had been to set up a program in the ship's computer, left alone to run in the background, away from any other system.

Ostensibly, it was just a simple algorithm, designed to passively scan all unencoded subspace transmissions in range as the Bounty travelled through the quadrant. All the algorithm was searching for was any mention of a specific name, somewhere in the overlapping traffic. It didn't matter where it was mentioned, whether in a personal communication, transport manifest, planetary news report or obituary. Provided that the raw data itself wasn't coded, her little algorithm would find it.

So far, it had turned up precious few results, and anything that it had found had nothing to do with who she was searching for. It was a big galaxy, after all, and no name is truly unique.

Still, each time an alert popped up, she got a nervous feeling in her stomach. And this time, she audibly gasped as she saw the contents of the message. After so long, the algorithm had finally found something.

She had found Sarina.

* * * * *

The two girls sat together on a fallen tree trunk at the top of the hill, hungrily eating the last of the snacks they had brought with them on the climb.

Below them, on the surface of Orpheus IV, the sprawling mass of the township lay before them, the lights slowly coming on at the first hint of

twilight. Behind them lay the tree line of the forest. The one the other children had disappeared into an hour earlier, to search for whatever fruits and twigs and creepy-crawlies they could get their hands on.

But the two girls had stayed behind.

As they got to the end of their impromptu picnic, the taller girl turned to her friend with an apologetic look on her face.

"I'm sorry, Sarina," Denella offered, "I just...don't think I like forests."

The smaller green-skinned girl looked at her friend and smiled.

"That's ok," Sarina replied, "We can stay here until the others get back. I didn't really want to go in there without you anyway."

Denella nodded as she scooped down the final piece of keflat fruit that her mother had packed for her. She and Sarina had become inseparable over the last few months.

They sat in silence for a few moments, as the sun continued to set overhead. Then Sarina looked over at her friend once again, a quizzical look on her face. "Denella, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Denella considered this question long and hard. It was a serious question, after all, and it clearly deserved a serious answer. As she thought, she swung her legs below the tree trunk where they sat, kicking up plumes of dirty red dust.

"A doctor," she said eventually, and definitively.

She kicked her legs in the dirt a few more times, and thought some more.

"Or a shuttle pilot. Or an explorer. Or an archae-lol-ologist," she continued, with what her eight year old mind was absolutely certain was the correct pronunciation, adding with complete authority, "That's someone who digs in the ground to find the olden days."

Sarina nodded along in understanding, a little in awe of her best friend's wisdom, as Denella swung her legs some more.

"Or a ship designer. Or an athlete. Or a chief engineer on one of those big Federation starships my daddy showed me pictures of."

Eventually, she stopped kicking the dirt and forced herself to accept the real answer to Sarina's question.

"I don't really know."

Sarina smiled and nodded, as she munched on the final remains of her food.

"What about you?" Denella asked inquisitively, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Sarina diligently finished chewing her food and looked up at the darkening sky, contemplating the question now it had been turned around on her.

As her friend considered her answer, Denella also looked up and saw a tiny speck of light moving across the evening gloom. She wondered if that was one of those transport ships entering orbit. One of those that her father had promised he would take her up to see one day.

She also wondered if she really cared all that much about seeing one of them up close any more. Especially if she was going to be a famous archae-lol-ologist when she grew up.

The two friends continued to swing their legs over the side of the tree stump, as the sun set in front of them.

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

Klath walked down the Bounty's main corridor, relishing what was in store for him.

With Denella and Natasha both in their cabins, he had left Jirel and Sunek behind in the cockpit to grab some dinner. Alone. In silence. Just as he liked it.

It wasn't that Klath was an unsociable creature. In fact, if there was bloodwine to be drunk and stories to be told, he was often the life and soul of the party. But, despite the crew's usual debauched conduct whenever they made it to a friendly port, most meals onboard the Bounty weren't like that. They tended to be more sedate affairs, filled with Klath's least favourite activity: Small talk.

So, this rare opportunity to eat alone was one that he had grasped with both hands. He walked into the ship's small dining area, looking forward to nothing more than a good hearty meal. And a few quiet moments.

As soon as the doors parted, he realised he might not be getting the latter. Denella sat at the only table in the room, idly toying with the remains of a fava root salad.

She looked up to see the slightly surprised Klingon enter, and she smiled.

"Denella," he managed simply, trying not to make his disappointment too apparent as he walked over to the replicator and ordered the bowl of gladst with extra grapok sauce that he had been hoping to enjoy with a side order of silence.

"Hi Klath," the slightly preoccupied reply came, "I know, I should be back in my cabin. Relaxing. But I...guess I couldn't sleep."

Klath sat down and hungrily shovelled a mouthful of gladst into his mouth with his fingers. He chewed it noisily, hoping that he could still get away without any need for small talk despite the presence of the Orion woman. She knew him better than anyone onboard, after all. But as he chanced a glance up, he saw the worried look on her face, as she stared into space and continued to toy with her food.

He set the second handful of food down and sighed. Two of the things that Klath valued most of all in the entire galaxy were now in direct conflict. His friendship with Denella, and his keen desire to avoid small talk at mealtimes.

Eventually, and ruefully, he realised there was only ever going to be one winner.

"Do you...wish to talk about it?"

The question sounded false, even to Klath. But it was enough to snap Denella out of her reverie, even as she continued to push her food around the plate in front of her.

"Maybe."

The answer caused Klath more irritation. Like with most mealtime small talk, he wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to do with it. After all, he had been careful to ask a simple yes or no question, in order to focus the flow of conversation, but now she had flagrantly ignored either of the possible responses and given him a third answer. One with no obvious follow-up from his side.

He decided that 'maybe' was short enough of a definitively positive response for him to eschew any further questions and get on with his meal without breaking the implied social contract at play. But then, just as he reached for another handful of gladst, she continued.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Klath grunted slightly, wondering whether he was now obligated to agree to her sudden demands when, in his eyes, she had done such a poor job answering his own initial question. Still, after a moment, he reluctantly withdrew his hand from the bowl again.

"Of course," he replied, mentally congratulating himself for keeping any trace of his growing irritation out of his voice.

"So—I mean, purely hypothetically speaking, how far would you go for someone that you...cared about? For a friend?"

Klath really didn't like this question. Even with his limited understanding of the rules of small talk, it seemed entirely too deep and far-reaching for a simple mealtime conversation.

Still, it seemed to matter to Denella, so he dutifully mulled it over.

"If the cause is just," he said eventually, "I do not believe there is a limit to how far I would go. Or should go. Regardless of the outcome."

"Is that official Klingon protocol?"

"Would that matter?" he asked back, happy to go tit-for-tat in asking questions, seeing as how the usual question and answer process seemed to be off the table.

"What about—? Oh, what was it..." Denella muttered, searching her brain for the scant quantity of rudimentary Klingon she had been trying to learn on Klath's behalf.

Eventually, it came to her.

“meQtaHbogh qachDaq Suv qoH neH.”

Klath nodded. “Only a fool fights in a burning house.”

Denella mustered a smile, mainly in relief that she’d found the right phrase, and hadn’t just asked him for directions to the tourist information office. “I mean,” she continued, “To me, that says hopeless battles aren’t a good thing. Sometimes it’s best to just let things go. Unless I’ve got the wrong idea.”

Klath considered this for a moment. He had to admit that he would not have predicted this was where this latest round of small talk would end up. “No,” he replied, “You have the right idea.”

“So, how does that fit in with what you just said?”

“My belief is a...personal one. That I have adopted since becoming a member of this crew.”

“Why?”

“Because we spend a significant amount of our time inside burning houses,” he replied with a trace of a smile.

The Orion woman returned the smile and stood up, leaving the rest of her own unfinished meal behind.

“Thanks, Klath,” she said with sincerity, “I guess I needed to hear something like that.”

The Klingon watched his friend leave with no small amount of confusion. As she reached the door, his curiosity got the better of him even as he stood on the verge of achieving the silent eating conditions he had been craving, and he called after her.

“Denella, what was this concerning?”

“Like I said: Hypothetical.”

She exited the dining room, finally leaving Klath alone. No closer to understanding small talk as a concept.

* * * * *

Despite the small size of the ship, the equally small size of the crew complement meant that it was always easy to move around undetected on the Bounty. Especially at ‘night’.

Clearly, in deep space, there was no concept of day or night. But like all spacefaring ships, the Bounty was programmed to bring about the illusion of night with a circadian rhythm, to allow the crew to maintain a regular sleep cycle. The ship ran on computer control and the lights throughout the vessel were dimmed to make it seem like some sort of witching hour.

Denella remembered her father telling her stories about why such systems were necessary. About how early travellers from Orion, and most other warp-capable worlds, had ended up going crazy on the first long-range assignments due to the permanence of the lighting onboard.

And so, in the dead of the Bounty’s mandatory pre-programmed night, she sneaked into the ship’s cargo bay, without anyone realising. Crazy or otherwise.

While back in her cabin, she had changed from her usual baggy overalls into a more stealth-like combination of plain black trousers and a dark tunic top. Not exactly special ops gear, but the best that she had available. She had also pored over the ship’s sensor data until she had found what she had needed in a nearby shipping lane, as well as doing what she could to locate a suitable destination to aim for.

Now she just needed some equipment.

She tiptoed through the bay, walking in between the bulky containers full of supplies for the Talarian miners, and eventually reached a small locker in the corner of the cargo bay, which contained what passed for the Bounty’s spare weapons complement.

She opened it and examined the limited treasures inside. She grabbed a set of ancient Ferengi stun grenades that they’d acquired at some point on their travels, and bundled them into the rucksack she was carrying. She also picked up an old 23rd century type-2 Starfleet phaser that Jirel had picked up at an auction, and a savage-looking blade they had managed to acquire from a Nausicaan during a disagreement in a bar on Gavan III.

Satisfied that she’d taken all that would reasonably help her in her hopeless mission, knowing she already had her Orion dagger on her person, she closed the locker and slung the rucksack over her shoulder.

She took a deep breath and turned around. Only to see Jirel leaning on the crates to her right, his arms folded across his chest.

“Gisjacheh!” she swore in her native Orion tongue, jumping in shock at the sight of the Trill.

“Charming,” Jirel smiled back, “How’s the relaxation going?”

“Don’t you ever sleep?” she asked as she fixed the rucksack to her back.

“Sometimes. Not when I’m worrying about someone on this ship, mind you. Klath mentioned that you were weird at dinner. Kind of. You know he’s not a big talker.”

She didn't smile, resolutely unwilling to be drawn into the conversation that he clearly wanted.

"Well," she shrugged, "Nothing to worry about. I was just—"

"Doing an inventory of the weapons locker?"

"Is that what we're calling it?" she asked with a lopsided grin.

"Hey, it's a locker, it's got some weapons in it, what else would you call it?"

There was a short silence. Jirel awkwardly itched at his spots, as he tended to do in uncomfortable situations.

"Come on," he sighed, "What's going on?"

Denella looked back at the man who had helped to rescue her all those years ago, and admitted that she owed him an explanation. After all, she was running off with all of his stun grenades.

Plus, she knew she had a bit of time to play with before her appointment.

"Alright. Let's talk."

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

The lights were also dimmed in the dining area as Jirel and Denella sat facing each other, freshly replicated cups of raktajino in front of them. Denella idly toyed with the type-2 phaser, working on reconfiguring the power cells in an effort to boost the ancient weapon's efficiency.

For his part, Jirel just sat and listened, trying to take in what she was saying.

"We were both taken at the same time, when the Syndicate came to Orpheus IV. We were transported together, we were...trained together. And then we were sold off to different ends of Syndicate space. I haven't seen her since."

She kept her focus on the phaser as she spoke, finding it easier to talk about these parts of her life through some level of detachment.

"Honestly, I had no idea if she was alive or not. There's not exactly a ton of information coming out of Syndicate space. But I kept monitoring subspace for her name. Any sign she was out there. I'm not even sure what I was hoping for, but I guess bringing down the entire Syndicate seemed like a pretty impossible job, so I focused on something...achievable."

She finished recalibrating the phaser's power transfer systems and began to slip the power cells back into the sleek black casing of the weapon.

"And I finally got something. An unencrypted message sent by a Ferengi casino boss to one of his contacts, bragging about his impending purchase for one of his establishments. He was talking about Sarina."

"Which establishment?"

"The message didn't say. But she'll be in the open when the purchase happens, wherever it happens. On a ship. No planetary dampening fields or anything. This is the chance I was looking for."

"Ok then," Jirel nodded, setting his raktajino to one side, "I'll get Sunek to alter our course, and we'll—"

"No," she said firmly, "I can't put you all in danger like that. Wherever the transaction is taking place, it'll be deep inside Syndicate territory. I'm going by myself."

"Come on, Denella. You can't be serious."

The Trill stared across the divide of the table at the Orion woman. She certainly looked serious.

"So, what?" he continued, "You're just gonna jump out the airlock and float on over there?"

She finished placing the power cells back inside the phaser and began to clip the outer casing back into place, checking the chronometer on her wrist before offering her explanation.

"In about twenty minutes, the Bounty'll pass within transporter range of a Yridian freighter heading in the right general direction. I'm going to beam myself over there and...negotiate transport to Syndicate territory."

Jirel stared at her in disbelief, wondering if she had actually gone crazy. Even the airlock plan seemed more sound.

"You're going to transport yourself between two ships? At warp? Travelling in opposite directions? On our piece of junk transporter? Holy crap, Denella, I barely trust that thing to get me the right side of a planet's atmosphere when we're in orbit!"

She shrugged impassively as she finished reassembling the phaser. "Provided I match the vector dynamics of the other ship and compensate for the conflicting warp field parameters, it should be—"

"Easier than just asking for our help?" Jirel interrupted her, still incredulous at the audacity of her plan.

She ran a quick self-diagnostic on the phaser, confirming that the weapon's efficiency was now back up to 79% of its initial specification. Not bad for a device pushing 120 years old.

"It's far too dangerous for me to risk all of you."

"Hey, nothing's too dangerous for—"

"Rilen Dar," she stated flatly.

Although her attention was still on the phaser, she could sense that the name had been enough to unnerve her friend, regardless of his usual levels of bravado.

"That's who's overseeing the deal," she continued, "The most prolific trafficker in the whole Syndicate. I guess it makes sense that he's ended up with Sarina again at some point. And if he was to get his hands on you, he'd—"

"We've dealt with worse people than him."

"No. You haven't."

Her pointed words hung in the air. Jirel had never probed too deeply into what she had gone through before she had arrived on the Bounty, but

everyone had heard plenty of horror stories of what life was like deep inside the depths of the Syndicate's black market.

Still, he wasn't ready to let her go off without them.

"And what about you, hmm? What happens if you get caught by him again?"

For the first time since they had sat down, she looked up from the phaser and stared into Jirel's eyes, a steely glint in her eyes.

"I won't get caught. Or, at least, I won't let myself get caught."

Jirel glanced at the weapon she was still toying with and caught the implication in her words. He didn't care for it very much.

She stole another glance at the chronometer. She knew she had no more time for talking. "Please, Jirel," she persisted, "Don't follow me."

Jirel looked confused. "What the hell is that supposed to—?"

He didn't get any further through his sentence. A single blast from the newly reconfigured phaser on the lowest stun setting was enough to silence him.

The unconscious Trill slumped onto the table.

* * * * *

Her fingers danced over the transporter controls at the speed of light.

Jirel hadn't been exaggerating about the difficulty involved in what she was trying to do, transporting between ships at warp. But he had underestimated her determination to figure out how to do it.

She had quickly found the Yridian freighter on long-range sensors, exactly where it was supposed to be, and was now making the finishing touches to calibrating the transporter for the point at which the two ships reached an optimum distance apart.

As she worked, she tried to ignore the nagging concerns she had about the possible issue with what she was doing. Everything relied on the Yridian ship maintaining a constant heading and speed. If whoever was at the helm suddenly decided to speed up, or drop out of warp, or deviate from their current course even a fraction, she was going to end up beaming herself into deep space.

The calibration completed, she grabbed the rucksack at her feet and slung it over her back, before pacing over and standing on the transporter pad, exhaling deeply.

She cast one final look around the Bounty's poky transporter room. The same one she'd seen when she had first arrived onboard all those years ago.

Absently, as she felt the automated transporter process beginning, she wondered whether she would ever see it again.

* * * * *

She didn't end up in deep space. She ended up exactly where she had wanted to be.

And while she wasn't a telepath, she could have easily predicted the first three expressions she saw on the Yridian man's face as she materialised inside the freighter's cramped engineering deck. The face, covered with wrinkled skin with large earlobes branching out from each side, cycled through the expressions very quickly.

The first expression was one of shock. Which was understandable, given that the last thing he would have been expecting during his duty shift inside the engineering deck of a nondescript freighter was an unauthorised incoming transport.

The second expression was one of lust, as it dawned on the haggard and grubby engineer that an Orion woman had literally appeared out of thin air in front of him. Just like in so many of his dirtier fantasies.

And the third expression was one of terror, as it dawned on him that the mysterious newcomer had a phaser in her hand, levelled at him.

"Right then," said Denella, "Take me to your leader."

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

Even back at school on Ferenginar, Runk had been earmarked as one to watch by his commercial instructors. And throughout his burgeoning career since then, he had prided himself on never considering any step too far in the pursuit of cold, hard latinum.

He was, as his final year thesis at the Ferengi School of Commerce testified, a strict believer in the Second Rule of Acquisition.

The best deal is the one that brings the most profit.

His strict belief in the Second Rule above all else had quickly seen him build up an enormous business empire of bars and casinos, across the length and breadth of the Ferengi Alliance. His bank balance had blossomed under Grand Nagus Zek's reign.

But recently, the changes brought about by the new Grand Nagus Rom, designed to modernise and reform the Alliance, had made Second Rule adherents like Runk sick to the pits of their stomachs. Suddenly the best deal wasn't necessarily the one that brought the most profit, it was the one that paid a fairer wage, or afforded more equality. And where was the sense in that?

And so, Runk had taken steps to protect the rights afforded to him by the Second Rule, and had moved his entire operation out of Alliance space, overseeing construction of a number of new casinos inside planetary systems controlled by the Orion Syndicate.

As far as Runk could see, that was the deal that would bring him the most profit, and therefore the best deal to take.

He left the Alliance behind, freeing himself from Rom's foolhardy pursuit of higher taxation, greater regulation and equal rights for females. He brought cheap land inside Syndicate territory from those desperate to leave, and therefore willing to take any offer that was made to them. And he utilised the complete lack of oversight or regulation on the gambling sector inside Syndicate space to really turn the screw on his casino's patrons.

But still, he knew he could do better. Even as his latinum reserves continued to swell, that didn't mean that Runk didn't believe there wasn't more profit to be found. He knew there were even more ways to attract inveterate gamblers to his establishments.

And so, his Second Rule instincts had led him here, to the Numekkk nebula. A swirling, writhing tumult of charged gas clouds and sensor-blinding radiation. The perfect place for a clandestine rendezvous.

And here, inside the festering storm, the man once voted 'most likely to reach the Divine Treasury' by his peers during his studies at the School of Commerce now found himself onboard a heavily armed cruiser enjoying a glass of warm Orion rum with Rilen Dar, while watching the seductive dance of the slave girl in front of him.

Runk had prepared for the meeting meticulously, ever since he had placed the requisition for the girl with the infamous Orion slaver.

He had researched the fairest price for a girl of the age and quality that he had requested, and calculated the best way to undercut that price without angering his host. He had been sure to request a DNA sample from the merchandise in order to verify that she was the real deal.

He had even taken a large shot of the best pheromone suppressant money could buy before he had beamed aboard the Orion ship, not wanting to take any chances with the rumours of what a slave girl could do to an average Ferengi.

And so, as he sat in the middle of the lion's den and watched his latest potential acquisition perform as she had been trained, he allowed himself a greedy smile.

He felt in control.

"Everything you expected?" the deep voice of Dar boomed out from his side.

Runk reluctantly tore his attention away from the dancer and turned to his host, a stoutly-built and overly muscular Orion man, who reclined in a lounge chair next to the Ferengi. He wore a rich maroon pair of trousers and a simple waistcoat, which was unbuttoned and fell open to show off his chiselled musculature and tree trunk sized arms. A clear show of raw force from the slave trader.

Runk had to admit that if they were meeting in any other circumstances, he would rightly be terrified. But this was a business meeting, and as such, he still felt in his element.

He was in control.

"Excellent, Mr Dar," he replied with a toothy leer, "I must say your merchandise is everything you promised it would be. I'm sure my patrons will be most impressed."

He allowed himself a greedy chuckle as he considered the wealth of profit that would be coming his way from adding a slave girl as entertainment at his main casino. Drunk, excitable gamblers being given another shot of stimulation and another chance to part with their latinum. Should this one-off trial go as well as he was expecting, he would be quick to make further purchases for his other establishments.

The Orion man smiled back at him. Runk didn't need to be an expert on body language to see it for what it was, a smile bereft of warmth or meaning. A cold expression on an emotionless facade.

"I'm glad to hear it," Dar said, idly handing a green metal padd to the Ferengi, "Sign here to complete the transfer, and the merchandise is all yours."

Runk glanced at the device. Everything was going exactly as he had expected. He took a sip of his warming rum, tapped a few commands into the padd, and passed it back across to Dar.

“My counter-offer.”

Dar’s expression shifted from an empty smile to an irritated scowl.

A lesser Ferengi than Runk might have considered this tactic a mistake. But the best deal was the one that brought the most profit, as his cherished Second Rule stated. So every offer had a counter-offer. And eventually, both parties would agree on a happy compromise, which Runk would deftly work to end up slightly in his favour. After all, Runk had been negotiating all his life. He knew how far to push a deal.

Unfortunately for Runk, he had never done business with Rilen Dar before. The Orion man didn’t even glance at the details of the counter-offer on the padd. He simply sat it back down on the table next to his chair.

“We had a deal, Ferengi.”

The tone of his voice was measured, but there was more than a hint of menace. For the first time since he had arrived onboard, Runk felt nervous. Still, he had been prepared for a few bumps in the road. Especially for a deal of this magnitude.

“I understand, Mr Dar,” he placated, bowing his head slightly in the sort of show of mock-deference that had served him well in the past, “I merely wish to negotiate—”

Runk had no idea there had been anyone standing behind him. But he heard the sound of the impact a split second before he felt the searing pain. In the scant remaining seconds of life afforded to him, he had just enough time to look down and see the end of an Orion dagger sticking out of his chest.

Unfortunately, the trauma to his body was so immediate, that he was dead long before he had time to contemplate the irony of the self-styled most ruthless businessman in the galaxy being literally stabbed in the back.

As the Ferengi’s lifeless body slumped to the deck, Rilen Dar looked up at the Orion guard who stood behind Runk’s seat, now missing a dagger from his belt.

“Clean that up,” he muttered simply.

The guard nodded and began to drag the corpse away.

Satisfied that his reputation was secure, Dar himself leaned back in his chair and enjoyed the rest of the show in front of him with a dark leer.

He didn’t negotiate.

* * * * *

Sarina watched the whole grisly scene play out in front of her with complete detachment.

It wasn’t the first time she’d seen one of Dar’s attempted deals play out like this. Indeed, she was only back under his ownership at all after Dar had double-crossed a former business partner on Trayan II. A double-cross that had ended with said former business partner being incinerated by a disruptor blast.

And after so many years in the Syndicate, working for so many masters, she now took such events as a simple matter of course.

So she just danced, and blocked everything else out.

Sometimes she allowed herself to dream of Orpheus IV, and the life she had once had. She dreamed of her family, and of her betrothed, one of the many Orion Free Traders that had been cut down where he stood when the Syndicate had come.

And she sometimes even dreamed of Denella, her friend. And wondered where she was now.

But increasingly, she found herself thinking about all that less and less. Those dreams and thoughts seemed more distant than they had ever been. She knew she would never go back there, so she tried not to torture herself with such memories.

Instead, she kept herself detached. She kept her mind blank.

And she continued to dance.

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

Fellot Yek had seen plenty of things during his time as captain of the Yridian freighter Grem Lok.

He had once been forced to navigate his ship through a Cardassian minefield to ensure that a shipment of illicit weapons reached a Maquis base in the Badlands. He had dodged countless Federation patrols during the Dominion War to bring shipments of building materials to the Breen Confederacy. He had once even single-handedly saved the entire ship by crawling down six decks via the access corridors to stop a warp core breach after the Grem Lok had collided with a quantum filament.

But he had never experienced something as crazy as this before.

“You what?” he half-cackled at the Orion woman in front of him.

Denella stood confidently on the Grem Lok’s command deck. A stuffy room consisting of little more than a handful of haphazardly positioned control interfaces and a small viewscreen.

“You heard me, Captain Yek,” she said, keeping her voice measured and the phaser trained on him.

The only other Yridian on deck was the crew member she had met when she beamed in down in the engineering section. On the trip up to the command deck, she had learned that his name was Paldor Yoss, and aside from him and Yek, there were only three other crew members aboard, two technicians and a co-pilot.

On the same trip, Yoss had learned not to try to touch the Orion woman, even when the desires of a lonely engineer on a long voyage got the better of him. His left arm hung limply by his side, the clean break of the bone a testament to the thoroughness of the lesson.

Yek suppressed a smirk at their guest, despite the weapon that was trained on him.

“So,” he ventured, still not sure this wasn’t an elaborate prank being played on him, “You, an Orion slave girl, want me to transport you to the Syndicate-owned colony on Gartek V? And not only that, but you want to pay me for the privilege?”

Denella’s expression remained entirely serious. She knew how crazy it sounded, but based on the limited research she had been able to do before leaving the Bounty, she knew that colony represented her best chance of success.

“Almost right. Except I’m not a slave girl.”

“I suspect you soon will be, if you continue on this journey of yours.”

She refused to flinch at Yek’s comment, or the darkly twisted grin that accompanied it. But she definitely felt herself tense up slightly.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Just get me where I need to go.”

Yek studied the Orion’s dark green face. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure her out.

“Well,” he said eventually, with a sarcastic bow of his head, “Is there anything else we can do for you, my dear?”

She ignored the sarcasm and chose to treat the question with complete sincerity.

“A cabin wouldn’t go amiss,” she shrugged, before glancing over at Yoss and his broken arm, “With a door that locks.”

“That can be arranged.”

Yek played along, because his mind was already exploring an avenue for some unexpected profit. As soon as the Orion woman was safely in the cabin he would provide her belowdecks on the Grem Lok, he could send a message to one of his contacts inside the Syndicate, offering him a very tempting prize indeed.

A lesser Yridian might have felt a small amount of guilt for double crossing her at the first available opportunity, and taking both the latinum she was offering and a tidy cut of the profits from his contact as well. But Fellot Yek had always prided himself on being a far more ruthless businessman than most people gave him credit for. He quickly dismissed any pangs of guilt.

As he allowed himself to wonder what the going rate for a slave girl was in this sector, Denella casually walked over to one of the consoles scattered around the room and checked over the bank of controls.

“Main communications?”

Yek’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, yes—”

He barely got his answer out before the armed Orion woman tapped a rapid series of commands into the console, and then smiled with satisfaction.

“Just FYI, that’s all comms access from this ship locked down until further notice, with a little personal encryption of mine,” she explained, “Just in case you felt like inviting anyone over for a party. Get me to the colony, and I’ll give you the decryption key. Eventually.”

Yek's face fell to the floor. Denella took a moment of satisfaction from it before she continued.

"And one more thing. According to the manifest, you're carrying a couple of asteroid mining shuttles. That right?"

Yek mustered a confused nod.

"I'll need to borrow one."

* * * * *

"She gets this from you, you know."

Klath's face wrinkled up, affronted at Jirel's accusatory tone.

"I do not understand."

Natasha had been the first of the Bounty's crew to wake up and discover Jirel's unconscious form in the dining area. After she had brought him round, checked him over and called for Sunek and Klath, the still slightly groggy Trill had unhappily explained what had happened the night before, and where their engineer had disappeared to.

"Come on," Jirel sighed at the Klingon, "This is straight out of Klath's Big Book Of How To Deal With Your Problems. Chapter one, paragraph one. Instead of swallowing your pride and asking your friends for help, you go racing off on some big dumb suicide mission all by yourself."

"He's right, buddy," Sunek offered, "That is classic you."

Klath went to retort, then saw the knowing glint in the Vulcan's eyes.

The last time Klath had embarked on a 'big dumb suicide mission' had been a couple of months ago, when he was being hunted by a vengeful Klingon from his time in the Klingon Defence Force, before his discommendation. Sunek, by virtue of being used as bait to lure Klath to the showdown, was the only one onboard who knew the details of what had happened. And by extension, the only one who knew the full truth about the shame of his discommendation.

And Klath intended to keep things that way. So he opted not to challenge Jirel's claim.

"Perhaps you are right. I should have suspected that she would do this, from what she told me."

"You should have suspected that she was gonna take a bunch of weapons, shoot me and hightail it off the ship?" Jirel asked with a mirthless grin.

Klath considered the situation for a moment.

"Perhaps not exactly this."

"So, what now?" Natasha asked, looking around the table at the others, "I mean, I know she said not to, but we're going after her, right?"

Jirel sighed, then slowly pointed at himself, Klath and Sunek. "We are," he emphasised, "First, we need to drop you at the nearest spaceport."

Natasha stared back at him, clearly a little perplexed by his statement.

"If things go wrong," Jirel continued, "Trust me, the Syndicate doesn't discriminate when it comes to the types of women they'll claim as—"

"Yeah, believe it or not, I'm aware how the Syndicate works," Natasha fired back, bristling slightly, "And I'll remind you that I'm not some damsel in distress, Jirel. I've served in wars, I've fought the Borg, I've dodged death plenty of times before. Probably more than you have. And besides, Denella's my friend, and you're gonna need all the hands you can get on this one. Right?"

Jirel paused. He didn't want to go into too much detail the reasons why he wanted to keep her safe from this, or the pesky feelings that were driving him. The ones that had been simmering since they had first met, and since she had spent an impromptu night in his cabin after they had rescued her.

"She is a fine warrior, Jirel," Klath grunted from the other side of the table, recalling their recent work together on a rogue Romulan Warbird full of crazed Vulcans.

For a moment, Jirel seriously considered forcing the issue, but he could see this was one fight not worth pursuing. "Sorry doc," he offered instead with a friendly shrug, "I guess sometimes I forget what you've been through."

Natasha's jaw clenched a tad as she found herself recalling the worst thing she'd been through. The destruction of the USS Navajo and the way she had left a fellow officer to die out of sheer panic. The reason she had left Starfleet and ended up here.

She wasn't entirely sure that Jirel's comment hadn't been a direct attempt to poke that particular hornet's nest, given that he was the only member of the Bounty's crew who knew her secret, but regardless, she did her best to brush it off.

"Glad we got that cleared up," she replied simply.

In truth, a significant part of her wasn't relishing this particular trip. Even Starfleet's finest tended to give the Orion Syndicate a wide berth wherever possible, and yet they were now about to fly into their territory in a bashed-up Ju'day-type raider.

She suppressed a shudder at some of the stories she had heard about ships that had strayed into Syndicate territory, and what had become of their crews. And Jirel was right about one thing. The Syndicate didn't just deal in their own kind when it came to their trafficking business.

"Ok, just so I'm clear here," Sunek piped up with a raised finger, "You want us to change course, fly directly into Syndicate-controlled space, track down the scary slave owner with the murderous grudge against us for stealing one of his girls a few years back, intercept his ship and help Denella steal another girl from him?"

"That's about the size of it, yeah," Jirel replied, forcing a smile.

"And I don't get a say in any of this?"

The determined stares from the other three told Sunek that he didn't. He tutted and stood up from the table.

"Ugh. Fine. Guess I'll go point us at the nearest Yridian freighter. But you should all know that I am this close to unionising..."

The Vulcan stalked out of the room, followed by Klath, who was itching to prepare the Bounty for the battles that were likely coming.

As Natasha stood and went to follow them, Jirel couldn't help but call out. "Nat, I'm serious, you know. If we get caught—"

"I know. Best not get caught then, had we?"

She looked back at him, and he nodded, before standing up and joining her on the walk back to the cockpit.

"Also," he said as they went, "We should probably tell the Talarians that we're gonna be late..."

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

Denella forced the familiar claustrophobic feelings to one side as she worked on the underside of the Yridian mining shuttle.

It was an ugly craft, a stout, snub-nosed design constructed from a dark brown metal, with two hopelessly outdated warp nacelles slung underneath the main body. Even her father would have struggled to turn a profit on this particular ship.

Inside, there was barely room for a single pilot in any degree of comfort, given that it was designed to do little more than park on the surface of an asteroid for long enough to fill the more capacious rear cargo section with whatever rock or ore was being mined and then return to its mother ship.

But her plan didn't require comfort, and she knew that she could use this exact sort of ship to her advantage.

Each onboard system was a simple, modular design, easy to maintain and reconfigure. It was rugged, designed to deal with the harsh and treacherous conditions of asteroid mining. Plus, much like herself, it had the sort of look that meant it would be easily underestimated by any potential foe. All she had to do was make a few changes to make sure it packed enough of a punch to justify any such underestimation.

She was coming towards the end of refitting the shuttle's limited warp drive, having already tapped some extra power into the impulse engines and strengthened the hull integrity.

They were closing in on their destination with every passing minute, but she was sure that she had time to finish this task and work on a couple of other systems before it was time for her to leave the Grem Lok. Although Captain Yek and the crew were following her wishes so far, she was sure that they were likely spending all their time trying to hack through her comms encryption, but she was confident that there was nothing they could do for the foreseeable future.

Still, she felt tense. Because with every moment, they were getting closer to somewhere she swore she would never go again.

Syndicate space.

The tension she was feeling only increased when she heard the footsteps approaching. Glancing down at the edge of the underside of the shuttle, she saw a shadow.

In a flash, she extricated herself from her prone position under the body of the shuttle, praying that one of the crew hadn't found a disruptor from somewhere. She didn't think that Yridian freighters tended to stock weapons, but she cursed herself for not making completely certain, and for leaving herself in such a tactically weak position.

As she jumped to her feet, she realised the situation was far more familiar to her than that.

"There you are," the gaunt Yridian smiled darkly, looking her up and down with undisguised lust.

She didn't recognise him, but she assumed from his filthy overalls that he was one of the technicians aboard. Either way, she kept her guard up.

"Here I am."

"Yek told me we had a slave girl onboard," the wrinkled Yridian continued, stepping forward, "But I had to see this for myself..."

"You might also wanna check on how your chief engineer's arm is healing," she replied coolly.

The Yridian smiled. A cold, empty smile. The sort of smile she had seen thousands of times.

"Ah, I am much more sturdy than that weakling Yoss, I think."

He took another step forward. And that was close enough.

She pounced, grabbing his arm and wrapping it tightly behind his back with a single deft motion, while simultaneously pulling the Orion dagger from where it was sheathed in her belt with her other arm and bringing it up to his throat.

In an instant, the Yridian's lustful glare turned into a state of full-on panic.

"So, here's what's gonna happen," she growled into the shaking man's ear, "You're gonna go find me a new ODN relay for the shuttle's aft thruster assembly. And while you're doing that, you're gonna tell anyone else on this crap-heap that fancies popping down here for a quickie that if they get within ten metres of me, they're gonna need the best doctor in the quadrant to rescue even part of whatever passes for genitalia in your species. Got that?"

The quaking Yridian quickly nodded, muttering some sort of unintelligible incantation in his native tongue as he felt the sharp blade at his throat.

After allowing him a moment or two to really appreciate his predicament, she quickly withdrew the blade and shoved him away. He scampered back out of the shuttlebay as fast as his legs could carry him.

Denella sighed and turned back to the shuttle, ready to get on with the work that had been so rudely interrupted.

As she did, she looked down at the Orion dagger in her hand and allowed herself a sad smile.

* * * * *

“Look at the state of you, Denella!”

She turned around from her work to see her mother standing next to the Ferengi microcruiser that she was midway through refitting.

Her long green hair was a chaotic tangle of split ends and bunches. Her face, as it forever seemed to be, was streaked with oil and dirt. And worst of all, the pretty little turquoise smock dress that her mother had diligently washed and re-stitched late last night, was streaked with grime.

Denella looked down at her unkempt state, then up at her mother’s judgemental stare.

Telmis tapped her foot sharply on the ground. That simple act, coupled with her stare and her slightly raised voice, represented the closest she ever got to being truly angry with her seventeen year old daughter.

“I’m sorry, mother,” Denella offered with a practised apologetic smile, “I just—I was getting ready when I realised why I couldn’t get the power flow properly stabilised through the warp coupler. The connectors had degraded over time, so I needed to replace them, and then—”

“And that couldn’t have waited?” Telmis asked, her look of patient disappointment showing no signs of fading, “You know how important tonight is, and...look at you!”

Denella looked down at her ruined clothes again and suppressed a cringe.

“I can change. That purple dress you got for my birthday—!”

“And then what? You get a sudden urge to, I don’t know, reverse the polarity of the—whatever it is you’re doing here, and ruin that outfit too?”

Denella looked sheepishly down to the ground. She knew she deserved the admonishment, but she still felt the need to defend herself. “It’s just...father always said that when you had a flash of inspiration, you should—”

“Your father said a lot of things. And you know as well as I do that most of them weren’t as clever as he thought they were.”

Denella went to retort, then stopped herself, choosing to bow her head in a deeper show of contrition instead.

Her mother softened slightly, smiling a patient smile and walking over to her. “I know how much it means to you to carry on your father’s work,” she said, taking in the ugly Ferengi ship, “I...can’t say I understand it. But I’m glad you enjoy it.”

The younger Orion woman managed a smile, but she knew there was more to come.

“But tonight is a big night. Not just for me, for the whole colony. And you know that. And you could at least have waited until tomorrow to...”

She tailed off, gesturing to the rear of the shuttle where Denella had been working away.

Denella sighed. The Orion Free Traders were forward thinking in many respects, but the Orpheus IV colony still clung to some traditions. And the summer festival was one of them. A chance for the whole community to get together for a long evening of celebration.

Frankly, Denella had never seen the point in such traditions. It was all a lot of silly dancing and singing and a chance for every one of her mother’s friends to try and manoeuvre their favourite son into a position to become her betrothed. But she knew that her mother still cared for tradition, and she couldn’t help but feel a fresh pang of guilt at the state of her ruined dress.

“You’re right, mother,” she managed eventually, “The shuttle can wait. I’ll change.”

She started to leave, but her mother gently grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“Do you have it?”

Denella looked back to her mother, and wordlessly reached down into her ankle boot, withdrawing the Orion dagger from the sheath concealed inside.

Telmis looked relieved when she saw the blade. Denella couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

“And you remember what I taught you? You remember how to use it—?”

“Mother,” Denella sighed, “It’s just the summer festival!”

“I know. And I also know that as soon as discussions turn to all of those eligible young suitors in town, you and Sarina will have run off to do whatever it is you do together. And I won’t see you again. I just want to know that you’ll be safe. That you can look after yourself. And Sarina.”

Denella resisted the urge to roll her eyes again. She turned the dagger around in her hand and looked back at her worried mother. “Don’t

worry,” she said, “I’ll be fine. And I always look after Sarina.”

Her mother smiled and hugged her tightly. It was a warm, comfortable feeling.

“Good,” she replied, “Now, how about we both go and get cleaned up?”

The two Orion women broke the hug and started on the walk back to the house, her mother’s outfit now covered in almost as much grime as Denella’s was.

* * * * *

Gartek V was an unassuming enough planet. A run of the mill Class M world orbiting a run of the mill Type G star.

Nothing about the deep green hue of the land masses or the warming blue of the oceans did anything to suggest the significance of Gartek V on a galactic level. It was an invisible significance. It represented the farthest reach of the Orion Syndicate’s boundaries in this part of the quadrant. The first colony that fell under the Syndicate’s direct control. Beyond this unassuming world, there be dragons.

Understandably, as the Grem Lok approached the planet, Captain Yek had signalled high alert throughout the poorly-defended vessel. Out here, people tended to shoot first and ask questions later.

On the command deck, Denella took in the humble sight of Gartek V where it hung on the ship’s small viewscreen.

“This is as far as we go,” Yek grunted at her from the freighter’s helm controls, “Trust me when I say that paltry pile of latinum you gave me doesn’t merit anything more.”

Denella tore her attention away from the planet and back to the unhappy Yridian.

“I don’t blame you,” she admitted.

She kept her weapons slung on her belt for the moment, confident that she was the only person onboard who was armed, and that any desire Yek and the rest of the crew had to stop her had been quelled now they had arrived at their destination. Chances were, they’d just be glad to see the back of her.

Yek studied her face again, still struggling to get a reading on the mysterious and apparently suicidal stranger that had effectively seized control of his ship.

“I do hope you know what you’re getting yourself into here,” he muttered, in a voice that was bereft of even a shred of actual concern.

“About as much as I ever do,” she shrugged back, trying to ignore what might await her from this point on.

She started for the exit of the command deck, but paused as she remembered something.

“I’m assuming you’re probably still pretty pissed off with me. I guess I would be too.”

Yek remained silent, but his expression rather betrayed the fact that she was right.

“I mean, I’ve beamed onboard uninvited, I’ve delayed your mission, I’ve assaulted half your crew - admittedly with provocation - I’ve given you a pretty meagre payment given how much you’re risking bringing me into Syndicate territory, I’ve crippled your comms system, and I’m about to steal one of your shuttles.”

“Steal?” Yek snapped, “You said you were borrowing it!”

“I lied.”

Yek’s small deep-set eyes narrowed even further.

“So,” she continued, “I guess if I were you, I’d probably be waiting for me to hop onboard that little mining shuttle and clear the launch bay, before blasting me to bits with whatever passes for a weapons system on this crate.”

She didn’t bother to add that she’d already scanned the armaments available on the Grem Lok, and found little more than a single low-powered disruptor cannon fitted to the underside of the freighter’s forward section. The intergalactic shooting range equivalent of a child’s catapult, but still enough to incinerate her poorly defended shuttle. Still, she saw from the slight twitch on Yek’s face that such a swift revenge plan had definitely crossed his mind.

“Thought so,” she sighed.

Before Yek could respond, she drew the old-school phaser from her belt.

“Sorry,” she added with a shrug, “The latinum definitely won’t cover this.”

She fired across the command deck, as Yek dived for cover. The console on the far side of the room that controlled the Grem Lok’s disruptor cannon exploded in a shower of sparks.

Yek's agonised scream of frustration was still audible to her all the way down to the launch bay.

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

The Bounty executed a tight arc to the right, narrowly evading the twin bursts of deep green disruptor fire as it did so. The small ship whirled away, closely followed by the pursuing form of a small Orion scout ship.

It was a simple design, a stocky and roughly rectangular main body, with a front section that tapered to a stubby point and short wings sprouting out from either side towards the rear. The disruptors mounted on those wings glowed once again, and spat out more deadly fire.

“Was it something we said?” Sunek quipped from the pilot’s seat as he sent the ship into another sharp evasive turn.

In truth, they hadn’t even got as far as introducing themselves. They weren’t even officially inside Syndicate space yet. But, just as they were gaining on the Yridian freighter that Klath and Sunek had managed to track down on sensors, the scout ship had appeared on an intercept course, operating a clear policy of shoot first and ask questions later.

“Shields weakening,” Klath reported as the whole ship rocked from a disruptor impact, “Firing torpedoes.”

Two tiny micro-torpedoes pulsed out from the Bounty’s rear launcher. The Orion ship was deft enough to avoid one, but the other impacted on their own weakening shielding.

“Keep that up, Klath,” Jirel nodded, even as the ship bucked and weaved around, responding to another flurry of frantic course corrections from Sunek.

Despite the Vulcan’s best efforts, another disruptor shot hit home, causing a relay at the rear of the cockpit to explode in a shower of sparks.

“That probably wasn’t important!” Sunek shouted over the wail of a new alarm.

“Our shields are collapsing,” Klath bellowed, as he fired off another flurry of torpedoes in the direction of their adversaries.

Jirel spun around to Natasha where she incongruously manned the engineering console. “Divert whatever you can to the shield generator.”

“On it,” she nodded quickly, before frantically tapping at the controls in front of her with a slightly more perplexed look on her face, “I think...”

Jirel stifled a grin and jumped over to the console alongside her, helping her out as fast as he could manage. “See, this is why we don’t usually give you anything to do up here.”

“Hey! I’m a doctor, not an engineer.”

Between them, they worked to get the Bounty’s shields somewhat closer to full power, just as another impact rocked the whole ship.

“That’s about all we can squeeze,” Jirel reported, “Sunek, any chance we can get rid of this guy?”

“If our weapons chief could shoot straight, we’d have done that by now!”

Even over the whine of the alarms, the unhappy grunt from the Bounty’s weapons chief was clearly audible. “Perhaps if our pilot wasn’t being so erratic,” Klath fired back, “I could secure an accurate weapons lock.”

“They’re called evasive manoeuvres, genius! They’re supposed to be erratic!”

To underline his point, the Bounty’s nose suddenly dipped and pivoted to the right, as the ship swept away from another disruptor blast. Equally, to underline Klath’s counterpoint, his latest carefully prepared micro-torpedo spread was completely disrupted by the Bounty’s sudden change of course, drifting off to the right of the pursuing vessel.

“Guys,” Jirel sighed patiently, “We really don’t have time for this.”

“Fine,” Sunek tutted, “Everyone hang on...”

He deftly swept the Bounty around in an even tighter arc, as everyone else in the cockpit braced themselves, using the ship’s greater manoeuvrability over its pursuer to his advantage.

The Orion ship tried to match the move, but the Bounty’s narrower turning circle won out, and Sunek brought the ship to bear on the tail of their enemy. The dark green vessel immediately began its own sequence of evasive weaving, trying to break formation, but Sunek kept himself focused and kept the Bounty clamped to their rear.

Without needing a verbal invitation, Klath tapped his own controls. The Bounty’s twin wing-mounted phaser cannons blasted out bursts of red fire, which slammed into the Orion ship. The shields flared bright green and collapsed, leaving the crippled vessel to pull away.

“They’re going to warp,” Sunek sighed with audible relief, “I’m gonna assume we’re not interested in chasing them?”

“Absolutely not,” Jirel replied, “Get us back on the tail of that freighter.”

“Will do,” Sunek nodded, before shooting a quick cheeky glance at Klath, “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Jirel ignored the latest unhappy grunt from Klath's side of the cockpit as the Bounty returned to warp speed with a familiar flare of light.

"At least that's the welcoming committee dealt with," Natasha offered with a hopeful shrug.

Jirel mustered a tight smile as he walked back over to his centre chair.

"You hope. Depends on who we run into next."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning that Syndicate ships tend to be a bit all over the place, weapons-wise. We could just run into another scout like that, armed with a couple of disruptors and a paper bag for a shield generator. Or..."

He paused, misplacing some of his bravado for a split second.

"Or we could not," Klath finished, pointedly.

Natasha managed a tense nod, looking a little bit paler than she had a few moments ago, and idly wondering whether she should have been so quick to dismiss Jirel's offer to leave her behind for this one.

"Well," Sunek offered from the pilot's seat, "I guess they know we're here now."

The Bounty continued on course, heading deeper and deeper into Syndicate territory.

* * * * *

It had all happened very quickly.

One second, Fyac Randos had been closing up his tavern for the night. Just as he had for the last five hundred cycles. As the elderly Orion man had worked, he had been silently cursing all of the mistakes he had made that had led him to as backwater a planet as Gartek V. Again, just as he had for the last five hundred cycles.

But, the next second, he had been confronted with something entirely unexpected. Something that had never happened in any of those previous five hundred cycles.

He found himself staring straight down the barrel of a stubby old-style Starfleet phaser, being held by a strange young Orion woman in dark clothing, with a murderous glint in her eyes.

He had no idea where she had ghosted in from, or who she was, but despite the wholly unexpected nature of what he was being confronted with, Randos barely reacted. When you had made as many enemies as he had throughout his long life, somewhere deep down there was always an expectation that something like this might happen.

For her part, Denella's impatience had been nearing breaking point. She had landed the Yridian shuttle a short distance away from Randos's tavern some hours ago, but had then had to wait for the place to close. Much as she had wanted to strike sooner, she knew that she needed to keep a low profile for now. Even on the fringes of Syndicate space, news of an armed former slave girl bursting into a crowded tavern was going to spread fast.

And so she had waited, with growing impatience, until Randos had finally kicked out the last of his most stubborn and inebriated patrons, confronting the elderly Orion when he had least been expecting it.

"Remember me, Randos?"

She couldn't help but ask the question, all the time keeping her finger pressed tight to the phaser's trigger. Deep down, she wasn't sure what answer she wanted to hear. But it soon became clear from the way that Randos squinted at her to try and compensate for the poor lighting inside the dingy tavern that he couldn't place her. She could have been anyone, as far as he was concerned.

"Huh," he grunted, "Narrow it down for me. Ex-wife? Ex-lover? Daughter?"

Denella felt herself bristle inside, but she kept a cool exterior. "Well, I remember you," she replied darkly, taking some small satisfaction from the faint glimmer of concern that crossed the old man's face, "All those years ago. Back at Rilen Dar's old place. You'd be there every week."

Randos remained silent, but there was definitely some semblance of dawning realisation crossing his weathered features.

"And I remember that you'd always want something from me. Every single time you came in," she continued, feeling her jaw clench, "Well, now I want something from you."

The older Orion kept his eyes locked on hers, not allowing his sense of pride to give way, even as he prepared for the inevitable. "If you're going to kill me, then kill me. I no longer fear death. And if I started to beg for my life every time someone showed up here with a grudge against me, I'd—"

The rest of his blasé sentence vanished in an ear-splitting roar of pain. He collapsed onto the filthy floor of the tavern, still screaming hysterically, as he looked down at the stump where his left foot used to be.

Towering above him, Denella brought the phaser to bear once again.

“Doesn’t take much to finesse the settings on one of these things,” she calmly explained over his screams, “Narrow the width of the beam, tweak the power levels, and it’s amazing the precision you can achieve. Best part is that the heat of the phaser blast cauterises the wound it leaves behind, so there’s no risk of you bleeding out.”

She looked down at the writhing man on the ground below her and saw the terror and pain etched into his face. But she didn’t feel any great sense of mercy.

“I’m not here to kill you, Randos,” she continued, “But I’m more than happy to hurt you. Maybe that way, you won’t forget me again.”

She leaned down, lowering her voice to a low growl.

“Now, tell me, where does Rilen Dar conduct his business these days?”

Randos’s eyes widened a tad as she said Dar’s name. It was enough to tell her that he had the information she needed, regardless of the lie he was about to try and spin.

“I—I have no idea what—”

He emitted another tortured shriek of misery, as his left leg disappeared entirely below the knee in a flash of burning agony.

“Randos, please,” she muttered, “I’m doing the best I can to leave you with one good leg.”

“If—if you want latinum,” he babbled, “I have twenty bars stashed away in the—”

He instinctively flinched as she brought the weapon to bear again. But this time, she paused before pulling the trigger. It turned out that somewhere inside of her, even after all she had been through, she couldn’t help but offer a modicum of mercy.

And this time, the threat of more pain was enough.

“The Numekk nebula!”

He spat the words out at her as he writhed in pain. She kept the phaser trained on him, wary of more lies.

“Go on.”

“Y—You’ll find it a few sectors over, deeper in Syndicate territory,” Randos stammered, “Th—That’s where Dar does his deals these days!”

“Why?” she pressed.

“Because th—the nebula masks his ship! From sensors, scans, everything! You can’t even get a comms link established unless you know where to look!”

“Do you know where to look?”

Randos flinched and shook his head. “No. Rilen Dar wants nothing to do with an old man like me any more. But I promise you, that’s where he is!”

Denella considered what he was saying. It certainly made sense. Smugglers, bandits and traffickers throughout the galaxy often used nebulae or plasma storms to help mask their activities.

But she was also still wary. Wary that Randos was still capable of lying, despite the fear in his eyes and the pain on his face. She bent down further and pressed the muzzle of the antique phaser squarely against the side of his head. No actual question was required.

“I—I swear, he’s there!”

She kept the weapon against his temple for a few more moments, studying his shaking form. “Thank you,” she spat out eventually, with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “You’ve been very helpful.”

She stood back up, leaving him nursing the remains of his leg on the dirty ground. Before making for the exit, she walked over behind the bar area of the tavern and checked over the ageing comms unit that was back there. One personal encryption key later, the unit was as locked down and useless as the one she had left behind on the Grem Lok.

She glanced back at Randos, and part of her now wondered whether she should make doubly sure of his silence with a more potent phaser blast. But ultimately she decided it was more fitting to leave him here, alone and broken, on Gartek V.

Satisfied with her work, she strode towards the exit. As she reached the door, the pained voice of the other Orion called out after her.

“You’re not the first person to go in there looking for him, you know! And I’ve never heard of anyone coming back out!”

She ignored him. All she could think about was Sarina, inside the Numekk nebula. So she walked on, and left what remained of Fyac Randos groaning in pain behind her.

Fellot Yek, captain of the Yridian freighter Grem Lok, was beginning to feel that this wasn't going to be his week.

He had already been forced to fly wildly off course by a phaser-wielding, and still as far as he was concerned, entirely suicidal Orion woman. Which had put his scheduled delivery of Denevan ore a full two days behind schedule. Then, that same Orion woman had crippled the Grem Lok's communications system and weapons controls, and to cap it all off, she had stolen one of his precious shuttles.

And then, just as he and his meagre crew were starting to get back on course, and getting the hell out of Syndicate territory, and before he had figured out how he was going to pay for the repairs the crippled freighter now needed, he found himself staring at the shiny blade of a Klingon bat'leth.

The two armed figures had beamed onto the command deck, and had once again completely taken him by surprise. But, to Yek's continued confusion, they weren't bandits, here to opportunistically strip the Grem Lok of anything of value while the ship was defenceless and vulnerable. Instead, all they seemed interested in was the suicidal Orion woman they had just managed to get rid of.

"Come on, Captain," the Trill who had beamed over with the Klingon said with a smile, "You're asking me to believe that's all you know? I'm a little bit offended."

Klath remained silent, and kept his grip firmly on the bat'leth and his eyes firmly on the Yridian, as Jirel paced more casually around the deck, waving his disruptor pistol around.

"You have to believe me!" Yek stuttered back, eyeing the blade in his face and wishing that he could just get a moment's peace, "She didn't say anything else! She just forced me to take her to Gartek V, assaulted my best technicians, and took off in a shuttle!"

Klath and Jirel shared a knowing glance. Jirel's smile widened a tad.

"Sounds like Denella," Klath nodded.

"Yep," Jirel replied, "Ran rings around this bunch of idiots, by the sounds of it."

"What—? Who do you think you are—?"

The Yridian stopped himself as the bat'leth reminded him who the interlopers thought they were.

"You're sure that's all you've got to tell us?" Jirel persisted.

"Y—Yes! I told you, I can provide you with the shuttle's transponder details. You can track her trail with that!"

Jirel sighed ruefully. The scant information he had bled from the Grem Lok's computer had backed up Yek's story. But part of him had been hoping for something more. "What do you think?" he asked Klath, whose focus was still on the terrified Yridian.

"I do not believe it is possible for one this feeble to be withholding any more information," the Klingon replied, "Given the circumstances."

"Yep. I'm thinking the same thing," Jirel replied, as he reached for the communicator on his belt and signalled the Bounty for transport, "Let's get moving. Gartek V it is."

Klath stepped back from the Yridian, who called after them as soon as he felt it was safe to do so.

"Wait! There's still the matter of all the damage to my ship!"

"Oh. Right," Jirel shrugged, "Yeah, sorry she did all that. Still, a hardy old freighter like this must've been through a lot worse..."

To illustrate his point, he gave the console in front of him a gentle kick with one of his scuffed and faded boots.

For reasons that would take the Grem Lok's technicians several hours to figure out, the gentle tap on the old console was just forceful enough to shake a single worn isolinear connector loose inside the console's power relay system. For reasons that would never be fully understood by any of the Grem Lok's crew, even after they had limped back to a safe port and completed extensive repairs, that single loose connection was enough to short out the ship's entire jury-rigged power grid.

As Jirel and Klath prepared for transport, the entire command deck was plunged into darkness and the ever-present hum of the engines vanished.

"Ok," Jirel's apologetic voice came through the blackness, "That one's on me."

Captain Yek's latest and loudest scream of despair was only partially drowned out by the whine of the transporter.

* * * * *

"What the hell do you want, old man?"

Rilen Dar spat the words out with undisguised contempt.

The muscular Orion's face was just visible through the static, and while it wasn't a clear picture, it was obvious enough that he didn't look pleased to see him. Dar didn't take kindly to being interrupted at the best of times, and especially not by impromptu communications from hopeless old men like Fyac Randos.

Still, Randos had now reached the point where he had nothing more to lose. Destitute, living out his days on a backwater colony, and now crippled and humiliated by a slave girl. If he didn't take this one chance to get back in with Dar, he may as well just give up.

Besides, with the pain and shame he was now feeling from his run-in with Denella, he'd decided that if he couldn't get revenge directly, he'd try to get it via someone else. And as soon as he'd discovered that the girl had only disabled his primary comms unit, not the secondary one, he had chanced using an old frequency of Dar's, hoping it was still being monitored.

Eventually, someone had answered.

"She's coming to you, Dar," he croaked, awkwardly propping himself up in front of the monitor and still breathing raggedly.

"Who?"

"The one that got away!"

It didn't matter how much static there was over the comms link, or how badly the secondary comms link in Randos's tavern was coping with the subspace distortion coming from the Numekk nebula, he could still see the look on Dar's face darken considerably.

He didn't need to elaborate further. Not many people got away from Rilen Dar.

"She...is coming to me?" he hissed, with a mixture of anger and disbelief.

"Y—Yes," the ailing Orion replied, gritting his teeth, "She...attacked me. And then she said she was...heading for you."

There was barely any acknowledgement of Randos's own predicament from Dar. He quickly cut straight through to the most obvious question. "And how did she know where to find me, old man?"

Randos flinched before he could stop himself. He should have known that was coming, but he was still quick enough to improvise an explanation.

"I—I told her," he admitted, before aggressively pursuing the lie as Dar's scowl deepened even further, "But only because I—I knew that you would want her to come to you!"

"Is that so," Dar replied flatly, not sounding overly convinced.

"Yes! I swear! And I called you as soon as I could to tell you! I mean, she is just one girl, Dar. If she comes to you, then you can—"

"I'm sure I can," Dar grunted, silencing the old man's rambling speech.

He still gave no indication as to whether or not he believed him. But eventually, the muscular Orion shifted forwards in his seat slightly.

"Well," he continued, "I look forward to...seeing her again."

"Yes, Dar," Randos babbled obsequiously, "But—"

"And Randos," he added, before the old man could get any further, "I do not like it when people give out my location."

Randos's eyes widened with renewed fear as Dar continued, realising that he wasn't getting anywhere near to getting back into his good books, despite the information he had provided.

"Watch your back..."

Before Randos could reply, the comms link blinked out, and he was left alone, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Then, he heard the sound of an incoming transport. And felt the sensation of a cold blade digging into the back of his neck.

He couldn't help but be impressed at the speed of Dar's operation.

But he was wrong. These weren't assassins sent from the Syndicate. The blade belonged to a Klingon bat'leth.

"Evening!" said a cheerful Jirel.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

The Numekk nebula was, objectively speaking at least, a beautiful sight.

A swirling, bewitching mass of brightly coloured gas and dust, it spanned almost the entirety of the Numekk sector itself, an enormous patchwork canvas of deep red and golden hues, painted against the inky dark canvas of the surrounding space.

If the Numekk nebula had any sort of sentience, rather than merely being a vast amorphous cloud of churning galactic matter, it would have been forgiven for having an inflated sense of pride. As galactic nebulae went, the Numekk nebula was a fine example for scientific study.

A dedicated science team, or deep space exploration vessel, would likely have felt as though they had won the Ferenginar Lottery had they been given the opportunity to study the complex array of materials that comprised this interstellar phenomenon. Exotic elements were waiting to be catalogued, complicated interactions and fluid dynamics to be observed and analysed, and emission spectra to be scanned and interpreted. The endless array of colourful particles would offer infinite opportunities for sample collection.

Even the most grizzled and cynical Federation starship, the type that spent years studying endless gaseous anomalies without ever making a first contact, or resolving a planetary conflict, or running into a Borg invasion, would have found some serious levels of excitement studying such a unique and fascinating interstellar phenomenon.

Unfortunately for the Numekk nebula, and any theoretical concept of pride an anthropomorphised version of itself might have possessed, it was located deep inside an area of the galaxy that was overseen by the Orion Syndicate. The Syndicate didn't exactly spend a lot of their time on voyages of scientific discovery.

And so, on a more subjective level, the Numekk nebula was an awful lot less beautiful. Especially when you got close.

It was a place to avoid, rather than to explore.

The chemical composition of the nebula made sensors largely ineffective at any great distance, which made it the perfect place to conduct any business considered underhand even by the standards of the Syndicate.

And that was before you got into the more fundamental navigational issues caused by the swirling eddies and currents within the gas cloud itself, sufficient to knock ships off course, or leave them blind and lost inside its confines.

Of those ships that went into the nebula, not many came back out. And few of those disappearances were ever investigated in any great detail. Whether they had come to grief thanks to the nebula itself, or something that was contained within was never pinned down.

All things considered then, there were a lot of reasons to give the Numekk nebula a wide berth. But as Denella looked out at the approaching maelstrom from inside the stocky Yridian mining shuttle, she knew she only needed one reason to go in.

Sarina.

Her fingers danced across the faded control panel in front of her, as she performed her fourth full sensor sweep of the nebula's interior. As with the first three, she got little more than a bunch of static and shadows back from the readouts. It didn't come as a surprise, but it was still a disappointment. As Randos had suggested, it looked like one of the quadrant's best hiding places. For one of the quadrant's most dangerous men.

Still, what scans she could carry out on the maelstrom in front of her left her satisfied that there were no external sensor nets, alarms or tripwires installed. Nothing that Dar had installed to let him know when any ship entered his fortress. Which at least allowed herself the reassurance that no matter how blind she was once she was in there, the odds would be even.

In fact, they should be tilted slightly in her favour. The shuttle's tiny size should render it even harder to detect. Plus, she was looking for a needle in a haystack, while they didn't even know there was a needle in their vicinity.

She made one final check of the shuttle's systems, and the modifications she'd managed to put together.

Not for the first time in her life, she knew that a fight was near.

* * * * *

They stood on opposite sides of the Bounty's nearly empty cargo bay. The Klingon man and the Orion woman shared a moment of meditative silence, as they faced off against each other.

"You are sure you want to do this?" Klath asked, breaking the silence.

Denella nodded immediately. She had been onboard the Bounty for several months now, and she was starting to get used to the idea that this was her new home. That she'd left the Syndicate behind for good.

Already, she had proved to be an invaluable member of the crew. Not only by getting the Bounty patched up into shape, fixing any number of

issues across the length and breadth of the ship. But also by bailing the crew out several unhappy scrapes that they had ended up in.

She was definitely getting used to the idea that unhappy scrapes were very much part of life on this particular ship.

Still, despite all that she had done, she felt as though she was missing something. She didn't just want to get by with her engineering prowess alone.

It helped that she had finally come to terms with her actions during her escape. She had never taken a life before, but while she had felt some residual guilt for her actions in killing the bartender, she also couldn't help but take some satisfaction from it. Especially given that the bartender in question had never had any issues ignoring his own moral compass when he was around her.

But the experience had been new. She had been taught the basics of defending herself by her mother, but never anything more than that. And so, she knew there was only one member of the Bounty's crew that she should seek out.

In front of her, the Klingon took a measured breath and gestured to the Orion dagger on her belt, an identical design to the one her mother had given her on Orpheus IV that she had replicated.

"Attack me."

Denella paused for a moment, then slowly withdrew the dagger from its sheath. But she remained where she was standing, unsure of what to do next.

Klath emitted a low growl and broke from the defensive posture he had adopted. "I thought you wanted me to train you."

"I do."

"Well, if I am to do that," he continued, "It is vital that I know how you fight already. So: Attack me."

He returned to his practised defensive pose. But she still didn't move.

She tried to bring up memories of her previous actions, when she plunged the blade into the bartender to save Jirel. How she had found something primal and impulsive inside her to go along with what her mother had taught her.

But on the other side of the cargo bay, she saw no threat. All she could see was a gruff, but warm-hearted Klingon warrior. Albeit one that was starting to get a little frustrated.

"Denella—"

"It's just—My mother taught me self-defence," she explained, "I want to practise, and to learn more about defending myself. Not attacking."

Klath returned to a neutral stance and considered this for a moment.

"On Qo'noS, when we are young, we are told the story of K'omek the Vigilant. He was an ancient ruler, back when my people still lived as separate tribes across our homeworld, before Kahless united the Klingons."

Denella listened on intently, dropping the hand holding her dagger to her side. She'd never taken Klath to be a storyteller, but here he was.

"K'omek's people deeply respected him. He led them fairly, and provided well for all of the men, women and children across his tribe. During an age when leaders were often challenged and deposed not long after taking charge, he reigned unchallenged for many years, and his tribe prospered greatly. But, K'omek's warrior instincts were limited. He was a cautious tactician. He never attacked another tribe, or sought to expand the boundaries of his territory. He focused on defending and maintaining that which they already had."

Klath paused for a moment. In truth, he'd never taken himself to be much of a storyteller either, but here he was.

"For a long time, K'omek's strategy worked well enough. Each time a rival tribe attempted to invade his territory, or launch a raid on one of his outer settlements, he would raise an army and repel them, to protect his people. But each of these acts of pure defence had a cost. Warriors were killed, land was bloodied and razed. K'omek was weakened, slowly but surely, with a thousand cuts. And eventually, one day, he was weakened to the point that he was defeated. His tribe, and all that he had done for them, was lost forever."

"I see," she nodded after a short contemplative pause, "So, you're saying that I really need to learn how to—"

Before she could process what was happening, the burly Klingon suddenly charged at her from across the bay, teeth bared, growling in anger.

Without her even realising, her instincts kicked in. Despite being wrong-footed, she grabbed Klath's outstretched arm and deftly stepped out of the way of his body. In the same fluid movement, she moved her leg around behind Klath as his momentum carried him arcing around her, taking his legs from under him and sending him toppling to the ground.

She pounced on his prone form and brought the dagger to his throat. Only then did her instincts stop her from going any further.

The Klingon stared back at her. He didn't look angry, or concerned, or embarrassed at the way his brute force attack had been parried. Instead, he was smiling.

"Impressive defence," he grunted, as she slowly retracted the blade, "I will not have to teach you quite so much after all."

She managed a smile of her own as she clambered off him and helped him back to his feet.

"But, you are right. You must do more than that. As K'omek learned, defence will only get you so far in combat. No warrior will ever be able

to accomplish all of their goals if they always wait for their enemies to make the first move. Eventually—”

In a flash, the Klingon grabbed her wrist that was holding the dagger in a vice-like grip, and used his strength to lift her up and over his back. She landed on the floor in a shocked and pained heap, her weapon went skittering uselessly across the deck. She could do nothing but stare up at her victorious attacker, who was just looking down at her with a knowing glare.

“—They will be surprised.”

The shock of the second attack had her heart pounding, but she mustered a nod of understanding as she accepted his hand to help her back up. More satisfied than ever that she had come to the best teacher.

“So,” she offered as she panted, “What now?”

Klath stepped back across the deck and kicked her dagger back over to her, before assuming a familiar defensive posture.

“Now,” he said, “Attack me.”

* * * * *

The chirp from the console in front of her, indicating that her final status checks were complete, snapped her back to reality.

Everything was ready.

The shuttle’s warp drive had been recalibrated to make it as efficient as possible, she had channelled additional power from the tiny ship’s reserve cells into hull integrity and shields. And there were a couple more tricks she had up her sleeve.

None of which boosted her chances all that much. The average Syndicate cruiser would still tear her tiny shuttle apart with a single disruptor blast. But she tried not to think too much about that. She knew that she just needed one shot for her plan to work.

She stared out at the imposing nebula in front of her, still no closer to knowing exactly what awaited her inside the turbulent storm. But she tried not to think too much about that either.

She was only really confident about one thing. This time, provided she got that one chance, she was going to attack.

Denella the Vigilant was no more.

Leaving the relative calm of normal space behind, she fired up the impulse engines and prepared herself for battle.

Part 3B

Part Three (Cont'd)

"I'm just saying, that really proves how much of a mature grown-up I've become."

Jirel swung around in the centre seat to grin at Natasha where she sat behind the engineering console, not looking entirely convinced by his argument.

"There me and Klath were, in the dingiest, booziest dive of a tavern you'll ever see, this Orion guy has the whole limb clean shot off - Denella's handiwork, we found out - and I didn't make a single comment about getting legless."

Sunek let out a chuckle from the pilot's seat. But Natasha was unmoved.

"Y'know," Jirel persisted, looking to Klath for backup, "Cos we're in a bar, and the guy's got no—"

"See," Natasha sighed, "It kinda negates the whole 'mature grown-up' thing if you won't shut up about the dumb joke you didn't make when you get back here. You get that, right?"

Jirel shrugged and smirked, looking like he didn't really get that at all.

The Bounty was racing through Syndicate space, following the trail left by the Yridian shuttle's transponder, at as high a warp speed as they dared to without their redoubtable engineer onboard.

The Trill's comments hadn't been a serious attempt to show off his supposed maturity. For a start, as Klath would have attested if he could have been bothered, it was a lie. Jirel had made a 'legless' joke approximately 4.7 seconds after seeing Fyac Randos's plight. But it had been an attempt to disarm the tension that had permeated the cockpit, as they got closer to their destination.

"So, he's just hiding in a nebula?" Natasha asked, changing the subject back to their more pressing concerns, to Jirel's slight irritation.

"I'm guessing it's the sort of nebula that screws up every sensor reading you can think of," he replied as casually as he could, "Perfect place for someone trafficking slave girls, weapons and crap knows what else to operate."

Natasha suppressed a shudder at the cold logic of the Trill's statement.

"Yep," Sunek added, with only a fraction of his usual cheery disposition, "If I was the worst person in the entire universe, that's where I'd be."

She saved herself from worrying about what she was hearing by returning to the text on the screen in front of her. The sum total of the scant research she'd been able to complete on their target.

"Well, I couldn't find a lot on this Rilen Dar," she stated to the room, "But there's bits here and there in the public domain. Wanted by six different security forces, including Starfleet. Counts of weapons smuggling, people trafficking, a series of raids on Ferengi trading depots. Oh, and he's been linked with at least thirty-seven unsolved murders."

"Sounds like our guy," Sunek offered, "He's a real charmer."

She forced herself to look away from the grainy image that accompanied one of the reports, seeing Rilen Dar's heavy-set features leering back at her through the screen. "Frankly," she concluded, "Based on what I've seen, I'm amazed you guys weren't all killed the first time you met him."

As she spoke, she saw Jirel and Klath furtively glance at each other, with a clear edge of guilt.

"Yeah, well," Sunek shrugged obliviously, "He liked us back then."

"He...liked you? Why did he like you?"

Sunek swivelled around in his chair, his mouth opening to continue his train of thought, when he was met with a stern glare from Jirel. He continued to swivel back around instead, completing a slightly odd 360 degree spin back to his controls.

"...No idea," he managed.

Natasha turned her attention back to Jirel, resolutely not letting go of the loose thread she had found to tug. "Why the hell did he like you, Jirel?"

The Trill and the Klingon shared another glance. Jirel sighed in defeat and turned back to Natasha.

"Believe it or not, breaking Denella out of the Syndicate wasn't the reason we ran into Dar that last time," he offered with a rueful grimace.

She pieced the remaining sections of the jigsaw together in her mind. She scoffed in incredulous disbelief.

"You...were working for him? You were working for the Syndicate—?"

"We work for anyone. I told you that when you first met us. And it was just a random delivery. We didn't realise who it was for until—"

She stepped right over his explanation before he could finish.

“Psh. Just a delivery. For the Orion Syndicate. What the hell was it? Weapons? Drugs? Holy crap, Jirel—!”

“Ok, get down off your high horse, your majesty,” he barked back, shocking himself with his angry tone, “It’s not like we were running slave girls across the border! It was a consignment of Orion ale and a bunch of replacement holosuite circuitry for some random bar. That’s all we knew when we took the job.”

“A random bar in Syndicate space?”

“As you might have noticed by now, we can’t be that picky about who we get to work for—”

“Don’t give me that, Jirel,” she growled, “You’re telling me there wasn’t a single delivery job in the entire quadrant other than a run to the Syndicate? Or was that just the one that paid the most latinum?”

Jirel stopped himself before he responded. The flash of contrition that blinked across his face was all it took her to realise that she’d mostly called it correctly. “Well,” he managed eventually, “If it helps, we never got any of that latinum.”

“Dar was grateful for the haste we had shown,” Klath added from behind his console, “As soon as we arrived, he was very eager to show us his...attraction.”

Natasha felt a chill pass down her spine.

“And that’s when we decided to do something,” Jirel offered.

“And if he hadn’t done that, then what, hmm?” she offered with a derisive tone, “Out of sight, out of mind? Take the money and run?”

Jirel felt his jaw tighten. “We’re just one little ship, doc. And we’re on our own. Out where you can get near enough to that nice straight moral line in the sand to see that it looks pretty uneven up close. We’ve got no backup, we’re not in any fleet, we’re not gonna bring down the Syndicate, or solve galactic hunger, or fight off the Dominion. We’re just trying to get by, like everyone else.”

He paused, thinking back to their fateful trip to Rilen Dar’s establishment.

“But sometimes, only sometimes, we get a chance to try and do a bit of good. Not a lot. But a bit. And when we get that chance, I like to think we take it.”

“It was the honourable thing to do,” Klath added, leaning into the cliché.

“And we did it all safe in the knowledge that we’d never be stupid enough to run into the murderous, depot-raiding, people-trafficking weapons smuggler ever again,” Sunek added.

Nobody smiled, but Natasha softened slightly as she looked around at her crewmates, reminding herself that she wasn’t in Starfleet any more. I signed up for this, she told herself. All of it.

Any hope of dissipating the renewed level of tension seemed futile, as an uncomfortable silence descended on the cockpit. It was broken, inevitably, from the pilot’s seat.

“Heads up, guys,” he chirped, tapping his controls to slow the Bounty to sublight speeds.

The others turned away from the impromptu debate, and focused on the view through the cockpit window. Which was filled with a landscape of crimson and gold.

“The Numekk nebula,” Sunek confirmed unnecessarily, “Kinda thought it’d be bigger.”

Jirel ignored his pilot’s quip. And also tried to ignore the uneasy feeling growing inside of him. “Anything, Klath?”

It was a question born of hope, rather than expectation. And the growl from the Klingon as he worked his controls betrayed the answer.

“As anticipated,” he reported, “I cannot scan much more beyond the nebula’s perimeter. But this is where the transponder trail ends.”

“Well,” Jirel muttered, “This oughta be fun. Take us in, Sunek.”

“Was afraid you’d say that.”

The Vulcan tapped his own controls, and the Bounty was enveloped by the maelstrom.

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

Denella carefully manipulated the shuttle's thrusters to keep the vessel as stable as possible in the swirling chaos of the nebula. Though the tempest that she was fighting against was nothing compared to the churning feeling in the pit of her stomach as she stared out ahead. Hoping that there was nobody staring back at her.

It hadn't taken long for her to find the needle in the haystack.

It helped that Rilen Dar's personal transport was every bit as large and imposing as she had expected it to be, which had made it much easier to find. It was at least 300 metres long. The main hull was a sleek deep green ovoid shape, with two menacing curved triangular wings sprouting out amidships. Both wings were adorned with hefty disruptor banks.

It hung in the midst of the chaos of the nebula, partially obscured by the gas clouds, a scant few kilometres off her bow.

As far as she could tell, she hadn't been detected. Although there had been plenty of false positives and sensor ghosts, each time she had seen the glimmer of a vague sensor reading through the soup on her screens, she had cut every non-essential system on the shuttle in order to render herself as invisible as possible.

All that was left for the moment was life support, the ineffectual sensors and the bare minimum amount of propulsion to keep her vaguely stable as the tiny ship was buffeted about.

As a result, the shuttle interior was now freezing. Even the environmental systems had been sacrificed. Her breath was visible in the dim light afforded to her, and she occasionally had to suppress a full-on shiver.

She tried to avoid getting too distracted by the menacing craft outside, and returned her focus to the scratchy sensor readouts. Although the nebula made accurate scans impossible, at this proximity she was at least able to get a rough idea of what she was dealing with. It was slow and imprecise work, but she had been able to ascertain that there were at least a hundred lifesigns aboard and only one of them was registering as female.

Sarina.

Any doubts she had as to her identity seemed quelled by the fact that the sole female occupant of the ship was located in an area covered by transport inhibitors. Not that she had ever seriously expected things to be that easy.

As she continued to strategise, and despite how closely she was monitoring the other vessel, the sudden alert from the dim console gave her a shock. The alert registered exactly what she had been fearing, a power surge on the other ship indicating that the engines were being fired up. She barely had time to react before she saw the huge Orion ship start to move.

It was only after she jumped into action, powering up the shuttle and preparing for some desperate evasive manoeuvres, that she realised it wasn't moving towards her.

It was moving away from her. Or, more specifically, towards something else. Something familiar, that she now saw emerging through the wispy clouds.

Her blood ran cold.

"No..." she whispered.

* * * * *

Sunek padded back to the pilot's seat with a freshly replicated cup of raktajino in his hand. It wasn't his first.

He flopped down into his seat and sighed as he stared out at the Numekk nebula. Other emotional beings might have seen the canvas of colour in front of him as a deeply beautiful or evocative sight. But after several hours of watching the same swirling clouds, he didn't think it was either of those things.

He thought it was annoying.

The general mood didn't help either. The Bounty was uncertainly tip-toeing through uncharted waters at impulse speeds, and while the earlier heated debate had faded into the ether after several hours of cautious searching through the clouds, the mood was still palpably tense.

And as Sunek sat and stared at the vista in front of him, his Vulcan hearing couldn't help but pick up on a particular irritating sound. One that had been going on for some time, and one that he'd now had enough of.

"Stop doing that!" he snapped, to nobody in particular.

Klath, Jirel and Natasha stopped what they were doing and glanced at the Vulcan with confusion.

“Doing what?” Natasha asked on everyone’s behalf.

“Someone back there is tapping their feet like crazy,” the Vulcan grumbled, “And it’s the most annoying sound I’ve ever heard!”

“You know, you should record yourself one day,” Jirel said from next to Natasha at the engineering station, “You’d be surprised.”

Sunek swivelled round in his seat to glare at the Trill. “Good one. Point is, I get it, we’re all worried about what’s gonna happen in here. But that noise isn’t helping!”

The others glanced at each other.

“Nobody’s tapping their feet, Sunek,” Natasha said eventually.

Sunek went to interject, only to be stopped by the returning sound of foot-tapping. Except now he, and the rest of those present, looked down at Sunek’s own legs, as they tapped on the deck below with jittery regularity.

He offered a slightly embarrassed shrug and gestured to the raktajino. “Too many of these, I guess.”

“Just keep us on course,” Jirel sighed patiently, “ And keep an eye out. Given how bad the sensors are, you might actually see something before the readouts do.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled,” he nodded, “One question: Am I looking out for Denella, or the other guy?”

Jirel pointedly didn’t reply. Because he wasn’t sure what the answer was. Instead, he returned his tired eyes to the console in front of him. Natasha had called up a copy of the sensor data from Klath’s console onto her own screen, so that all three of their sets of eyes could keep a lookout.

So far, all they had run into were a couple of stray meteoroids and pockets of gas that had confused their sensors. Still, they worked on.

The renewed silence was punctuated by a sudden grunt from Klath. He tapped the garbled sensor readouts with an edge of concern.

“I...may have something.”

“Can you be more exact?” Jirel asked.

“Unclear,” the Klingon replied with an edge of frustration, “Possible contact at three-four-two mark six. It could be another echo, but this one seems—”

“Got it,” Natasha barked with urgency, “It’s moving!”

“Confirmed,” Klath nodded.

“Um, guys...”

Sunek’s words were enough to turn everyone’s attention back to the front of the cockpit, to see what had triggered his comment.

A huge Orion ship, bearing down on them through the clouds.

“Evasive!” Jirel screamed.

It was an unnecessary command. Sunek had already jumped into action. But it was too late.

The first disruptor blast hit home and collapsed the Bounty’s shields in a single hit. The second smashed straight into the port wing, which exploded in a burst of twisted metal and sent the whole ship into a death spiral.

All four occupants in the cockpit felt their world tip upside down. Each of them were slammed with force against whichever bulkhead was nearest.

As the whole ship tumbled helplessly around with no hope of recovery, Jirel felt the transporter effect take hold. Usually in situations like this, as he faced off with certain death, he was used to such a sensation taking hold at the last second to rescue him from certain doom.

But this time, he had a horrible feeling that things were about to get a lot worse.

* * * * *

Frozen in place, Denella watched on in horror as the brief, terrible battle unfolded. The Bounty hadn’t stood a chance.

She felt helpless as the ugly blasts of disruptor fire tore through the ship, paralysed as she watched the little vessel tumbling out of control. It was clear, even from this distance, that one more shot would be enough to finish them off.

Despite her warnings, they had come to help her. And this was their reward.

Just as she feared that she was about to watch everything she still had to care about succumb to destruction at the hands of the man that had

already robbed her of so much, the tumbling form of the Bounty was enveloped in a green-tinged light.

Not a disruptor blast, but a tractor beam.

She realised what was happening. Whether Rilen Dar had recognised the Bounty immediately or not, simply obliterating the ship that had wronged him previously was never going to be enough. Like a big cat in the jungle, he didn't want to just kill his prey. He liked to toy with it first.

Which, while the thought sent a fresh chill down her spine, had at least bought the Bounty's crew some time.

She tore her eyes away from the Bounty as it was tractorbeamed nearer to the Orion ship, and began to work her own ship's controls. Regardless of how sound her plan was, there was no more time to prepare for it.

Because now, one way or another, there were an awful lot of people on that ship that she needed to save.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

Natasha tried to keep herself as calm as possible as she was dragged through the door and physically thrown into the room.

She had been beamed over with the others, into a vast cargo area deep inside the Orion ship, where they had found themselves surrounded by a circle of armed guards. But almost immediately, she had been isolated and dragged away. The last time she had seen the others, Klath was being restrained by half a dozen of the guards, after the Klingon had immediately attempted to dive into a hopeless battle.

The two men that had taken her had remained silent during the short journey, and even after throwing her to the ground, they still didn't say a word. Instead, they walked back out and allowed the heavy door to close, sealing her inside.

With some effort, she stood up and looked around, finding herself in what she could only describe as a boudoir.

She was struck by the strange incongruity of the room. Unlike the savage interiors of the dank and miserable corridors she had just been led down, this room was a picture of outlandish decadence and luxury. Elegant furniture, warm carpeting and shiny golden fixtures and fittings graced the entire span of the vast confines of wherever she was, an expansive chamber that seemed almost large enough to fit the entire Bounty inside.

The furniture itself all looked plush and enticingly comfortable, though she tried not to focus too much on the huge bed that dominated one particular corner of the room. Instead, she scanned the room for anything usable. Anything she could use as a weapon, or any possible way out of the nightmare that she'd been swept up into.

It was only then that she realised that she wasn't alone.

On the other side of the room she saw the head of a shocked and slightly terrified Orion woman emerging from behind a large lounge chair.

The other woman seemed to relax slightly as she saw that the guards had left, and her new companion was merely a slightly dishevelled human woman, rather than whoever else she might have been expecting. Still her eyes remained wide and cautious, and as Natasha took a step towards her, the green-skinned woman instinctively shrank back slightly.

"Hey, it's ok," Natasha called out across the room, beginning to realise who the unfamiliar Orion woman was, "I'm not gonna hurt you. Are you...Sarina?"

The other woman didn't reply, but her eyes widened even further in surprise as she stared back at her guest, answering the question without needing words.

It had been a long time since anyone had called her by her actual name, and it seemed strange to hear it again. Especially from a human woman that she had never met before. Nobody had thought to use it to refer to her since she had left Orpheus IV.

Still, it did bring back some distant memories. Happy memories.

"Don't worry," Natasha continued, aware of how ridiculous she was about to sound, "We're here to...rescue you."

She allowed herself a moment to consider the irony of her words, and the apparent hopelessness of the situation.

"My name's Natasha," she continued, as the Orion woman ventured a few inches further up from behind her improvised cover, "I'm a friend of Denella."

In an instant, the Orion woman's face lit up. Those distant happy memories were brought into focus with a single word. All the hope that she had locked away inside herself after so many years with the Syndicate began to slowly drip back into her mind. And for the first time in a long time, she heard herself speaking.

"Denella...?"

"That's right," Natasha nodded, seeing the hope in the other woman's eyes. And praying that it wouldn't turn out to be false hope, "We're gonna get out of here, ok? But I'm gonna need some help from you—"

In a flash, the hope vanished, and Sarina retreated back behind her cover.

"No," she whispered, "No escape."

Natasha sighed in defeat at the setback in her attempt to get the Orion woman on her side.

As she looked around and considered her options again, she couldn't help but wonder how badly things were going for the others.

* * * * *

The huge green fist flew into Jirel's midriff with ferocious force.

All things being equal, the Trill would have at least tried to dodge the blow. But right now, he had no chance of doing that. He was being restrained by two stout Orion thugs, who held his hands tightly behind his back. As a result, the fist slammed into him with unimpeded ease, sending a fresh surge of searing pain through his battered body.

Jirel coughed and spluttered helplessly as all the breath was once again forcibly removed from his body.

On the other end of the fist, Rilen Dar stared back at him, smiling with undisguised glee.

Even as Natasha was dragged away in one direction, the other three Bounty crew members had been manhandled in the opposite direction, ending up in a dark, foreboding holding cell inside a secure brig area. Or at least, Klath and Sunek had ended up in the cell. Jirel had been kept outside by the same two guards that now restrained him.

And then Dar had arrived, and the beating had started. A beating that showed no signs of ending any time soon.

The shirtless Orion master fired off another punch, this one connecting with Jirel's head. His whole skull rattled from the impact. He tasted blood in his mouth.

"You are without honour, you filthy petaQ!"

Klath spat his angry epithet in Dar's direction from the other side of the cell's forcefield, his latest in a long running attempt to goad the Orion away from Jirel. But like his previous efforts, it was entirely ignored. Dar was focused on exacting his revenge.

Jirel's vision was becoming blurry. He struggled to focus, even as he saw the outline of Dar's fist heading towards him again. As the fist connected with his ribs and he felt something snap, he forced himself to look back up at his attacker, trying his best not to give Dar the satisfaction of seeing him defeated.

"Wh—What?" he managed to gasp in between ragged breaths, "Th—That's the best...you've got?"

It sounded pathetically hollow even as he said it, given that he was clearly barely staving off unconsciousness as it was. Still, it felt good to get it out.

Dar merely smiled even more darkly and cracked his knuckles for good measure, the unsettling sound echoing around the empty room. "Oh no, Trill," he fired back, "I have plenty more. I just don't want to break you completely before I've really started enjoying myself."

Before Jirel could muster the strength for another round of false bravado, another punch thudded into his stomach. His vision momentarily flashed bright white.

"It was so thoughtful of that useless old fool Fyac Randos to warn me that you were on your way here," he gloated, referring to the second call that he had received from his former acquaintance on Gartek V.

"If you really wish to fight someone," Klath bellowed, "Then fight me!"

"Yeah!" Sunek chimed in, with an impressive show of bravery, "That's Klingon for 'pick on someone your own size'! Which, I'd just like to make sure we establish, based on our respective heights and body weights, would rule me out of the equation..."

For Sunek, at least, it was an impressive show of bravery.

The hulking Orion man paused the beating for a moment and looked over to the cell with no small amount of disdain. He stepped away from the ailing Jirel and paced in front of the forcefield with a confident swagger.

"Believe me, Klingon, I would love to fight you," he growled, "But then, Syndicate mining operations are always on the lookout for someone with your brute strength. And I wouldn't want to damage the goods before I've made the sale."

Klath growled in impotent frustration as Dar glanced over at Sunek, looking the altogether scrawnier man up and down.

"As for you, Vulcan, I can't see anyone as fragile as you fetching a useful price from any mining company. But I'm sure that someone will consider you a more than acceptable...concubine."

Sunek considered this for a moment. "Feels like that sentence could have gone a lot better, but also a hell of a lot worse for me."

He tried to deliver the line with confidence, but Klath could tell that it wasn't filled with Sunek's usual irrepressible level of humour. Even he could see the gravity of their situation.

Dar, for his part, continued with his assessment of his new-found prizes.

"As for that human female of yours. Well, I don't mind saying that she will fetch me a pretty little price indeed. Even that pathetic little garbage scow you flew in on will be worth a few bars of latinum to the right scrap merchant."

The Orion man's lazy swagger around the room brought him back to the ailing form of Jirel, still supported on either side by his goons.

"But this one? This one isn't worth anything to anyone. So, it's only fair that I get to have a little fun, hmm?"

He hovered over Jirel's bloodied form and slammed home two more punches. The Trill felt another rib snap, but he strongly suspected that by this point, a few broken bones were the least of his worries.

Dar took a moment to lean into Jirel and whisper in his ear, loudly cracking his knuckles again for effect. "Let this be a lesson to you, Trill.

Never steal anything from me.”

Jirel tried to force his mouth open to deliver another riposte before more pain arrived. But he was stopped by the sound of a chirp over the ship’s comms link.

“Bridge to Dar,” a deep, but slightly uncertain voice boomed out, “Another ship is approaching our position.”

Dar paused just as he was winding up for another punch, looking more than a little irritated by this distraction. He had specifically asked to be left alone to enjoy himself.

“Destroy it,” he bellowed, “And do not interrupt me again!”

“Yes, Dar,” the reply came, pausing for a moment before risking the further wrath of their master, “But you should know that it is...her.”

At this, Dar’s expression switched to one of intrigue. The corners of his mouth curved up into a greedy smile.

“Must be my lucky day,” he muttered to nobody in particular, before calling back out to the comms link itself, “I’m on my way.”

The comms link closed with a telltale click, as Dar nodded to his goons. They roughly dragged Jirel’s limp body over towards the cell, preparing to restrain him with the others.

“We’ll have to continue this later, Trill,” Dar growled at him.

It was the last thing that Jirel heard, as he finally succumbed to unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Denella waited patiently for her hail to be acknowledged.

Part of her felt terrified, as the tiny Yridian shuttle, now completely exposed to the Orion ship, hung a scant distance away from several menacing disruptor banks. But she also knew that Dar wasn’t the sort of person that had a habit of destroying precious merchandise. Which, in his eyes, was all that she had ever been.

So she was betting her life on the Orion man not wanting to shoot before he’d had a chance to claim her back. She was betting that he would answer her hail.

And eventually, he did.

As soon as she saw his face, she couldn’t help but feel a pang of terror. The years had aged his features, but it was still unmistakably Rilen Dar. Even on the tiny viewscreen on the comms panel of the Yridian shuttle, she could see the telltale leer on his face. She would never forget that look.

Behind him, half a dozen subordinate Orions worked around the bridge of his ship. All clearly subservient to their master, stood at levels below where Dar sat in his towering throne of a command chair, staring at her through the screen.

“Well then,” he said, “That is a familiar face.”

She kept a tight lid on the rush of terror she felt inside, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing that side of her feelings, and kept her focus on his face. Even as she carefully moved her left hand subtly across the control panel and brought the shuttle’s outer magnetic clamps online.

“Rilen Dar,” she managed, summoning as much courage into her voice as she could, “I wonder, can you remember my name?”

His eyes narrowed in front of her. “Your name was never important, slave.”

She suppressed another shudder, as her roaming left hand deftly tapped the propulsion controls to the shuttle, bringing up the pre-arranged program she had spent many hours calculating as she travelled to the nebula.

“Now,” Dar continued, “Why don’t you save me the disruptor power and lower your shields for me, hmm?”

“You first,” Denella shot back mirthlessly.

Dar let out a superior cackle at this comment. All the while, she continued to work, out of Dar’s line of sight, certain that he felt in control of the situation to the point that she would be able to keep him talking for a little longer.

“So, we have to do this the hard way?” he replied, “A pity. I don’t remember you putting up quite as much resistance before.”

She suppressed a more significant flinch, as she tapped at the controls for the shuttle’s small laser cutter.

On the screen, on the bridge of the gigantic Orion cruiser, she saw Dar casually turn to one of his subordinates and gesture at her. “Target main disruptor banks on that shuttle. Low power only. Disable it, but don’t damage the cargo.”

The subordinate nodded. She felt herself tense up further as she used passive targeting to align the cutter.

Time was nearly up.

“Funny. I guess that’s all you ever do, isn’t it, Dar? You damage. You break. You hurt, and you destroy. Damn near broke everything about me.”

She stared back at the screen, recalling her parents, her friends, her crewmates.

“But lucky for me, there were other people in my life. People who taught me how to repair. How to mend and fix. Fix myself, fix a warp drive, fix just about anything. I guess that’s the difference between you and me. You break, I fix.”

“Fascinating,” Dar spat out, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “But really, this is why you hailed me? Why you revealed yourself? To tell me that? What a pitiful waste of time, slave.”

She offered a shrug, feeling her confidence growing slightly as she finished her final few bits of preparation.

Whatever happened, it was now or never.

“Not just that,” she said calmly, “Also: Interstellar courtesy. I thought I’d give you and your crew the chance to surrender.”

For a moment, there was nothing but silence over the comms link. Then, Dar burst out laughing, followed shortly after by several members of his crew in the background. Not warm laughter, but cold, mocking cackles. The sound of someone in complete control of the situation.

“S—Surrender?” Dar managed between deep guffaws, “You and your little shuttle want me to surrender?”

“I don’t want you to,” she replied truthfully, “I just thought I should give you the courtesy.”

More laughter. But she didn’t let it faze her. She remained calm, staring Dar down through the screen.

Her visible confidence began to have an effect on the burly Orion man. This fresh burst of laughter stopped more quickly than the first, and his face betrayed a twitch of irritation, as if he wasn’t entirely sure whether or not there was something behind her apparent death wish.

She rested her fingers on the controls and licked her lips. Hoping that the methodical calculations she’d checked and rechecked were going to hold up.

“Enough of this foolishness!” Dar snapped, turning back to his gunner, “Prepare to fire!”

Denella let out a deliberately audible tut. “Ah well,” she offered, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Before Dar could get off another retort, she cut the comms link. The screen went dead.

And she fired.

End of Part Three

Part 4A

Part Four

She heard the engines first.

The powerful roar of half a dozen sets of thrusters filled the air as the small green landing ships came rushing over the horizon and towards the township. Even though she was only nineteen, and had mercifully never seen a Syndicate ship before, she had been told enough to be able to recognise one when she saw it.

When he was alive, her father had said that Orpheus IV was far enough away that the Syndicate would never bother them. That their interest in the Orion Free Traders was minimal. But over recent months, she had seen plenty of evidence from newscasts and in word of mouth around the township that this may no longer be the case.

Reports of raids by Syndicate groups reaching further and further into Free Traders territory. Stories of outposts being razed and destroyed, settlements being ransacked, and innocent men, women and children being rounded up en masse to bolster the Syndicate's trafficking operations.

She had been working hard over the last few weeks to convince her mother that they needed to leave Orpheus IV for somewhere deeper inside Trader-controlled space. And Telmis was beginning to realise that her daughter might be right.

But as Denella saw the ships preparing to land, she realised she had run out of time.

She dropped her tools, ignoring the half-repaired Gorn transport pod parked next to her, and ran for the house.

In her mind, she quickly formulated a plan. She would get back, find her mother, and find Sarina and her family, and then get them back to the pod. It was a work in progress, but it was spaceworthy. And if they were lucky, they'd have a chance to evade whatever Syndicate ships were in orbit. It was a small chance. Still, it was better than the alternative.

But before she got even halfway back to the house, she could see that it was too late. Two of the ships had landed right next to her homestead. She could make out a gaggle of burly Orion men as they swarmed through her mother's house, along with the small collection of homes nearby.

She ducked behind a tree before any of them spotted her, and peered out from behind the cover in terror.

Sarina was being dragged towards one of the landing ships by two of the men, kicking and screaming as much as she could to put up a fight. But it was barely slowing the men down.

Denella felt a flash of impotent anger as she saw the younger Orion woman's terror. Her friend. The one that she had always said she'd protect, and look after. She reached down and felt the hilt of the dagger in her boot. She gently lifted it and hefted it in her hand. But she didn't move. She had no idea what she was going to do, even as she watched her best friend being dragged away.

There were at least two dozen men visible down there, to say nothing of how many might be inside the houses, ransacking the place for whatever valuables they could take. And she suddenly felt very small.

She felt the urge to run. To run away. Perhaps, if she could make it to the cover of the forest, she could hide. She could survive. If she could stay out of sight for long enough.

For once in her life, the forest seemed like the lesser of two evils.

But she also felt the urge to do something, do anything, for her mother, and for Sarina. And the other Orions being carried away. Even though she knew it was useless, that it would be a hopeless fight, part of her wanted to do something.

Fight or flight. A simple choice.

Shamefully, as the cries of the girl she had promised to protect drifted out from the homestead, she felt herself turn away. Back towards the forest. While her mind was still in conflict, her body had made a decision. She was running away.

And then she stopped. Frozen to the spot. In terror.

She hadn't heard him approaching her from behind, but now he stood in her way. Before she could move, an arm the size of a tree trunk shot out and grabbed her around the neck. The other one grabbed the wrist that held the dagger, squeezing it mercilessly until she dropped it.

The dagger that her mother had given her dropped to the soft ground below. She felt his grip tightening around her neck. She struggled to breathe.

"Well, well," the burly Orion muttered at her, "This trip just keeps getting more profitable."

He snorted in satisfied amusement as she quaked in his arms. She couldn't move. His vice-like grip saw to that.

"My name is Rilen Dar," he continued, "And you...belong to me."

He picked her up and began to carry her away over his shoulder, back towards the nearest of the landing crafts.

And she didn't struggle.

As they ascended the steps up into the ship, she saw that her home was on fire. She had no idea where her mother was. Or Sarina. What she did know, as the flames licked higher and engulfed the second floor, was that she would never see Orpheus IV again.

And she still didn't struggle.

Her face was blank. Her body was limp.

In her mind, she started to work on replacing the primary power grid on an Antedean warp shuttle.

* * * * *

The calculations for a warp jump were some of the most complicated and precise in all of warp field mechanics.

It was usually postulated as a concept by all warp-capable species shortly after they discovered the means of faster than light travel. But it usually took a lot longer to refine.

The idea was simple enough. A split-second burst of warp speed to instantaneously propel a vessel or probe a relatively short distance between two points.

There were plenty of famous uses of such a jump throughout galactic history.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard had used one to defeat a Ferengi Marauder in the Maxia Zeta system. Arbeiter Drak'han of Dexia Minor once ordered his entire warfleet to warp jump directly into orbit of neighbouring Dexia Major, to win a battle that was lauded as the most remarkable military upset of all time. And renowned 23rd century Bzzit Khaht shuttle racer Bzzakhashgon was once disqualified from an interstellar time trial around the Lethian system for allegedly using a warp jump during his final qualifying run, an allegation that Bzzakhashgon strenuously denied all the way to his grave.

But it was possible that nobody had ever used one in as foolhardy a way as Denella had decided to.

When she fired on Rilen Dar's ship, she had actually kicked off a pre-programmed combination of several discrete actions, all carefully designed to occur in a tight sequence.

The shuttle's tiny laser cutter shot out an overpowered band of reddish energy at the Orion vessel's shields. A brief burst that was significantly more than the cutter was designed to handle, and one that burnt out every element inside it almost immediately.

A simple laser was nowhere near enough to bring the shields down, or even weaken them, but it was enough to give them a tap, and cause the Orion cruiser's modular defence systems to recompile the shield grid around the impact site as a matter of course. Just as Denella knew Orion shield generators always did.

Which meant that, for a fraction of a split second, the shields winked off around where the laser cutter had hit them, leaving a tiny, shuttle-sized hole. Not long enough for any weapons system to take advantage, but long enough for Denella's faster-than-light plan.

At the same time, the shuttle's warp drive flared into life. In a literal blink of an eye, the shuttle executed a short-range warp jump, straight through the hole the laser had caused. It was as if the tiny ship had disappeared from outside the shield, and reappeared inside it, now with no barrier between itself and the larger vessel's hull.

As the jump took place, the shuttle's deflector array sent out a burst of theta radiation into the surrounding gas and dust of the nebula, serving to further blind the already patchy sensor data that the Orion ship was receiving just as the shuttle breached its defences.

Finally, the magnetic clamps activated, as the hull of the Orion ship loomed large. With a dull thud and an impact strong enough to shake the vessel's occupant significantly more than she had been hoping, the shuttle clamped onto the hull like a limpet.

Despite how long it had taken Denella to prepare for it, the whole process was over in an instant. If she'd been entirely honest, even after all her preparation, she had only given herself a 50/50 chance of the whole thing succeeding. But it had. Exactly as she had planned.

Still, she didn't allow herself even a brief moment of satisfaction. This was just the start. Instead, she completed one final check of the belongings in her rucksack, and then quickly stepped over to the shuttle's ore transporter.

It wasn't an ideal scenario, using a device primarily designed to handle rocks in order to get herself onto the other vessel. But she tried not to worry too much about that.

As for what she had just managed to do, she barely paid it another thought.

Which was a shame. Because it meant that even though it had been as impressive a warp jump as anything attempted by Picard, Drak'han or, allegedly, Bzzakhashgon, chances were that nobody would ever hear anything more about the Denella Maneuver.

* * * * *

On the bridge of Dar's ship, the mood had shifted in an instant.

Just as the gunner was preparing to fire, the entire vessel had gently rocked from the impact of the improvised weapon, and the shuttle seemed to disappear in front of their very eyes.

Dar growled in frustration, causing every one of his subordinates to flinch. "What the hell just happened?" he spat out, to nobody and everybody.

The subordinates all leapt to action, working their controls to try and get some sort of answer to Dar's question that wouldn't anger him further.

They all knew that they wouldn't like him when he was mad.

Eventually, one subordinate, a young navigation chief called Tarlas Rel, found an answer. He wasn't the only one to find it, but he was the only one naive enough to inform Dar.

"I am picking up a transporter signature. Deck 16, section 11!"

Before Dar had a chance to respond, Rel's console chirped out another warning. Several other consoles around the bridge also chirped, but again, Rel was the only one eager enough to report the reason to his master.

"Internal sensors are down throughout the ship! Someone has flooded the computer with a recursive program!"

The other subordinates braced themselves for Dar's wrath to rain down on Rel. But Dar checked himself. While he was pretty sure he would enjoy killing Rel, he felt it was best to focus on the more pressing issue for now. Instead, he pointed at a pair of his other subordinates and barked out spittle-flecked orders.

"Get down there, take as many guards as you need, and bring her to me!"

The two Orions quickly nodded and exited, as Dar turned back to the viewscreen, his face like thunder.

He had considered joining the hunt himself, to try and satisfy the frustration and irritation that he was feeling after being so completely wrong-footed by a simple slave girl. But he had a standing to maintain as the master of this particular domain. It wouldn't have been proper for him to reduce himself to the level of stalking around below decks with the rest of his guards and subjects.

Dar wasn't concerned. He had more than a hundred of his most loyal subjects onboard, and regardless of how many tricks this particular slave might have up her sleeves, she would be captured eventually.

But he was also pragmatic when he needed to be. And he had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly where his unlikely adversary would be heading. He knew what she was looking for, what she had come all this way to find. And on the off chance that she did manage to evade his guards, he could make sure he was there to meet her.

He stood from his throne-like chair and immediately started towards the bridge's turbolift, without a word to his subordinates.

Just as he reached the turbolift doors, and still feeling that he hadn't quite scratched his irritation as much as he would have liked, he turned back and fired a single disruptor shot into the back of Tarlas Rel, silencing the young navigator and his irritating reports forever.

The remaining men on the bridge barely batted an eyelid at their master's latest irrational act of callousness.

Dar turned back to the turbolift, and allowed himself a satisfied smile.

He had enjoyed that.

Part 4B

Part Four (Cont'd)

Despite the potential unreliability of the ore transporter, she had materialised exactly where she had planned to, in an empty service corridor on the lower decks of Dar's ship.

The relatively isolated location gave her time to put her piece of software to work silencing the ship's internal sensors. It wasn't a foolproof plan. Tricorders and handheld scanners would still be unaffected, but it would give her a small amount of cover, and prevent Dar from just beaming her lifesigns straight into a detention cell.

Still, she knew her beam-in would have been detected. She had to move quickly. Once the software was in place, she drew the phaser from her belt and re-checked the vicinity. The coast was still clear. For the moment.

She crept down the corridor, deeper into the ship.

The Orion cruiser had looked menacing enough from the outside, and inside was no different. The walls of the corridor were covered in ugly metal overhangs and sharp, jutting corners. The lighting was relatively dim, which meant there was gloom and shadowy corners everywhere.

It seemed to be a trait of Orion ships. Especially Syndicate ones. Even if Rilen Dar had upgraded his ship from the smaller raider he had travelled in when he had taken her from Orpheus IV, the interiors were very similar. Shadows everywhere. And she stayed in those shadows as she moved. Until she could find a way to get off the beaten track even further.

She ducked behind a corner as she heard footsteps approaching, gripping the phaser even more tightly as she did so.

"There's a whole bunch of guards coming down here to search," she heard one of the burly Orions gripe as they approached her concealed position, "We should leave it to them."

"You fool," the other one spat, "Dar wants the girl. If we find her before the others get here, we'll be the ones in line for a promotion. Or do you want to live out your days in the engineering decks?"

Denella peered out from her hiding place and watched the two men walk obliviously past with their backs to her. Thumbing the phaser to a wide-beam stun setting, she fired without a second thought. Both of them slumped to the floor in a heap, neither having the time to register what had hit them.

She adjusted the rucksack on her back and turned away from the two unconscious forms, sneaking further down the corridor. As she crept, she kept an eye out for any sort of access junction or panel that would give her access to whatever maintenance tunnels there were on this ship.

She knew that was her best chance of getting to the upper decks undetected. Perhaps her only chance, given that there were guards heading her way.

As she absently wondered when they might arrive, she rounded a sharp corner in the corridor. And came face to face with a knife.

It was a typical Orion design, not unlike her own, though with less of an ornate pattern on the hilt. This one was more utilitarian in nature. But even as her eyes were on the blade, her senses were also assessing the man holding it. This Orion was young, but well-built enough to be intimidating, dressed in deep brown overalls. He stood cocky and confident.

After all, he'd got the jump on her.

Still, she was relieved to see that he was on his own. Presumably another straggler in the engineering decks looking to curry Dar's favour.

"Drop it," he grunted, gesturing to the phaser in her hand.

She complied. For the time being.

"Huh," he continued, looking her up and down, "Dar is going to be very pleased with me. Very pleased indeed..."

She finally took her eyes off the weapon and properly looked up at the man who held it. "I wouldn't bet on it," she replied.

And then she attacked. Just as she had learned to do.

Launching the attack out of nowhere, she kicked out with her foot, connecting squarely with his leg and eliciting a shocked scream of pain. Her younger opponent dropped the weapon and backed away, which was a rookie mistake. She followed up with a flurry of further kicks, before grabbing the Orion man's arm and slamming him into the bulkhead in front of them.

She grabbed her own dagger from her belt and brought it up to his throat. She couldn't help but take some satisfaction from feeling him shaking underneath the weight of her body.

"Y—You can't...!" he managed to splutter.

Denella kept the blade tightly pressed against his skin. She remembered the bartender. The first person she had killed, all those years ago. "I can," she replied after a moment, "But you're not worth it."

She retracted the blade ever so slightly, then slammed his head straight into the bulkhead, knocking him out in an instant. He slumped down to her feet. She slipped the blade back into her belt and picked up the phaser where she had dropped it.

Then she spotted what she had been looking for further down the corridor. She rushed over to the access panel even as she heard more footsteps approaching, and crawled through.

Ever deeper into the bowels of the ship.

* * * * *

The entire holding area was filled with a roar of pure guttural rage, loud enough to make the walls rattle.

Seconds later, it was filled with a different noise. The unmistakable sound of a heavy Klingon body impacting on a powerful security forcefield. There was a fizz and crackle of energy accompanied by a far more pained roar. Then the fizzing ended, and gave way to the sound of the same heavy Klingon body falling to the floor of the holding cell in an aching heap.

Then there was silence.

“So,” Sunek quipped into the silence, “How’s that working out for you?”

Klath summoned the energy to pick himself up off the deck, but he didn’t acknowledge the Vulcan, who was crouched on the other side of the holding cell, doing his best to tend to Jirel’s broken and unconscious form.

That had been the fifth futile attempt that he had made to breach the forcefield with pure strength alone. And it had gone about as well as the previous four. Klath knew that it was a spectacularly poor plan with no real hope of success. After all, a forcefield running off the power generators of an Orion cruiser could replenish its strength much faster than he could hope to do. But he still felt the need to do something.

“I mean,” Sunek continued behind him, “You know what they say about doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, right?”

Klath’s sense of impotent anger was even building to the point that he was seriously starting to consider relieving some of that frustration by shutting his annoying Vulcan companion up. But ultimately, he decided against it. For now. Instead, he turned and walked over to Jirel’s prone body.

“His condition?”

Sunek sighed and looked back up at the Klingon. “I’m not a doctor. But it’s not looking good, buddy. You saw the beating he got. There’s gotta be head trauma, broken bones, Surak knows how much internal bleeding...”

His words tailed off, but the implication was clear. Klath looked down at the swollen and bloodied face of his friend and grimaced.

“If he wanted revenge, he should have fought me,” he growled, “I was just as involved in taking Denella from him as Jirel was.”

“First rule of interstellar bastardry,” Sunek offered with only a fraction of his usual humour, “You don’t get where this guy has by picking too many equal fights.”

Klath grunted unhappily in response, before he turned his attention back to the forcefield, preparing for a sixth assault that would likely go as well as the preceding five. “Still, Jirel needs medical attention. That is why we must try to break out of here.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure you’re gonna kill yourself before you short out that thing,” Sunek countered as he stood back up and gestured at the shimmering forcefield.

“Then what do you suggest?”

“I dunno. I guess we need to wait here until the guards come back to move us someplace, and then figure something out. We’ve been in plenty of holding cells before, right? Guards are always doing stupid things like that.”

“And how long will that take?”

“I dunno, Klath! Who am I? Head of shift rotation?”

The two bickering friends stood toe to toe with each other as they argued. For a second time, Klath considered taking some more aggressive steps to shut Sunek up.

Whether or not the Vulcan sensed how close he was getting to being slugged in the face by his crewmate, he took a step back and sighed, looking a little less adversarial. “Ok, so, we definitely need to get out of here one way or another, right?”

“Right,” Klath nodded, not entirely sure why that needed reiterating.

“Right,” Sunek nodded back, “Cos you don’t wanna live out your days down some Orion mine, and although I’m still not entirely clear on what he meant by ‘concubine’, I also really, really, really don’t wanna find out.”

Sunek paused, looking down at Jirel’s unmoving body, and then back up at the forcefield.

“So,” he continued, “I’m just gonna say that - hypothetically speaking, you understand - do you think that we’d have a chance of shorting it out if we were to use someone, y’know, more...willing to take the hit?”

Klath’s eyes widened, hoping that the Vulcan wasn’t implying what he thought he was implying. “You cannot mean—”

“I’m just saying - again, totally hypothetically - what if we were to push, say, something kinda Trill-sized and unconscious into the forcefield. Something that’d, y’know, be less able to jump back when the pain got too much? Would that maybe...short it out?”

Klath grunted unhappily, fixing the Vulcan with a glare that suggested in no uncertain terms exactly what he thought of Sunek’s suggestion. It wasn’t the first time the Bounty’s pilot had seemed willing to sacrifice one of his colleagues for himself. Nor the first time he had played it off as a bit of banter.

“Ok, don’t give me that look. I’m not saying we actually do it, obviously! I’m just—Y’know, we’re brainstorming, thinking big, working with what we’ve got, right? No wrong answers—!”

“That was a wrong answer,” Klath stated flatly, as he focused back on the forcefield and prepared for the pain he was about to endure.

“Come on,” Sunek persisted, “Whatever we’re doing, your plan is definitely not the answer either. I dunno what you think you’re achieving, but I can definitely bet you ten bars of gold-pressed latinum that you’re never gonna just magically run through that forcefield.”

Klath ignored him, and charged. And, to his surprise, magically ran through the forcefield.

Technically, just as he reached the shimmering wall of energy, it had disappeared, and he had continued through the gap left behind at full pelt, only managing to stop himself before he careered into the far wall. He turned around to see the equally surprised Sunek staring back at him, suddenly worried about the wager he’d placed seconds earlier.

“Hey, no, no, no, that doesn’t count,” the Vulcan blurted out, “You didn’t run through anything. It was switched off. That’s cheating!”

“Sunek,” Klath sighed, trying to focus his colleague back onto more pressing matters.

“Seriously, if you think I’m paying out for that—”

“Sunek!” the Klingon snapped with more urgency, gesturing for him to stop rambling on and start utilising the surprising new-found freedom they had been granted.

“Oh, right, yeah,” Sunek nodded, stepping out of the cell, “Also, what the hell just—?”

Before he could finish his question, a sturdy metal grate dropped down from the ceiling, crashing onto the deck in between them. Seconds later, the grate was joined on the deck by a familiar green-skinned woman, who deftly jumped down from the access tunnel above the room.

“Guys, will you get a move on,” she sighed, “This isn’t a party, it’s a jailbreak.”

“Denella!” Klath roared.

Sunek didn’t think he’d ever seen a Klingon hug someone before. Until now. Klath wrapped the Orion woman in a hearty embrace, which she was happy to return in kind. Then, she saw Jirel’s unconscious body over the burly warrior’s shoulder.

“Oh my god...”

They broke the hug and she rushed over to the Trill’s side, leaning down and brushing his bloodied face with worry.

“He put up impressive resistance,” Klath offered by way of a positive spin, as he stepped over to her side, “But he requires medical attention.”

Denella stifled the pang of guilt at what had happened to Jirel, all because he had loyally followed her, and stood back up. “Ok, you two get out of here. Take Jirel, get back to the Bounty, and get him whatever treatment you can manage. I still need to find Sarina.”

“We must assist you—”

She shook her head, giving the Klingon an intense stare that he immediately recognised.

“You know, more than anyone, I need to do this alone. Just make sure you’re waiting for my signal, ok?”

Klath nodded wordlessly, and stepped over to pick up Jirel and hoist him over his shoulder.

“Um,” Sunek offered as Klath and Denella stepped back out of the holding cell, “Where the hell are you going, exactly?”

Denella checked the phaser on her belt, then mustered a slight smile as she glanced at Klath again.

“I’m heading into a burning house.”

Klath’s mouth curled up into a tight smile of his own, complete with a nod of understanding and a look that displayed no small amount of pride in the warrior in front of him.

“Qapla’, Denella,” he grunted.

Sunek, for his part, just looked confused.

Part 4C

Part Four (Cont'd)

The good news, such that it was, was that after some time, Sarina had finally felt comfortable enough to emerge from behind the cover of the lounge chair.

The bad news was that, rather than helping Natasha muster some sort of escape plan from the lavish boudoir that was serving as their holding cell, she had instead scurried across to one particular area of the room, which was dominated by a full-length wardrobe, and had quickly started to select various outfits from within it. And she seemed to be completely ignoring Natasha's questions.

"Ok, Sarina, please listen to me, how many guards are we dealing with outside? Just the two that brought me here, or are there more—?"

Before she completed the sentence, Sarina interrupted her.

"You must prepare yourself for the master," she said, beckoning Natasha over to the wardrobe.

She said it in a voice that was quiet and diligent, chillingly devoid of any sort of emotion. As if she was talking about getting ready for a weekly cadet review.

Natasha reluctantly walked over and glanced over the outfits that Sarina had selected. Though suggesting that any of them were substantial enough to be called an outfit seemed laughable. "Yeah, I'm good with what I've got on," she managed.

Sarina, still on auto-pilot, looked her up and down, assessing the rather more dignified tunic and trousers that she was wearing. "The master won't be happy with that," she replied.

"Well, I'm hoping to disappoint him for as long as I—"

She stopped herself short, not wanting to finish that sentence out loud. For as long as she could. That, she knew, was the long and short of it. She could do her best to fight, to channel all of her Starfleet training, or even to try and negotiate or bargain her way out of it. But it would likely all just be delaying the inevitable.

Unless she could get through to Sarina.

"Listen," she persisted, as the other woman dispassionately offered up another outfit for her assessment, "We really are here to save you. But I need you to—"

"No," the green-skinned woman called out, a tear forming in her eye, "I—In the past, I have tried to—But I know, there is no escape. I serve my master."

Natasha felt her heart break at the defeated tone to her words. Silence descended as she flopped down into a nearby chair, sensing defeat.

"But...you said," Sarina whispered as she disappeared back into the wardrobe, "Denella was here?"

It was the first time since they had met that Natasha had heard any emotion other than fear in the other woman's voice. And it gave her a glimmer of hope.

"That's right."

Sarina considered this information, idly toying with a piece of fabric on one of the garments as she did so.

"I remember her," she said eventually, "If she's here, then—"

Sarina immediately shut up as the main door to the suite opened. Natasha could see visibly that the woman had retreated back inside herself. As she whirled around to see who had walked in, she suddenly understood why.

Rilen Dar marched over to where the two women stood. The muscular Orion cast a deeply unhappy glare at Natasha as he approached, but he addressed the enfeebled Sarina.

"I thought you would know to prepare this one. Why is she still dressed like that?"

"I am sorry, my master," she offered quietly.

Natasha ignored the rush of fear she felt inside, and instinctively tried to protect Sarina in the only way she could see that she could, given the situation. By distracting her master's wrath away from her.

"Yeah, that's my fault," she said, idly gesturing to the elaborate wardrobe, "Would you believe you've got nothing in my size?"

Dar didn't smile. His stare chilled her to the bone, but she maintained her front of defiance. It was all she seemed to have left.

"I can see you're going to require a little more training than the Orion women require," he scoffed with a dark leer.

"Probably," she shot back, surprising herself with her front of confidence, "So much effort that it probably isn't even worth your while—"

The speed of his movement took her by surprise. One moment, she had been standing straight next to Sarina, and holding her ground with defiance, the next Dar was onto her, forcing her backwards.

His bodyweight crushed her against the wall. His face got close enough to hers for her to smell his fetid breath. She stifled a wave of nausea, as she tried and failed to wriggle free. He was too powerful.

“On the contrary,” he hissed at her, “I do like a challenge...”

She felt one of his hands grab her around the throat with a vice-like grip, preventing her from even trying to resist any further. Off to one side, Sarina stared down at the ground, retreating further inside herself.

With no more defiance to offer, Natasha struggled to even gasp for air.

And then the ceiling exploded.

* * * * *

“Just...explain one thing to me.”

Klath sighed in frustration at the Vulcan’s continued efforts at conversation, and fired twice to fell the two Orion guards charging at them.

He staggered further on down the corridor, as alert sirens blared out all around. He had Jirel’s limp form over his left shoulder, and the stout Orion disruptor pistol he had liberated from the first guard they had run into in his right hand. In his wake, Sunek scurried on behind him, with a disruptor of his own.

As a rule, Klath disliked energy weapons for personal combat. There was nothing especially honourable about simply shooting your enemies, as far as he was concerned. But, all talk of honour aside, Klath was also a pragmatist. And so, in their current situation, a disruptor pistol worked just fine.

The only other thing he needed was some peace, to focus on the task of getting them to a transporter room, and back onboard the Bounty.

Sunek didn’t seem to agree on that point.

“See, we came all the way out here to help Denella, right?” the Vulcan continued, as they reached another intersection and paused while Klath checked around the corner to make sure that the coast was clear.

“Yes,” Klath grunted as a reluctant reply.

“Ok,” Sunek nodded, seemingly oblivious to their perilous situation, “But now we’ve actually caught up with her, we’re just leaving her back there to go off all by herself and do who the hell knows what? While we just run away and hide?”

Klath glanced around the corner again and fired off a succession of disruptor blasts, as a trio of Orions rounded the next intersection and thundered towards him. All of which did nothing to stop Sunek’s train of thought.

“Cos, honestly, if our plan was just to run away and hide the whole time, then I’d really rather we’d have just done that from the start.”

Klath gritted his teeth as he felled the final guard, leaving the coast clear. Still Sunek continued.

“Preferably in a bar that can mix a decent Risan mai-tai—”

Exasperated, Klath whirled around to the Vulcan, Jirel’s unconscious form still propped up on his shoulders. “Sunek, can you please—!”

He paused in shock as he saw the Vulcan lift his disruptor in his direction and fire.

It took him a second to realise that the shot had actually passed just to one side of him. Behind him, the Orion guard that had just rounded the corner, ready to attack, slumped to the ground.

Sunek looked back at the Klingon with an entirely innocent face.

“What?”

Klath stifled a rueful smile and merely nodded a terse thank you, before leading them off on their continuing journey back to the Bounty.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Sunek pointed out as they walked, “Why did we leave her back there?”

Klath kept his focus on the route ahead, not wanting to be bailed out by Sunek twice in one day, but he considered his answer as he did so.

In the end, Denella answered it for him.

From somewhere far above them, it was impossible to tell how many decks away, they heard the distant but unmistakable sound of an explosion. The entire ship gently rumbled all around them from the aftershock of the tremor.

Klath glanced back at Sunek as the Vulcan tried to narrow down how far away the explosion had been with his more finely attuned hearing.

“Because she can handle this herself from here.”

Sunek raised an eyebrow. And nodded in understanding.

Part 4D

Part Four (Cont'd)

The boudoir was in chaos.

Twisted fragments of metal lay all around where the ceiling had been blasted apart by the force of an old school type-2 phaser's power cell, wired into a secondary plasma relay that passed right above the room.

Two guards raced into the ruins of the room from outside, weapons drawn, and looked shocked to see Dar staggering back towards the door, coughing and peering through the dust and debris that hung in the air. Natasha had gone the other way, taking what cover she could in the corner by the wardrobe, with Sarina cowering alongside her.

Before anyone present could fully adjust to what was going on, Denella dropped down through the ragged hole in the ceiling, right into the middle of the mayhem. She held her phaser tightly and still had her rucksack secured on her back.

Natasha couldn't help but smile. To her side, she heard Sarina instinctively grab her arm and gasp, in shock at seeing the promised face from her past in the flesh.

In contrast, Dar's sneer returned as he saw her, despite the havoc all around him.

"Back off," Denella said to the guards, gesturing to their weapons as she kept the phaser trained on their master, "Now!"

The guards paused, frozen in confusion. They definitely weren't used to a slave girl giving them orders. But Dar turned to them and nodded, and they shrank backwards towards the far wall of the room.

The Orion turned his attention back to Denella. She resisted the compelling urge to flinch under the gaze of her former owner.

"Huh," Dar tutted, his demeanour remaining supremely confident in the midst of the carnage, "I had a feeling you might find a way to creep up here, slave."

Denella kept her finger on the phaser's trigger and maintained her poker face. She didn't want to give the man opposite her the satisfaction of seeing any weakness. And she also wanted to cover for the fact that, with the phaser in her hand now missing its power cell, it was entirely useless. "I think we need to talk, Dar," she said.

"And I thought you said you didn't destroy, you fix?" Dar offered back, glancing around at the remains of what used to be his favourite room on the ship.

"I fix things that are worth fixing," she countered.

As if on cue, Sarina's voice drifted over to her, even as a whisper.

"Denella..."

The older Orion woman wanted to keep her attention on the face of the enemy. But hearing her friend's voice after so long was too much for her. She glanced across at where Sarina crouched next to Natasha, staring up at her.

"Sarina," she managed to reply, focusing on keeping her emotions at bay and resisting the overwhelming urge to drop her weapon and race over to hug her long lost friend, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry it took me so long to—"

Seeing her distracted, Dar took the opportunity to take a step towards her. She spotted his movement out of the corner of her eye and snapped her attention, and the phaser, back in his direction, forcing him to stop. A minor victory, she told herself.

"Touching though this reunion is," Dar boomed out sarcastically, "You said you wanted to talk? So talk."

Denella slowly nodded, and slipped the rucksack off her back. Dar watched on in curiosity as she casually tossed it over to his feet, a tell-tale metallic jangle coming from inside.

"What is this?" he grunted.

"Payment," she replied, "Every scrap of latinum I've managed to save up since I got away from you, Dar. Twenty bars of the stuff."

The hulking Orion man raised an intrigued eyebrow and greedily bent down to lift the bag up, checking the heft of the heavy bag and nodding in appreciation. "Huh," he smiled coldly, throwing a glance back at his guards, "A slave with latinum. Now I have seen everything."

The guards let out mocking laughs. Denella stoically ignored them.

"I'm here to make a deal with you," she continued, "All that latinum, in exchange for the release of my friends."

She took a couple of steps backwards, towards where Sarina and Natasha remained crouched down.

Natasha stood back up and smiled at her friend. Sarina remained crouched down, staring at Denella as if she had seen a ghost. The expression tore at Denella's heart some more, thousands of words that she wanted to say to her jostled around in her mind. But she had to keep focused.

She only had time for a couple of words. Not a thousand.

“Trust me,” she whispered, before she turned back to Dar.

“Do you really expect me to deal with you, slave?” he bellowed back at her with palpable derision.

Denella gritted her teeth and continued to match Dar’s glare with one of her own. She wasn’t going to be bullied by him again. “You’re a businessman, Dar. Think about it. You’ve already seen the mess I’ve made around here, and trust me, it can get a lot worse. Or, you can cut a deal. You take the latinum, and we’ll be on our way.”

Natasha struggled to work out what Denella’s plan was. Next to her, she felt Sarina grip her arm a little tighter.

In contrast, Dar couldn’t help but laugh again. A deep, mocking burst of laughter that was again echoed by his guards.

Denella watched on patiently, keeping her useless phaser primed.

“Well, I see you’ve turned into quite a negotiator since I last saw you,” Dar said as the laughter subsided, “Except, you forget one thing. Rilen Dar doesn’t negotiate.”

He stepped over towards his guards, dropping the rucksack on the ground by his feet. Denella licked her lips with an edge of concern.

“I was hoping you’d make an exception once you—”

Dar cut her off before she could get any further with her attempt at negotiation. “And here’s another thing,” he growled menacingly, “I suspect that the explosion you just caused used up the power cell of that phaser. Which means that thing no longer functions.”

Denella felt a bead of sweat form on her forehead.

“If I’m wrong,” Dar continued, gesturing at one of the guards, “Shoot him.”

The guard tensed up a little, understandably. Denella’s poker face remained in place, but Dar seemed to see straight through it.

“So, as far as I can see, you have no weapon, and you have no plan. And what do I have? I have your friends. I have your ship. I have your latinum. And I have you.”

Denella saw that her bluff was called. Her arm dropped to her side, and the phaser clattered down onto the deck, amongst the debris and detritus at her feet. Dar’s leer extended further, as he basked in his victory. Despite the damage that had been caused to his ship, he knew that the latinum he would make from selling an extra slave would make up for that.

Denella turned back to Natasha and Sarina, who both stared back at her.

“This?” Natasha hissed, “This was your plan?”

As Natasha spoke, she saw a glint of something in the Orion woman’s eye. When Denella opened her mouth to reply, she didn’t speak. She just mouthed two more words at them.

Take cover.

She chanced a glance at her chronometer as she turned back to the gloating form of Dar. It was time.

“Really, slave,” the Orion master snarled, gesturing at her defeated form, “This was all you had?”

“Pretty much, I guess,” Denella replied with a shrug, “Except for one little thing.”

She allowed a sliver of a smile to creep onto her face. It unnerved Dar momentarily. He wasn’t used to his slaves smiling at him. At least not genuinely.

“See, I’m just a poor, simple, ex-slave girl, trying to get by in deep space. Honestly, Dar, do you really think a girl like me has got twenty bars of latinum?”

Dar’s gloating leer vanished in an instant, as the smile formed fully on Denella’s face.

Quick as a flash, he grabbed the bag filled with heavy jangling metal from where it sat at his feet and ripped the top open. Staring back at him, fresh from the Bounty’s weapons locker, was a cluster of Ferengi stun grenades.

At the same moment, Denella turned and dived backwards, pushing Natasha and Sarina down with her and trying to cover them as best she could. She scrambled to tap the communicator on her belt, hoping that someone was around on the Bounty to receive the signal.

Across the room, Dar roared in anguish.

It was too late for the guards to really understand what was happening.

The grenades exploded, precisely on schedule.

The two figures in the cargo bay panted heavily, getting their breath back. Both of them were bruised and battered from their latest training session. Just as they always were. They understood that they weren't going to hone any of their skills if they did things by halves.

"Impressive," Klath managed to get out between heavy breaths, "You parried my final counterpunch without looking."

Denella remained bent over, her hands on her knees as she took in ragged lungfuls of air. But she mustered a smile. "Your sleeves," she said, gesturing to Klath's plain brown tunic, "Picked up the sound moving through the air."

The Klingon looked down at his arm, as if this hadn't even occurred to him.

"So," she continued, standing back up straight, "Same time tomorrow?"

Klath began to collect up some of the weapons that lay strewn around the deck from their morning's enterprises. "I do not believe that will be necessary."

"What do you mean?"

Klath carefully returned his bat'leth to its leather sheath, and turned back to the confused Orion woman. "I have taught you all I can," he explained, "Your last parry was proof of that. I do not believe there is anything more I can help you with."

She stared back at him as she got her breath back. Her expression suggested that she wasn't entirely convinced. "We can't just stop all this now," she insisted.

Klath glared into the whites of her eyes. A question he had wondered for a long time on his lips.

"Why are you doing all of this?"

"What do you mean? I need to be able to protect myself. To—"

"No," Klath shook his head, "You could already protect yourself. You proved that in our first lesson. But I have taught you how to attack. How to fight. And still you want more. Why?"

She considered offering him a half answer, something to deflect from the full reality. But she knew that she owed him more than that. She picked up her dagger from the ground and idly spun it around in her hand as she spoke.

"Because I need to know that I'll be ready."

"For what?"

She stopped spinning the dagger and gripped the handle of the weapon tightly.

"All those months ago, you rescued me from the Syndicate. But really, I know it's not gonna be forever. All this, all I'm doing onboard the Bounty, it's just temporary. One day, all of that will come back and find me."

She placed her dagger back in her belt and turned back to Klath.

"And I need to make sure that I'll be strong enough when that day comes."

She turned and walked towards the exit of the cargo bay. Klath watched her as she walked, then called out just as she reached the door.

"Tomorrow. Here, at the usual time."

She looked back, a half-smile on her face. "I thought you said you had nothing more to teach me?"

"But now I understand your reasons. You are preparing for battle," Klath pointed out, "It is important that you practise your combat skills, regardless of whether there is more to be learned."

The Klingon matched her smile and continued.

"Besides, perhaps there are some things that you can teach me."

* * * * *

The ringing in Denella's ears was intense enough to mask the sound of the transporter, but even without hearing and with her eyes closed, she felt the tingle of the beam's effect.

She forced her eyes back open, and found herself lying prone on the pad in the Bounty's transporter room, with Natasha and Sarina still underneath her. Blinking to adjust to the harsher light of the Bounty, she looked around at the familiar surroundings, and saw a smiling face at the transporter controls.

"Am I glad to see you," she croaked, patting the deck of the Bounty to her side for emphasis, before adding, "You too, Klath."

The Klingon quickly walked over to help the three women back to their feet.

Natasha shook her head to try and clear the ringing, feeling a palpable sense of relief flooding through her. "I changed my mind," she offered to Denella with a wince, "That was a hell of a plan."

Denella smiled back at the human woman, ignoring the pain emanating from her back where shrapnel from the grenade explosion had dug into her flesh. She turned to her side, where Sarina looked around fearfully, gripping onto the taller Orion woman's arm and trying to make sense of what was happening.

Denella knew exactly what she was going through in her mind, because it was exactly what had gone through hers all those years ago, in the same tumbledown transporter room of the same beaten Ju'Day-type raider.

The two women made eye contact. Once again, Denella's head felt like it was going to explode with all of the things she wanted to say to her friend that she hadn't seen in so long. In the end, she decided not to say anything. She just embraced Sarina in a tight hug. A hug that spanned the decade or more that they had been apart. Sarina reciprocated, as tears formed in their eyes.

"Don't worry," Denella whispered in her friend's ear, "You're free."

As Klath and Natasha allowed themselves a moment to witness the emotional reunion in front of them, they were interrupted by Sunek's voice over the ship's comms link.

"Um, guys? We've got a few problems up here..."

His words of concern were followed by the deck pitching to one side as the whole Bounty shook from a barely evaded disruptor blast.

The group raced out of the transporter room and continued down the Bounty's main corridor, dashing up the metal steps and bursting into the cockpit just as the ship bucked again, evading another blast.

Sunek frantically worked at the pilot's controls as the ship swept through the familiar colours and patterns of the Numekk nebula ahead of them.

Klath took his place at his console, while Denella slid into the engineering station, with Sarina still with her, gripping her arm tightly. Natasha just clung onto Jirel's vacant centre chair for dear life, the Trill still unconscious down in the medical bay.

"So, the good news is, whatever the hell just happened over there sent their whole power grid haywire. We're out of the tractor beam," Sunek shouted back, "The bad news is, I think they noticed."

The ship pitched again as the Vulcan flung the ship out of the way of another disruptor blast.

"Shields are still offline. Returning fire," Klath reported, "No effect."

"We can't go to warp until we're clear of this stupid nebula," Sunek added, "And even then, pretty sure an Orion cruiser's got us outpaced!"

Denella's jaw clenched tightly as the ship veered again. Even with Dar dead, the Syndicate was resolutely refusing to leave her alone. The Syndicate that had hurt her so much, destroyed her home, and hurt so many of her friends.

The Syndicate that had, in some awful twisted way, made her the person she was today.

She wondered if she had it in her to make sure that situation changed for good. Tried to rationalise the final element of the plan that she had put together to herself once again. She glanced over to Sarina, saw the fear in her eyes as the Bounty shook again. She looked around the cockpit at her friends, who had risked and very nearly lost everything to try and help her on her reckless quest. And she decided that, for these people, she did have it in her.

She quickly tapped a succession of commands into the console in front of her, then smiled sadly at Sarina. "Hang on," she whispered, "I've still got one last trick."

She didn't wait a second longer, and tapped a final button on her console. The Bounty transmitted a simple command through the nebula to the tiny Yridian mining shuttle that was still clamped to the side of the Orion ship.

The shuttle's computer received the command and obediently set about carrying out the instruction contained within it. Even though the instruction required it to release the magnetic constrictors around its tiny warp drive.

With the constrictors offline, the warp core breach was almost instantaneous. The venerable old shuttle exploded in a fierce ball of fire, ripping a huge hole clean through the cruiser's engineering section. The huge Orion ship listed uncertainly to one side, further explosions visible across the underside of the hull as the damage it had sustained broke out into a full-on cascade failure.

And then, against the beautiful backdrop of the crimson and gold nebula, the late Rilen Dar's mighty Orion cruiser exploded.

The Bounty, wearing its battle damage on what remained of its port wing, crested the shockwave of the explosion as it permeated into the nebula.

And the little ship, and her crew, limped away to freedom.

End of Part Four

Part 5 (Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Epilogue

Jirel sat up in the single bed of the Bounty's cramped medical bay and winced.

Natasha had worked tirelessly on their journey back out of Syndicate space to heal his myriad wounds. And he was just about back in one piece.

"Five broken ribs," she reported as she ran a final scan over his body, "One punctured lung, a ruptured kidney, broken leg, fractured jaw—"

"Thanks doc, I get the picture," he replied with a knowing grimace, "And thanks for patching me all back up. Again."

"Good news is, next time it happens, you're entitled to a free soda."

They shared a smile, as she quickly stopped thinking about how worried she'd been when she'd first seen the state he was in after his reunion with Rilen Dar. It wasn't the time to get into all of that.

Instead, she continued with the scan, and opted for a different area of conversation.

"I get it, you know."

"Get what?"

"What you said earlier. About how uneven the moral line can get out here, and all you can do is try to do a bit of good where you can. For what it's worth, I think this ship does more good than you give yourself credit for. Even if it is just one ship."

"I'll remember that the next time we take on a supply run for the Syndicate," Jirel replied, matching her resulting withering look with a cheeky smile, "Kidding. Obviously."

In the following moment of silence, as they maintained each other's gazes, Jirel was certain that the two of them were sharing a moment of something or other. But he stopped himself from pursuing that any further. It wasn't the time to get into all of that.

"Well," Natasha said eventually as she finished her scan, "I'm officially calling this treatment over. You're good to go."

The door to the medical bay opened and Denella walked in. Natasha saw the look between the two friends, and got the message. "I, um, guess I'll go grab a coffee," she nodded, flashing a smile at Denella as she exited.

As the door closed behind her, a relieved looking Denella walked up to the fully mended Jirel and gave him a warm hug.

Then, as she broke the hug, she gave him a fierce slap across his face.

"Um, ow?" Jirel managed, with some justification.

"That's for being a complete idiot," she replied, smiling despite herself, "I told you not to follow me, and you nearly got yourself killed back there! What the hell did you think you were doing, flying out into Syndicate space like that?"

"You did it first."

"That's different. I had to."

"So did we," he replied, with an uncharacteristically serious tone, "You know that if you go charging off on some crazy suicide mission, the rest of us are gonna have your back. We're gonna come after you—"

"And get caught by the Syndicate boss with the grudge against you? And get beaten within an inch of your life? And have to get bailed out by your engineer on said crazy suicide mission?"

Jirel looked a little more sheepish when she put it like that. "I didn't say we'd be any good," he offered with a shrug.

Denella's smile widened as she shook her head in amusement.

"How's our guest?" he asked eventually.

"She's still...getting used to everything. From my experience, it takes a while to get everything right in your head. But...she's ok."

"Is she gonna stick around?"

"Not right now," Denella said sadly, "There's a Betazed centre just inside Federation space that helps people like Sarina. Over in the Corvin sector. Natasha suggested it as a starting point, and Sarina wants to go there. I said we'd take her?"

Jirel nodded silently, though he felt as though his blessing really wasn't needed for that particular order.

“Longer term...I don’t think she knows,” the Orion woman continued, “But I’ve said I’ll stay with her for a while, while she gets settled. For as long as she needs me.”

“Take all the time you need. We can handle the repairs—”

“Like hell you can,” she smiled, as she turned and made for the exit, “But don’t worry, I can multitask.”

Jirel smiled back as she left. Moments later, Natasha returned, clutching a freshly replicated mug of coffee in her hand.

“Didn’t I discharge you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jirel said, rubbing his slapped cheek, “But I think this is gonna bruise.”

* * * * *

The Bounty sat parked on the surface of Corvin III, next to the calming expanse of the Betazed care facility.

The ship’s rear ramp was deployed, and the crew, along with Sarina, stood on the soft grass underfoot along with one of the employees of the centre, a porcelain-skinned woman called Palia Rani.

“You can stay with us as long as you need,” the Betazoid woman explained to Sarina in a soft and kindly tone.

The younger Orion woman looked around the countryside that surrounded the facility and saw the rolling hills and the woods in the distance. She managed a smile. “It reminds me of...home,” she whispered.

“Me too,” Denella nodded with a smile of her own.

As the two Orion women walked away from the group, to take in the view by themselves, Rani turned around to the rest of the Bounty’s crew and gestured around in a friendly manner. “The rest of you are welcome to stay as well, while you make your repairs.”

Jirel looked up at the shattered remains of the Bounty’s port wing, and took in the other signs of battle damage across the long-suffering ship’s hull.

“Thanks,” he nodded, “We might need it.”

Natasha looked around at the picturesque surroundings of Corvin III. “Well, I’d definitely be happy to spend some time here,” she offered, glancing at Klath, who didn’t appear to share that particular belief.

Sunek, for his part, kept his inquisitive focus on the Betazoid woman. “So, hey, like, you can really read our minds? You can, y’know, tell what I’m thinking right now?”

Rani looked back at the Vulcan with a somewhat disgusted expression on her face.

“Yes.”

Jirel glanced awkwardly over at Natasha. “I mean, we probably shouldn’t stay too long...”

* * * * *

After a brief tour of the rest of the facility, Denella left Sarina to settle in, happy that she was being looked after.

She didn’t rejoin the others, or even start on the Bounty’s latest repair schedule. Instead, she returned to a spot a short distance away from where they had landed to consider the view again.

Sarina had been right. The place could have been Orpheus IV if she hadn’t known any better. The deep blue sky, the rolling hills and the warm, rich red of the soil all brought back a sea of memories in her mind. She also knew that this would be as close as she and Sarina ever got to their old colony. They would never be able to actually go home again. Orpheus IV was lost to them.

She heard heavy footsteps approaching, as Klath stepped up alongside her.

“Beautiful, huh?” she ventured as she contemplated the view.

Klath’s grunt was enough to betray the fact that the Klingon was still slightly less impressed by the beauty of Corvin III than everyone else seemed to be.

“It is very green,” he managed.

He turned to look at his friend, who was still staring out at nothing in particular into the distance. On seeing her troubled look once again, he reluctantly opted to flex his developing small talk muscles once again.

“Do you...wish to talk about it?”

Despite everything, Denella stifled a smile before she collected her thoughts. “I guess I was just wondering how many more there are out there,” she mused as she looked up to the heavens, “How many more Sarinas.”

Klath considered this for a moment. “We could attempt to rescue more of them. It would be quite a battle.”

“Take on the entire Syndicate? In the Bounty?”

“We could find a larger ship,” Klath retorted, apparently in all seriousness.

She turned her attention to her Klingon companion and smiled warmly. They stood in silence for a moment.

“You fought well, Denella,” he offered eventually, “You should be proud.”

She managed a slight nod, but his words didn’t seem to have the positive outcome that he had been hoping for. He pushed further.

“I was...going to suggest that we have a feast. In honour of your battle.”

At this, Denella raised an eyebrow. If she didn’t know any better, she’d have sworn that the gruff, burly Klingon was trying to make her feel better. “To toast the great battle of the Numekk nebula? Bloodwine? Toasts? All that?” she asked.

“Something like that.”

“And you’d compose a song for it?”

Klath shot a worried look at the Orion woman, only to see the smile on her face that gave away the fact that she was messing with him. “I could try,” he replied with a hint of amusement of his own.

She sighed and shook her head as she turned back to the Bounty, leaving the view behind. “Thanks for the offer, Klath. But I’m not sure a feast is really necessary. Tell you the truth, I don’t really feel like celebrating.”

The two friends started to walk back to the ship together.

“Why?” Klath asked as they went.

She looked back up into the sky as they walked, a tinge of sadness clear on her face. She thought about what she had been compelled to do. The lives she had ended, the carnage she had caused. And she thought about how many other slave girls might be out there, still needing to be rescued, somehow, by someone.

“Because it doesn’t really feel like I won.”

* * * * *

In the end, there was no feast to toast the battle of the Numekk nebula, but the tired and tormented crew of the Bounty did at least find some moments of peace on Corvin III.

Denella spent as much time as she could with Sarina, reconnecting with her old friend and trying to help her recover.

Sunek spent most of his time on Corvin III receiving a succession of disgusted looks from the various Betazoids that were unfortunate enough to pass nearby to him.

As he had promised, the recovered Jirel took charge of the repairs, with help from Klath and Natasha. Even though he knew Denella would redo them all as soon as she had the time, it felt good to at least pretend to help.

Jirel even managed to sell an appropriate excuse to the Talarians about the delay to their shipment of mining supplies. Though he was less sure how he was going to sell the fact that most of the supplies were now irreparably damaged from the Bounty’s latest firefight.

As the sun set at the end of the day on Corvin III, Sarina sat cross-legged on the bed in the quarters that she had been assigned, opposite her friend. The two friends had spent almost all of their time together since they had been reunited talking, about the past, about happier times, and about all of Denella’s adventures with the Bounty. They barely touched on Sarina’s experiences, but Denella didn’t need to know any of the details.

The important thing was that her friend was already adjusting. She was smiling. It was a smile that brought joy to Denella’s heart.

“I just...can’t believe it’s really you,” Sarina managed as they looked at each other, “I can’t believe you did all this. For me.”

“I just...I guess I always thought I’d see you again, one day. I never wanted to—”

Denella couldn’t ignore the guilt inside any more. She stifled a sob. “I’m sorry,” she managed, as Sarina touched her shoulder with concern for her friend, “You don’t know that I—I was supposed to protect you. Look after you. But when the Syndicate came, I—”

She stifled another sob as she recalled her fight or flight decision back on Orpheus IV.

"I saw them ransacking the homestead, dragging you away, and I should have attacked. I should have fought them!"

"There were too many of them," Sarina whispered, "You couldn't have fought them all."

"I should have tried. You were being carried away, I had my dagger, but—When I was caught, I was trying to run away. I—I tried to run away...!"

The younger Orion woman shifted across the bed and gave her friend a comforting hug, one that Denella accepted.

"But you came back," Sarina whispered.

The words, and the hug, seemed to melt the guilt from Denella's soul. She controlled her tears and managed a faint smile. A moment of silence descended.

"What do I do now?" Sarina asked eventually, as they broke the hug.

Denella looked around the comfortable surroundings of the quarters Sarina had been given, and remembered the same confusion she had experienced after her own impromptu rescue all those years ago. How after so many years with the Syndicate, she had forgotten what it was like to be free.

"Whatever you want to do," she said eventually, her smile returning.

Sarina considered the enormity of this statement for a moment, then nodded. Denella rubbed her arm supportively, then started to get up to leave her friend to rest.

"Stay?" Sarina whispered, "I...don't want to be alone."

Denella wiped away the remaining tears and nodded in understanding. She lay back down on the bed next to her friend, as Sarina settled down to sleep.

* * * * *

The two girls swung their legs off the side of the tree trunk as the sun continued to set. In the distance, they heard the sounds of the other children returning from their adventures in the forest. It was nearly time to head home.

Denella looked over at Sarina, who had now been silently contemplating her answer to the question for so long that Denella was wondering if she'd forgotten about it.

"Sarina," she said in her best stern grown-up voice, the one she'd learned from listening to her mother chide her father when he stayed out too late working on his shuttles, "You know it's rude to ignore someone. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Sarina swung her legs some more, looking up into the darkening sky. "I'm thinking," she insisted, with a hint of irritation, "Don't rush me."

The younger Orion girl chomped on the final bite of her snack, while Denella returned to kicking the rusty red dirt at her feet.

After a long time searching through her brain, Sarina was finally satisfied that she'd found the right answer, and nodded with confident certainty.

"Happy," she said, "When I grow up, I'd like to be happy."

Denella screwed up her face at this. It seemed like a silly answer as far as she was concerned. But then, she was still mostly thinking about what sort of things she would do if she was a famous archae-lol-ologist.

So she accepted Sarina's answer with a friendly nod, as the other children's voices grew ever nearer, and their time on top of the hill together grew shorter.

The two girls sat together and watched the sun set.

* * * * *

In the safety of the quarters on Corvin III, Denella looked down at Sarina, as she lay peacefully sleeping with her head tucked onto her friend's shoulder. And she smiled.

Shifting slightly, careful not to wake the younger woman, she settled back and closed her own eyes.

And, as per her doctor's orders many days ago, Denella finally got some rest.

Chapter End Notes

Inside Baseball/Inside Bounty - Thoughts and musings assembled from reading back over notes from my files. Presented in hope of kindling the reader's interest, but mainly in service of the author's boredom.

This represents the final episode in the 'character establishing' trilogy that followed the first episode (See Notes in 102 & 103 for more). Finally going into more detail about Denella's backstory. This was originally conceived as an episode where one of the Bounty's roster would pretty much carry the episode themselves. Denella was going to set off on her own and leave the Bounty's crew behind. But while she still initially does that, I decided to get the rest of the crew to try and catch her up to flesh out something of a B plot.

This was a tricky episode to write from a tonal perspective. Fundamentally, I want the Bounty to be a light-hearted action/adventure PG-13 sort of a read throughout. Like the Trek TV shows of my youth. Which means that an episode dealing with Orion Slave Girls, human trafficking and the rest of it had to tread a pretty careful line.

Initial outlines and a couple of failed drafts had a much darker plot. In that, Denella was contacted by an entire group of girls at a Syndicate 'slave den' on a planet called Havol. She convinced the crew to mount a rescue, which involved Jirel and Klath posing as traffickers offering Denella and Natasha as slaves to get them on the inside, only for the plan to go wrong and them all ending up being held captive by savage Orions. But the deeper the story went into the mechanics and workings of the Orion slave trade, the darker it got until, frankly, it wasn't any fun to write. So that whole concept was abandoned in favour of Denella basically 'going Rambo' in order to save her childhood friend from the Syndicate.

In the final story, while there are plenty of hints about the darker side of life in the Syndicate, we only ever see Denella (via flashback) and Sarina dancing. Which seemed a lot more comfortable an approach for a series like the Bounty. The rest of that side of Trek lore is, I'm sure, worthy of a deeper dive in an appropriately considered fanfic. But that is beyond this series, and this writer.

The 'Bounty-verse' take on the Orion species is fleshed out in this episode. It was never entirely clear to me from the TV shows what the differences between Orions, the Syndicate and any nominal Orion government really was. At times, the Orion 'Syndicate' seemed to be treated in the same way as the Klingon 'Empire' or the Cardassian 'Union', while at other times the Syndicate was merely a criminal underground nominally headed by Orions (in DS9's "Honor Among Thieves", Chief O'Brien successfully infiltrates the Syndicate without interacting with a single Orion). There are plenty of non-canon explanations for this, but a lot of it is inconsistent.

For the Bounty series, I envisaged at least two distinct strands of Orion culture. The Syndicate, comprising the slave traders, pirates and criminal enterprises. And the Free Traders, a separate group of Orions who live more lawfully and peacefully. Denella and her family lived on a Free Traders world before it was overrun by vastly more powerful Syndicate forces and the Free Traders were either killed or taken into slavery. I've left it uncertain as to whether the 'fall' of Orpheus IV was part of the Syndicate wiping out the Free Traders or whether there is still a section of Free Traders territory, but the suggestion is that there is precious little left even in the best case, given that Denella can't think of anywhere she would want to go during the flashback scene when she first offers to help Jirel to repair and maintain the Bounty.

In doing this, I also wanted to sidestep the events of the Star Trek: Enterprise episode "Bound", which makes a dubious attempt to explain away Orion 'slave girls' by confusingly suggesting that Orion women used pheromones to ultimately control the men that appeared to be enslaving them. Always struck me as a poor attempt by the writers to play around with the 1960s-era 'green skinned babelicious alien sex slave' schlock sci-fi trope scot free. That is very much not a thing in the Bounty-verse.

Like "Where Neither Moth nor Rust Destroys", this episode went through more drafts of the title than the content if my notes are anything to go by. Alternative titles apparently included "Slaves to the Job", "Confessions Of A Slave Girl", "Other People's Conflicts", "What Did Your Last Slave Die Of?" and "Aphrodite is Crying". Why I was so determined to make this particular episode title some sort of wacky pun I have no idea, but I guess I was worried about straying too far into grimdark heavy drama with the plot. Ultimately, the title is a reference to Kermit the Frog's timeless hit song. And a direct allusion to Denella's skin colour and her confronting her past in the hands of the Syndicate.

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