

## Star Trek: Bounty - 105 - "Once Upon a Time in the Beta Quadrant"

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## Star Trek: Bounty - 105 - "Once Upon a Time in the Beta Quadrant"

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

The Bounty's crew respond to a call for assistance from a former colleague of theirs, who needs their help to defend his newly acquired property from a ruthless outlaw on the infamous Planet of Galactic Peace.

# Prologue

## Prologue

It was a faint noise, but it was definitely getting louder.

The dishevelled collection of cloaked nomads paused in the middle of drilling their fourteenth hole of the day and cast their eyes up to the source of the unexpected sound.

At first, all that any of them could see was a trio of faint wispy trails, slowly drifting from the dusty ground into the shimmering heat haze of the mid-afternoon sky. From this distance, they could have been anything. Thin, low-hanging clouds way off on the horizon, a trick of the light under the baking heat of the glaring sun, or even the remnants of a ferocious dust devil drifting back into the ether.

But the rhythmic sound that accompanied the vague sight helped to contextualise the situation for every one of the haggard figures paused next to their drilling rig.

It was the sound of galloping hooves.

The beasts tore across the landscape in close formation, kicking up the three trails of reddish sand in their wake. Despite the arid heat, they were clearly suited to the harsh conditions, and even though the riders on their backs were pushing them hard, they never missed a step.

The nomads knew enough about the local area to see that they had come from the general direction of Arcadia Falls. And whoever the riders were, the speed and purpose of their journey suggested that they clearly had a destination in mind.

As the figures drew nearer, their impromptu audience could take them in more fully.

The three tirelessly galloping animals were all pale blue coloured, with a small horn protruding from their foreheads. Each of the riders were dressed in dusty, sandblasted clothing, and eschewed the loose cloaks of the nomads in favour of stout wide-brimmed hats to keep the blinding sun out of their eyes. And each of them carried a rifle over their shoulders, of a type popular across the whole planet. Dirty metal tubes, each with a cylinder of compressed air attached along the top side, with a crude handle and trigger mechanism at their base.

Despite the weapons, the nomads presently returned to their work. It was clear that the figures weren't slowing down. And if the riders weren't at all interested in them, then the nomads certainly weren't interested in the riders.

After all, the fourteenth hole of the day wasn't going to drill itself.

So the parched nomads returned to their laborious task as the riders rode past. And before long, they were out of sight once again. And the noise had gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

A short time later, the three riders had made their way through a narrow path between steep mountain sides into the next valley along, and their quarry was in sight.

They slowed down as they approached the ramshackle collection of wooden and sheet metal buildings, standing a little incongruously in the middle of the desert, but they still trotted right past a weathered sign warning that they were entering the private property of Goodlife Ranch without paying it any attention.

As they reached the main homestead in the middle of the ranch, they finally brought their steeds to a halt and deftly dismounted as one.

Under their tattered hats, each of them were bald, their worn and pock-marked faces flecked with scars and peppered with dirt and their dry mouths filled with dirty, rotten teeth. Not that there was any shame in any of that. It happened to everyone around these parts.

They slowly paced over to the front of the homestead in a loose formation, lining up a short distance away from the front door. For the time being, none of them felt the need to reach for the rifles on their backs.

Aside from the creaking of a loose window shutter somewhere on the property, there was a moment of silence.

When it became apparent that Goodlife Ranch's occupant wasn't in any hurry to join them, the leader of the trio called out.

"Zesh!"

The sudden cry caused a couple of the horses to snort in surprise. But there was still no sign of any movement from inside the homestead itself.

Silence descended again, save for the rhythmic creaking of the shutter.

The leader glanced at his colleagues on either side of him and smiled an ugly smile. For the time being, they were happy to play this game. "You know why we're here, Zesh," he continued, "Toxis is a patient man. But he's getting tired of waiting. And he wants this ranch."

A creak. Then silence.

“Now, things don’t need to get nasty if you don’t let ‘em, Zesh. Understand? So why not just come out and talk?”

Another creak.

Except, this time, the creaking sound didn’t come from the rogue shutter, but from the front door of the homestead as it slowly opened and the ranch’s occupant reluctantly stepped out into the burning afternoon sun.

The hands of the three men instinctively twitched in the direction of their weapons, but none of them drew them just yet. Instead, they watched as the short, stout figure emerged. He was dressed in a dusty brown tunic and trousers, and wore a hat that had been specially modified for the dimensions of his wider head and bulbous ears.

The figure took a nervous step forwards, trying to control the shaking in his body that betrayed the fear he felt inside as he stared back at the three armed men on his doorstep.

The leader of the trio smiled wider, showing off the full extent of his decaying dentures. He still couldn’t help but find the current owner of Goodlife Ranch amusing to look at. Mainly because, thanks to the somewhat sheltered life he had led, this was the first Ferengi he had ever met.

But he didn’t allow his amusement to sidetrack him for long. As soon as Zesh was fully out in the open, he glanced at his colleagues again and nodded. All three of them drew their rifles in unison and brought them to bear on the quaking Ferengi.

For his part, even though Zesh had mentally prepared himself for exactly this sort of reaction, he couldn’t help but tense up even more.

A Ferengi’s first instinct would usually be to avoid this sort of situation entirely. Gun fights, disruptors and open warfare were things they preferred to keep their distance from. Even the Ferengi Alliance’s impressive fleet of Marauders was primarily designed as a show of strength to make other species think twice about an armed assault, rather than as a war fleet in its own right.

It was a trait that was often misinterpreted by more intolerant observers as simple cowardice. But it was much more of a practical matter. Forever enshrined in Ferengi tradition as Rule of Acquisition number 125.

You can’t make a deal if you’re dead.

And yet, Zesh had gone against those instincts, and now found himself here. With three dirty rifles pointed at him, armed with nothing more than the power of conversation.

“I—I thought you wanted to talk!” he stammered, raising his hands high above his head in the universal sign for surrender.

The leader of the trio shrugged his bony shoulders. “Maybe we’ve got nothing much to say.”

Zesh licked his lips as he felt a trickle of sweat drip down his back. A nervous sweat, and not the result of the baking heat.

“See,” the leader continued, “Toxis has been very clear about this. All he wants is the ranch. And while me and my boys here’d prefer different, he’d rather you didn’t come to any harm.”

He casually gestured to where the Ferengi stood with the end of his rifle.

“Except...looks to me like you’re determined to get in the way.”

Zesh felt a second trickle of sweat join the first. But with every instinct inside him telling him to flee, he forced himself to say what needed to be said. “Yes, well, y—you see, as I told Toxis himself, I—I’m not planning on leaving. And I’m prepared to defend Goodlife Ranch, if that’s what it takes.”

The leader’s ugly grin widened into a chuckle. He indulged in another glance at his colleagues, with an air of mockery to it.

“Is that right? You and what army?”

Despite the gravity of the situation, the Ferengi couldn’t help but roll his eyes. He was sure that his colleagues loved being handed that sort of lead-in line.

Suddenly, all around the group in front of the homestead, five new figures revealed themselves in unison. Two emerged from either side of the homestead, one on top of the roof itself, and two more from inside smaller outbuildings to the left and right of them. Each of them wore wide-brimmed hats of their own, but were dressed in clothing that was notably less dust-blown than everyone else’s. One was even dressed in an incongruous Hawaiian shirt.

And all of them had an air-powered pistol in their hands, pointed directly at the three strangers.

They had them surrounded.

“This army,” one of the newcomers, sporting lines of spots down each side of his face and neck, grinned back at them.

The three interlopers took in this new situation with a slight edge of panic, given how instant the reversal of fortune had been. They could see a hopeless situation when they were in one.

“And just who the hell are you?” the leader managed to ask in the direction of the man with the spots.

“The name’s Jirel,” said the grinning Jirel, “And we’re protecting this place now. As you can see.”

The strangers looked around again at the rest of the Bounty’s motley crew. Slowly, the three of them lowered their own weapons.

Jirel, emboldened by this visible concession, stepped out from his cover on the right side of the homestead and gestured to where the three horses still stood and grazed, entirely oblivious to the scene unfolding next to them. The Trill capped off his entirely unnecessary show of bravado by leaning a little too heavily on his adoptive Colorado accent.

“Now, I suggest you boys saddle up, and mosey on outta here.”

This time, the rest of the Bounty’s crew joined Zesh in the eye roll.

\* \* \* \* \*

Minutes later, the trio of riders were galloping back the way they had come.

As they emerged through the pass in the mountain range into the next valley, the same group of nomads were once again disturbed by their noisy galloping. They looked up from their work again as the riders sped into view. But just as before, the gang of armed bandits only held their attention for long enough to make sure that they weren’t heading for the nomads themselves.

As the figures raced past, the nomads returned their attention to drilling their fifteenth hole of the day in the desert.

After all, gangs of armed bandits were a familiar enough sight around here.

It was just the way things were on Nimbus III.

## Part 1A

### Part One

The Dominion War had resulted in a number of unforeseen side effects across the galaxy. As wars so often did.

One of the most striking side effects had been the entirely unexpected brokering of peaceful relations between the Federation, their Klingon allies and the Romulan Star Empire.

Granted, it may not be destined to be a lasting peace. And it wasn't as if the UFP flag was about to be raised over every settlement on Romulus. But after centuries of hostilities, the great powers of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants had finally put aside their differences the old fashioned way. By reluctantly teaming up to protect their respective interests from the threat of an even greater enemy.

But this current peace wasn't the first time the three powers had attempted to foster some sort of common ground. And their last failed attempt remained visible to this day, festering in the depths of the Tau Dewa sector.

Nimbus III. The Planet of Galactic Peace.

To some, a great big interstellar punchline. To the members of the Federation in particular, their most painful humiliation. A blot on their copybook that was so shameful that the very name of the planet was almost taboo.

And Natasha Kinsen, the former Starfleet officer who now comprised the Bounty's entire medical staff, felt deeply uncomfortable as she stood at the top of the ship's rear loading ramp and surveyed the planet they had landed on. Even though she no longer had any real ties back to the Federation, having left all of that behind, she still felt a palpable pang of guilt inside of her. The same feeling any Starfleet officer got when they were confronted by this place.

In her time at the Academy, she had attended a presentation by a team of hip young anthropologists, who had conclusively ranked Nimbus III in second place on their all-time list of failed projects throughout recorded galactic history.

It had only been kept off top spot by a recent discovery on Doran IV, where an ancient ruler had spent his entire lifetime attempting to construct a tower tall enough to touch the faces of the gods in the sky. Which is how the ancient Doranians had viewed the stars. The full extent of the folly of King Kr'aakula'a became clear when you found out that the average Doranian lived for roughly 500 Earth years, and that frequent tremors around the site of his tower, caused by an active fault line, meant that archaeologists believed the structure itself had never exceeded a height of 150 feet.

Still, the anthropologists had concluded that it had been a very close run fight for top spot. Mainly because Nimbus III wasn't just the Federation's failure. Or the Klingons, or the Romulans. It was just about everyone's failure.

Since the planet's infrastructure had first collapsed in the latter part of the 23rd century, there had been countless attempts made to build it back up. Some by one or more of the original powers, others by various third parties, hardy investors or risk-taking speculators. After all, even if Nimbus III wasn't the most hospitable, or resource-rich planet, it was still a habitable world in a strategically favourable position between three of the galaxy's big players.

But, almost as if the planet itself was allergic to even the slightest modicum of success, every single one of those attempts had failed. And after every failure, whichever government, corporation or venture capitalist that had arrived with grand plans for Nimbus III had quickly and quietly moved on, leaving the planet and its permanent residents to rot all over again.

Each time, all that was left behind was a disparate smattering of colonists, bandits and anyone unfortunate enough not to be on the last shuttle out of Paradise City. And those that were left behind had no choice but to rebuild all over again however they could, with whatever was available.

Which was never very much. Because there really wasn't that much on Nimbus III to begin with.

Not that any of that made Natasha feel any less guilty. Even though she wasn't born when the colony was first established, and had never previously been within five sectors of the place, all of this still felt like partly her fault. That was Starfleet guilt for you.

"Let me give you a hand with that."

The voice shocked her out of her reverie. She looked back down the ramp to see Zesh approaching her, smiling and gesturing to the crate at her feet.

After they had seen off the trio of armed goons that had turned up to harass the Ferengi, they had returned to the orbiting Bounty and brought the Ju'day-type raider down for a proper landing next to Goodlife Ranch. All the easier to unpack the supplies and spare parts that Zesh had requested when he had first contacted them some days ago.

"Thanks," Natasha offered back, as she and Zesh stood either side of the crate and lifted it up.

She had found herself intrigued by Zesh as soon as Jirel had explained that he was a former crewmate from long before she had joined them. And having now met him, it hadn't taken her long to see that, as seemed in keeping with the Bounty's current crew, he was far from a typical example of his species.

He was still clearly motivated by latinum and business opportunities, but there was a friendliness, a kindness and even a generosity to his

personality that seemed out of place. Best of all, it had now been several hours since they had first met, and unlike just about every other Ferengi she had run into on her travels, he still hadn't made a single tedious comment about his preference for his women not to wear clothes. Which made him a-ok in her book.

"So," he offered by way of conversation as they descended out of the shade of the Bounty's hull and back into the energy-sapping heat, "How are you finding Prosperity County?"

Prosperity County, Natasha had quickly learned, was the region of the planet where Goodlife Ranch was located. What she hadn't learned was what had brought Zesh here in the first place.

"Yeah, it's great," she managed with a smile topped with a ladle of sarcasm, "Thinking of getting my own place here actually. What are the real estate prices like?"

"You know," Zesh replied with a glint in his eye, "You'd be surprised..."

He couldn't help but let out an impromptu cackle of amusement as he saw her confused reaction to this latest enigmatic comment about the hidden value of this particular part of Nimbus III.

"Ah, you're just like the rest of Jirel's crew, I'm afraid. Never able to see the true value of something. That's why I had to leave them in the end, you know."

"It was?"

"Yes," Zesh nodded, as he glanced across the ranch to where the others were standing, "Trust me, your life with that crew will be interesting, filled with all sorts of misfortunes and misadventures. But it will never be profitable."

Natasha considered this for a moment. She had only been onboard the Bounty for a few months, since they had rescued her from her unintended exile following her escape from the crippled USS Navajo and she had resigned her Starfleet commission. But already she knew enough about her new colleagues to see the truth in Zesh's words.

"Who says I need my life to be profitable?" she opted to counter with.

Zesh looked back at her from across the crate and cackled again. "Because, enlightened hew-mon or not, out here, that's what we all need."

Natasha went to counter this latest point, but she couldn't find the words to. Though she did silently wonder whether she should be taking financial advice from the Ferengi that felt his own fortune lay in Goodlife Ranch.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just so we're all on the same page, the guy's gone nuts, right?"

Sunek, the Bounty's curiously emotional Vulcan pilot, stood next to Jirel as the Trill checked over the crate that he had unloaded from the ship, fanning himself with his hat in an ineffectual attempt to deal with the oppressive heat.

"Cos," Sunek added as he dropped the hat back onto his unkempt mop of hair, "And this is my considered, professional opinion: Does this place ever suck?"

Jirel stifled a smile. Because part of him strongly disagreed with his pilot on that point. In fact, he had jumped at the chance to drop what they had been doing and answer Zesh's call for three very strong reasons.

One, Zesh was an old crewmate. And Jirel's unofficial rule was that when a former crewmate needed help, they always answered the call.

Two, Zesh's message had come with the promise of a big payday. And while Jirel didn't like to admit it, given how much it leaned on the stereotype, he knew that Zesh had never steered them wrong before when it came to latinum.

And three, Jirel had heard plenty of stories about Nimbus III. Especially Prosperity County. And having been brought up by his adopted father, the now-Admiral Bryce Jenner of Starfleet, on a diet of Old West nostalgia, he'd always secretly wanted to visit and see it for himself.

It had turned out to be dry, dusty, miserably hot, and filled with plenty of grizzled gun-toting bandits on horseback. It was everything he'd dreamed it would be.

Though he wasn't so wrapped up in himself to see that this wasn't an opinion that the rest of the crew shared.

"I mean," Sunek continued to grumble, "I grew up in the middle of Vulcan's biggest desert, and even I'm struggling. Not as much as some of us, admittedly..."

He nodded over to the other side of Jirel, where two remarkably frizzy-haired individuals stood checking over their own crates. Neither Denella, the ship's Orion engineer, nor Klath, the Bounty's disgraced Klingon weapons chief, seemed to appreciate the sudden attention being drawn to the impact that the arid air of Nimbus III was having on their respective hairstyles.

"Shut up, Sunek," Denella offered mirthlessly.

Klath backed her up with an unamused growl.

Jirel just shook his head in amusement. Nobody had been brave enough to bring that up so far, but trust the former V'tosh ka'tur member to go straight for it.

Before the Vulcan could tug on that thread any further, though, Natasha and Zesh reached the group and dropped their crate onto the dusty ground with a pair of tired grunts.

"Ugh, this heat," Natasha managed, "I've had three sonic showers since we got here, and I still feel like I absolutely stink."

Nobody had been brave enough to bring that up either.

Seeing through the uncomfortable silence that had descended, Natasha subtly leaned down and sniffed her armpit, before quietly taking an embarrassed step back away from the group.

"Seriously though, Zesh," Jirel nodded at the Ferengi, "We don't get it."

He gestured around at the ranch and the surrounding desert, as Zesh glanced back over at Natasha with a knowing look. "What did I tell you? Never seeing the latinum in the situation."

The Trill took a look around Goodlife Ranch again as Zesh patted his damp brow with a small pocket square he produced with a flourish.

"I definitely don't see much latinum in this situation," he shrugged, "I see a lot of sand?"

The Ferengi cackled good-naturedly as Denella gave up on her latest attempt to tie back her runaway hair situation with a frustrated sigh. "Come on, Zesh," she grimaced, "What's the deal? Why did you call us all the way out here?"

"Yeah," Sunek chimed in, "You got some big magic machine lying around here somewhere that turns gigantic piles of garbage into priceless jewels? Cos if that's a real thing, you're gonna be the richest guy in the four quadrants."

"Perhaps it's time for the full tour," Zesh smiled as he returned the pocket square to his trousers and began to gesture around with the time-honoured manner of a showman, "Everything you can see here, the ranch, the horses, the land, all of it is mine. Thanks to a particularly fine performance that won me the annual Tongo tournament at the Ferengi outpost on Carrion II."

"Huh," Natasha mused as she tried to ignore the fresh all-over body sweat that was setting in, "What was second prize? Two ranches?"

Jirel snorted. Zesh offered another good-natured cackle.

"If only. Because this place has fetched me a princely sum of latinum indeed. Or at least it will, in a few days, when my buyer gets here. A Markalian by the name of Choth. And there'll be a very generous cut for all of you as well."

"Provided we keep the natives off your back?" Denella offered.

Zesh looked slightly less happy for being reminded about the unwelcome trio of strangers that the Bounty's crew had already helped him with, one of the reasons he had been so desperate for their help. "Yes, well, there have been a few...issues with the locals. They work for a man called Toxis. His gang took over the nearest town shortly before I arrived, and he seems to have had his sights set on this place ever since."

"Outlaws," Jirel muttered with a slightly dopey grin, "Cool."

"That's not how I'd describe them."

"We have already dealt with those individuals," Klath grunted as he finished tying back his own nightmare hairdo.

"They'll be back," Zesh replied unhappily, "You can be sure of that."

Jirel stepped forwards and gently patted his old colleague on the shoulder, electing to eschew his usual practised space adventurer pose in favour of one more suited to a space cowboy. "And that's why you called in the finest gunslingers in the quadrant, right?"

"Gunslingers'?" Klath muttered in confusion.

"Ugh, don't get him started again," Natasha sighed, the only one of the group who was reluctantly picking up on the Trill's many references, "Besides, that doesn't explain why this place is so valuable."

The twinkle returned to Zesh's eyes as he gestured towards a particularly unassuming wooden hut nearby. "Follow me..."

The Ferengi trotted over to the hut with surprising haste given the stifling heat, and the Bounty's crew gamely followed.

"Seriously," Sunek offered as they walked, "If it's a magic jewel-making machine, I called that five minutes ago. You all heard me, right?"

"Not quite," Zesh replied, as he led them into the dingy hut, "But perhaps something even more valuable than that. For the people of Nimbus III, at least."

Inside the dimly lit interior of the hut, the confused crew of the Bounty could make out a squat rectangular object in the middle of the room, covered by a dusty sheet.

"Behold," Zesh cackled at the unassuming sight as he grabbed the corner of the sheet, "The true value of Goodlife Ranch!"

He pulled off the covering with a flourish, revealing a large metal box, with piping running out of one side, into the ground, and a shattered and darkened control panel on the other side.

“Wow,” Sunek said with a sarcastic sigh, “There’s disappointment on my disappointment.”

“What is it?” Klath added, on behalf of the entire group.

Zesh leaned over and lifted up a panel on the side of the box, revealing something that was more easy to identify. And one that, for Natasha at least, suddenly revealed the true value of Goodlife Ranch.

A tap.

“Holy crap,” she blurted out, “You’re saying this thing’s a—”

“It will be when it’s repaired,” Zesh chipped in with a glance at Denella, “Thanks to some handiwork from the greatest engineer in the galaxy.”

“Yeah, yeah, butter me up later,” the Orion woman griped, “What exactly am I fixing?”

“It’s a well,” Natasha whispered.

“It’s a-well what—?”

“Shut up, Sunek.”

Zesh chuckled greedily and patted the top of the broken unit. “What you see here, my friends,” he confirmed for anyone still not on the same page, “Is the only stable source of fresh water in all of Prosperity County. Maybe even on the whole planet.”

His audience took this in for a moment. It seemed as though Sunek had called it right. Zesh did have a magic machine that was going to make them rich, after all.

## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

The crystal clear liquid slowly but surely filled the dirty glass right up to the rim, and then cascaded haphazardly over the top.

Only an annoyed grunt from the intended recipient of the glass caused the distracted man pouring the drink to realise the mess he was making.

The grunt was enough to get the bottle of Nimbosian spirit pulled hurriedly away from the glass, which was then apologetically slid over to the burly Nimbosian miner that had ordered it. Despite the state of the presentation, the miner had few qualms in grabbing the glass with a filthy hand and throwing the burning alcohol back in one gulp, before sliding the glass back for a refill with a slightly less annoyed grunt.

But he found that he would have to wait, because Bri'tor, the owner of the Bar of Plenty, was distracted once again.

His attention, as it often was these days, was entirely on a specific patron at his long-suffering establishment, who was sitting on the other side of the dirty saloon that served as the main watering hole in Arcadia Falls.

Like every major settlement on Nimbus III, Arcadia Falls was ironically named.

It shouldn't have been like that. When the colony was still in the design phase, the optimism of the planning committee had been contagious, and every corner of the planet was given a name befitting the hope that Nimbus III was going to provide the rest of the galaxy.

And then the project failed. And every one of those names, from Arcadia Falls to Paradise City to the peak of Mount Aspiration, simply served as a never-ending list of cruel jokes piled on top of a planet overloaded with cruel jokes.

There was nothing stopping the remaining residents of Arcadia Falls from changing the town's name if they wanted to. But there didn't seem to be much point. Besides, they usually had more pressing issues to deal with. Especially once the gangs had started to roll into town.

Bri'tor had lived in Arcadia Falls for several years now. He had seen plenty of gangs arrive, take control, terrorise the locals and then move on. He thought he and his family had learned how to deal with them by now, and make the best of things.

But that had been before Toxis had arrived. After that, everything had changed around here. Especially for Bri'tor.

And so, whenever Toxis was in the Bar of Plenty. He kept quiet. And he kept a close watch.

But even this simple act didn't go unnoticed. When you got on the wrong side of as many people as Toxis had, you developed a sixth sense for when you were being watched. Even when his back was turned, he could feel a slight prickling sensation on the back of his neck as his adversary's eyes bore into his skin.

"Bartender," Toxis calmly grunted, not bothering to look around, "I've told you before, I don't like it when folks stare at me."

The bar fell silent. Not expecting that response from a man with his back turned, Bri'tor nearly dropped the bottle he was holding out of shock.

"Don't make me do to you what I did to that brother of yours..."

The atmosphere seemed to tense up even more with that knowing comment. Suitably chastened, the meek Nimbosian, whatever courage he had once had long since extinguished, turned his attention back to the miner's refill.

Satisfied that he had dealt with that irritation for the time being, and with the flow of conversation picking up again around the room, Toxis turned his attention back to the three men standing in front of him. "Now, Breshk, let's get back to business," he continued, his calm demeanour tainted with a clear undertone of menace.

Toxis sat at a wooden table to one side of the Bar of Plenty, which featured a few similar tables scattered around and Bri'tor's simple bar area which ran down the rear of the room, complete with shelves that were sparsely stacked with whatever Nimbosian liquor was available. His long thin legs were propped up on top of the table, and as Breshk looked down at him, his thin, gaunt face was partially obscured by the brim of his hat.

Standing a short distance away, keeping a watchful eye on proceedings, was Rutox. A burly Nimbosian in dark clothing who served as Toxis's second in command. Breshk had already noted that Rutox's right hand hung by his side, near the visible pistol at his waist.

"So," Toxis continued, "We're gonna keep things simple. Just where the hell is my ranch?"

Breshk licked his dry lips. Either side of him, his two cohorts watched on with clear concern, all three of them having been dreading this moment since they had been forced to beat a hasty retreat back from Goodlife Ranch.

Toxis looked up at the three men, gently lifting the brim of his hat up to take in their silence. Aside from the hushed conversations elsewhere in the room, the only sound was a slight squelching noise as he idly chewed on a mouthful of his favourite blend of Nimbosian tobacco.

With no answer forthcoming from the nervous men, Toxis shrugged and continued. "Ok, Breshk, let me tell you the way I see it: I sent you and your two friends here to head out and make sure I got what I wanted. Nice and simple. Nice and easy. But, instead, you all came riding right back here, and as far as I can tell, Zesh is still living on my ranch."

His deep voice rose with a hint of irritation at the end. He turned his head to one side and casually spat a chunk of tobacco down onto the dusty ground, causing the trio in front of him to wince involuntarily.

“Which means that you’ve let me down. And I don’t like men that do that. How many times have you let me down now, Breshk?”

Breshk opened his mouth instinctively to answer the question, before pausing and changing his line of defence. “See,” he managed, “It wasn’t our fault, Toxis. There was a...complication.”

“Is that right?” Toxis drawled back at them, “And what complication might that have been?”

“O—Off-worlders!”

At this, Toxis’s cheek twitched, just a fraction. Behind him, Rutox took half a step forward, no longer trying to hide where his attention was.

“Zesh has got off-worlders,” Breshk continued, with a fraction more confidence, “At the ranch!”

Toxis dropped his feet off the table and leaned forwards, glaring intently at each of the men in turn for any sign that they were spinning him a tall tale. “Off-worlders?” he muttered slowly and thoughtfully, “That so?”

The two men standing either side of Breshk nodded quickly, beads of sweat visible on their foreheads, only partly down to the humid atmosphere inside the bar.

Toxis considered this information in silence for a moment, chewing the remains of his tobacco thoughtfully as he mulled this information over. Just as Breshk felt a bead of sweat roll down his quivering forehead, Toxis’s face twitched again, the beginnings of a rare smile creeping onto his face across his features.

“Well now,” he said, “Why didn’t you say so?”

The smile grew and grew, accompanied by a slightly chuckle. Breshk and his cohorts relaxed slightly, offering slightly cautious smiles of their own.

“Hear that, Rutox?” Toxis called back to his right hand man, “You know what they say. Where there’s off-worlders, there’s weapons. There’s supplies. Hell, there might even be a whole goddamn starship.”

“That’s what they say,” Rutox grunted in his deep baritone voice.

Toxis nodded and leaned back in his seat once again, slamming the dusty boots on his feet back up onto the table top.

“Well then,” he continued to chuckle at the increasingly relieved men in front of him, “Thank you for bringing me that very interesting information. Seems like we might be in line for a bit more than a ranch. Might be in line to take the whole miserable planet.”

His smile spread wider. A relieved Breshk allowed himself a smile of his own.

The sound of the gunshot stopped every conversation in the bar in its tracks all over again. The bang of the pellet leaving the barrel of the pistol in Rutox’s hand was accompanied by the familiar whooshing sound of the compressed air that powered the weapon being discharged.

At the bar, a horrified Bri’tor looked back over in time to see the shocked look on Breshk’s face as he slumped lifelessly to the floor.

The two men either side of where Breshk had been standing watched on in silent horror. Rutox calmly reloaded his weapon and placed it back in his holster. Toxis, equally calmly, stood up from the table and looked down at the dead man on the floor. All of his previous good humour having disappeared.

“Twice,” he spat out, “That was twice you’d let me down.”

Leaving the other two men, and several other patrons in the Bar of Plenty, quaking in their wake, Toxis and Rutox made for the exit. As he reached the door, Toxis felt a familiar irritating tingle on the back of his neck.

“I told you, bartender,” he added, without looking back, “Don’t stare at me.”

As Toxis disappeared outside, Bri’tor quickly returned his attention to the dead man on the floor of his saloon. Sadly lamenting the latest bloodshed that Arcadia Falls had seen.

And fearing that it wouldn’t be the last.

## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

The frustrated cry of anger was clearly audible through the thin walls of the hut.

Denella paused in the middle of her initial examination of Goodlife Ranch's water pump and pricked her ears up in guarded curiosity. She hadn't realised that anyone else was awake yet.

The Bounty's crew had turned in for the night inside the cooler atmosphere of the ship itself, with Zesh eagerly accepting the offer of the ship's spare cabin after spending too many nights suffering in the stifling confines of the ranch itself. And after a chilled night's sleep, Denella had specifically woken early to get started assessing the repairs that Zesh needed doing. Partly to avoid doing too much work in the worst of the Nimbosian heat. And partly because she just really loved repairing things.

Although she was starting to reassess the latter of those reasons after three hours spent assessing the state of this particular repair. Very little about the improvised Nimbosian design in front of her made any sense.

And besides, she was an engineer. Not a plumber.

She was just about losing her patience when she had heard the angry cry from outside. Wiping her dirty hands on her weather-beaten overalls, she peered outside the door of the hut at the rest of the ranch, basking in the morning sun. It didn't take long to locate the source of the noise, though what she saw just provoked further questions.

She stepped out into the heat and walked over to the small porch area to the side of the main homestead, staring at the curious sight in front of her as it rocked back and forth on a creaking wooden chair.

"Sunek?" she managed, "What the hell are you doing?"

The Vulcan was in the middle of running a small knife down a piece of wood in his hands. All around him were haphazard piles of shavings, along with various other wooden bits in varying states of disrepair.

It didn't escape Denella's attention that there were also a succession of deep gouges in the wooden handrail next to where Sunek was sitting. From their shape and size, Denella quickly surmised that they had been made very recently by the blade of the knife in Sunek's hand. The evidence of the ferocity involved in some of the gouges didn't exactly settle her growing concerns.

Sunek, for his part, didn't look up from his work, as he rocked back and forth in the chair and continued to shave off thin slices of the light brown wood, his face a picture of concentration underneath his hat. "Some dumb thing Jirel told me about after dinner last night when he wouldn't shut up about all that 'Old Earth' crap," he explained as he worked, "It's called 'whittling'."

He stuck out his tongue in a show of concentration, underlining how seriously he was taking the task at hand.

"You just sorta carve out what you want in the wood. Stupid hobby, if you ask me."

Denella watched the Vulcan work. There was something undeniably amusing about the scene, but after a moment her eyes strayed back to the gouges on the handrail. She wasn't used to her friend getting that angry. Still, she surmised, remembering her own irritation with the water pump, maybe it's just the heat getting to us.

Eventually, Sunek growled again and tossed the piece of wood he'd been working on onto the deck of the porch below, alongside all the others. "It's supposed to be a depiction of the ancient Vulcan gods of death and war fighting on their armoured sehlat's at the gates of Sha Ka Ree. Saw a piece of art about that when I was a kid, dated back to before Surak's Time of Awakening. It was pretty cool."

"And what's it ended up being?" Denella asked.

Sunek reached down and retrieved his unfinished masterpiece from the ground, idly turning it over in his hands before shrugging in conclusion.

"Piece of wood."

Denella sighed and leaned back on the freshly damaged handrail. "Do you ever think that maybe the reason you never stick with a hobby for very long is that you set your sights too high?"

"How do you mean?" Sunek asked, scrunching his face up in confusion,

"Well, why not start with something a bit easier? Why not try whittling a...stick?"

Sunek looked at her with disgust. As if she'd just asked him to sculpt something obscene. More disgusted than that, in fact, given that whittling mild erotica was probably next on his schedule. "What would be the point of that?"

She shook her head, accepting that this was going to end up being the latest in a long line of pastimes that Sunek had dived into with both feet and then immediately abandoned. Whittling could join Anbo-juutsu, Risian cuisine and the bass guitar he had once impulsively replicated for himself on the pile of forgotten hobbies.

Still, the angry undertone of the Vulcan's latest creative dismissal remained a concern.

“Sunek, are you ok?”

The Vulcan snapped a look at her a little more quickly than he’d wanted to, followed by a guilty glance in the direction of the gouges on the handrail.

In truth, the sudden flash of rage had taken him by surprise. He prided himself on his laid back approach to pretty much every aspect of life, but after his latest failed attempt to recreate a priceless piece of prehistoric Vulcan art in Nimbosian hardwood, he had experienced a flare of anger so great that it had only been satisfied by him repeatedly plunging the knife into the softer wood of the rail.

And he knew, deep down, that wasn’t the first such incident that had happened recently.

He had thrown a padd across his cabin with enough force to smash the screen, after the latest romance novel he had been sent via the interstellar subscription service he had been talked into signing up for had arrived corrupted and unreadable. And he had even wrenched one of the adjusting levers on his pilot’s chair clean from the housing after wasting twenty minutes trying to get it back the way he liked it, after Klath had adjusted the seat to his own larger dimensions.

Ordinarily, he’d have just dismissed it all as a bit of pent-up frustration. Nothing a blowout weekend on Risa wouldn’t cure.

But the residual dispassionate side of his Vulcan intellect couldn’t help but recall his recent run-in with some of his former V’tosh ka’tur colleagues. And the series of forced mind melds he had received from a particularly crazed Vulcan called Sokar. The ones that had caused him to nearly betray his friends, and assist Sokar in a revenge attack on Vulcan itself.

Although he was sure he was back to normal after that, he also recalled what he had seen since then when he had tried to pick up an old childhood meditation technique. The sailing ship on the Voroth Sea. And the storm that sat on the horizon.

Still, Sunek didn’t want to get into any of that right now. That was all way too serious. And now that the handrail had taken one for the team, he felt suitably relaxed again. So he met Denella’s concerned gaze with a typically Sunek-ian grin.

“I’m fine,” he replied, standing up and tossing the wood back down to the ground, “Whittling’s dumb, is all.”

He adjusted his hat, pocketed the knife, and walked back to the front door of the homestead whistling a deliberately jaunty tune.

Denella followed him. Her concerns very much not put to rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Please say it.”

Jirel looked at Klath from across the wooden table that dominated the main living area on the ground floor of Goodlife Ranch’s main homestead.

The actual structure, like the other buildings on the ranch, was made of large wooden beams supporting thin metal sheets. Inside, while there were computer controls dotted about, the furniture was archaic, tired and worn. It was as if you had stepped through a temporal anomaly into the past.

And Jirel was loving it.

On the other side of the table, the Klingon folded his arms defiantly, as the front door opened and Natasha and Zesh entered from outside.

“I am not going to say it,” Klath growled at the Trill.

“Say what?” Natasha asked.

Jirel nodded his head in Klath’s direction and smiled widely. “I’m trying - really, really trying - to get Klath to give me a great big old ‘yee haw’,” he explained excitedly, before turning back to the still impassive Klingon, “C’mon. Please? I’ll give you ten slips of latinum.”

The Klingon’s glower deepened, but Jirel persisted.

“Tell you what, I’ll also accept a ‘Howdy, partner’.”

“I’m almost scared to ask this,” Natasha sighed patiently, “But you are aware that this is all real, right? This isn’t a holosuite program, or a quirky theme park, or some sort of fever dream. This is a very, very real and very, very scary planet.”

“Um, it’s a very, very cool planet,” Jirel countered, gesturing to his hat, “With cowboy hats.”

“And guns. And bandits. And god knows what else.”

“Besides,” Zesh chimed in from her side, “You’re here to do a job, Jirel. And we need a plan. My buyer won’t be here for another two days, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got a plan,” he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, keeping his attention on Natasha’s unimpressed face, “Listen, doc, don’t let that Starfleet guilt of yours ruin everyone else’s fun while we’re down here, ok?”

Natasha's face immediately morphed into a glower as deep as anything that Klath had been able to produce. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean. Everyone knows how much you lot hate to be reminded about this place. Tends to be a bit of an obsession with you guys. The grim little hellhole you helped to create. How could the perfect Federation mess up so badly—?"

"Ok, firstly, I was kinda hoping you'd noticed, but I left Starfleet behind a while ago. And secondly, I might be unhappy about being here. But not because of some collective guilty conscience. Because of basic decency. I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea of us all profiting off of other people's misery!"

"My buyer assures me that he intends to sell the water back to the Nimbosians for a fair price," Zesh offered, not exactly making the strongest pitch for humanitarian of the year, "Minus overheads."

Jirel's focus remained on Natasha. The human woman stared back across the table, allowing herself to be consumed by the growing unease that had been kindled ever stronger since Zesh had revealed Goodlife Ranch's secret treasure. "I've told you before, you need to stop pretending like you're still in that old uniform of yours," the Trill fired off with a knowing grin, "Cos if you don't, then you're not gonna last long in this job."

"And you need to stop pretending that you're too cool to care about other people, cos I know by now that's not true," she countered, before gesturing to his cowboy getup, "And you really need to stop pretending this is a costume party. Cos it isn't. It's the Planet of Galactic Peace. The most dangerous planet in the quadrant."

"I'm not pretending this is a—"

"You're wearing spurs, Jirel," she said, gesturing down at the metal spikes sticking out the back of his dusty boots, "You're actually wearing spurs."

There was an awkward pause from the Trill, as he looked down at his footwear and back up again.

"They, um, they came with the boots—"

"He replicated them this morning," Klath boomed out from his side of the table.

"Ok, whose side are you on?"

Zesh sighed deeply and flopped down in the chair next to Klath, gesturing to the bickering duo as he did so. "You know, Jirel, all this is no way to run a business operation."

The Ferengi's pointed comment was enough to distract the Trill and the human from each other, as they whirled around to Zesh in unison.

"Um, excuse me?" Natasha snapped.

"Rule of Acquisition number 229, my dear. Latinum lasts longer than lust."

That comment was enough to elicit a scoff from Natasha, and a look of confused innocence from Jirel. Both of which, Klath wordlessly thought to himself, seemed designed to overcompensate for something or other.

"Well, that's definitely not what's happening here," Natasha fired back.

"Yeah," Jirel nodded defiantly, "Plus, Rule of Acquisition number 581: You should always...y'know. Shut up."

"Good one."

"Hey, I'm defending your honour here!"

"I don't need my honour defended by a man who's dressed up like a holodeck malfunction! Besides, this isn't about—This is about us doing the right thing down here!"

"Which we definitely are doing."

"How can you say that—!"

"Guys!"

The unexpected voice of Denella caused the bickering duo to shut up, to the appreciation of their small, unhappy audience around the table. They all turned to see the Orion engineer and Sunek standing in the doorway, surveying the scene with a trace of amusement.

"Hate to break up this thrilling discussion, but...what's this plan of yours?"

Jirel considered brushing off that comment and getting back to his bickering. But he could feel every set of eyes in the humid homestead on him. And he decided it probably wasn't the time.

"Fine," he conceded, "The plan. Let's get moving."

The Trill walked over to the door, making a distinctive clinking sound with every step that he took. The sound that had seemed so incredibly cool to him when he had walked down the Bounty's loading ramp this morning suddenly making him feel distinctly self-conscious.

As he walked past Denella and Sunek and out into the harsh sunlight, the Vulcan glanced down and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“What the hell have you got on your feet?”

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

A few moments later, after Jirel and his footwear had clinked their way out in front of the homestead, he finished laying down the bones of his plan to the rest of the residents of Goodlife Ranch.

The looks on the faces of the assembled throng suggested that they weren't overly impressed with what had been said.

"Is that really your best idea?" Zesh griped.

"Again," Natasha chimed in, "Really important that you clarify to me, a medical professional, that you know this isn't a holosuite program."

Despite the largely predictable reactions, Jirel fronted up in defence of his plan. "Trust me. This makes total sense. If this guy Toxis is causing all our problems, then me and Klath'll just head into town and, y'know, talk it out. Reason with him. Smooth this whole situation out. For long enough for Zesh to make his sale, at least."

"If all you're gonna do is talk it out," Denella asked with a pointed look, "Why do you need Klath?"

"In case we don't completely talk it out," Jirel offered with a shrug, "And while we're doing that, the rest of you can help Denella fix the water pump for when the buyer gets here."

"Oh," Sunek managed, his sarcasm levels approaching critical mass, "Great."

"Plus, you can keep an eye on the ranch. All that make sense?"

Everyone immediately began to call out at once. Jirel sighed and held his hand up. "Bad choice of words. All that clear to everyone?"

This time there was a more reluctant chorus of nodded responses.

"Toxis isn't exactly the reasonable type, you know," Zesh cautioned, "I've tried the diplomatic approach myself."

"Yeah, but he's never met Klath. He can be very persuasive."

The burly Klingon mustered a nod at this.

"So, trust me," the Trill added, "Everything's gonna be fine."

"And what makes you so sure of that?" Zesh griped.

Jirel grinned and took the opportunity to strike the newest space cowboy pose in his arsenal, the one he'd been practising in his cabin earlier in the morning. "Because," he drawled, "We're the good guys."

Before Natasha could contest that particular point any further, Klath held up the stubby Nimbosian pistol he had been furnished with. "I still have concerns about these weapons."

"Not enough sharp edges?" Sunek quipped.

"They are far too crude. The sights appear to be crooked, the barrels are of poor construction, and the delivery method of the projectile is inefficient. I believe we should use some weapons from the Bounty if we are going to—"

"Ah, ah, ah," Zesh tutted, wagging his finger at the burly Klingon, "No energy weapons on Nimbus III. It's a universal law. One that even the Ferengi Alliance has never been stupid enough to break. And we're the idiots who sold the Pakleds their first warp drive."

Natasha found herself warming to Zesh a little more. It was indeed a rule for anyone dealing in or around Nimbus III. Given how much damage and destruction was caused on the planet with the simple projectile weapons already available to the Nimbosian residents, giving them access to anything more powerful would be devastating.

To some extent, it was a self-regulating rule. Occasionally the odd phaser or disruptor might find its way here through the black market, but with no reasonable means of keeping the power cells charged, energy weapons were not only prohibited, they were also largely useless. Still, there was no point in risking breaking that particular rule. So, even though there were several energy weapons on the Bounty, that was where they had all agreed they would stay. Regardless of Klath's withering assessment of the local alternative.

"So, it's settled," Jirel nodded in support of Zesh's point, "We're gonna do this like proper cowboys."

He pulled his own pistol from its holster and went to spin it round his finger. Only for it to immediately fall from his hand on the sandy ground below.

"Well," Sunek said, "I'm feeling a lot safer already."

Jirel sheepishly retrieved his gun, before nodding at Klath. "Let's get moving—"

"I'm gonna come too."

The Trill and the Klingon stopped and turned back to where Natasha had stepped towards them.

“Come on,” Jirel tutted, “We’ve got a job to do. We don’t need you spreading your Starfleet guilt all around town.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I just want to help. Besides, you’re about to head into a lawless town of renegades and bandits dressed like that. You’re gonna need the backup.”

Jirel glanced down at his outfit. Along with the spurs, he had also spent the morning replicating a cotton shirt complete with deep red piping and an embroidered pattern across the front, and a weathered leather belt with a holster for his Nimbosian pistol, topped off with a thick silver buckle.

He felt a slight tinge of embarrassment, but that was overridden by a greater belief in how awesome it all was. So he fronted it out.

“You wish you looked this good,” he fired back with a grin, “But fine. If you wanna come, you can come. Just promise me you’re not gonna guilt trip us all the way there and back, ok? Cos that’s gonna get really boring.”

Before she was able to respond, Jirel and Klath turned and continued on their way. Though Klath stopped suddenly when he realised Jirel was heading in a completely different direction.

“Where are you going?” he called out at the Trill, “If we are going into the town, then the transporter is this way.”

Jirel spun around on his heels, his grin wider than ever before. “Heh. We’re not gonna need the transporter today, buddy.”

“Then how do you intend to—?”

The Klingon stopped in the middle of his question, as Jirel excitedly gestured to something on the far side of the ranch.

Klath looked over and saw what he was referring to. A gaggle of blue-tinged animals standing together in an enclosure, gently grazing on the meagre patches of scrub at their feet.

The Klingon immediately turned back to the beaming Jirel.

“You cannot be serious.”

\* \* \* \* \*

From a distance, Goodlife Ranch was the picture of tranquillity. Nestled in a dusty valley between two gently rolling mountain ranges, with a natural pass flowing into and out of it, the whole area was mostly cut off from the harsh winds that tended to be whipped up across the deserts of Prosperity County.

And while the dust bowl of a valley did suffer under the blazing Nimbosian sun, the high mountains did at least offer some possibility of a touch of shade either side of high noon.

As Prosperity County went, it was one of the better places to live. Even if that wasn’t exactly saying much.

Right now, from high up on the mountainside, even the activity within the ranch itself seemed sedate and tranquil through the binoculars that Rutox held up to his eyes.

He and several other members of Toxis’s gang that had been sent to do what Breshk had failed to do had concealed themselves behind an outcrop of rocks, with their Nimbosian horses tied up some distance away, equally out of sight.

Rutox blinked away the sand that was blown into his face by a sudden gust of dry wind and kept his focus on the ranch.

It hadn’t taken long to establish that Breshk and his cohorts had been telling the truth. The signs of the presence of off-worlders were there. Specifically, the squat form of the Ju’day-type raider parked in the valley next to the ranch. That was more than enough to confirm that Zesh was definitely not the only off-worlder in Goodlife Ranch right now.

The good news continued moments later, when Rutox spied the sight of several figures preparing to make their way out of the ranch on horseback. And if they were leaving, that would leave a significantly smaller number at the ranch itself.

“Huh,” Rutox grunted to himself with a satisfied smile.

He dropped the binoculars away from his face and turned back to the other men, gesturing at the one that was carrying a burly old-fashioned communicator on his belt.

“Get to it,” he snapped, “Tell Toxis that he’s got some company heading his way.”

He glanced back into the valley and smiled even more darkly.

“And tell him that our odds out here just got a hell of a lot better…”

Rutox took a moment to consider that luck seemed to be on his side all of a sudden. Which didn’t happen often on Nimbus III.

Breshk might have let his master down. But Rutox wasn't about to make the same mistake.

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

Klath's entire world was in chaos.

His vision blurred as he was tossed about this way and that, desperately clinging on to whatever he could for dear life. In all of his years, in all the unwinnable battles and myriad implacable enemies that he had faced down throughout his battle-scarred life to date, this was perhaps the closest to Sto-vo-kor he had ever felt.

Atop his out of control Nimbosian horse, he thundered on and on across the desert wilderness.

Behind him, Jirel and Natasha were in hot pursuit, both of them keeping a tight hold over their own ferociously galloping steeds as they tried to catch up with the frenzied maelstrom of hooves and dust ahead of them.

It had become abundantly clear that Klath was not an experienced rider.

As the horse underneath him started to tire slightly, the Klingon managed to secure a stronger grip on the reins. He pulled back sharply on them as he bounced around the feisty animal's back. But the horse showed no sign of stopping. If anything, the severity of Klath's actions caused it to speed up again.

"Klath!" Jirel managed to call out over the hooves impacting the sand, "Slow down!"

"I cannot!" the Klingon bellowed back, "I think mine may be broken!"

He gave the reins another yank to underline his point.

The Trill kicked his horse on, trying to manoeuvre himself closer to his friend through the choking dust that was being kicked up, even as Natasha cut left to try and flank Klath on the other side.

"Not so hard!" Jirel urged, seeing Klath's awkward tugging on the reins, "I thought told me you'd ridden before?"

"You are mistaken!"

Klath's horse sensed the other animals gaining on either side, and instinctively swerved away with enough immediacy to cause Natasha and her own mount to have to take avoiding action. Klath was nearly thrown clean off by the severity of the movement.

Jirel kept his own horse grimly under control, and with an extra kick, rider and steed were able to get back alongside the Klingon.

"Give me the reins!"

With considerable difficulty, through Jirel reaching out one way and Klath the other, the Trill was able to make a grab for the frayed material of the second pair of reins. He took a tight hold, as the two horses pounded across the desert in formation, and started to ease Klath's animal out of its gallop, while simultaneously slowing his own.

Slowly, but surely, the two horses slowed to a trot.

"Thank you," Klath managed, accepting the reins back as Natasha caught back up to them.

"Seriously, I could have sworn you told me you'd ridden before," Jirel smiled back, "Something about your uncle rearing Sark's back on Qo'noS?"

Klath glowered back at him as he caught his breath, with enough force to make Jirel decide that he should probably move on.

"Nice riding," Natasha offered to Jirel, who failed to stop himself from looking a little smug at the unexpected compliment, "I assumed all this wannabe cowboy nonsense wouldn't extend this far."

"Hey, Colorado born and bred," he grinned, before his face contorted a little, "I mean, technically I don't really know where I was born. On a Trill colony, apparently, to whoever abandoned me as a baby—You know what, that can wait for my therapist. Point is, on Earth, my family kept horses out in the country. Y'know, when my dad wasn't—"

Jirel stopped himself, glancing back at Klath, who was listening on with mild intrigue, not used to the Trill talking about his past in such detail.

"I did not know that," he grunted, "About your family."

"Yeah, well," Jirel managed with a shrug, "Never came up, did it?"

Natasha kept a watching brief, aware that she was the only one of the Bounty's crew who was privy to the full details on Jirel's family, and the way that he had so completely failed to emulate his father's Starfleet career.

At times, she still felt it was odd how little the crew seemed to know about each other's pasts, given how they spent all their time living in each other's pockets on such a small vessel. But she was also learning that when your past was as miserable and filled with regret as theirs seemed to be, you didn't feel like sharing much.

She definitely felt the same way about elements of her own past.

As they trotted on, Jirel glanced over in her direction, eager to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Anyway, you’re not so bad yourself,” he said, motioning to her riding style, “Didn’t realise they had so many ranches back in London.”

She offered a shrug and patted her steed as it bucked its head slightly. “Three years of riding lessons,” she explained, “When I was a teenager.”

“Huh, cute,” Jirel grinned back, “Still though, I guess one snobby riding school isn’t really a match for some real horseback riding, out in the country.”

“Um, pretty sure I was keeping up with you well enough just then.”

“Yeah, but who was the one who managed to slow both horses down at the same time without anyone getting hurt?”

“Psh. I could have done that with my eyes closed!”

“You wanna settle this with a race? Cos we’ve got time for a race.”

In between the bickering duo, Klath emitted a low, frustrated growl. Realising that he was going to be stuck in the middle of them all the way to Arcadia Falls, on top of a wild animal that seemed to have no clear control system.

As the group moved on through the desert, and Jirel started picking out landmarks that they could race to, the Klingon wondered if he had drawn the short straw on this particular adventure.

Fixing a water pump now seemed like the more palatable option.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Crap on a crapping pile of crap!”

Denella’s latest string of expletives echoed around the confines of the small hut, even as Zesh entered with an armful of straggly wiring.

“From what I remember,” her former shipmate offered, “That’s not a good sign.”

The Orion woman groaned as she stood from behind the bulky water pump unit and did her best to dust down her baggy grey overalls. As Zesh wisely kept his distance, she gestured at the rear of the housing with annoyance.

“I have no idea who put this thing together, but I would really like five minutes alone with them and a live plasma conduit.”

She wiped her face with her hands in frustration, doing little more than coat her skin in a fresh layer of dirt. Zesh smiled sympathetically as she continued. “I mean, it’s a complete mess. There’s about six different types of wiring back here, chunks of isolinear circuitry that I can’t tell if it’s supposed to be doing anything, and—”

She paused to spit out a few flecks of dust and sand that had crept into her mouth.

“—The whole thing is filled with crapping sand!”

Zesh stepped forwards cautiously and set the wiring down on top of the unit, as Denella took a tired slug from the canteen of water she had brought from the Bounty.

“This is Nimbus III,” he offered, “I’ve found that down here, people tend to make do and mend with whatever they can get their hands on. Everything gets repaired, reclaimed or repurposed. Over and over again. Actually, I was rather hoping that sort of thing would appeal to you.”

“What the hell gave you that idea?”

“Because I recall a time onboard the Bounty when we made our escape from a gang of Kzinti pirates thanks to someone getting the warp core back online using an ore sample pod as an improvised intermix chamber.”

Denella mustered a friendlier expression. She could see when someone was massaging her ego. Throughout her life, she’d heard just about every line going. But when it was her engineering prowess being complimented, she didn’t entirely hate it. And, deep down, while the water pump was proving to be a singularly frustrating challenge, with the unassuming exterior of the unit hiding a chaotically improvised mish-mash of components and systems, there was a part of her that was in its element.

“Besides,” Zesh continued, gesturing to the wires he had brought, “Your humble assistant has dredged up the extra duranium wiring you wanted. Cannibalised it from an old mining generator.”

She cast an eye over the parts that Zesh had brought with him, picking through the wiring with a critical eye. “Hmm. Not exactly ideal, is it?”

“Just the way you like it,” Zesh countered with a smile.

This time, Denella’s face creased into a wry smile of her own. He wasn’t wrong.

“Ok,” she continued, as she continued to sort through the pile, “Now I just need Sunek to get back with that microsoldering kit I asked for, and

I'll see if I can—"

As if she had just read out some mystical Vulcan incantation, almost as soon as she had mentioned his name, the door to the hut swung open and Sunek burst in, looking even more irritated than Denella had been.

"Ok, so, this place is officially my least favourite place ever," the Vulcan griped to nobody in particular as he stomped into the dusty hut, "Stupid, sand-filled, hot-as-crap hellhole of a dump of a stupid planet!"

Zesh watched the Vulcan pacing around the stuffy hut with a modicum of curiosity, but Denella snapped her attention back to the task at hand. "Sunek, you got that microsoldering kit?"

But Sunek wasn't listening. He was entirely absorbed by his own frustrations. And his anger.

"You know what just happened? I went back over there to get whatever stupid thing you wanted, rested my hand on the rail of the cargo ramp, and just freaking burned myself! Right down to the bone!"

He held out his right hand to underline his point, which now displayed an ugly red burn across its pale surface.

"Hurts like crap! And I do all my favourite stuff with that hand, so now that's gonna be a whole thing—"

"Sunek," Denella sighed, "The kit?"

"I mean, what the hell are we even doing here?" the Vulcan's rant continued unimpeded, as he poked an accusing finger squarely in Zesh's direction, "Protecting this guy's stupid Tongo prize? I remember when we used to take on actual proper jobs, y'know?"

"And I remember when you used to be the funny one," Zesh muttered under his breath.

Sunek's keener Vulcan hearing meant that he fully picked up on that comment, and he whirled around with genuine venom in his eyes. A look that caused Denella genuine unease.

"Oh, I'll show you funny, big ears," he snapped, marching over to the Ferengi and forming an angry fist with his good hand, "I'll show you right now—!"

"Sunek!"

Denella snapped his name out with enough intensity to cause the angry pilot to immediately pause, though not before everyone present, including the thoroughly unnerved Zesh, could see that the fist was raised, and he had been ready to use it.

Keeping her focus on the Vulcan, Denella jerked her head in the direction of the door. "A word? Please?"

With his anger now regressing back to a mere sulk, Sunek reluctantly followed her out into the blazing heat, cradling his injured hand and leaving a relieved Zesh to pat the nervous sweat off his brow with his pocket square.

As soon as they were a short distance away from the hut, Denella whirled around to her colleague, who was looking down at the ground and scuffing the sand with his boot.

"Ok, look, I don't know what the hell's gotten into you lately. If it's the heat, or something you ate, or the first stage of Pon Farr, but you need to calm down."

"I am calm!"

"Don't lie. You've been flying off the handle ever since we got here, and you were just about to punch Zesh in there!"

"He was asking for it."

"He really wasn't."

Sunek's head snapped up to glare at her, a fresh flash of anger glowing in his eyes. But unlike Zesh, Denella didn't flinch. After the day she'd had wrestling with the water pump, she had some frustrations of her own to work off.

"Please, try it," she grunted, "Cos I'm definitely in the mood to punch back."

For a moment, it looked as though Sunek was actually going to take a swing. But at the last moment, he unclenched his fist and returned to unhappily cradling his burned hand.

"Sorry," he managed, an apology delivered with all the emotional conviction of a surly teenage Tellarite that had just been caught stealing latinum from their mother's purse.

"Save another one of those for Zesh," she replied, before gesturing down to his hand, "Now, go run a dermal regenerator over that, and then, if it's not too much trouble, bring me the microsoldering kit."

He gave her another of his best teenage pouts, but eventually conceded the point with a slight nod of his head, and started a slow trudge back towards the Bounty, exaggeratedly kicking his heels as he went.

As Denella watched him leave, her own frustrations subsided, replaced by concern for her friend. Whatever was happening to him.

As Sunek walked, he tried his best to ignore the fiery pain in his hand.

And the similar sensation in his head.

## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Although he'd never admit it to the others, Jirel was genuinely starting to doubt whether he hadn't accidentally walked into a holosuite program by mistake. Because wherever they went in Prosperity County, everything seemed a little too perfect.

He brought his Nimbosian horse to a gentle halt on the outskirts of their destination and took in the sight of the town.

A creaking wooden sign in front of them indicated that this was indeed Arcadia Falls, adding the seemingly unnecessary information that it contained a population of 357.

A dusty main street ran through the centre of the town, with squat buildings on either side, all made of wood and sheet metal, like the buildings back at the ranch. Several simple signs hung above the doors, advertising the wares that lay within.

The rest of the town's dwellings, such as they were, surrounded the main road in a simple grid system delineated by narrow dirt roads.

A gentle, dry breeze whipped up trails of sand and dirt down the length of the road. And while Jirel thought it was probably just a trick of his imagination, he swore he could hear someone playing a harmonica somewhere in the distance.

The Trill adjusted his hat against the fierce sun and expertly dismounted his horse, sighing in quiet satisfaction at the scene in front of him.

Alongside him, Natasha drew up and climbed down from her own steed. But she didn't see the same adventure playground in front of her that the wannabe space cowboy had seen. Instead, she looked beyond the surface level and focused on the details of the threadbare settlement. And she didn't like what she could see.

She spied a few of the town's population braving the afternoon sun. A few hunched forms with gaunt, tired expressions nervously flitted in and out of some of the establishments on the main street. They all wore worn and dirty clothes, silently expressing clear signs of poverty.

During her first posting in Starfleet, as a young ensign onboard the USS Tripoli, she had been part of the first away teams on the surface when the ship had helped to liberate a Bajoran labour camp on Ventok II. And while the scenes of suffering she had witnessed there were significantly worse than what she could see in Arcadia Falls, there was a definite familiarity.

It was something in the demeanour of the figures. The slumped shoulders as they moved. In a manner that suggested that they had given up hope. That this was all they were destined for. To struggle to exist in a forgotten town in a forgotten corner of a forgotten planet.

And there was something else that hung in the air as well. Something that she knew all too well. A faint, but unmistakable sense of menace.

"Seriously," Jirel griped as he glanced over at her worried look, "Don't ruin this for me."

She forced her attention away from the unhappy vista she had been confronted with and back to the irritatingly cheery Trill. "Really?" she scoffed as she gestured to the scene, "You still think we're doing the right thing down here? Taking the latinum and running away? Whatever happened to helping the poor?"

"I'm poor. That's what the latinum's for."

"I'm serious, Jirel."

She fixed him with a knowing glare. And for a second, his grin slipped, just a fraction. And just for long enough to give Natasha a modicum of comfort that he wasn't dismissing her take on the situation as entirely as she'd feared. But before she could tug at the thread any further, they were interrupted by the ungainly arrival of the final member of their party.

Klath managed to bring his horse to a stop a short distance from where the others stood, and attempted to dismount, only for the uncooperative beast to shift around at a critical moment in the procedure, causing him to tumble and land in an undignified plume of dirty brown sand.

"Yeah, I take it back," Jirel grinned, his brief crisis of conscience now forgotten, "You definitely haven't ridden before."

Klath growled unhappily as he got back to his feet and dusted himself down with as much dignity as he still had available. "I prefer the transporter," he stated simply, in a tone that strongly suggested that he wanted no further discussion of the matter.

Jirel stifled a chuckle as he led them over to a stout wooden fence, where the three of them tied their horses securely and left them to graze on the brittle grasses poking through the sand in the shade of the posts.

"Now what?" Klath asked, not unfairly.

Jirel surveyed the main street of the town and chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Well, according to Zesh, we're looking for the biggest low-life in all of Arcadia Falls. So I say we find the local saloon."

"Huh," Natasha griped, "So there really is literally no situation where your first instinct isn't to find the nearest bar—?"

"Still not letting you ruin this for me."

Before Natasha could get any more shots in, Jirel started down the dusty street. She and Klath shared a concerned look before following in his

wake.

Natasha felt an unsettling feeling as they walked. It felt as though they were attracting a lot of stares. And not just from the few Nimbusians that she could see flitting about, she had an unerring feeling of being watched through every window shutter and doorway that they passed. She could tell from the way that Klath's hand was now resting on the pistol at his waist that the Klingon's own battle senses were tingling as well.

It felt odd to see the Klingon without his trusty bat'leth on his back, but even though such bladed weapons weren't banned on Nimbus III, and despite his preference for more honourable combat, Klath was experienced enough to see that, practically speaking, a projectile weapon was his best bet if anything happened here. Even if he didn't care much for their construction.

It didn't take long before Jirel pointed to one specific establishment on their left side. The unassuming building in question looked similar to all the others, but there was a sign hanging over the door that rather optimistically proclaimed the establishment to be the Bar of Plenty.

"I'd say this is the right place," the Trill grinned.

He went to walk in, only to jump back when two burly Nimbusians came staggering out of the door, almost colliding with Jirel in the process.

"Excuse us, fellas," one of the Nimbusians grunted, gesturing to the other man, "Something in there must've disagreed with him."

"Huh," Jirel offered, "Guess we'll eat elsewhere—"

"Oh my god."

Natasha's gasp cut through Jirel's attempts at levity, and he quickly realised what she meant. They could all now see the dirty red bloodstain on the second man's shirt.

"A battle," Klath grunted appreciably, causing the first man to smile wryly.

"A disagreement."

While Klath pondered this minor technicality, Natasha's medical instincts immediately jumped into gear, as she took hold of the injured man on the other side and helped to support him. "I'm a doctor," she said by way of explanation, "I can help."

"Natasha," Jirel cautioned.

"Not now, space cowboy," she snapped back, keeping her focus on her patient, "Is there somewhere we can take him?"

The uninjured Nimbusian looked a little confused, as if offers of help were in shorter supply than water around here. But seeing the determination in Natasha's eyes, he jerked his head in the direction of another building across the street. "Infirmary's over there, ma'am. Can't say it'll do him much good, mind."

Natasha nodded and started in the direction of the building, almost dragging the two Nimbusian men along with her. She barely got three steps away before Jirel called out again, a clear undertone of concern in his voice.

"Hey, Nat. Remember, we're not here to—"

"Let me do a little bit of good while we're down here, Jirel," she called back, "I'll catch you up when I've stopped the bleeding. Besides, I thought this place was too cool to be dangerous?"

As she walked on, Jirel glanced over at Klath, who shrugged his burly shoulders.

"She will be fine," he boomed at his suddenly worried friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel's worries about Natasha lasted as long as it took him to step through the doors of the Bar of Plenty. And suddenly, he was enjoying Nimbus III all over again.

As soon as he and Klath walked into the dusty saloon, the low hum of conversation, along with the jaunty music being played on some sort of piano-type instrument in the corner of the room stopped immediately.

Behind the bar, the bald and buck-toothed patron of the establishment nervously paused midway through pouring a drink for a gangly Nimbusian dressed in nomadic robes.

The room wasn't exactly full, and seemed to betray no sign of whatever violence had just befallen the man they had just met. But in the sudden silence, every customer in the place all turned their heads as one to take in the sight of the Trill and the Klingon, outlined in the doorway.

As Jirel stared back at the throng of haggard patrons, and Klath scanned the room for the most likely threats, the Trill couldn't help but whisper one word under his breath.

"Awesome."

With a deliberately exaggerated flourish, he stepped forwards with a confident smile and a friendly tip of his hat.

“Howdy there, folks,” he drawled, rediscovering the worst of his accent in the nick of time, “Don’t mind us. We’re just passing through.”

After a further uncertain moment of silence, which was as much down to the accent as it was anything else, normality resumed. As if someone had unpaused time, the conversations resumed, the music started up again, and the bartender resumed pouring.

Jirel glanced over at his Klingon companion, his confident smile still in place. “See? I know what I’m doing.”

“Now what?” Klath grunted, feeling like he was having to ask that a lot with regards to Jirel’s plan.

“Now we, y’know, ask around.”

Klath nodded and took a step forward, only for Jirel to shoot an arm out to stop him and finish up his statement. “But with a bit of subtlety, ok? I get the feeling these people are gonna be anxious around strangers, and we don’t want to get the same treatment that guy outside got, ok?”

Klath nodded in apparent understanding as the two of them made their way over to the bar, with the Klingon still keeping one hand close to his weapon as they walked past the occasional group of watchful men gathered around one of the stout wooden tables.

As they got to the bar, Jirel called the bartender over.

Bri’tor uncertainly approached the strangers, cautiously eyeing them up as he did so while trying to remain as casual as possible to the untrained observer, cleaning the shot glass in his hand with a dirty rag. All things considered, it hadn’t been a particularly violent day so far by the Bar of Plenty’s low standards, aside from the odd disagreement. But as he sized up the two men, he had a feeling that might be about to change.

The strangers were clearly not from around these parts. In fact, they were clearly not from Nimbus III at all. Which tended to spell trouble, as far as Bri’tor was concerned.

Still, he was a businessman first and foremost, inasmuch as one could be a businessman in Arcadia Falls. And so he put on his best welcoming smile as he met the Trill and the Klingon.

“Hey there. What’ll it be, gents?”

Jirel went to reply, but before he could, Klath’s voice boomed out.

“We are looking for a man called Toxis.”

In an instant, the entire establishment was plunged into silence again. Conversations ceased. The music was extinguished. Bri’tor dropped the glass he was cleaning onto the ground where it shattered into a thousand pieces, his welcoming smile vanishing in an instant.

Jirel sighed deeply and shook his head. “Subtlety, Klath. Remember what I said about subtlety.”

The Klingon looked back at the Trill with a slightly put-off expression. “I do not see why we have to—”

“N—Now listen, friends,” Bri’tor stammered nervously, “We can all see you’re new in town. But this is a friendly establishment, you hear? And you really shouldn’t go around saying names like that without—”

Before Bri’tor could get any further, the door to the Bar of Plenty swung open again, with enough force to cause everyone present to turn around as one. And Jirel immediately realised that their search wasn’t going to take very long at all.

Toxis strode into the bar, dressed in dark clothing which didn’t seem to be causing him any discomfort in the Nimbusian heat. His grizzled, pock-marked face displayed an even fuzz of beard growth, and his sunken blue eyes stared back at the newcomers with clear contempt as he slowly chewed on a mouthful of tobacco.

Behind him stood a couple of menacing heavies. All three men were clearly armed, with twin Nimbusian pistols holstered to their waists. But for the moment, they left them there.

“Feels like my ears are burning, strangers,” Toxis muttered with his deep voice as he pushed back his wide-brimmed hat with his thumb.

Klath’s hand twitched closer to his own pistol, the Klingon’s eyes narrowing as he surveyed the three men.

Jirel, for his part, couldn’t help but mutter one single word as he stared back at the dangerous outlaw in his midst.

“Awesome...”

## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Natasha wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand as she took a step back from her patient.

It wasn't an entirely sanitary procedure. But then, very little about the impromptu emergency surgery she had just performed had been.

The unconscious Nimbosian man lay on what passed for a surgical table in a side room of Arcadia Falls's infirmary. The table was a tired metal construct which to her medical eye looked like it had arrived here from the last century. It was in keeping with the rest of the equipment she had been forced to improvise with during the procedure. Old school instruments and tools, dubious sanitation, and not a functioning tricorder to be found anywhere in the dilapidated building.

But despite everything, as she surveyed her patient through the ever-present heat of the room, she felt a sense of satisfaction that her Hippocratic Oath was safe for another day.

Using a combination of emergency field training techniques, vague memories of a series of lectures on historical medicine she had attended at the Academy, and a fair share of improvisation, she had managed to clean, cauterise and stitch up the ugly knife wound in the man's stomach.

And, after arriving at the infirmary, she had also managed to find some assistance.

"Well I'll be," a voice next to her piped up, "I've never seen anything like that."

Natasha turned and smiled at the source of the voice. "Yeah. He'll need monitoring for any signs of infection, but I think our patient's gonna make it."

She had met Kitaxis as soon as she had unceremoniously barged into the infirmary carrying the injured man, and from what she'd been able to ascertain during their moments of conversation during the procedure, she comprised the entire medical staff of Arcadia Falls.

She was a stout woman, a species that Natasha wasn't entirely familiar with. She had curiously feline features, not unlike a Caitian, but with bare skin instead of fur. She was also in possession of not one, but two cleavages, which even in her modest nurse's outfit was proving more of a curiosity to Natasha than she'd probably have liked it to be.

But while there were plenty of physical differences between them, there was something far greater that they had in common. Something that all medical professionals had across the galaxy, regardless of the facilities they worked in, from human to Nimbosian to Romulan to Breen. A determination to help people.

It wasn't a trait that was necessarily common across all life forms without a medical background. In fact, the gruff Nimbosian who had reluctantly helped Natasha carry the injured man to the infirmary had then disappeared almost immediately. Natasha had a sneaking suspicion he had simply walked back to the saloon across the street, as if the desperate race to save the other man's life had just been a fleeting annoyance that had kept him from his next round at the bar.

But while he had made himself scarce, Kitaxis had stayed by Natasha's side throughout the entire operation, fetching her tools and equipment as she had called for it. Or at least, the closest approximation to whatever she had asked for that was available inside the threadbare medical cabinets of this particular facility.

As Natasha moved over to the rudimentary sink and cleaning facilities located in the corner of the room to clean herself up as best she could, Kitaxis moved over to the injured man's side and checked his vital signs.

"You know," she nodded in response to Natasha's comment, "I really think he is gonna be alright, isn't he?"

"You sound surprised," Natasha replied good-naturedly, as she thoroughly scrubbed the blood from her hands.

There was a pause. She looked over at the other woman, who wasn't smiling. Instead, she was looking down at their patient with sad regret. "Lotta folks come into the infirmary like this," she lamented, "Usually all I can do is just try to make them as comfortable as possible."

Natasha finished scrubbing her hands and dried them on a nearby towel, feeling the gnawing sense of guilt that persisted inside her approaching critical levels. "What about the other staff? Doctors? Surgeons?"

"Hasn't been a doctor in Arcadia Falls in all the time I've been here," she explained, "When me and my husband came to town, the infirmary had been closed for months. I've done what I can to get the place up and running, but I'm not a doctor."

"What about your husband?"

At this, Kitaxis allowed herself a slight smile. "Bri'tor runs the saloon across the street. Truth is, that's where too many of my patients come from."

Natasha finished drying her hands and stepped back over to the table as Kitaxis continued with a slightly more lamenting tone.

"I know a few things about medicine, but not enough. Not much I can do for gunshots, or mining accidents, or wounds like that. Maybe if Bri'tor's business brought in more money, we could afford more equipment, or to bring in a doctor from Paradise City..."

The ball of guilt in Natasha's stomach started to ache.

“But,” Kitaxis concluded with a shrug as she started to clear away the tools from next to the operating table, “I guess towns like this don’t get doctors.”

Natasha heard herself sigh audibly. In her mind, the reason that they had travelled to Arcadia Falls had now been almost completely forgotten. All that remained was a palpable need to help.

She stepped up to the other woman and smiled. “Well,” she offered, “You’ve got one now. Any more patients around here?”

Kitaxis looked up at the soft features of the human woman with a look of surprise. Like Natasha’s comment was the last thing she had been expecting.

Kindness, after all, was in short supply in Arcadia Falls.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Really, you’re too kind.”

Jirel watched as the glass on the table in front of him was topped up again from the dirty brown bottle in Bri’tor’s shaking hand.

He wasn’t entirely sure what he had been expecting when Toxis had so dramatically walked into the bar. A gunfight, a bar brawl, or even a good old fashioned duel out in the street. Instead, the grizzled man had apparently decided to add them to his bar tab.

Jirel and Klath sat on one side of one of the Bar of Plenty’s larger wooden tables, with Toxis on the other, flanked by his goons who had been introduced as D’Ronn and Sa’Loq. Jirel was slightly embarrassed to admit that he couldn’t remember which was which. Partly because the two bald Nimbosian goons looked very similar. But also partly because Jirel’s head was starting to feel a little foggy from the shots of burning Nimbosian liquor that they had already shared.

And they kept on coming. Courtesy of the meanest outlaw in Prosperity County.

“Nonsense,” Toxis drawled with a grin, accepting his own refill from Bri’tor, “Kindness is nothing to do with it. If me and my boys can’t make a couple of off-worlders feel welcome in our humble town, then what the hell is this planet coming to, right, bartender?”

Toxis went to pat Bri’tor on the shoulder, only for the shorter Nimbosian to duck out of the way instinctively with a flinch, eliciting a chuckle from Toxis.

“Don’t mind him,” he continued, “He’s been on edge ever since me and my boys had to teach his brother a little lesson. Ain’t that right?”

Bri’tor gently set the bottle down on the table and took a step back, summoning up as much defiance as he could despite the fear he felt inside. “Can’t teach lessons to a dead man, Toxis.”

Toxis’s expression hardened slightly for a moment, before his face creased back into a smile and he let out another cruel chuckle, backed up by equally mocking noises from D’Ronn and Sa’Loq.

“Well now,” Toxis said through the chuckling, “I guess that’s true, isn’t it.”

He and his comrades laughed a bit louder as they looked back over at Klath and Jirel. Neither of them felt like joining in.

“I…don’t get it,” Jirel managed.

To Jirel’s side, Klath remained silent, the Klingon’s focus entirely on assessing the men in front of him from a battle perspective.

Klath’s own liquor glass remained untouched. He knew that this wasn’t the sort of situation where he should be impairing his senses in any way. He also knew he would already be at a disadvantage in any fight. These men were used to Nimbosian weapons. He wasn’t.

The chuckling continued for a moment, even as Bri’tor took the chance to quickly retreat back to the bar area, before Toxis’s weathered features hardened into a more adversarial glare. “I can see you’re not in the mood for pleasantries, strangers. Your choice.”

Jirel shifted awkwardly in his seat, suddenly feeling the two rows of spots down his face starting to itch, as they tended to do whenever he felt nervous. For all the the free liquor and the apparent friendliness so far, he didn’t need to have Klath’s sense of danger to detect the menacing undercurrent in just about every one of Toxis’s comments.

“Still,” Toxis continued, idly chewing his tobacco as he spoke, “I gotta say, off-worlder. It’s a pretty brave man that comes riding into Arcadia Falls to see me.”

He paused for a moment to send a thick chunk of tobacco arcing down onto the floor, landing inches away from Jirel’s boot where it poked out from the side of the table.

“Pretty brave, or pretty stupid. Which is it?”

“I’ve been called both,” Jirel offered with as casual a shrug as he could muster, “But we’re not here to fight. Just to talk.”

Toxis chewed thoughtfully for a few moments as he stared across at the Trill.

Jirel felt a bead of sweat passing down his back and licked his lips. He considered scratching his increasingly itchy spots, but reasoned that it was probably best not to make any sudden movements for the moment.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Klath tense up a little more as the silence continued. And although he couldn't tell for sure, the Trill felt as if the entire bar had fallen silent again, with everyone in there focused on Toxis as he chewed over both his tobacco and Jirel's comment.

Eventually, the outlaw leaned forwards and nodded. "Ok then," he motioned, "So talk."

Jirel licked his lips again, idly wondering exactly when this little adventure stopped feeling quite so much like fun.

"Um, well," he began, keeping his tone as friendly as possible, "We're here to smooth things over, y'know? I understand that you and our friend have had a little difference of opinion over his ranch, but I think we can sort this all out."

Toxis's face betrayed a flicker of something that Jirel couldn't quite place. "My ranch, you mean?" he offered by means of a correction, "My ranch that your little hobgoblin friend is squatting in."

"Come on now," Jirel replied a little more boldly, feeling as though he was making progress, "We're all adults here, Toxis. And we know that Zesh won that place fair and square."

Toxis's face creased into a tight, thin smile. A second chunk of dirty tobacco joined the first on the ground.

"Fair and square doesn't mean much in Prosperity County, off-worlder. Guess it's the way we're all brought up. When there's as little to fight over as there is down here, folks'll fight over what there is stronger than anywhere else in the galaxy."

For reasons that Jirel didn't want to dwell on, part of him thought about Natasha, and her guilt trips from earlier.

"So," Toxis continued, "While I can respect the stones on you folks for coming all this way to help out your little friend, I'm afraid that I can't respect much more than that."

"We are prepared to resist you," Klath grunted, still struggling with the concept of subtlety.

Toxis sized the Klingon up with the look of a man who definitely didn't mind a fight. "I don't doubt it," he replied, "But I'm gonna get my ranch."

"Hey," Jirel persisted, "I'm sure we can all—"

He was interrupted by a curious chirping noise from a tiny old-fashioned communicator located on Sa'Loq's belt. Or possibly on D'Ronn's belt, Jirel still wasn't clear.

Without even looking over to D'Ronn (or Sa'Loq), Toxis leaned back in his seat with a sudden look of contentment on his face. As if he already knew what the message was going to be. Like he'd been waiting for it. All this time.

Despite the fact that he was still suffering in the intense Nimbosian afternoon heat, seemingly being exacerbated by the fiery alcohol he'd been imbibing, Jirel felt a chill pass down his spine. His spots itched with a burning intensity.

"Or," Toxis said darkly, "Maybe I've already got it."

## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Denella could sense that she wasn't alone.

It had been several minutes since Zesh had left her alone in the hut, the Ferengi suggesting that he go and fix them some food back onboard the Bounty. Since then, she had redoubled her efforts on the water pump in front of her. And was actually starting to make some good progress.

And then, just as she had finished the painstaking and somewhat noisy job of rewiring the main motor, and she prepared to stand back up from her prone, crouched position behind the stocky pump unit, she had been hit with an unerring feeling that there was someone in the hut with her.

They must have got in while she had been running the motor through its full calibration setup.

She deftly reached down for her faithful Orion dagger that was clipped to her belt as silently as possible, and prepared to pounce.

And then, she heard something else.

"Ugh! Stupid planet!"

She felt herself immediately relax and withdrew her hand from the blade, and stood up from behind the pump housing. On the other side of the hut, the irritated Sunek jumped back, seemingly surprised to see her. The jumpscare did little to help his ever-darkening mood.

"Hey, idiot! Don't do that!"

"Do what?" she asked, as she wearily stretched her aching back.

"Don't jump out on people like that! I had no idea you were back there!"

Despite the continued erratic behaviour of her colleague, the Orion woman couldn't help but smile at this bemusing comment. "Where did you think I'd be?" she asked, gesturing around, "Playing racquetball over in the east wing? Sunning myself by the pool?"

Sunek went to snap a fierce retort back at her, but managed to stop himself before his simmering anger boiled over again. A process that he was finding harder and harder to complete the longer he spent in Goodlife Ranch. He put some extra effort into summoning up whatever residual good humour that remained inside of him, and idly gestured to the water pump with his dermally regenerated hand.

"How's it coming?"

Denella wiped her hands on her overalls and stepped around to the front of the unit. "It's getting there," she replied, "Watch this."

She tapped a command into the control panel, now activated with a fresh external power pack but still flickering slightly, and stood back proudly. The two crewmates watched on as the bulky pump slowly but surely whined into life, filling the small dusty hut with a thoroughly nasty, grinding sound which screeched out from the long-dormant mechanisms.

Both of them involuntarily winced as the noise reached a crescendo, Sunek covering his sensitive Vulcan ears against the barrage of discordant grinding, before the whole unit suddenly shuddered to a silent halt.

A somewhat less proud Denella looked back over at her unimpressed colleague.

"Like I said. Getting there."

Sunek mustered a smile. And to her fresh concern, Denella realised that it had actually been a while since she had seen him do that. Which was a very unsettling thing to say about Sunek.

What the Vulcan did next was even more unsettling.

"Want some help?"

Denella couldn't have looked more shocked if he had got down on one knee in the Nimbosian sand and proposed.

"Come on," he added begrudgingly, "This place sucks, and the sooner we get that stupid thing fixed, the sooner we can go wait for Zesh's buyer on the Bounty, right?"

"I guess so," she nodded, before gesturing to a collection of freshly-cut metal pipes on the ground by his right foot, "If you wanna grab those, we need to replace the whole section of pipework from the pump to the faucet."

Sunek picked up the piping and they started to get to work, the Vulcan passing her the appropriate piece of pipework as she gestured for it.

After a few moments, Denella felt the need to break the silence.

"Ready to talk about it yet?"

Sunek felt himself facing an immediate internal crisis. After all, he definitely didn't want to talk about his feelings. That was a serious matter,

and Sunek hated serious matters. Maybe he used to like talking about them, back in his student days at the ShiKahr Learning Institute back on Vulcan, when he had been an activist with the V'tosh ka'tur, helping fellow Vulcans explore their emotions if they so wished.

But these days, he preferred to act on his feelings, not talk about them.

Still, there was something bugging him, in the part of his mind where his more traditional logical self still resided. Because, logically, if he didn't want to talk about what he was going through, he'd have just locked himself away in his cabin on the Bounty. Instead, he had come here, where despite his initial shock he must have known that Denella would still be working.

And even after she had made her presence known, he could still have just walked off. But he hadn't done that. He had stuck around. And more than that, he had actually offered to help, so he had a valid reason for still being here.

Which suggested that, logically, at least on some level, he did want to talk about it.

He hated logic sometimes.

"I promise," Denella chimed in, unaware of the debate going on inside Sunek's head, "Whatever you tell me won't go beyond the walls of this hut. By the honour of the Great Sun God of Orion."

Sunek interrupted his internal discussions to look up at her with a curious expression.

"Did you just make that up?"

"The god? Yes. The sincerity? No."

Despite his conflicting thoughts, Sunek couldn't help but offer a lop-sided grin. He passed her another part of the pipework and shrugged in good-natured defeat. "Fine. You were right. I've been having some...anger issues lately. And, I dunno, I guess the heat down here has made it worse."

He thought back to the violent flash of rage a short time ago, when he had come close to throwing a punch at Zesh, and suppressed a shudder.

"A lot worse."

"You're an emotional guy," Denella replied as she fixed the piping into place with a deft flick of her hyperspanner, "I thought you'd be used to that sort of thing."

"Sure, I've been angry plenty of times. But this has been different. Like it's constantly there, in the background, y'know? And it's been like that ever since the whole Sokar mind meld...thing."

At this, Denella paused in her work and looked squarely at her friend.

She hadn't personally seen the full extent of Sunek's temporary transformation during the Bounty's run-in with a Romulan Warbird controlled by radical former members of the V'tosh ka'tur. But she had managed to glean enough information to understand that Sokar, a former colleague of Sunek's, had achieved some form of mind control over his followers by using a series of violent forced mind melds.

Sunek had reclaimed control and broken whatever hold his former friend had over him at a critical moment, just as he was about to shoot Jirel. But this fresh revelation suggested to Denella that he wasn't entirely over it.

"I'm sure it'll pass," he continued, "I guess it's some residual aftereffect or something. And I've been working on a bunch of old Vulcan techniques to fix it, y'know? Spice tea, mental exercise, watched a bunch of these holovids with Betazoid women in them—You know what, that's not an old Vulcan technique, forget I said that one."

Denella managed a patient smile. She could allow the odd bit of vintage Sunek in return for him actually opening up.

"I've even tried meditation," he sighed, as if he was now admitting something genuinely shameful, "Pretty stupid, right?"

Denella scrunched up her face. "I meditate," she countered, "Most mornings, before breakfast. Gets me prepared for another day working with you idiots."

Sunek grinned back and shrugged. "Well, now you know. Heart poured out. Serious business shared. And like I say, it's probably just the heat down here making it worse. But I'm in control, and it'll get better sooner or later, right?"

He looked back at her with a slight glimmer of worry visible in his eyes. Like he was looking for some genuine reassurance from her.

"I'm not sure I can answer that," she admitted with a sigh, "But, Sunek, if you need to keep talking this through with someone, I'm here. If you like, we could even run through some meditation techniques together?"

Somewhat dashing Denella's hopes that she'd made a genuine breakthrough in her sudden role as ship's counsellor, Sunek snorted in amusement at this suggestion. "Yeah, right. Daily classes in the cargo bay? Matching robes? Invite the others down for a good old laugh? Sounds kinda dumb."

"Kinda dumb?"

"Yeah. Kinda really dumb. Like I said, it'll get better."

"You sure about that?"

Sunek reacted to her pointed question with a look of fresh irritation, but paused and reset himself, before breaking out in a fresh grin.

“Sure I’m sure. Nothing a decent meal won’t fix, anyway.”

Denella suddenly realised how long it had been since Zesh had left, and realised that she was feeling pretty hungry herself.

“Huh,” she mused, “That’s a point. What’s happened to our chef?”

She paced over to the door of the hut, leaving Sunek to idly toy with the remaining piping. As she stepped through the door into the Nimbosian sun, her mind was still focused on her worries about her friend, and the revelations he’d just told her. Which meant that she wasn’t nearly as attentive as she would normally have been for any signs of danger.

As she exited the hut, she saw Zesh straightaway.

But she also saw that he wasn’t there of his own volition. And he wasn’t alone either.

He was accompanied by six stout men pointing six Nimbosian pistols squarely at her.

**End of Part Two**

## Part 3A

### Part Three

The ear-splitting cry of pain filled the room with a haunting sound that sent a shiver cascading down every spine in earshot.

The accompanying crack of bone was enough to make everyone present wince in unison. All except the one person responsible for causing the pain.

"I did advise you to try a sedative," Natasha smiled apologetically at her latest patient.

The sandblasted nomad stared back at her with fearful wide eyes. But as the pain subsided and the unfamiliar-looking woman stepped back, he awkwardly lifted his left arm back up in astonishment and turned to his similarly dishevelled colleague that had brought him to the infirmary with delight.

Natasha nodded in satisfaction and looked over at Kitaxis, who still looked a little shaken from the noise of the man's cry.

"There. One dislocated shoulder reset. Another successful treatment."

Part of her was undeniably enjoying her work in Arcadia Falls's infirmary. The back to basics approach she was having to take was rewarding experience and invention over simply triaging and treating ailments with a quick wave of a tricorder.

But as soon as she had started to enjoy herself, she was bitten by a pang of remorse. After all, this was real life for the residents of Nimbus III, and if she started seeing this as a chance to play at being an old school medic, then she was dealing with their plight no better than Jirel and his deluded cowboy fantasies.

So instead, she focused on the concerns of her patient, turning back to the silent nomad and his colleague with her best medical officer's glare.

"Listen, be more careful operating that drilling rig of yours in future. And I'd strongly advise you to take an analgesic from the nurse before you leave."

Her mute patient stood and accepted a small vial of pain killing medication from Kitaxis. He offered a simple nod of acknowledgement before the pair of nomads exited the main room of the infirmary.

"You're welcome," Natasha shrugged as they left.

"Done that myself a few times," Kitaxis said as she began to clean down the treatment area, "Doesn't always work."

"The trick is to get the patient to relax their muscles before you try to seat the joint back in the socket," she explained, worrying that she was maybe being a little patronising towards the woman that had apparently worked at the infirmary for some time now.

But Kitaxis didn't appear patronised. Instead, she nodded in understanding, taking in the impromptu lesson she was getting.

"Course," she added, "Nomads are lucky if it's just a dislocation they get from drilling accidents. Had a lot of amputations as well."

Now it was Natasha's turn to wince as she pictured the somewhat mediaeval approach to that form of surgery that would be possible in this location.

"But," Kitaxis continued, "It's hard work that's gotta be done. Takes a lot of time, and a lot of nomads to find water out in Prosperity County."

Any satisfaction Natasha was feeling for the help she'd provided vanished in an instant, and the guilt returned in a flood. The idea that an inhabited planet in the 24th century would have such an issue with something as simple as their water supply seemed perverse.

When Nimbus III had first been set up, the absence of stable fresh water had always been dismissed as a 'tomorrow problem'. With three galactic superpowers sending regular supply ships loaded with resources, external sources of food and water were plentiful.

Which meant that by the time everything collapsed, no permanent solution to Nimbus III's most glaring problem had been established. And the small amount of work that had been done to construct a network of water treatment facilities connected to the few stagnant pools and saltwater lakes on the surface were cannibalised for parts by the marauding bandits that had been left behind.

Since then, every fresh attempt to domesticate the place had featured some proposal for dealing with the water situation on page one of their prospectus.

Some suggested terraforming projects, some wanted to put modern replicators in every home on the planet, with no clear plan for how to power them, one promised an audacious solution using a vast solar sail array to capture and insert a rogue ice moon into orbit which could then be mined for water.

One group had even posited a solution based on a long-forgotten experiment that took place in the Mutara sector a century ago, which they claimed could be modified to deliver a smaller scale habitat on a specific region of a planet's surface. But the scientists involved in that project disappeared without a trace weeks after it was first announced, with rumours floating around that the Obsidian Order had been responsible.

But whatever solution was suggested, none came to fruition. And with supply runs to Nimbus III now almost non-existent, water remained the sparsest of commodities on a planet renowned for sparsity. And the thought that, in the modern age, people were still losing limbs, or even

their lives over something as fundamental as fresh water, made Natasha's sense of guilt more palpable than ever.

And she decided she had to do something.

"Kitaxis," she said firmly, "What if I told you that—"

The door burst open suddenly, stopping Natasha in her tracks, and the man she had treated earlier staggered in wearing only his trousers, fully conscious, and even more fully confused about the neat stitching across his gaunt stomach where a stab wound had once been.

"Wh—What the hell happened?" he managed.

Natasha and Kitaxis quickly rushed over and supported the unsteady man over to a chair in the corner of the room.

"Hey, easy," Natasha offered with concern, "You've had a lot of stitches in that wound."

The man looked up at her, then down at his stomach. It was far from the only scar across his upper body, a patchwork of ugly blemishes dotted across his leathery skin, but it was the neatest.

"You did this?"

"The lady here's a doctor, Gr' Ash," Kitaxis nodded, "She's fixed you up. Good as new."

Natasha offered the man a guarded smile, not entirely sure how the grizzled Nimbosian barfly was going to take her impromptu surgery. To her relief, his face creased into an appreciative smile. She was slowly starting to get used to the time delay involved in a resident of Nimbus III processing the concept of kindness.

"Well," the man called Gr' Ash nodded, "Thank you, miss. When I saw the knife go in, I thought I was a goner there."

"Just try to steer clear of any more...disagreements," Natasha offered back.

Gr' Ash nodded, tentatively feeling along the ridge of stitches with his hand as he mulled over his lucky escape. "Say," he added suddenly, "What brought a medic to Arcadia Falls anyway?"

Natasha paused before she answered, as she was forced to remember the reality of their mission to the town. Such that it was. With a heavy sigh, she realised that she should probably at least try to help Jirel and the others out on their search.

"Actually," she admitted, "I came here with my friends. We were looking for a man called Toxis?"

As soon as she had said the name, something visibly changed in the faces of both Gr' Ash and Kitaxis. Something replaced their usual look of sad acceptance at their lot in life on this particular planet. Something that was clear in their eyes.

Fear.

And suddenly Natasha felt herself worrying all over again. Though not for the residents of Nimbus III. But for her friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

The door to the storeroom of the Bar of Plenty burst open.

The room itself continued to make a mockery of the bar's name. Aside from a couple of crates half-filled with dirty liquor bottles and a few pieces of broken furniture, it was entirely empty. There really wasn't plenty of anything anywhere.

But such issues were not on Jirel or Klath's mind as they were frogmarched inside by D'Ronn and Sa'Loq, both with their pistols pointed at their backs. Toxis followed behind, dragging Bri'tor along by his skinny arm.

Klath kept his left hand clamped over his right arm, as a trickle of dark pink blood ran down his tunic top. Proof that, when Toxis's men had pulled their weapons, he had at least attempted to resist, just as he had promised.

Fortunately for the Klingon, his sudden leap at the nearest goon had surprised them enough to throw off their aim. Unfortunately for the Klingon, the pellet they had fired had still managed to graze his arm with enough force to render his resistance brief and ineffective.

"Honestly," Jirel said, who had opted to raise his hands in defeat and remained unscathed, "I thought we were getting along back there."

Jirel's statement was answered by D'Ronn, or possibly Sa'Loq, digging their pistol a little deeper into his back.

"Come here, bartender," Toxis drawled, shoving Bri'tor over to where the off-worlders stood, "Save my men the trouble and relieve our guests of their weapons."

Bri'tor looked at the scowling Klingon and the unhappy Trill with an apologetic glance, as he took their pistols from their belts.

And then, for a moment, he was standing in the same room as Toxis, with a loaded weapon in both hands. It was a fact that didn't escape either party.

“Huh. Bet you’re thinking about using those, eh, bartender?” Toxis grunted with a dark leer, “Get some revenge for that brother of yours?”

Toxis’s own men seemed uncertain about this situation, both of his goons switching their attention to Bri’tor momentarily. The bartender forced himself to look up at Toxis, who made absolutely no attempt to defend himself. Instead, he just stared back with the confidence of a man who knew that he was perfectly safe.

Moments later, Bri’tor’s shoulders sagged, confirming that supposition. Jirel looked at the defeated man with sympathy, while Klath was more disappointed. This man was no warrior, that much was clear.

“That’s what I thought,” Toxis scoffed, “Now get rid of those, and bring something to restrain these two gentlemen with.”

Bri’tor nodded and scurried off. As a final humiliation, Toxis didn’t even bother to watch him leave, knowing there was no risk of even being shot in the back.

“Hey,” Jirel tried again, “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

Toxis adjusted his wide-brimmed hat and looked back at the Trill. To Jirel’s surprise, he was sure he saw a slight tinge of regret in the outlaw’s eyes. “That’s where you’re wrong, stranger,” he replied, “This is the way it always has to be down here in Prosperity County.”

The man clad all in black took a step closer to Jirel, any hint of regret now having vanished.

“See, what you don’t understand is we were never going to be able to negotiate, you and I.”

“I’m sure we could have—”

“Because I’ve seen folks like you before. Off-worlders who come here, join us in the dirt, dress up like this is all a game. Except this ain’t no game for us, stranger. This is life for me and my boys. I know what you got on that little ranch of yours, in that outhouse. And we can’t have the likes of you stopping us from taking something like that.”

He punctuated his speech by sending a glob of tobacco arcing down onto Jirel’s boot and kicking his foot with enough force to make his replicated spurs jangle.

Jirel stifled a grimace. Not only for the reminder of some of the less tactful elements of his outfit, but also because it was now clear that Toxis knew about the water pump at Goodlife Ranch. And he found that he had exhausted his own reserves of bravado for the time being. He suppressed a gulp.

This never happened in the holosuite.

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

Of all the sharpshooters in Prosperity County, Rutox had long considered himself to be the strongest of all. His trigger finger was his pride and joy, and it had served him well for many years.

But, it turned out, Denella's was even faster.

She may have been taken by surprise by the half dozen armed men that greeted her as she exited the hut, but it had immediately been clear to her that everything in the ranch was at risk. As indeed was everything in the immediate vicinity of the ranch. And so, her own trigger finger had kicked into action.

Just before she raised her hands in surrender, she had swiftly keyed a simple command into the communicator on her belt. Relaying a pre-programmed message not to any individual, but to the Bounty itself.

It was a command that she had put together some time ago, primarily because they tended to leave the ship parked on a lot of planets, more often than not leaving it unguarded. She considered it a miracle that it hadn't been stolen already. At least, before she had added in her code.

Now it was less of a miracle. Because with a deft touch of her trigger finger, she had put the Bounty into lockdown.

Which wasn't impressing Rutox, who had dragged her and Zesh across to their ship, only to find that the rear ramp was retracted, and there was apparently no way onboard.

The Nimbosian outlaw growled in frustration as he turned back to where Denella and Zesh stood, guarded by two of the gang members. The other three had been sent around Goodlife Ranch itself, checking for any other off-worlders still lurking around the place.

He stepped right up to the Orion woman, close enough for her to have to repress a feeling of nausea as she felt his fetid breath on her face, though she kept herself as outwardly stoic as possible. "Ok, listen here," he growled, "Toxis is gonna be here soon. And he's gonna want those weapons you've got inside your ship."

"What weapons?" she replied with an air of innocence, "We're pacifists."

Next to her, she heard the somewhat less calm Zesh groan slightly.

"By the Registrar of the Divine Treasury," the Ferengi muttered unhappily to himself, "Still making jokes. Even now."

Rutox's leer grew a little darker. Denella kept her expression as calm as possible.

"Don't get smart, off-worlder," he grunted back, "I ain't kidding around here. Neither are my boys."

She felt the sensation of an air-powered rifle being dug into her back, but she didn't flinch. "I can't open it," she offered more seriously, "Not yet. The ship's been deadlocked. None of us can get in. Not for twenty four hours, anyway."

It was a lie. The lockdown could be undone at any time with her own personal decryption key, an extra failsafe she'd built in just in case she ever locked everyone out by mistake. But that wasn't something that she was prepared to reveal to the Nimbosian in front of her.

"What the hell kinda ship is that?" the man with his rifle to her back grouched.

"The kind that doesn't like strangers."

Rutox's eyes narrowed. With a growl of rage, he turned and fired his pistol at the Bounty's left rear landing strut. Denella felt a choking stab of sympathy pain as the pellet struck the strut with enough power to pierce the metal. After a second, a trickle of lubricating fluid began to ooze out.

Her baby was bleeding.

"L—Listen," Zesh piped up, "I think we can work this out. If you give me access to a computer terminal, I have a small quantity of latinum that I can transfer to you, or your superiors, within three business days—"

The forceful jab of a rifle into his back stopped his negotiation before it had even got started.

Rutox turned back to Denella with a sudden look of inspiration, and wagged a stumpy dirt-streaked finger at her.

"You're lying."

"I'm not—"

Before she could back up her first lie with further untruths, Rutox turned and now pointed his pistol at Zesh's tender head.

"Lie to me again, and I pull the trigger."

"A—Actually," the Ferengi stammered, now finding two weapons were being pointed at various parts of his body, "I think if I pay an extra transaction fee, I can get the transfer completed overnight—!"

“Now,” Rutox continued, ignoring Zesh’s pleas, “Here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna let us into this ship of yours, and you’re gonna fix that water pump you’re hiding back there. And you’re gonna do both before Toxis gets here, otherwise your friend gets a hole in the head. Ok?”

There was a tell-tale hiss from the pistol, indicating that he had cocked the weapon again. On the other end of the weapon, Zesh started to wail quietly.

Denella licked her lips, processing the fact that the outlaws seemed to know about the pump while ignoring the wider psychological implications of how she perhaps felt a touch less concerned about Zesh being shot than she was about the Bounty getting shot again.

Rutox, meanwhile, showed no sign of moving his pistol.

“Ok,” she nodded eventually, “I’ll do what you want. Starting with the pump.”

Rutox’s face darkened still further. “Your ship—”

“Pump first,” Denella insisted, hoping she wasn’t pushing her luck too far, “It’s a way bigger job, so if that boss of yours wants both things done before he gets here, I’d suggest you let me prioritise that. Trust me, I’m an engineer.”

The burly Nimbosian stared at her with an expression that made Denella worry that her final attempt to buy some time wasn’t going to work. But eventually, he retracted his pistol from the Ferengi’s head and nodded, just as the three man search party returned.

“No other folks here,” one of them gruffly reported, “Whole ranch is clear.”

Rutox nodded in satisfaction, then idly gestured to Denella and Zesh with his pistol. “Take these two back to the pump and get them to work. And keep a close eye on them. They try anything, shoot ‘em.”

He looked down at the quaking Zesh with a cruel smile.

“This one first.”

The men nodded. Two of them grabbed Denella and Zesh by their arms and began to march them back across the baking expanse of Goodlife Ranch. Denella allowed herself a momentary sigh of relief, glancing at the still-fearful Zesh and offering him a supportive smile and a nod.

It was still a pretty hopeless situation, but they’d bought some time for the others. Not only for Jirel, Klath and Natasha, wherever they were over in the town and whatever they were getting up to. But also for Sunek, who was still hiding out somewhere.

She just prayed that one of them had a plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunek didn’t have a plan.

In fact, all he’d really managed to do since he had peered out of the hut through a crack in the door and seen Denella being led away by a group of armed Nimbosians was hide.

He had at least done a good job of hiding, even if Sunek did say so himself.

He’d managed to squeeze through a gap in the metal panelling at the rear of the water pump’s hut moments before three of the men had burst in to conduct their search. And had then continued to flit from cover to cover in the late afternoon sun, staying one step ahead of the search party until they had completed a full lap of the entire ranch.

Finally, as the men had returned to their colleagues, presumably satisfied that their extensive search was complete, Sunek had hidden himself away in one of the ranch’s storage sheds near the outskirts of the habitat. Here, he was confident that he could remain hidden while he put his plan into operation.

Except, Sunek didn’t have a plan. Which was proving something of a hindrance as far as his plan to put his plan into operation was concerned.

Trying to find some sort of inspiration, he had completed a quick inventory of the shed he had randomly holed himself up in, hoping to find some sort of weapon, or a transporter pad, or some comms equipment with which he could signal the others for help.

But his search had yielded nothing like that at all. Instead, all he had found was some old, worn out soil reclamators, stripped of most of their useful parts, a few crates of empty seed pods, and a few mostly dried out containers of fertiliser and chemicals.

Presumably, a former owner of the ranch had actually attempted to grow something out in the middle of the desert at some point. And presumably they had failed.

But much to the chagrin of Sunek, and the incredibly heroic and cunning plan that he didn’t have, the same former owner hadn’t thought to invest in any weaponry, or a communications console, or even a transporter pad. Which, as far as Sunek was concerned, was an unforgivable oversight.

The Vulcan sat down cross legged on the warm sandy ground inside the shed and sighed, staring at the meagre supplies he had in front of him.

Inside, he could feel the anger starting to rise again. Born of the frustration he was feeling.

He was roused from his frustrations by a noise from outside. He scampered over to a gap in the metal sheeting of his latest hideout to peer out at the rest of the ranch, worried that he might have to make another swift exit. But instead, he saw a gaggle of people walking back over to where the water pump was housed. Denella and Zesh were being marched there at gunpoint.

The frustration inside Sunek rose a little further. The anger began to ferment.

He saw his friends in danger. He saw that they were hopelessly outnumbered against the hostile forces that had entirely swamped the ranch. And he saw that he had no chance to get back to the Bounty.

He definitely needed a plan.

## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

The sound of the men saddling up outside the Bar of Plenty was enough to attract worried attention from all corners of the town.

Natasha peered out of the window of the infirmary, flanked by Kitaxis and Gr' Ash, who buttoned up his shirt to cover his fresh scar and set his dusty hat back on his head.

The two Nimbosians had been in the middle of telling her about Toxis and his gang when they had been disturbed by the ruckus outside. They had explained how the gang had ridden into town having already ransacked several other settlements in Prosperity County on their way here. Like a tornado slowly tracking across the desert, they spread destruction and misery as they passed through.

Kitaxis had even opened up about the personal impact that the latest carnage to hit Arcadia Falls had wrought on her, the death of her husband's brother at Toxis's own hand.

And as Natasha had listened, the knot of guilt inside of her had grown and grown. As had the palpable sense of worry. That once again the Bounty's crew were very much in over their heads.

Those worries only grew as she watched the unruly group of men in the street outside. All of them were armed and ready for action, some hooted and hollered as they prepared themselves for whatever they were doing. And most of them kept their attention on one man in particular. A tall, gaunt man on a sturdy Nimbosian horse who carried himself with a calm, quiet menace and idly chewed a mouthful of tobacco with a satisfied smile.

It didn't take Natasha long to figure out which one was Toxis.

"Looks like they're moving out someplace," Kitaxis muttered from Natasha's side as she stared out the window.

It was an unnecessary comment, given what they could all see, but it broke the unsettling silence that had descended inside the now otherwise deserted infirmary.

It also didn't take Natasha long to deduce where the motley crew outside was moving out to. "The ranch," she whispered, eliciting looks from the other two.

"Excuse me?" Kitaxis asked, confused.

Natasha snapped back to business mode, her concerns for the others overriding her sense of residual guilt for the time being. "I've got to find my friends," she explained, "They went into the saloon over there."

"Lotta people go into that saloon," Gr' Ash mused with a surprisingly philosophical air, "Not all of 'em come out."

That didn't make Natasha feel any better. She moved over to the exit, only for Kitaxis to call out and stop her in her tracks.

"Be safest if you waited. They'll be gone soon."

Natasha turned back to the worried face of the nurse, prepared to argue her case.

"You should listen to her," Gr' Ash added with a grimace, "You don't want to get in their way. And if those friends of yours fell foul of Toxis...well, then there's no hurry."

This comment unsettled her further, but she couldn't help but see the logic. So she returned to the window.

But not before checking that the loaded Nimbosian pistol was still safely attached to her belt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Out in the street, Toxis checked his own pistols and slid them into his holsters with quiet satisfaction, before turning his attention back to the gaggle of men around him. It wasn't exactly an army. But he didn't exactly need one. Rutox had reported back that he had already claimed the ranch, and the ship that the off-worlders had arrived on.

This wasn't an invasion. But a victory march.

His gang had been put together over a lifetime spent out on the fringes of what passed for civilisation on Nimbus III. But even though they professed loyalty to him, Toxis knew that if push came to shove, there wasn't a single man here that he would trust his life with. In fact, he was sure there were already a few of them that were plotting to kill him, now that he had Goodlife Ranch under control.

Trust was a definitely relative term on Nimbus III.

Still, Toxis had lived with that ever-present threat for long enough now, and he was sure he'd see off any challenge that came along. He'd seen

off plenty of them before.

And now he had the ranch, and a starship, he'd be almost untouchable. Not just in Prosperity County, but on the whole planet.

So he remained entirely confident as he gently kicked his horse to the head of the group and turned to address his men.

"Well then, boys," he called out, "What say we go see my ranch, hmm?"

The gathered throng hooted and hollered in further celebration, drawing yet more attention to themselves. One or two even fired a few shots into the air to punctuate their calls.

Toxis himself remained a picture of dark serenity, as he pulled on his reins and turned towards the direction of Goodlife Ranch. But as he prepared to leave, he felt something that interrupted that feeling of calm.

He felt a tell-tale tingling sensation on the back of his neck.

The outlaw whirled his head around in an instant, knowing exactly where to look. He was just about fast enough to catch a glimpse of Bri'tor as he quickly tried to hide from view in the window of the Bar of Plenty.

Toxis stifled a grimace, wondering whether he should solve that particular issue that had been festering for so long once and for all before he rode out to the ranch. But ultimately he dismissed it. There would be plenty of time for him to deal with the cowed bartender later.

So he turned away from the saloon. And led his army of outlaws out of town, leaving behind nothing but a series of wispy trails of dirt.

And a lot of miserable people.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bri'tor stared down at the two pistols on the top of the bar in front of him.

They were the same weapons that he had taken from the off-worlders on Toxis's behalf, without even questioning what he was doing. Like an obedient servant.

He had held those weapons in his hands, right in front of Toxis, and he had done nothing. Because he had been scared.

For all of the rage he felt when he looked at the man who had killed his brother, he could certainly keep it well hidden when he needed to.

He looked up at the empty expanse of the bar, now vacated by Toxis's men, who had driven out any other regular customers when they had quickly turned on the off-worlders and marched them to the back room. Yet again, as Toxis had driven away his customers, and used the place like his personal play area, Bri'tor had done nothing.

He had heard them talking about the ranch, and the ship that the off-worlders had brought with them, but he had been too focused on carrying out Toxis's demands to really focus too heavily on what was being said. Even though the gang had brought him nothing but misery since they had arrived, he had just done what they had asked.

Because he was scared. And his fear had trumped any resistance he might have otherwise tried to offer.

And even now, there were two armed members of Toxis's group in the back, standing guard outside the back room where the off-worlders were restrained. Which Bri'tor had allowed to happen without so much as a passing comment.

He hated Toxis. For what he had done to him, and what he was continuing to do to him. But as he stared at the weapons in front of him on the dusty counter, apparently as useless to him as if they had been toys made for children, Bri'tor realised that there was someone he hated even more than Toxis.

He hated himself. For allowing it all to happen.

Just as he miserably contemplated his continued inaction, and forced the fresh memories of his brother out of his mind, the door to the saloon burst open. He looked up and immediately felt better as he saw the kind face of his wife walking in.

But he was more guarded when he saw who Kitaxis was with.

On one side of her was a mysterious woman in a dusty brown tunic that Bri'tor had never seen before, and on the other side was Gr'Ash, seemingly entirely recovered from his earlier disagreement in the Bar of Plenty.

Upon seeing the miraculously recovered man, Bri'tor immediately feared the worst. Revenge and recriminations were popular subjects in Arcadia Falls.

"N—Now listen," Bri'tor managed, taking a step back, "I don't need any trouble here—"

"Honey, relax," Kitaxis smiled, as she walked over to him, "It's not like that."

She stepped behind the bar and gave him a warm hug. Of the sort that, even after so many years of fetid misery in Arcadia Falls, still filled him with comfort.

Ignoring the touching reunion between the bald bartender and the stout nurse, Natasha's attention was focused on the familiar pistols on the counter. She recognised them as the models that Jirel and Klath had taken with them. And that, combined with the absence of the Trill and the Klingon in the bar, was filling her with a sense of dread.

"My friends," she barked at Bri'tor, "Where are they?"

Bri'tor glanced at Kitaxis, then at the stranger. Any instincts he might have had to help being blocked by his fear.

"I don't know what you mean—"

"They came in here," Natasha pressed, not interested in any excuses or lies, "And these are their weapons. So where the hell are they?"

"The lady needs an answer, Bri'tor," Gr'Ash grunted from Natasha's side.

Natasha felt a little odd about the backup that she had managed to procure. But having saved his life, Gr'Ash now definitely seemed to be on her side. As she and the looming Gr'Ash played the bad cops, Kitaxis was proving a natural for the role of the good cop.

"Bri'tor," she cooed as she held him close, "This lady here has just helped a whole bunch of people in the infirmary. Even saved Gr'Ash from bleeding to death. She's given so much for us, so we need to do something in return, and help her find her friends."

Natasha ignored the fresh pang of guilt and kept her focus on Bri'tor. The bartender turned to his wife, his eyes still wide with fear.

"B—But...if Toxis finds out that we—"

"Feels like that's all we worry about these days," she smiled sadly, "Afraid of doing anything incase Toxis finds out. And if not him, then some other bandit with a gun who rides on into this godforsaken town."

He thought about his brother, and he felt himself shrink back slightly. "There's a good reason for that," he countered.

"I know," she smiled sadly, "But going along with them all this time has brought us nothing, has it? Just a lot of pain and misery. So, maybe we need to stand up to him instead. Maybe it's time we stopped running scared."

Bri'tor stared back at Kitaxis, looking into the determined eyes of the woman that he loved. And something sparked in the back of his mind, behind all of the fear and the sorrow. A feeling that he hadn't felt for a long time.

He turned back to the stranger and nodded, gesturing to the back.

"I know where your friends are."

Natasha nodded in relief and started out in the direction he had indicated, only for Bri'tor to call her back.

"But," he added with fresh concern, "There's two men back there. Two of Toxis's best."

"Reckon we can deal with them," Gr'Ash grunted darkly, reaching for one of the pistols on the counter in front of them.

"No," Natasha called out, halting him, "No shooting. Not until we have to."

"What exactly do you have in mind instead?"

Natasha looked around the room, deep in thought. Then she laid her eyes on the meagre collection of bottles behind the bar and smiled, glancing at Kitaxis.

"I'm gonna need you to fetch something from the infirmary."

## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

"I get it. We're in trouble. But you've got to admit, this is still kinda—"

"Do not say it."

"—Cool."

Klath grunted deeply unhappily. He had said it.

They were trapped alone in the back room of the Bar of Plenty, having both been firmly tied up to a pair of rickety wooden chairs with the thick lengths of rope that Bri'tor had sourced.

Since Toxis and his goons had left for the ranch, Klath had spent all of his time straining against his restraints in an effort to break free. And he really believed that he was making progress.

He may not have actually been making progress, but he believed that he was. And that was enough to keep him going for the time being.

But while the Klingon had been doing that, Jirel seemed uninterested in either attempting or deluding himself into believing he was attempting escape. Despite the Trill's worried realisation after Toxis had restrained them, he seemed to have lapsed back into being more interested in their surroundings than anything else.

Which, as far as Klath was concerned, was becoming insufferable.

"But, I mean, look at all this, Klath," he persisted over the Klingon's growls over exertion, "We've been tied up! By a ruthless gang of outlaws! In a saloon! No holding cell, no forcefields, none of that crap. Just good, old-fashioned—"

"Rope," Klath growled as his restraints dug further into his wrists in his latest attempt to weaken them, "Yes, I am aware. And it appears well constructed. I cannot find a weakness."

Jirel kicked his feet in the dirt, ignoring any fleeting embarrassment at the sound of his ever-present spurs jangling. "It's just all so real, y'know? So visceral. The smells, the look, the feeling of—"

"Jirel," Klath persisted, "We must focus on escaping and getting back to help the others. Your plan has failed."

"Well, I wouldn't say it 'failed' as such—"

"It has failed!" the Klingon snapped, "It was a tactically poor decision which put us in a position of weakness. All because you have allowed whatever inexplicable interest you have in this place to cloud your judgement."

Jirel went to offer another comment, but the Klingon's frustrations were now boiling over.

"The doctor was correct. This is not a holosuite program. This is a serious situation. And I feel ashamed that I did not point this out more forcefully earlier. A good warrior should always seek to challenge a battle plan when there are signs of weakness."

With that, the Klingon growled deeply as he again threw all of his strength into breaking his restraints, suppressing a wince at the flare of pain coming from the wound caused by the pellet.

In the other chair, Jirel considered Natasha's comments from earlier again. The ones that he'd been trying his best to ignore. And he sighed. "Ok, fine. You're right. But stop doing that. You're gonna sprain something."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"I dunno, maybe? You know how it is when we get captured. Something always turns up for us."

Klath craned his neck around to the Trill with an unhappy glare and a sarcastic grunt.

"I wish to challenge that battle plan as well."

"Alright, fine, what do you suggest, hmm? Seeing as how the Incredible Hulk act isn't working out for you over there?"

The Klingon reluctantly paused in his latest attempt to escape via brute strength alone, and scanned the room as best as he could, the cogs starting to turn in his brain. He gestured behind Jirel with an awkward nod of his head.

"If you can get to that shelf behind you and knock that crate of bottles onto the floor, they should break on the hard floor."

"And then?"

"Then, I will use my weight to rock myself hard enough to fall to the ground, and if I can grab a shard of glass with one of my hands, I should be able to use that to cut through my bonds. That will allow me to free you as well, then we can use some of the larger shards to overpower the guards outside, take their weapons and fight our way back to—"

Just as Klath was really beginning to believe in his increasingly elaborate plan, they suddenly heard two loud thumping sounds from outside. Although neither of them could be sure, it sounded similar to what you'd expect to hear when two burly Nimbusian guards suddenly collapsed to the floor. Moments later, there was a different noise. The sound of the stout wooden door's locking mechanism being deactivated, and the heavy door itself being opened.

The two restrained men watched on as a curious gaggle of individuals entered the room. They recognised the bartender that had tied them up before. They also vaguely recognised the man they had seen exiting the bar earlier with a bloodstained shirt on. Neither of them recognised the cat-like woman in the nurse's outfit, nor either of her cleavages.

But they both definitely recognised the woman in the middle of it all.

"Would you look at the state of you two idiots," Natasha sighed.

As Bri'tor rushed over to untie the two prisoners, Jirel and Klath looked back at their colleague with no small amount of surprise.

"The guards?" Klath asked.

Natasha smiled and nodded over at the woman in the nurse's outfit.

"We brought those fellas a drink," Kitaxis explained, "With a little something from the medicine cabinet in there. I'm always amazed what boys'll drink if a girl says the right things to them."

As Bri'tor finished untying the pair of them, Klath glanced over at Jirel, who offered him a shrug and the slightest of grins.

"See, Klath? Something always turns up for us."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lissepians!"

Zesh's frustrated voice reverberated around the hut, even as the taller of the two goons that had been sent to keep an eye on him and Denella kept his pistol pointed at him. But the weapon had been trained on Zesh for so long that it had almost become part of the scenery, and so despite the continued threat, the Ferengi was at a point where he felt confident enough to pace around on the dusty ground, lamenting their situation.

The goon, for his part, seemed perfectly happy to let him do what he needed to do. He absently chewed on a metal toothpick and watched him rant with ill-concealed amusement.

"I knew I should have hired Lissepians! Lissepians wouldn't have come up with some stupid plan, or wanted to ride around on horses. Lissepians would have just guarded the place, like I was paying them to do! They're never any trouble!"

Denella paused in her repairs to wipe the sweat from her brow. "You know," she offered, with a trace of amusement, "I'm starting to feel a little insulted."

Zesh wasn't in the mood for banter. He just continued to pace, stomping his feet into the dirt to underline his point.

"And the jokes!" he snapped, "Lissepians wouldn't make so many jokes! They actually take their work seriously."

The Ferengi paced onwards on his never-ending tour of the hut, gesturing at the amused goon as he began his next lap.

"I mean, this was exactly what I didn't want to happen! This is precisely the thing I hired you all to help stop from happening!"

"You were on the Bounty for a while, Zesh. You should have known that we're not very good at any of this."

The Ferengi paused and fixed her with an unimpressed glare. He really wasn't in the mood for banter.

Denella shrugged apologetically. Truth be told, she wasn't much in the mood for it either. But she was starting to get a tad concerned that regardless of how effective a coping mechanism it was for him, Zesh's constant complaining was going to end up annoying their guards.

Initially, she had tried to buy them some more time by playing dumb, and conducting the remaining repairs as slowly as possible. But despite appearances, the goons assigned to watch them weren't completely stupid. They saw through that immediately. And with the threat to Zesh's life still apparent, she hadn't had much choice than to speed up to something nearer her normal working speed. Which wasn't good news, because it meant that she was nearly finished.

And then there was nothing standing between her and having to let the gang onto the Bounty.

Seeing that she had momentarily stopped working, the second of the goons stepped forwards and idly brought his own weapon to bear on her.

"Yeah, yeah," she griped as she grabbed a coil spanner from the ground and ran it over the final set of connections for the replacement filtration system she had just installed.

Frustratingly, even though this was the last big job she had left to do, and she'd been hoping to kill a few hours with it, the unit had nestled perfectly into the housing at the first attempt. For the first time, possibly in the entire history of Nimbus III, it had actually been a completely

straightforward repair.

She finished her work with the spanner as slowly as she dared, even as Zesh continued to pace around behind her.

“This is what always happened on the little adventures we used to have,” he whined, “Everything always went wrong because you’d all mess around instead of focusing on the latinum. Rule of Acquisition number—”

Zesh’s audience was spared the reciting of yet another Rule of Acquisition when the door to the hut opened and Rutox stalked in, causing both of the casually slouching goons to immediately jump to attention.

“We done here yet?” he spat.

Denella spied a chance to possibly buy a bit more time. It was a dubious plan, but one that she found had paid off a surprising amount of times over the years. “Nearly,” she offered, “But I’ve run into a bit of an issue with the secondary pump oscillator. I’ll need to completely recompile the configuration on the hydration capacitors and then check each of the isoneutronic linkages with a phased trimetric scan—”

Her improvised stream of consciousness was halted by the sight of Rutox’s pistol pointing at her head, the pistol’s owner looking decidedly unimpressed.

“Don’t give me the fake engineering mumbo-jumbo, off-worlder,” he grunted without a trace of amusement, “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

She didn’t have much choice but to give a curt nod in return. It had been a very dubious plan.

“So,” Rutox persisted, “I’ll ask you again. We done here yet?”

Denella looked back down at the water pump, now basically entirely repaired, and ran through the remaining options she had as far as stalling tactics were concerned. Which didn’t take long, because she didn’t have many.

“See,” Rutox persisted with an ugly grin, “I just got word that Toxis is on his way. And if you’re not done with this, and done opening up that ship of yours before he gets here, then you’re gonna be in real trouble.”

The Nimbosian’s words unsettled her just as much as his grin did, as he casually showed off his rows of rotting teeth.

“You’re out of time.”

Silently, she couldn’t help but agree with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I promise, it’ll be easier the second time.”

Klath considered Jirel’s words as he unhappily surveyed the horse, realising that he had no other way of getting back to Goodlife Ranch. Unless he wanted to walk.

With Natasha having treated and bandaged Klath’s arm, they were now hurriedly preparing to leave, after she had told them all about the small army that she had seen riding off towards the ranch.

After he helped Klath back onto his steed, Jirel turned and saw the third member of their party was still staring back down the main street of Arcadia Falls. “Hey, come on,” he called out, “We’ve gotta get moving.”

“Just one second,” she said, gesturing back into the town, “Kitaxis and Bri’tor said they were going to get something for us.”

Jirel tutted as he looked up at the still-blazing sun, which was starting to creep slowly towards the horizon. “We don’t have time,” he gestured, “We need to get back before the sun sets.”

“And what then?” she countered knowingly, “What’s the new big clever plan to fix all this? And bear in mind that if you suggest a duel at high noon, I am going to feed your head into the next power relay we see.”

Jirel went to respond, then stopped. He actually didn’t have a great answer to that question. Apart from the duel at high noon idea, which sounded very cool.

“We are numerically disadvantaged,” Klath offered instead, “But we have the element of surprise. If we can evade Toxis’s men and gain access to the Bounty, we should be able to rescue the others.”

“See?” Jirel added, gesturing to the Klingon, “Would it kill you to have a bit of positivity like that every now and again?”

“Jirel, what exactly do we have to be positive about? We’ve lost the ranch, the ship, our friends, and we’re hopelessly outnumbered.”

“Maybe,” Jirel replied curtly, “But you’re not helping by delaying us like this. Just because you made a few friends down here. I should warn you, your Starfleet’s showing again—”

“Don’t you dare make this about that again, Jirel. Those people just risked their lives to save you back there!”

“I said thank you, didn’t I?”

“I actually don’t remember. Did you?”

From his precarious position on top of his horse, Klath groaned quietly to himself as the latest round of bickering kicked off, wondering if they were going to keep this up all the way back to the ranch again. And then, as he looked up, he saw something surprising. He gestured back into Arcadia Falls, silencing his two colleagues.

Jirel and Natasha followed where the Klingon was pointing, and stared in shock.

Down the main street came a gaggle of Nimbusians on horseback, all trotting in their direction. Many of the men were unknown to them. Some were dressed up with wide-brimmed hats and dusty jackets, others wore nomad cloaks. All carried weapons of some sort.

But they recognised the leaders, as Bri’tor, Kitaxis and Gr’Ash led the unruly gang up to where the three Bounty crewmates stood in shock.

“Told you we had something for you,” Kitaxis smiled at Natasha.

“What the hell?” she managed back.

“You’re riding out there to stop Toxis?” Gr’Ash offered, “Figured we couldn’t let you do that alone. Especially after what you’ve done for us here.”

He rubbed the freshly-stitched scar on his stomach over his shirt and managed a thankful smile at Natasha.

“We asked around,” Kitaxis added, “Didn’t take long to find a lot of folks in Arcadia Falls who want rid of Toxis’s gang more than you do.”

“But...this is going to be incredibly dangerous,” Natasha persisted.

It was Bri’tor who brought his horse forwards to answer her, glancing back at Kitaxis before he started speaking.

“My wife told me all about what you did earlier. Don’t think this town’s seen kindness like that in a long time. Matter of fact, I’d forgotten what that sorta thing felt like.”

The constricting guilt in Natasha’s gut wrapped itself around her another notch.

“And even though it scares me,” he continued, “Feels like we’ve gotta do the right thing. There’s still some good people down here on Nimbus III, after all.”

He gestured back to the strange mix of grizzled miners, nomads and townfolk behind him. Natasha looked over at Jirel again with a knowing stare. The Trill immediately knew what she was getting at, but he opted to play dumb. The last thing he needed now was to deal with her Starfleet guilt.

And he definitely didn’t want to deal with the ever-growing gnawing sense he was feeling inside about their whole situation down on Nimbus III.

“Still think we’re the good guys?” she asked pointedly.

He wasn’t sure he did. Not any more. But he wasn’t going to say that. So instead, he adjusted his hat to the most heroic angle he could manage, and swung himself up onto his horse.

“More than ever,” he lied with a grin.

And then he turned and kicked his horse onwards. And the cavalry rode off out of town.

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

Sunek stood on the deck of the ancient Vulcan sailing ship as it gently drifted across the surface of the Vorothe Sea.

He exhaled as quietly as he could, as he listened to the calm waves gently lapping against the wooden frame of the hull, and focused on maintaining his balance on the slowly rolling boards underneath his feet.

He couldn't help but feel faintly ridiculous standing there like that. Mainly because he wasn't actually standing there like that. He was still back in the sweltering confines of the storage shed he was hiding in back on Goodlife Ranch.

But he needed to focus on his plan. The one that he still didn't have. And so, with his anger and frustration again threatening to bubble over and ruin his concentration, he had retreated back to this old meditation technique from his youth. The one that he had found himself returning to since his run-in with Sokar.

Sokar had used the technique for more nefarious means within his followers. He asked those Vulcans in his thrall to see the Vorothe Sea as it really was back on their homeworld, a violent and unfettered tumult, which ancient ships had only dared navigate at great risk.

As far as he had been concerned, it was downright hypocritical, not to mention inherently illogical, for Vulcans to teach their children meditation with such an inaccurate view of the Vorothe Sea, and a perfect example of the disease at the heart of a Vulcan society that treated emotions as something to be suppressed and purged.

But as Sunek had recovered from his encounter with his former friend, he had come to see that the logic of the scene was in the peace itself. If you could picture serenity in the chaos of the Vorothe Sea, you could control anything.

Which made sense to Sunek now. More so than it used to when he was a child.

Except now, whenever he pictured himself on the deck of the ship, the scene was never entirely tranquil and peaceful, as it was supposed to be. And he was never entirely in control.

He opened his eyes and stared out across the clear expanse of water. And saw the storm on the horizon. And he sighed.

He had pushed it back, forced it to retreat for the time being. But that was all he had done. Sunek chewed his lip, lost in thought for a moment. Because there it was. In the distance. Where it always was.

Feeling like it was waiting to explode into action.

And then he opened his eyes for real, and looked down at the mish-mash of empty seed pods, stripped-down reclaimators and the dregs of various industrial fertilisers and chemicals that lay haphazardly on the ground in front of him. And he allowed himself a quiet but unmistakably Sunek-ian chuckle as he put together the jigsaw puzzle in his mind.

At long last, he had a plan.

Now he just needed to use his Vulcan intellect, the part of his brain that he was usually least interested in using, to figure out the details.

So he went to work, opening up one of the seed pods and examining the bottles for some sort of clue as to what was inside them.

For the time being, as he worked, his anger was forgotten. The storm had almost disappeared. In fact, he was actually happy, because he'd figured it all out. Everything was going to be ok, and it was all thanks to him.

And then, from outside the shed, he heard the gunshot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella watched on in silent horror as the hefty body slowly slumped to the ground in an undignified heap.

For his part, Toxis felt a slight pang of regret at what had just happened. Despite how quickly he had acted. As he gently reloaded his pistol with a tell-tale hiss of air, he stepped forwards and stared down at the still, unmoving form in the sand. He gently stretched out a dusty boot and prodded it slightly, quietly affirming that his shot had been fatal.

"Shame," he muttered to himself, as he chewed his tobacco.

Denella stared down at the man's body, feeling a rush of outrage inside her at the savage and unnecessary death she had just witnessed.

"You didn't have to do that!" she spat out at the gaunt leader of the gang that had now doubled in number since Toxis's arrival a few minutes earlier.

Toxis kicked the body again for good measure and shook his head.

“A damn shame.”

He turned back to the Orion engineer, who struggled against the two men standing either side of her and restraining her out in the middle of the ranch. Next to her, Zesh was whimpering quietly.

The sun was starting to set now, and the shadows around the ranch were lengthening. Though there was no end to the oppressive heat.

Toxis seemed at ease with the climate though. More so even than the other Nimbosians. He stepped up to the defiant green-skinned woman and the more fearful Ferengi and leered at them.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Denella repeated more quietly.

“Afraid I did,” Toxis retorted, “And that was all on you, off-worlders.”

Denella scoffed as she looked back down at the unmoving body of Rutox in the dirt. It turned out that it was him that had run out of time.

“See,” Toxis continued, “If you’d have just done what Rutox asked you to do, he wouldn’t have let me down like that. And that was twice he’d let me down.”

He punctuated that comment by glancing around at the other members of his gang that stood around the ranch, making sure they were all taking that comment in.

It had brought him no joy to shoot a man as loyal to him as Rutox. Men like that were a rare commodity in Prosperity County. Nevertheless, he had his rules. And he also knew that an act like that would send a message to the rest of his men. Anyone considering challenging him or defying him now that he had the ranch and the off-worlders under his control.

Nothing could have underlined his ruthlessness more.

For her part, Denella returned her gaze to Toxis, staring at his deep blue eyes underneath the peak of his hat with a look of impotent rage. She balled her fists up and felt herself shaking. She was perfectly used to death and to killing. A lot more so than she’d like to be. But it was the senselessness of the act she’d just witnessed that had so outraged her.

“Course,” Toxis continued, casually pacing off to one side, “I could always have killed you. After all, you’re the ones that are defying me, aren’t you? But then, I do kinda need you to get into that ship of yours.”

He turned back to Denella and stared darkly at her.

“And I am going to get into that ship of yours. And I’d rather do it without having to kill any other folks, understood?”

“Y—You know,” Zesh stammered, “I have a cousin who runs a supply route in the Badlands, he’s always on the lookout for personal bodyguards. Pays a very handsome salary—”

Not for the first time today, the Ferengi’s improvised attempt at negotiating was silenced by a pistol being pointed at his head. On the other end of the pistol, Toxis kept his focus on Denella.

“But I’m always willing to kill some more if that’s what it takes to get the message across.”

The Orion woman mentally calculated the likelihood of her being able to surprise the tall Nimbosian and disarm him before any of his cohorts were able to shoot her or Zesh.

Although the others she could see in her peripheral vision didn’t have their weapons ready, she concluded that there was zero chance of that being successful. Even if she did wrest the pistol from Toxis, there would still be plenty of time for his cohorts to shoot them before she’d even had a chance to run for cover.

“Ten...nine...” Toxis began.

Upon hearing the countdown, a bead of nervous sweat dripped down Zesh’s face, past the barrel of the pistol that was still pointed squarely at him.

“Um,” the Ferengi managed, “Denella?”

“...Eight...seven...”

Denella idly wondered whether letting the bandits onto the Bounty would actually prove a tactical advantage, whether she could use the home soil to her benefit.

“...Six...five...”

She quietly cursed herself for not building more failsafes into the ship. Once they were inside, the weapons would be theirs.

“...Four...three...”

“Denella!”

But that couldn’t be helped.

“...Two...”

She grimaced and nodded, ending the countdown in its tracks, to the relief of Zesh. She didn't need to be a champion Tongo player like him to see when the cards were stacked against her. She'd bought all the time she could.

Which, as it turned out, was just the amount of time that had been needed.

In the sudden silence that followed the end of the countdown, everyone inside the ranch heard a curious clanging sound. A metal object haphazardly hitting a sandy surface. They all turned as one to see a small cylindrical object rolling gently towards them.

Nobody had seen where it had come from, but based on the trajectory, it had probably been thrown from one of the sheds on the far side of the open ground they were standing on.

But nobody really had any time to contemplate the origins of the object any further than that.

Because then Sunek's bomb exploded.

## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The cavalry charged on through the desert.

Viewed as a whole, it certainly wasn't the most imposing sight. A haphazard collection of a couple of dozen individuals racing across the scorching sand in a loose huddle, kicking up the dust as they thundered onwards towards their target. But what they lacked in organisation, they made up for in a shared sense of determination.

Klath, his earlier unhappiness with the main mode of transport on Nimbus III now forgotten, rode at the head of the improvised militia, eager to get to the impending battle.

To his side, Jirel kept pace. Mainly to keep an eye on the Klingon's galloping horse, in case it improvised a new destination for its passenger as it had done on their ride to Arcadia Falls.

Further back, Gr' Ash was keeping a tight grip on his Nimbosian rifle, already drawn and loaded with pellets. He suppressed a wince on each heavy landing as it jarred his scarred stomach, making him doubly committed to not getting surprised as he had been earlier in the saloon.

All around, the other grizzled Nimbosians raced along with them, armed with whatever pistols or rifles they had brought with them. Each one equally determined to come back alive.

As they rushed onwards, Natasha deftly brought her own steed up alongside Jirel's. The wannabe cowboy, spurs still jangling along with the sound of hooves, did his best to ignore her presence. Mainly because he was pretty sure he knew what she was going to say.

"They're putting everything on the line for us," she called out, not caring who else heard.

Jirel stifled a grimace. He'd been right. But despite her latest comment, and his own growing concerns on the same issue, he used the shared sense of determination within the group to keep focused on their objective.

"And they're getting something in return," he fired back, "We drive Toxis and his gang away, and they get their town back."

"Until the next gang of outlaws shows up."

Jirel failed to stifle the second grimace. He glanced over at the irritatingly benign face of the doctor riding next to him. The face that he really hated to let down. The face that, ever since he had first seen it, seemed to have an unerring ability to cut through whatever facade he attempted to put up, and was somehow able to burrow right down into the deepest recesses of his feelings.

And the face that he was now starting to get seriously annoyed by. Because it was the face of someone that had a point.

"You know what's really healthy?" he called back, "Suppressing stuff. Trust me. Just take all that pesky guilt and bury it really nice and deep down in that brain of yours, ok?"

"Why, Counsellor, I didn't recognise you out of uniform."

"Let's just...focus on winning our ranch back, ok?"

"Our ranch?"

Before his grimace threatened to permanently take control of his face, Jirel just sighed and kicked his horse on, moving out to lead the pack. He was hoping it looked like the actions of a dashing space cowboy hero, asserting himself at the head of the cavalry.

But in reality, as Natasha watched him move, it just looked like the actions of someone who was fresh out of answers. She shook her head sadly and eased her own horse back, dropping back into the rest of the pack.

Before long, she found Kitaxis and Bri'tor, the couple now risking their lives for the Bounty's crew, and an awful lot of latinum they were completely unaware of. She felt a familiar gnawing sense of guilt inside, but offered the willing nurse and the meek bartender a supportive smile.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"We were just thinking," Kitaxis offered back, "About when we used to sit up at night and talk about getting away from Prosperity County for good."

The level of guilt inside her rose by a few more inches.

"Except," Bri'tor added with a rueful chuckle, "We never really had an idea of where we'd go, even if we could. Been here for so long, it's our only home. No matter what happened. Guess we both convinced ourselves things'd get better one day."

"And," Kitaxis added as she bounced in the saddle of her steed, "Turns out the universe might have had a plan for us this whole time."

The guilt rose higher. It felt like it was up to her shoulders.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” she offered, silently hoping that they might just agree and ride back to town.

Bri’tor and Kitaxis looked over at each other from either side of Natasha’s own horse, in unspoken agreement over their potentially futile actions.

“All this time since my brother died, we’ve been trying to stay of trouble,” Bri’tor replied, “Just trying to stay safe. But I guess there’s no such thing as staying safe on Nimbus III. So all that’s left is to stand up and be counted.”

“Amen to that,” Kitaxis affirmed.

Natasha felt the level of guilt inside her reach her neck. Her lack of response gave Kitaxis an opening to continue.

“Can I ask you a question, honey?”

She nodded back over the thundering of the hooves in the sand below.

“It’s just,” the nurse continued, “One thing we can’t figure out is why you folks didn’t escape from all this while you could. I mean, we might all be stuck here, but you folks have a ship. You could have left Goodlife Ranch any time you wanted.”

The guilt rose so high that Natasha started to feel like she was drowning, straining to keep her head above it.

“I guess we were just wondering what’s so important about this ranch anyway?”

Natasha pictured the precious water pump, back in the hut on the ranch, and the priceless treasure that it contained. She recalled the poverty that she had seen back in Arcadia Falls, the constant struggle and sacrifices that the other Nimbosians had to find fresh water of their own. She thought about the sacrifices this group was now making, not realising that it was all merely in aid of the Bounty’s crew making a healthy chunk of latinum.

The guilt no longer felt like a liquid that was drowning her. It felt solid, crystallising all around her and choking her as it did so.

And she decided that, regardless of whether it was Starfleet guilt talking or not, the Nimbosians she was riding into battle with deserved to know everything.

After all, they were supposed to be the good guys.

“Listen,” she began, “The truth is that—”

“Look!”

Natasha had no idea where the cry had come from, but it snapped everyone’s attention back towards their destination.

They had just entered the valley where Goodlife Ranch was located, and from this distance, it was just about possible to make out the small group of ramshackle buildings that made up the unassuming settlement.

But it wasn’t the ranch itself that their attention had been called to. There was a plume of smoke rising up from within the confines of the ranch, slowly disappearing into the ether.

Whatever had caused it, one thing was immediately clear to every member of the cavalry.

The battle had already started.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toxis coughed and spluttered to get the dirt and sand out of his mouth as he regained his footing.

The ringing in his ears subsided as he tried to take in what had happened. One second, he had been interrogating the off-worlders, finally about to gain access to their ship, and the next, all hell had broken loose.

All around him, all he could see was smoke and dirt from the explosion. All he could hear were the occasional panicked shout from one of his men, coupled with the occasional gunshot. He had no idea who was shooting, nor at what, but he suspected that they were instinctively firing at shadows, completely disorientated by the situation.

He could no longer see the off-worlders. The green-skinned woman and the bulbous-headed man had entirely disappeared from view.

The grizzled outlaw grimaced and gripped his weapon tightly, blinking through the choking air to try and resolve the scene in front of him.

As the view cleared, he could make out that some of his men had already scattered. The sound of hooves galloping away from them suggested that the explosion had been enough for some of them to immediately cut their losses. Loyalties be damned. But plenty had remained, and were still standing around the expanse of the ranch, coughing and blinking in confusion.

As they saw Toxis through the smoke, they began to make their way over.

It was immediately clear to all of them that their boss wasn’t in a good mood.

“Don’t come this way!” he bellowed, “Get out there, find those goddamned off-worlders, and bring them back to me!”

In an instant, every man stopped in their tracks sprung into action, checking their pistols and fanning out into the ranch, even as the dust cleared further.

Toxis himself gritted his teeth in anger. He had no idea where the bomb had come from. But presumably it had come from a colleague of the off-worlders. Which meant that there had been someone left on the ranch even after his men had seized and searched it.

Which meant that someone had let him down again.

And that made him even angrier. His usually calm and cool demeanour now completely left behind in the dirt.

Just as he prepared to take off and join the hunt, he heard something else over the calls from his men and the residual ringing in his ears. He turned to peer through the smoke, following the sound of clattering hooves, terrified screams from some of his men, and the sound of further gunshots.

The cavalry had arrived.

Toxis prided himself on his eagerness and his willingness to fight. That was what had got him as far as he already had gotten in life.

But something else had gotten him this far as well. A deep sense of pragmatism. He was always willing to fight, so long as the odds were on his side.

So, as his remaining men took on the fresh carnage of an invasion through the chaos left behind by the bomb, and a few more of them took the opportunity to flee from the ranch entirely, Toxis slipped away into the shadows.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was one thing that the Ferengi hated more than anything else, and that was loud and unexpected noises.

Their wide, bulbous ears and associated keen sense of hearing were often an advantage in their day to day lives, especially around the negotiating table. But they were also constantly at risk from sudden changes in volume, especially when given no time to really prepare.

And right now, Zesh was cursing his biggest assets, as he hid behind one of the outlying buildings at Goodlife Ranch, desperately trying to quell the ringing in his ears.

One of the more shameful events in Ferengi history was the reign of Grand Nagus Utek in the early 22nd century. A paranoid and cruel ruler who had authorised the use of sonic weapons against perceived enemies of the state. Having read about the brutality of the pain as a young student, about how subjects had been sent insane from powerful blasts of sound waves, inflicted on them for crimes as minor as underpaying their respects at the Chamber of Opportunity, Zesh had never really understood what they must have gone through.

But now he was getting a pretty good idea.

The ringing seemed to fill his entire skull, the constant buzzing sound leaving him almost entirely cut off from his most precious of senses.

Keeping his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to resolve the situation, he blinked through tear-streaked eyes, caused by the dust kicked up by the explosion, and tried to figure out exactly where he was.

As soon as the bomb had gone off and everyone had scattered in fear and confusion, Zesh had found himself released from the grip of his captors, and had raced off blindly into the ranch until he had found some cover. He had only made it a few yards before he had tripped and fallen to the ground, seconds before a gunshot had sounded out and a deadly pellet had gone whistling past where he had previously been standing.

After that near miss, he had desperately crawled the rest of the way to cover, operating on his survival instinct alone.

He wasn’t quite sure which building he was behind, but he was pretty sure that he was close to the main homestead. And if he could get there, he at least had a chance to find a weapon and find a way to get to the rest of the Bounty’s crew.

He awkwardly smacked the sides of his head a few times to try and clear the buzzing, which only partly worked. In the distance, he was sure he could just about make out the sound of hooves and further gunshots, but he didn’t have time to contextualise those.

Instead, he crept along, hugging the wall of the building he was behind, finding his way to the corner and feeling glad that the ringing was starting to subside.

He felt less glad of his situation seconds later, when he rounded the corner itself.

And he saw the barrel of the gun.

## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

Klath had generally been pretty miserable since they had arrived on Nimbus III. What with the heat, and the horses, and the bemusing rules of their bizarre location. But at long last, he was finally managing to enjoy himself. The weapons he was wielding may have been antiquated, but a battle was still a battle.

The Klingon fired his pistol off into the melee, before ducking back behind the cover that he, Jirel and Natasha had found, and turning back to his colleagues.

“This is much more like it,” he growled with satisfaction.

Jirel stifled a smile, even as several projectiles whizzed past their position, and fired in the rough direction they had come from.

Although it was hard to tell in the anarchic tumult that had descended on Goodlife Ranch, it felt like they were inching towards their goal.

The cavalry had arrived to find Toxis’s men already in the midst of scattering, as a result of whatever explosion had gone off. Many of them had continued to flee after seeing them arrive, clambering back on their horses and riding off. And the cavalry had let them go. But despite the pandemonium, plenty more had decided to stay behind and fight.

Klath fired again, then urgently gestured to the next building along.

“Now!”

He raced the short distance across the dusty ground to the next position of cover, with Jirel and Natasha following close behind, both of whom dived the final few feet as another pellet pinged past them and arrived at the fresh cover in a small cloud of sand.

“Any sign of the others?” Natasha called out as she checked her own weapons.

Neither of her colleagues had an immediate answer. They were yet to locate Denella, Sunek or Zesh. And most of the others that they had ridden in with from Arcadia Falls had quickly melted into the ranch to find their own cover.

An agonised scream sounded out from somewhere around them. It wasn’t the first. Natasha once again found herself hoping whoever it was had only been injured.

“We are making progress,” Klath reported as he scanned ahead of them, “More of our enemies have escaped. Those that remain are disoriented. There is little organisation to their attacks.”

He fired around the corner as he ducked his head out for a further check.

“And I believe I may have a route to the Bounty’s position from here. If you provide covering fire—”

He was stopped by a gentle pat on the shoulder from Jirel. “I’ll do it.”

“Jirel,” Natasha sighed over the melee, “Don’t be stupid.”

“Hey now, I’m always stupid,” he grinned, before looking back at Klath, “Besides, you were right. It was that dumb plan of mine that got us into this mess. Only fair I get us out of it.”

“It will be extremely risky,” the Klingon pointed out.

“True. But I’m faster than you are. Besides, it’s always a lot less risky when you’re the one doing the covering fire.”

Before the Klingon could offer any more resistance, Jirel reloaded his pistols and stepped to the edge of their cover, gesturing ahead. “Head to the right, around the back of the big outhouse, and I should have a clear path to where we’re parked, right?”

Klath nodded. Natasha drew up to the pair of them, looking distinctly worried.

“Jirel, for the last time, this isn’t a holodeck program.”

A further flurry of pellets whizzed past to underline her point, and for a moment, Jirel’s trademark cocky grin slipped from his face.

“Yeah,” he nodded, “I know that now.”

But before he allowed himself to get too serious, he also couldn’t resist picking his grin up from off the ground and adopting his most elaborate space cowboy pose to date, puffing his chest out to such an extent that it looked like he was about to snap a vertebrae.

“But don’t you worry,” he added with a painfully exaggerated drawl, “I’ll be back before you know it, little lady.”

With that, the Trill turned and raced out from their cover, as Klath fired as precisely as he could in the direction of their enemy’s positions for long enough for Jirel to reach his destination. Puffs of dirt were kicked up by pellets hitting the ground just behind the wannabe hero’s boots, spurs and all, but he just about made it to cover before any hit home.

Satisfied, Klath ducked back and reloaded his pistols, before glancing at Natasha with confusion.

“‘Little lady’?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella landed a punch to the side of the Nimbosian goon’s head, causing the taller bald man to stagger back, his hat flopping to the dusty ground.

She followed up with a kick to the man’s standing leg that was strong enough to drop him down and join his headwear, and a second kick that connected with his head with enough force to knock the consciousness clean out of him.

Panting from the exertion, and feeling her lungs ache from the dirt she had inhaled, she relieved the unconscious man of his pistol and dashed for some cover.

She had been separated from Zesh ever since Sunek’s improvised distraction, having managed to break free of her captors in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. Since then, she had been doing her best to find either the Ferengi or the Vulcan. But all she had found were a succession of Nimbosian outlaws.

She peered around the corner of the hut she was now concealed behind and scoured the nearby landscape. In the distance, several buildings away, she could just about make out what appeared to be a cat-like woman in a nurse’s uniform firing a rifle alongside a cloaked nomad, the two of them fighting side by side from their own position of cover.

She shook her head to try and clear her vision, and after ascertaining that what she had seen hadn’t been a mirage, she decided that it might be best to head the other way.

She raced to the next building, even as gunshots continued to sound out in the distance.

But she arrived at the new cover at exactly the same time as another of Toxis’s men running from the other direction. The two of them froze as they saw each other, before Denella swiftly brought her newly acquired air pistol to bear on her target, assuming the Nimbosian would do exactly the same to her.

All things being equal, he may well have done. But Denella then saw that he wasn’t armed.

“P—Please, miss!” the young man cried out, raising his hands, “Don’t shoot!”

Denella gritted her teeth as she stared back at the terrified Nimbosian. She had done her fair share of killing just recently. Particularly, a vengeful rampage that had taken her back to the heart of the Orion Syndicate.

But at least she had known for a fact that everyone there had deserved it. Looking at the terrified and emaciated man in front of her, she wasn’t so sure that the same was true here. So, she found that her trigger finger, which had served her so well earlier, refused to budge. Instead, she lowered her weapon and jerked her head towards the exit of Goodlife Ranch.

“Run,” she muttered, “And don’t stop.”

The Nimbosian followed both instructions to the best of his ability.

Denella allowed herself a moment of relief that she still had a charitable side inside her, before she continued to hunt for her friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel had taken a moment to get his breath after sprinting for his life to the cover of the building that Klath had indicated was the best location to get to the Bounty from.

He reloaded his pistols and placed them in his holsters for the time being, trying not to feel too much of a fresh sense of shame as he saw his fancy replicated belt buckle glinting back at him from his waist.

He crept along the side of the building and approached the open space on the other side. Peering around the corner, he saw a reassuringly familiar sight off in the distance. Just beyond the fence that served as the boundary of Goodlife Ranch, the Bounty sat parked in the desert, oblivious to the pitched battle still continuing in its presence.

Behind him, he could hear the gunfire was starting to drop in frequency and intensity, suggesting that while the battle still wasn’t over, the cavalry was winning the day and driving off the outlaws.

Once he was back aboard the Bounty, he could use the transporter to resolve the final few skirmishes. Whatever the rules were about what was and wasn’t allowed on Nimbus III, he was sure he could get away with that. So it was with a renewed sense of confidence that he stepped out from behind the building and started to make for the ship, with the slowly setting sun shining in his face.

Even though there was a lack of cover, the fighting was some distance away now. He felt safe enough to make a move for it.

After a few paces, his spurs gently clinking as he went, he heard the voice.

“That’s far enough, off-worlder.”

Jirel slowly turned around, already recognising who was there. From behind another building, a short distance away, Toxis emerged.

As the Trill furtively scanned the local vicinity with his eyes, worried about having fallen into some sort of ambush, the other man let out a dark laugh. “No need to check,” he continued, “This time, it’s just you and me, stranger.”

Despite the danger he was clearly now in, and despite knowing he definitely wasn’t on the holodeck, Jirel couldn’t help but feel an excited chill pass down his spine as he stood opposite the outlaw clad all in black.

It was just the two of them, facing off against each other. Both with pistols at their waists.

“...Awesome.”

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

Zesh hadn't had the pleasure of being formally introduced to Sa'Loq. But he didn't need to be on first name terms to see which side he was on. The pistol pointed at his stomach rather gave that away.

The Ferengi didn't have a weapon of his own. So once again, he had to fall back on his ability to negotiate.

"L—Listen," he stammered, his hands raised up to the heavens, "Before you kill me, and have that unspeakable act on your conscience for the rest of your life, you may want to consider that I was just the victim of a very loud explosion, which has almost certainly caused irreparable damage to my auditory cortex. In fact, I'm positive it ruptured my tympanic artery, which given our remote location means inoperable internal bleeding. So, really, w—when you think about it, I'm already dead."

His adversary didn't seem overly sold on the negotiation. Zesh felt his legs turning to jelly.

"You know, off-worlder," Sa-Loq grunted, "Toxis wants you rounded up and brought back in. But maybe I'll just tell him this was self-defence..."

Sa-Loq cocked his pistol. Zesh licked his parched lips and opened his mouth again. Both men were surprised to hear the angry roar that emanated out.

Except the sound hadn't come from Zesh.

Instead, just as Sa'Loq went to pull the trigger, the banshee-like form of a crazed Vulcan in a garish Hawaiian shirt raced in as if from nowhere and tackled the gangly Nimbosian to the ground in a flurry of screams and limbs. The force of the collision was powerful enough to send the loaded pistol skittering across the dirt, out of reach of both of them.

Instead of grabbing the freshly liberated weapon, Zesh found himself watching in shock as Sunek, seemingly powered by some sort of primal rage, grappled with Sa'Loq for dear life.

Even though his opponent had him beaten in terms of height and weight, the Vulcan seemed to be making up for it with sheer energy, and despite the humid early evening conditions on the ranch, he was soon on top.

Sunek, for his part, was barely thinking about what he was doing. As soon as he had turned the corner and seen Sa'Loq's weapon pointed at Zesh, he had acted on instinct. An instant flare of passionate anguish had rushed up from deep inside, and the next thing he knew, he was wrestling the man in the choking dirt.

He was still running off that fulminating anger as he fired a couple of punches into the midriff of Sa'Loq with enough force to clear the air from his body.

Sunek would have been the first to admit that he wasn't a natural fighter. In fact, he was probably the least capable of the entire Bounty crew. Still, right here and now, that didn't seem to matter. He managed to sit up in the dirt, straddling his opponent. Sa'Loq's desperate attempts to parry the blows that rained down from above became weaker and weaker.

And each time a punch landed, it was accompanied by a growl of guttural fury from the depths of Sunek's heart.

So consuming was his anger that it didn't even register with him when the Nimbosian succumbed to unconsciousness from the force of the beating. That he was now merely thumping his fists down onto the bloodied face of a man who could no longer fight back.

He was still running on frenzied autopilot as he reached into the back pocket of his trousers and withdrew the small whittling knife he'd been working with earlier. The one he had already got a feel for as a weapon during his impromptu melee attack on the wooden handrail of the homestead.

Without a second thought, he thumbed the sharp blade out of the housing and raised it above his head, a murderous glint in his eyes.

"Sunek!"

Zesh's hand grabbed his arm with enough force to stop him in his tracks.

"I think you got him," the Ferengi added, the sarcasm in his tone disguising the deeper shock that he was feeling from what he had just witnessed.

And suddenly, the rage subsided inside Sunek. Replaced by a feeling of horror at what he had done. He dropped the knife and hurriedly clambered off Sa'Loq's unmoving body, scrambling backwards through the dirt on his hands and knees, trying to get away from the bruised and bloodied face of the man he had just attacked as he took in ragged lungfuls of warm air, panting from exertion.

Zesh awkwardly leaned down and checked the unconscious Sa'Loq for a pulse. Despite the aching in his tired lungs, Sunek suddenly found himself holding his breath.

"Is he—?"

Zesh stood back up and wiped the second-hand blood off his hand with his pocket square, before looking back at the Vulcan in the dirt. "He'll

live.”

The Ferengi helped Sunek back to his feet, who only now took his eyes off his victim to look down at his bloodied and ragged knuckles, the skin worn raw by the force he had used.

“I thought you Vulcans just did that nerve pinch of yours?” Zesh added as they hastily walked away from the scene of the fight.

It didn’t happen often, but Sunek found that he didn’t have anything to say. He didn’t know what he could say.

Because he wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s over, Toxis. You lost.”

Jirel tried to keep all traces of cockiness out of his voice as he stared the outlaw down and the shadows grew longer across the ranch. He was only partially successful.

“But listen,” he continued, “I’m a nice guy. You can leave Prosperity County. And you’ll have my word that nobody’ll follow you.”

Toxis didn’t move. Both of his hands hung down near his holstered pistols. He managed a slight grunt of amusement. “You really don’t understand how things work here, do you, stranger?” he said, “See, Toxis doesn’t lose.”

Now he did move, taking a step to his right. Jirel matched his movement. The two men slowly circled each other, Jirel doing his best to ignore the embarrassing clink of his spurs with every step he took.

After a few more steps, Toxis stopped. Jirel did the same. It didn’t take the Trill long to see what that little manoeuvre had been for. The setting sun was now in his eyeline, and Toxis had moved around so that his view was unimpeded.

Should have seen that one coming, he thought to himself with a rueful grimace.

Instinctively, he moved his hands a little closer to his own pistols, as he stared through the reddening sky at his adversary. “Everyone’s got to lose one day,” he quipped back across the distance between them, “Guess today’s that day for you.”

Toxis was unmoved. His only response was to send a familiar glob of tobacco down onto the ground next to his foot, without taking his eyes off the Trill.

A slight gust of wind blew a slither of dust across the expanse between them. But it did little to quell the heat of the moment.

Jirel was sure that Toxis’s hands were now resting on his pistols.

“You know, you’ve been talking pretty smart ever since I met you,” Toxis offered back, “And I’ve really been looking forward to wiping that dumb smile off your face.”

“Bigger men than you have tried,” Jirel called back, entirely truthfully.

In the distance, the sound of gunfire elsewhere in the ranch grew ever more sporadic. Each man ignored it, keeping their focus on each other.

Jirel felt his own hand twitch over his pistols.

He couldn’t help but recall the times he’d practised his quick draw in front of the mirror as a kid. And also a few times in his cabin on the Bounty since they had started their journey to Nimbus III. He was just a tiny bit disappointed that it wasn’t actually high noon.

Unfortunately for Jirel, he had once again entirely confused holosuite programs with reality. Because, while most of the scene he was in was straight out of the old Westerns he had excitedly watched as a dorky child back on Earth, Toxis wasn’t.

Toxis was no programmed character, or connoisseur of old Earth culture and the rules of the final showdown. He was from the Planet of Galactic Peace.

Which meant that, as Jirel continued to soak in the scene, Toxis felt no compulsion to stand on any further ceremony.

Before the Trill in the cowboy hat had time to fully contemplate what was happening, he saw Toxis draw a pistol. And he heard the gunshot.

Jirel had never been shot by a projectile weapon before.

He’d been on the wrong end of just about every other sort of weaponry. He’d been burned by disruptor fire, stunned by phasers, been slashed and stabbed by more bladed weapons than he cared to remember and been punched more times than a Terrellian boxer. But this was new. So he had no idea what it was supposed to feel like.

Still, he was pretty sure it was supposed to feel like something.

On the other side of the shoot-out, Toxis stood stock-still, outlined by the encroaching sunset, with a serene look on his gaunt face.

A split second before he'd pulled the trigger and finished off the irritating off-worlder for good, he'd felt something. Something he immediately realised he should have picked up on before, but that it was now too late to do anything about.

He'd felt a tingling on the back of his neck.

Now, as the pain from the pellet slowly engulfed his torso, and his eyes began to glaze over, he heard the scratch of footsteps in the sand behind him. He didn't bother to turn around.

"Huh," he grunted, with a slightly weakened voice, "It's you."

And with that, he fell to the ground, leaving Jirel staring across at where Bri'tor had emerged from behind one of the nearby buildings, holding a gently hissing pistol. The Trill watched on as the bartender walked over to where Toxis had fallen and stared down at the man that he had feared for so long.

"Yep," Bri'tor grunted, "It's me. And...that was for my brother."

Toxis didn't reply. He'd never reply to anything ever again.

Jirel quickly walked over to where Bri'tor stood. The bartender acknowledged him as he approached with a simple nod.

"How the hell did you know we were here?" the Trill asked.

Bri'tor gestured down at Jirel's feet with the barrel of his gun.

"Heard your boots."

Jirel looked down at his spurs, and made a mental note to miss out that part of the story when he told the others later.

Mustering a smile, he looked back up at Bri'tor. "Well, thanks. I guess I owe—"

He stopped himself, glancing around at the ranch and smiling ruefully.

"I guess I owe you one."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Jirel and Bri'tor made it back to the centre of Goodlife Ranch, the battle was well and truly over. The remaining stragglers in Toxis's gang that had made it to the end had found themselves entirely outnumbered and outgunned, and had taken off on their horses even before hearing of their boss's untimely demise.

And so the two of them returned to find that an atmosphere of quiet celebration had descended on the scene.

After sharing a respectful nod, they parted ways. Bri'tor rushed over to embrace Kitaxis, who was looking over several injured townsfolk as best she could with help from Natasha, while Jirel headed to where Klath, Denella, Sunek and Zesh had gathered, in the shade of the main homestead. As soon as he got to them, he was accosted by Denella, who gave him a relieved hug.

"You're an idiot," she said.

"I know."

"We were victorious," Klath added with a hearty tone, entirely unnecessarily.

"I know that as well. Everyone ok?"

For some reason, the only person that didn't acknowledge him was Sunek, who seemed preoccupied with something else. Before Jirel could enquire any further about what the matter was, Natasha joined them.

"I think we all made it," she said, gesturing back to the injured townsfolk, "A fair few injuries and wounds, but we've patched them all up."

"Thank you all," Zesh sighed in relief as he patted his brow with a fresh pocket square, "Now, with Toxis gone and the pump repaired, all we need to do is wait for my buyer. He should be here in another—"

"Nope."

Zesh was stopped in his tracks by Jirel's comment. The others looked equally perplexed. Jirel sighed deeply, then continued.

"We can't do that, Zesh. We can't go through with the sale."

His comment was met by a sea of confused faces, and one distinctly miffed Ferengi. "After all we've just been through," Zesh retorted, "We most certainly can!"

"No," Jirel shook his head, glancing at the woman standing next to him, "Natasha was right. We can't just make a profit off these people, Zesh. Not now. They just risked their lives to help us out down here—"

“We all just risked our lives!” the Ferengi fired back, “Do you have any idea how many guns I’ve had pointed at me today?”

But Jirel’s mind was made up. He didn’t exactly like the way that it was made up, but it was made up nevertheless. “I’m serious,” he persisted, “If we do this, we’re no better than the guys we just drove out of town. We’re just another gang sweeping into Prosperity County, taking what we want, and leaving them with nothing. Can you honestly say that doesn’t bother you?”

“Yes,” Zesh said with an irritated glare.

“Well,” Jirel replied with a defeated shrug, “Turns out it bothers me.”

“Good,” Natasha nodded, “Cos it bothers me as well.”

To the surprise of everyone, Klath stepped over to where the two defiant Bounty crew members stood in opposition to the Ferengi, joining in with their impromptu protest. “These people fought well,” he boomed, “It would not be honourable for us to take advantage of their courage for our own means.”

Zesh rolled his eyes. He could see where this was going.

“Well, I guess I’m with these guys,” Denella chimed in, as she stepped over to the group, “This isn’t how I wanna make my fortune.”

Everyone, including Zesh, turned their attention to Sunek. The Vulcan had been entirely passive so far, still troubled by and struggling to process what he had just done during the fight for the ranch.

But, seeing that everyone’s attention was on him, Sunek did what he did best, and buried his own troubles deep down inside himself in order to reassert his usual cheeky demeanour.

He allowed a comforting grin to spread across his face.

“I can see my crewmates are being incredibly stupid, even by their own standards,” he said, “And I’m totally onboard with it.”

He bounded over to join the others. Zesh stared at the united group like they’d just trashed his own Attainment Ceremony.

“Come on, Zesh,” Jirel pressed, “You got the place for free. It’s not like you’re losing anything.”

“Except for all the latinum that Markalian was gonna give you,” Sunek added, now entirely back to his old self.

Zesh sighed and shook his head, throwing his hands up in resignation. He was as defeated as Toxis’s gang had been. “Why,” he said miserably, “Why are you being like this? I mean, you really don’t have to be like this, you know? You’re not Starfleet!”

Jirel adjusted his hat, running his hand across the brim to position it at just the right angle.

“No, we’re not,” he drawled, “We’re the good guys.”

The others rolled their eyes more thoroughly than ever before. Zesh tutted miserably.

“This,” he grumbled at the Trill, “This is why you’ll never make a profit.”

#### **End of Part Four**

## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **Part Five**

The Bounty remained parked next to Goodlife Ranch as the formalities of Zesh's revised deal for the place were completed.

It didn't take long. On Nimbus III, formal ownership rights rarely existed in any strict legal sense. So, instead, one moment Goodlife Ranch belonged to Zesh, and the next it didn't.

The new owners stood inside the stifling heat of the hut and watched as Denella excitedly talked them through their new treasure. A treasure that, despite the Orion woman having hated it for most of the repair, she had grown to find fascinating.

"See," she said, pointing at the pump unit as she babbled on, "Actually, it's using an old fashioned mechanical pump to bring up the water, but there's a whole isolar control unit bolted on alongside to control the pressure, flow rate, and everything else. There's this duranium wiring running between the two, and the way the two systems have been integrated is actually—"

She paused and looked back at the blank faces of Bri'tor and Kitaxis staring back at her, apparently less enthused by the details of the uniquely Nimbosian technology in front of them.

"Well," she added with a shrug, "I thought it was cool."

Standing to the side of the new owners of Goodlife Ranch, Natasha offered Denella a smile, while Kitaxis stepped forward and shook the Orion woman's hand.

"Thank you," she said, with sincerity, if not with understanding.

Denella nodded and smiled, then stepped over to the exit. Just as she was about to leave, she turned back and gestured to a supply crate on the far side of the hut. "Oh, yeah, it'll be fine if you keep up with the maintenance, but just in case, there's a spare motor in there. Actually, it's interesting, because I was expecting it to be an old flywheel design, but it's actually based on a type that the Klingons use in their—"

The blank stares returned. She gestured to the crate again, slightly embarrassed.

"So, yep, spare parts are over there."

With this, the green-skinned woman left them alone, and Kitaxis and Bri'tor turned back to Natasha, their faces lighting up with thanks.

"You really gonna let us have all this?" Bri'tor asked, still not believing it.

"We really are," Natasha nodded back.

She walked over to the pump, filling a canteen with fresh water and passing it to them. They drank thirstily and smiled in satisfaction at the crisp, fresh taste of the life-giving liquid inside.

"So," she continued, "No Toxis, and all the water that Prosperity County should need to keep everyone healthy. Plus, I've unpacked a few basic medical supplies for that infirmary of yours."

"I don't know how we can ever thank you," Kitaxis whispered, "Why are you folks doing all of this for us?"

Natasha paused. She didn't really want to get into her guilt right now. Because the longer she had thought about it, the less she felt it was mere residual Starfleet guilt, and the more she felt it was something else. A deeper, more long-lasting guilt connected to her final act onboard a starship.

No, she definitely didn't want to get into that right now.

"Just call it a thank you," she replied instead, "For everything you helped us with."

The Nimbosian couple smiled thankfully again. Generosity was in even shorter supply than kindness in Prosperity County.

"And you say it'll never run out?" Bri'tor asked, gesturing to the pump.

"You'll need to be careful, ration it appropriately," she explained, "But from what I can tell, no. There's a reservoir under here that's being constantly replenished."

The husband and wife nodded again, even as Natasha continued without prompting.

"I mean, I know it almost never rains on Nimbus III. But the mountains around this particular valley seem to be made from an especially porous rock, and while the temperature at the peaks doesn't allow for ice formation, I believe the atmospheric conditions at night must condense the water vapour into droplets all year round, which then pass down through the rock strata to form a permanent water table in the valley that's high enough to—"

She stopped as she saw a pair of familiar blank faces.

“Well. I thought it was cool.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Whatever the noise was, it was definitely coming from inside the ship.

Denella had returned to the Bounty to find that all was not right. She crept along the ship’s single main corridor with one ear cocked, trying to figure out what the exact problem was. She prided herself on being able to identify just about any technical or mechanical issue onboard the ship by sound alone. From a loose drive plate to a faulty plasma relay, she was proud to possess a sixth sense in her diagnostic toolkit.

But this sound was new. A harsh and disharmonious rasping sound that she didn’t recognise and was struggling to pin down. Which was very troubling. Because if the Bounty was making a noise she didn’t recognise, that meant that she didn’t know her ship anywhere near as well as she thought she did.

Just as she reached the end of the corridor, and began to wonder whether she needed to start ripping off wall panels to track the source down before they took off, she realised it was coming from the dining area at the front of the ship. She walked over to the doors and heard the rasping sound increasing in intensity. Bracing herself for whatever fresh technical malady lay ahead, she stepped inside.

And found Sunek sitting at the table, blowing into a curious metal object.

“Sunek!” she snapped, “What the hell?”

The Vulcan looked up and took the object away from his mouth, ending the teeth-jarring noise for the time being. He waved the object at her and shrugged. “It’s called a harmonica,” he offered, “Another one of Jirel’s weird old Earth things. Figured it might suit me more than whittling.”

“You’ve definitely given up on that, then?”

Sunek remembered the last thing he’d attempted to use the whittling knife for during his one-sided fight with the Nimbosian goon, and suppressed a shudder.

“Yep,” he said, without expanding on his reasons, “Thought I’d try something musical instead.”

“Is it...supposed to sound like that?”

Sunek looked down at the shiny silver harmonica in his hand and offered another shrug.

“No idea.”

Oblivious to the real reason for his decision to quit whittling, Denella sighed and contemplated the ever-growing list of Sunek’s abandoned hobbies. A list she suspected the harmonica was destined for as well.

“Well, can you maybe practise somewhere more sound-proofed? You had me worried that the ship was falling apart.”

Sunek looked around and took in the ever-sorry state of the Bounty. “The ship is falling apart—?”

“The ship is fine!”

With a further sigh, she turned back to the door. Sunek called out before she exited.

“Hey, um, Denella?”

She patiently turned back around, wondering what additional pithy remark he had lined up for her about her ship. But for once, Sunek wasn’t thinking about pithy remarks. Instead, he was awkwardly trying to do something that was very unlike him. But it was something that, after what had happened during the fight in the ranch, he now feared he needed to do.

He needed help.

“You, um, remember earlier? When I—Y’know, when you talked about us maybe, like...meditating? Together?”

“The thing you said sounded ‘kinda really dumb’?”

Sunek suppressed a grimace and shifted uncomfortably in his chair, as Denella tacitly enjoyed watching the Vulcan squirm for once.

“Yeah, well, I say a lot of things you don’t seem to listen to. Like the other week when half the sonic showers were fritzed, and I cleverly suggested that in the interests of shipwide efficiency, you and Natasha should hop in one together and—”

“Sunek.”

“Ok, fine,” he sighed, giving up on his usual jokes and looking at his friend with a slightly pleading look, “What I’m trying to say—I mean, I’m not sure I’m dealing with...what I’m going through as well as I’d like. So, if the offer’s still there, I could find the time to—I mean, I

guess we could, maybe—”

“Seven am. Tomorrow. Cargo bay,” she smiled, “Bring your own mat.”

The Vulcan stopped trying to find the right words, and just nodded back. With a look of sincere thanks.

“I do have one condition,” she added.

“Yeah?”

She gestured to the silver instrument in his hand.

“Never play that thing again.”

She turned and walked out. Sunek watched her leave, then turned the harmonica over in his hand with an absent smile. He felt the storm recede a little bit further, and allowed himself to think that everything was going to be fine.

Seconds later, he snapped his head back up to where Denella had been standing.

“Wait, seven am? In the morning?!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

Zesh stood at the foot of the Bounty’s loading ramp, having accepted their offer of a lift home, squinting through the arid air at the ranch that he had literally just given away. For free. He shuddered to think what an act like this had done to his chances of ever getting into the Divine Treasury.

Alongside him, Jirel and Klath surveyed the ranch from under the brims of their hats.

“I mean,” the Ferengi continued, “What am I supposed to tell my buyer? He’s travelling a long way for this.”

“Tell the truth,” Jirel shrugged, “You got a better offer.”

Zesh turned and fixed him with an annoyed glare.

“I’m serious,” the Trill persisted, “You can’t judge everything you do in this life on how much latinum it’s worth to you.”

“Can and will,” Zesh countered.

Jirel smiled in amusement as the Ferengi kicked his heels in the dust. The worst part of the whole sorry affair, as far as Zesh was concerned, wasn’t the loss of the latinum, or even the damage this might cause his business relationship with Choth, a Markalian that he had always found had more latinum than sense.

The worst part was that, deep down, he feared that he knew they were doing the right thing.

“Ugh,” he griped as he continued to kick the dirt, “Never let a hew-mon’s conscience get in the way of a sale...”

“That a Rule of Acquisition?” Jirel asked.

“No. But it definitely should be.”

From the direction of the ranch, Natasha wandered over to join them, having said her goodbyes to the bartender and the nurse who were now in charge of Goodlife Ranch for posterity. As she reached them, she smiled broadly at Jirel, who matched it right back.

“Thank you,” she said, “For finally seeing sense.”

“Hey, don’t thank me. Thank the bartender back there that saved the life of this stupid wannabe cowboy. Spent so long replicating myself all the gear, I forgot that these people are living this, every day of their lives.”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed slightly at this ostentatious confession. “I mean, I’ve literally been saying that to you ever since we first got here—”

“So, yeah, you’re welcome,” Jirel added quickly, ending that moment of gloating with an elaborate tip of his hat.

She shook her head, before gesturing back up the Bounty’s rear ramp. “We ready to go?”

“Not quite,” Jirel said, looking over at Klath with a widening grin, “Come on, buddy. One ‘yee-haw’ for the road?”

Klath grunted impassively. But Jirel wasn’t giving up.

“I’m serious. I’m not leaving this place until I hear you say it.”

“I see,” the Klingon muttered thoughtfully, “Well, in which case...”

He looked back at the expectant face of the Trill, with a slight twinkle in his eye.

“...I hope you enjoy your new life here.”

With that, he turned and walked up the ramp, back into the ship itself. With an amused shake of his head, Jirel followed, along with Zesh and Natasha.

“Fine, be like that,” he pouted, “But I swear I’m gonna make the rest of you see how cool this planet is if it’s the last thing I do. Starting with a weekly movie night. My pick.”

At the top of the ramp, Zesh turned back and cast one last longing look at the once in a lifetime fortune he had allowed himself to leave behind.

“At least this proved one thing,” Zesh sighed, “I was right to leave your crew behind when I did, Jirel. There’s no fortune for me here.”

“You wanna know something that might make you feel better?” Natasha asked, offering the Ferengi a supportive smile.

“Try me,” Zesh shrugged back.

She gestured out to the dusty confines of Goodlife Ranch, and the wider vista of Prosperity County beyond. “Well, you might have just succeeded where the Federation, the Klingon Empire, the Romulans and god knows how many other people have failed, and spread a little bit of happiness on the Planet of Galactic Peace.”

Zesh mulled the gravity of this statement over for a long, solemn moment. “No,” he concluded eventually, with a firm shake of his bulbous head, “That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Natasha smirked and walked off towards the cockpit with Klath, while Jirel tapped the controls to retract the cargo ramp.

“You know,” Zesh muttered to him after the others had left the cargo bay, “You should watch that hew-mon and her pesky conscience. It’ll be the death of you one day.”

Jirel let out an amused snort, as they followed the others out of the cargo bay. The Trill still clinking with every step.

“I should go change my shoes...”

\* \* \* \* \*

A few moments later, the Bounty slowly rose up from the dusty surface of the desert. As it ascended, it kicked up a great swirling cloud of sand as it did so, enough to sting the eyes of some of the more unfortunate horses grazing back at the ranch.

Not that the horses seemed to care all that much about the sand, or the noise. After a moment, they returned to their grazing.

The Ju’Day-type raider pirouetted around gracefully and slowly ascended into the sky, before blasting away from the ranch and leaving Prosperity County behind.

Riding off into the sunset.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bri’tor and Kitaxis sat in each other’s arms and watched the off-worlders depart. They carried on staring up into the sky for a long time, even as the ship finally disappeared from view above their heads.

After a moment, Bri’tor glanced at his wife and smiled. “Reckon today’s been a pretty good day.”

Kitaxis smiled and nodded back. “Reckon it has.”

Those sorts of days were few and far between around here, and they appreciated the rarity with another moment of contented silence, even as the sand kicked up by the Bounty’s departure drifted back down to the ground.

“Fresh water,” Bri’tor muttered eventually with another smile, “All the fresh water that folks around here’ll ever need.”

Kitaxis looked up into her husband’s eyes and nodded again. “Feels like everything around here’s finally going right for all of us,” she asserted, “Not a moment too soon as well.”

They allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by another contented silence.

It was true that things were going well for them now. After all, Toxis was gone, Arcadia Falls was free, and they now had the treasures of Goodlife Ranch to enrich and energise the local population on top of that. Enough water to satisfy the thirst of the entire region. Maybe the entire planet.

“You know,” Bri’tor quietly mused as he considered their future, “There’ll be a big demand for all this water.”

“Naturally,” Kitaxis nodded.

“So, I was thinking...we should probably organise some sort of protection. Y’know?”

Kitaxis considered this for a moment.

“What sort of protection?”

Bri’tor shifted awkwardly as he thought things through in his head. “Well,” he ventured, “I was thinking we’ll need to keep hold of all these weapons. Maybe even get a few extra hands around the place. To keep things nice and secure, right?”

“Like guards, you mean?”

“Sure, like guards. A few loyal guard-type people.”

Kitaxis nodded. It made sense to her. After all, this was a very precious commodity they’d been given.

“Seems like a good idea,” she replied, “Just to be safe, after all. Just a few men. Enough to protect us. And our ranch.”

Their ranch. It was their ranch, after all. They’d been given it.

Another moment of silence descended over the pair. Both of their minds were now quickly turning over.

“Of course,” Kitaxis said eventually, “Those men would need paying...”

“Right,” Bri’tor nodded, “Men ain’t gonna work without a fee. But the bar doesn’t make enough for all that.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“But, I guess we might make a little extra if we...”

His attention drifted over to the hut containing the water pump. The one that they had been given to spread happiness around Prosperity County.

“Yeah,” Kitaxis nodded, “I mean, we wouldn’t charge a lot. We’d be practically giving it away.”

“Absolutely. But we gotta pay the men somehow. And then there’s maintenance, upkeep, that kinda thing.”

“Oh yeah. Plus...a little for ourselves.”

The husband and wife broke their calming embrace and stood up, their attention now entirely on the hut, and the profit inside. And they continued to discuss their plans, and how best they could exploit the opportunity that had been presented to them.

And how they would eventually control Arcadia Falls, and Prosperity County in general. And how they would be different from all the others that had controlled Arcadia Falls in the past. Even though, deep down, they knew they probably wouldn’t be all that different.

But that didn’t matter.

It was just the way things were on Nimbus III.

## **The End**

### 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 episode was a lot of fun to write, but it went through a tortured development process. While the plot involving Jirel and Klath riding into Arcadia Falls to reason with Toxis was always present, I struggled to figure out what to do with everyone else. Initially, there was a B plot with Denella and the others installing shield generators around Goodlife Ranch to protect it. But not only was that not very interesting, it also suggested a level of tech readily available to the Bounty crew that I didn’t want to make an established thing. There was then an idea to have Denella and Sunek take the Bounty to collect Choth, Zesh’s buyer, and bring him back to Nimbus III, only to get into peril. But that just degenerated into a bunch of space chases that never tied back to the ‘cowboy western’ side of the story, so I settled on sending Natasha into town with the others and having Denella, Sunek and Zesh fall into the clutches of Toxis’s men.

Zesh is the first (but not the last) former Bounty crewmate that the current motley crew bump into, and he will continue to be an occasional recurring character as the series goes on. In the early stages of planning the series, there was going to be a permanent Ferengi crew member, but when brainstorming plot ideas for the character, I struggled to find a great deal that hadn’t already been

covered a lot better with the Ferengi stories in DS9. Plus with Zesh's need for profit being in direct conflict with the Bounty crew's general inability to make much of that, it made sense that he would have set out by himself at some point.

There was some creative licence used with Nimbus III. Obviously the spaghetti western homage in this episode is rather different to the vaguely desert nomad-ish angle used in Star Trek V. But the planet already had the guns and the horses, so it wasn't a huge leap to suggest that at least part of the planet might have gone in this direction. And the nomads are still there, drilling for water, as seen in the prologue. If I was being indulgent, I'd say the idea was a love letter to the TOS era when plots would often be dictated by whatever second hand costumes the props department found lying around. "Hey, Gene, they just wrapped that WW2 movie over there. I guess we're going to the planet of the Nazis!" and so on. Not that fanfic is bound by such limitations, but there you go.

One of the most fun parts was filling in the 'lore' around Nimbus III. Explaining why the planet was still in such a state nearly a century after Star Trek V, the failed attempts to improve things, and also naming all the various cities, towns, ranches and landscapes. Taking a lead from Paradise City to name Goodlife Ranch, Arcadia Falls, Mount Aspiration and so on.

The final resolution to the standoff between Jirel and Taxis was a late change. While it was always going to be Bri'tor who delivered the killer shot to the big bad outlaw, the fact that he was alerted to the standoff by the sound of Jirel's spurs was added while I was publishing the story for the first time on TrekBBS, and it was pointed out that I'd given Jirel's spurs a Chekhov's Gun vibe by focusing so much on them during what was supposed to be a throwaway gag in an earlier scene. Fortunately, it didn't take much to add in a few lines about them, and it serves as a nice payoff for the otherwise meaningless references to Jirel's silly footwear.

Sunek's arc was baked in much earlier, though. This represents an important development in his character after the events of 103, showing that all is clearly not well inside him after Sokar's forced mind meld. His final attack on the Nimbusian outlaw threatening Zesh, which nearly ends with him stabbing him with Chekhov's Whittling Knife, will come up in later episodes.

Originally, the episode was going to end with the 'Bounty flying off into the sunset' visual during the epilogue. But I decided on a more appropriate downer ending with Bri'tor and Kitaxis slowly but surely being corrupted by the slyer of an opportunity of a better life that the Bounty's crew had given them. It felt more in keeping with Nimbus III as a planet where nothing can ever go right, regardless of how well-intentioned everyone might be.

The episode name here was locked in from the first draft, and is only the 567th piece of media to directly reference Sergio Leone's classic "Once Upon a Time in the West". Elements of the plot are supposed to pay slightly wonky tribute to the film as well, including the slow-build confrontation on the ranch in the prologue and the plot revolving around various individuals looking to control a certain piece of land. And yes, Nimbus III is in the Beta Quadrant. I looked it up. Boom, research.

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