

## Star Trek: Bounty - 106 - "He Feedeth Among the Lilies"

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## Star Trek: Bounty - 106 - "He Feedeth Among the Lilies"

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

(1 of 2) After an onboard emergency forces the Bounty to set down for repairs on the nearest planet, Jirel finds himself being inexplicably hailed as their saviour by the pre-warp natives and their charismatic leader.

## Prologue

### Prologue

The rash on Sister Lyca's arm was getting worse.

She walked over to the gaggle of villagers gathered around the campfire, resisting the urge to frantically scratch at the ugly red welts that peppered her from elbow to wrist, knowing that would only bring temporary relief from the burning discomfort. As she approached the fire, she was sure that she could see the face of the Beast of the Great Hereafter dancing in the flames. That it was preparing to take her from this place for good.

A steaming pot of takarti root soup gently bubbled away in a huge bronze pot over the fire, sending great billowing clouds of spicy, aromatic steam out across the wide open expanse of the village's central square.

The meal, fit for the entire village, was being tended to by three of her fellow Sisters, and the smell of the rich purple-tinged dish distracted her from the rash, and the tricks of the flames. It reminded her of simpler times, when she had watched her own mother preparing the same meal.

The fire itself served as the heart of the community, with every Makalite that lived inside the village walls responsible for keeping it burning every day from first light until the small hours of the morning as soon as they were old enough to forage for wood. As such, it served not only as a place for cooking. It was also a place to meet others, to tell stories, and, inevitably, to gossip. Sister Lyca felt increasingly certain she had already been the subject of the latter this morning.

As she approached, the trio of pale blue skinned figures gathered around the pot looked up from their work, and appeared somewhat wary to see her.

Yes, she realised, they must have heard.

Despite that setback, she fixed a friendly smile onto her face as she arrived at the fire.

"Sister Lyca," the eldest of the women, a village elder called Sister Hyla, nodded, "Good wishes to you this morning."

"And to you, Sisters. Good wishes to you all on this new day."

She stood tentatively in front of them, fighting the continual desire to itch her rash, and keeping that part of her arm covered with the sleeve of her dress for the time being.

"You need not trouble yourself," Sister Hyla continued, "We need no help preparing first meal."

Lyca glanced around the square nervously. This was the focal point of the whole settlement, like all of the villages in this province. All around the square, huts and other structures fanned out in roughly concentric rings. Most of them were built from simple wood and stone, but in the bright sunlight of the morning, Sister Lyca saw the reflection of the new additions. The shiny glint of the new metal supports and struts that had been used to help strengthen the huts against the elements.

All courtesy of The Seer's kindly benevolence.

The glinting pieces of metal reminded her how much had changed in their small village recently, and made her more determined that she had to talk to her sisters at the campfire.

"I come here to speak about—"

"We know," Sister Hyla responded quickly, her tone measured yet stern, "We hear that you caused quite a scene in Brother Anker's hut while The Seer was there yesterday. And we are not interested in hearing more words that go against the prophecy."

"What you have been saying is blasphemous!" one of the younger women, Sister Ryna, added, her voice considerably less measured than Sister Hyla's.

Sister Hyla calmed her by gently gesturing with one arm, while the other arm reached for the wooden spoon to stir the pot of fragrant soup. As she reached, the sleeve of her own dress rode up, revealing a string of telltale red welts.

"But you have it too!" Sister Lyca pressed, pointing to the uncovered rash and revealing her own pock-marked arm, "We are all sick now, the entire village! And we're getting sicker!"

She watched as Sister Hyla quickly pulled her sleeve back down to cover her sickness, and all three women looked down to the ground. Their faces seemed to betray clear uncertainty, and she decided to seize on it.

"We are not getting better, nothing is helping," she continued earnestly, "The Seer brought this disease to us. I am sure of it."

Sister Ryna's head shot back up to stare at her, defiance clear in her young eyes. "We three all keep faith with The Seer. You would be minded to do the same, Sister."

"Look at her skin!" Sister Lyca persisted, gesturing intently to Sister Hyla's arm, "And it gets worse with every new dawn, you can all see it! Brother Anker is now too sick to leave his hut, even after The Seer's visit. Sister Prya's youngest grows weaker by the hour. The Beast of the Great Hereafter calls out for us all! Why can you not admit what is clear to your own eyes—!"

“Sister Lyca. You seem distressed?”

The familiar voice silenced her on the spot. She turned around.

The other three women retreated back over to the soup, which was now threatening to boil over directly onto the campfire.

He stood across from them near the edge of the square, his arms open wide and his green robes gently billowing behind him in the morning breeze. It was a peaceable vision that was only slightly undermined by the two somewhat menacing Brothers that flanked him on either side.

Unlike the rest of the villagers, he wasn't blue-skinned. He was considerably paler and more lightly hued. His forehead was also missing the ridge of raised bone which all the Makalites that Sister Lyca had ever met before had.

The Seer had explained to the villagers that he had travelled here from a distant land. And that he was here to listen. Slowly but surely, any fears or mistrust that the villagers might have had gave way to acceptance. And then, as disease had come to the village, to something stronger.

Blind faith in what The Seer was promising them in his prophecy.

“Good wishes to you, Seer,” Sister Hyla called out as she tended to the soup.

She and the other two women at the fire bowed in deference. The Seer offered them a nod, but his focus remained fixed on Sister Lyca. For her part, she tried to ignore the fear that she felt inside, along with the itching sensation on her arm. She kept her back straight and unbowed and her expression defiant.

“It really does pain me to see a member of my flock looking so troubled,” he continued, a gently lilting tone to his voice.

“We should all be troubled,” she muttered back.

The Seer's benevolent expression barely changed, though she could see that his face had tightened slightly, as if he was irritated by her. “Well,” he continued after a moment, “I do hope you've all remembered to make your donations this morning at the temple?”

He gestured to a large and entirely metal hut at the side of the square. It was the newest construction in the whole village, specifically requested by The Seer, and it had become the most revered place for all of the villagers. A place to pay respects to The Seer's benevolence.

“Yes, Seer,” Sister Hyla nodded deferentially, “We have all paid our respects.”

“And what about you, Sister Lyca? After your unfortunate little outburst in Brother Anker's hut yesterday, I do hope you've found it in yourself to pay special respects. To properly repent on this brand new day.”

The Seer's features were still calm, but there was an accusatory tone to his voice. She could tell that he was challenging her. She ignored the fear inside and took a step forward.

“I repent nothing,” she said as strongly as she could manage.

She heard gasps from the Sisters around the pot. But The Seer himself remained serene, with the look of a man who knew he was still in control.

“Well,” he nodded, “That's your decision, of course—”

“I stand by it all! Everything I said! The prophecy is a lie!”

She shouted loud enough for her voice to carry across the entire square, and out into nearby streets and huts. Several villagers emerged into the square to take in the spectacle, and the growing audience emboldened her further.

“How long have we been paying respects, Brothers and Sisters? How long have we been listening to The Seer's proclamations? And the sickness just gets worse.”

The Seer shook his head and turned to the growing crowd, holding his arms out even wider and bringing his showmanship to bear on them. “Poor Sister Lyca, her words are so cruel,” he mourned for the crowd's benefit, “But I ask you, has The Seer ever let you down before? When you needed your crops to flourish, or the rains to come, did I not forecast it? And I assure you, the prophecy is real, if you keep the faith, and pay your respects, then The Seer will always take care of his flock—”

“We're dying!”

Sister Lyca spat out the words, and held up her arm for all around to see. This seemed to trigger a flicker of anger on The Seer's face, just for a moment, before he regained his composure.

“Please!” she called out around the square, “You must all see! The salvation that The Seer has promised is not coming for any of us!”

“Alas,” The Seer bellowed even louder, whirling his cloak around with a flourish and gesturing to the two Brothers in his entourage, “Sister Lyca appears to have entirely lost her faith. Perhaps a few more days in the Bastille will help her to find some clarity of thought...”

The Brothers moved over and grabbed her arms. She winced as one of them clasped her reddened forearm. She tried to writhe and squirm to break free, but it was useless.

“If we keep hope in our hearts,” The Seer continued, “In time, your Sister may be ready to rejoin us.”

“No!” she cried out in frantic desperation, even as the Brothers started to haul her away, “Don't listen to him! Please!”

She was interrupted by a sudden unearthly roar, enough to shake the very ground on which they all stood, and causing the vast cooking pot to topple clean over, ruining this morning's helping of takarti root soup. The villagers in the square, Sister Lyca included, all began to panic. Other villagers came rushing out of their huts in confusion, with trusty stones and slingshots in their hands to fend off whatever was threatening the peace of the village.

Then, above their heads, something flashed into view. Sister Hyla gasped out loud.

It was a curiously large object, with two stocky and short wings. There was a faint wisp of smoke trailing from it as it jagged across the sky.

Everyone watched on, pointing at the mysterious object above them.

Some thought it might be a great angry bird, sent to punish them for their past misdeeds. Others feared it was a symbol from the dead souls of their ancestors. Sister Lyca heard one of the Brothers restraining her mutter a long-abandoned Makalite incantation in the direction of the object.

Only The Seer remained calm. Because only The Seer knew what it really was. He threw his hands aloft dramatically, turning his theatrics all the way up to eleven for the benefit of his terrified audience.

"My flock! Here it is! My prophecy is coming true, exactly as I foresaw!"

He shot Sister Lyca a knowing look as he continued. She didn't call out again, as stunned into silence as the rest of the villagers were.

"Please, I beg you all, take this chance to double your donations in the temple! Whatever you can spare! Because now our salvation will come to pass!"

He gestured to the object in the sky, as it descended further.

"The spotted man with the skyship is here to take us from this place!"

Hearing his words, the villagers erupted in cheers of adulation. Many of them raced back to their huts for further treasures to take to the temple.

Sister Lyca stared up into the sky, dumbfounded by what she was seeing. As she looked back down, The Seer fixed her gaze with a cruel smile.

High above their heads, the Bounty prepared to land.

## Part 1A

### Part One

“This was not my fault.”

Sunek, the Bounty’s wiry Vulcan pilot, leaned back on one of the Ju’Day-type raider’s landing struts, his arms folded in front of him in a clear show of defiance. A defiance that was backed up by his latest loud Hawaiian shirt, which he had taken a liking to wearing recently.

In front of him, three other members of the Bounty’s small ragtag crew, all considerably more soberly attired in plain grey and brown tunic tops and trousers, regarded him with a trio of looks that suggested that they didn’t quite believe his tale of innocence.

“What?” Sunek persisted as he saw the three unimpressed glares being aimed at him, “It really wasn’t my fault!”

“And yet you were the one in the pilot’s seat at the time,” Klath, the Bounty’s fierce Klingon tactical chief, growled at him.

“That’s true,” Sunek conceded with a nod.

“And, while in said pilot’s seat, you did ask us to - and I quote - ‘check this out’,” Jirel, the unjoined Trill captain of the ship, added.

“Can’t say I didn’t.”

“And then something exploded, and the power went out,” Natasha Kinsen, the ship’s former Starfleet doctor, piped up, completing the details of the Bounty’s recent bout of misfortune.

“Yeah, well, when you all put it like that...”

Natasha smiled and shook her head, as the Vulcan in front of her pouted slightly sheepishly. Even though she had been with the Bounty for several months now, and had met plenty of emotional Vulcans of one kind or another, she was still getting fully used to being in the company of a former follower of the V’tosh ka’tur. The Vulcans without logic.

“All I’m saying is,” Sunek went on, continuing to fight his corner, “I’ve pulled off that little comet slingshot trick a thousand times, and that’s never happened before. Therefore, it wasn’t my fault, it was the stupid ship.”

“Hey!” Denella, the Bounty’s Orion engineer snapped, as she walked over to join the group, “Don’t call my ship stupid.”

Dressed in her usual oversized overalls, her face was already streaked with grease and grime as she checked over the Bounty with a small tricorder. But she took a moment to reach over and gently pat the Bounty’s landing strut as she chided the pilot.

“Yikes,” Jirel grinned, “Sleep with one eye open tonight, Sunek.”

“Whatever,” the Vulcan sighed, kicking the ground under his feet and feeling increasingly like the rest of them were ganging up on him, “The point is, I’m not taking the blame here. That manoeuvre was completely, one hundred and ten percent sound.”

“And yet,” Klath grunted, gesturing around them, “Here we are.”

The Bounty had made an impromptu and mostly emergency landing on the edge of a lush forest on the planet’s northern continent. The Class M world had been the only habitable planet within range when Sunek’s little trick had gone so badly wrong.

On the other side of the parked ship was a range of hills and snow-capped mountains, while the oddly green-tinged sky was completely clear save for a few wispy streaks of cloud.

It wasn’t an ideal location for a stopover, and the slightly higher gravity would make any heavy lifting needed during the repairs that bit more difficult. But given the sudden catastrophe that had broken out, they were lucky to find something this habitable this near to where they were. As ports in a storm went, things could have been an awful lot worse.

“What’s the damage?” Jirel asked his engineer, electing to steer the conversation away from the job of apportioning blame for the time being, and back to more practical issues.

“Not as bad as it could have been,” she shrugged, checking over the tricorder readings, “But the starboard impulse casing’s got a crack in it the size of my arm. It’s those cheap crappy deuterium sheets we picked up last month.”

“Hah!” Sunek chirped up, pointing victoriously at the others in turn, “So it was the ship’s fault! In your faces! In all of your stupid faces!”

“It’s not like we could have swung for anything better,” Jirel pointed out, as the Vulcan began an impromptu victory dance underneath the ship’s hull, “And it’s gonna be like that for a while, now we’re gonna miss our rendezvous.”

Denella nodded in tacit frustration. Their recent cash flow issues were not going to be helped now they were absolutely certain to be late with a delivery of baffle plates destined for a Bolian freighter in the next sector. “Fair point,” she conceded, “Still, from what I can tell, it shouldn’t be too big a job to get her patched up and ready to go.”

“From what you can tell?” Klath asked, with an edge of caution.

Denella waved the tricorder at the Klingon and shrugged again. “No big deal, there’s just some weird plasma radiation around this whole area. It’s messing up any wide range scans I’ve tried, and I’m not sure how bad it’s screwing up the short-range stuff. Probably gonna have to do a visual inspection of the hull to make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

Natasha’s medical instincts kicked in immediately. She moved over to Denella and checked the tricorder readings over her shoulder.

“Hrm, not sure I like the look of that,” she mused, “We’ll probably be fine for as long as the repairs’ll take, but I’ll fix us up with a shot of something just to make sure.”

“Nice,” Jirel tutted, “Picked a great place for a vacation.”

She ignored the Trill’s comment and walked back up the Bounty’s rear loading ramp to retrieve her medkit from the ship’s small medical bay.

Meanwhile, Denella turned her attention back to the damage to the ship. “So, I should be good to get us patched up enough to take off in a few hours, but I might need a willing volunteer to help with the heavy lifting.”

“Psh,” Sunek smirked, “Good luck with that—”

“Congratulations, Sunek,” Jirel stepped in, jabbing a finger at him with a grin, “For bringing us to this delightful, irradiated wilderness, you just became Denella’s lackey for the day.”

“Wh—? Lackey? Hey, come on, you can’t make your second-in-command someone’s lackey!”

“My what?” he snorted, before he saw the surprisingly serious look on the Vulcan’s face, “Oh, crap, do you really think you’re second-in-command?”

“What the hell is that supposed to—?”

“You know what? Let’s not get into all that now. But you are helping Denella. Think of it as your big prize for pulling off that comet slingshot.”

Sunek went to fire back another comment, but he stopped himself at the last second and quelled the brief flash of annoyance with a deep, soothing breath.

He had been working hard to quell his anger issues ever since they spilled over during a fight with a marauding outlaw on a recent trip to Nimbus III. Where, after his frustrations had built up and up, Sunek had lost all control and beat the man with such ferocity that he had nearly killed him.

Since then, thanks in part to some secret meditation sessions with Denella in the Bounty’s cargo bay, and a lot of focused breathing, he was finally putting that emotional issue to one side.

He was still sure they were connected to a series of forced mind melds he had been subjected to by a former V’tosh ka’tur colleague some months ago, but he had stopped worrying about it too much at this point. He was in control of the storm inside of him.

And that was, in fact, the reason he’d tried the slingshot. The return of his dominant easy-going side had given him the desire to keep everyone entertained on their otherwise mundane delivery run. Even if it hadn’t quite worked out for the best this time, he’d still had fun doing it.

So, instead of succumbing to a momentary flash of anger, as he might have done before, Sunek controlled himself, and settled for sticking his tongue out at Jirel instead.

Natasha hurried back down the ramp with a hypospray in hand, and went around gently pressing it into each of their necks in turn. “Hyronalin compound,” she explained as she worked, “Should make sure none of us grow any ears on our backs while we’re down here.”

“Come on then, flyboy,” Denella clicked her tongue in Sunek’s direction and gestured back up the Bounty’s ramp, “You’ve got some duranium sheets to carry.”

The Orion woman bounded up the ramp, followed with significantly less enthusiasm by the Vulcan, who dragged his feet like a sulky teenager.

“Wasn’t my fault…” he muttered as he disappeared inside the ship.

Jirel and Klath shared an amused glance, as Natasha finished her work with the hypospray and turned her attention to the surrounding area. Specifically, the lush forest to the east.

“Look at the colours along the treeline,” she mused wistfully, “We could go out and collect some samples, see if we can cut through the radiation to scan for signs of—”

“Hey, Nat,” Jirel motioned, “We’re just here to fix the ship. This isn’t a field trip.”

She looked back at the Trill and the Klingon, neither looking especially excited about being here, and reminded herself that she wasn’t with a Starfleet landing party right now. Still, despite the lack of enthusiasm, she elected to stick to her guns.

“I just think we could take a look around. While they’re completing the repairs.”

Klath stared out at the forest, taking in the diverse and unique landscape that lay in front of them.

“Why?” he offered simply.

“To explore?” Natasha sighed, gesturing out at the trees, “To see what’s out there? To search this little corner of an unexplored planet while we have some time on our hands?”

A pause. The hulking Klingon scanned the forest again.

“Why?” the gruff response inevitably came.

Jirel couldn’t help but smirk, even as Natasha persisted with her sales pitch to the unconvinced member of her fledgling away team.

“Because who knows what’s out there? A valley filled with jewels the size of rocks? A tree made out of dilithium crystals? A river of pure latinum flowing just behind the tree line?”

Klath considered each of these points for a moment as he conducted another visual scan, before decisively responding with a shake of his head.

“Unlikely.”

“Come on Klath,” Jirel offered by way of appeasement, “You know how it goes, right? You can take the girl out of Starfleet, but you can’t take—”

“Don’t do that. Are we gonna have a look around or not?”

She glared at Jirel, and the Trill found himself reluctantly conceding to himself that, not for the first time since they had rescued her from involuntary exile in the Kesmet sector, the newest member of the Bounty’s crew was going to twist his arm with some ease.

And so, he decided that if he was going to end up going along with her plan eventually anyway, he may as well go along with it now, and save everyone some time. He then wasted a few further seconds trying to figure out if that piece of internal logic actually made any sense.

Then, he turned to Klath and held his hands up in casual submission. “Ok, come on, why don’t we spend a couple of hours going boldly, hmm?”

Klath grunted slightly, still entirely unenthused by the idea.

“Besides,” Jirel added, “You’d kick yourself if she was right about that river of latinum.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sister Lyca had no idea of the significance of the name of the Bastille. None of the Makalites could possibly have known about that. All she really knew was she really didn’t like being here.

It was a newer construction in the village, one of several that had been built since The Seer had arrived, and it stood away from the ordered concentric structure of the rest of the villages, on the very fringes of the settlement.

The walls were mostly built from the shining metal sheets that The Seer had brought back to the village from his forays beyond the forest, though the supports were all wooden and the roof was a traditional weave of branches and sticks of the kind used around the rest of the village.

The Makalites had not seen such a volume of metal before, save for a few glinting nuggets that foraging parties occasionally discovered. But it had quickly proved to be a revolutionary building material, not just in new buildings, but in supplementing the existing huts around the village.

The Bastille itself was a squat rectangular construct, with just one entrance that was lockable from the outside by a thick wooden block placed across the doorway.

Inside, Sister Lyca sat on the floor, restrained by ropes to one of the central wooden columns. There was little else inside in the way of comfort for The Bastille’s sole unfortunate inhabitant, and she still felt the gnawing itching pain from the rash on her arm behind her back.

She had been locked away more and more often as she had taken an increasingly fervent stance against The Seer and his prophecy, driven by the sickness that she saw everywhere inside the village, and her unshakable distrust in the man that the rest of the villagers had taken as their spiritual leader.

But now, as she sat on the grassy floor of the Bastille, she found herself with cause to question her own beliefs for a change. Because she had seen it with her own eyes, out in the square. The skyship had appeared above their heads. Just as The Seer had claimed it would.

Part of her was still sure she was right. That The Seer was the cause of their woes, not the solution to them. After all, the sickness had only shown up after he had arrived. But another part of her was now conflicted. If The Seer had been right about the skyship, maybe he had also been right about their salvation. And maybe she had been wrong.

She was still fighting her internal conflict when the door opened, and the man himself entered.

There were no windows in the Bastille, but she could just about make him out through the minimal light that was seeping in through the weaves of the roof.

“Sister Lyca,” he sighed slowly, tutting thoughtfully as he paced over to her, “What am I going to do with you...”

She felt instinctively fearful given her entirely immobile state, but there was no trace of menace in his voice. Though he did sound different to

his usual bombastic self. Quieter, more guarded, but still to Sister Lyca's ears, entirely untrustworthy.

"See," he continued, gesturing to her uncomfortably restrained form, "All this. This really isn't me, you've got to understand. I'm a nice guy. Really, I am."

Not for the first time since she had met him, Sister Lyca found herself doubting The Seer's words.

"But the thing is," he continued, now pointing back to the outside world, "I have an image to maintain out there, you know? And, if you don't mind me saying so, your constant meddling around is becoming just a little bit annoying."

She remained silent, staring back at the strange man as he paced around the room, and remaining conflicted between the falseness of his words, and the start of the apparent fulfilment of his prophecy that the village had just witnessed.

The Seer paused and looked around the slightly grim interior of the building, shaking his head.

"I mean, look at this place. I only built it as a deterrent, Sister Lyca. Did you know that? Big scary prison to help keep the peace among the flock. Even the name's a bit of a joke. And apart from that one guy who stole a harvest of kava fruit, you're the only one who's ever been in here!"

She couldn't help but feel an odd flash of pride at that comment. Especially given how irritated he clearly was by her.

"So," he signed, turning back to her, "To reiterate, I'm a nice guy. You're stuck here again. And I'm ready to listen. You've seen what we all saw out there. My prophecy was correct. So just tell me, what is it gonna take to get you to fall in line and stop ruining everything for me, hmm?"

She considered her options, felt the rough twine keeping her hands in place. But she was also now increasingly sure of her original belief, that The Seer was not the great oracle he claimed to be. He seemed almost worried as he stood in front of her.

"I have nothing to say to you," she replied, her voice sounding small despite her best efforts as it echoed around the empty room.

"Fine, you don't need to say anything to me," The Seer tutted, toying with the end of one of the long billowing sleeves of his robes with clear irritation, "As a matter of fact, after listening to you for the last few days, I welcome the silence. But it would really help me out if you would go out there to your Brothers and Sisters and repent. Not for me, but for the good of the flock. Ok?"

She scrunched up her face in determination and shook her head, taking further succour from the grimace this elicited from him.

"I know what it is that I believe," she replied, "And I will never stop trying to help my Brothers and Sisters to see the truth as well."

"Unbelievable," The Seer scoffed, shaking his head, "Even when you've seen the magical skyship with your own eyes? Even as the rest of the village believes that their salvation is here? You're still going to try and undermine me?"

Sister Lyca thought about the skyship again, the great shining object that had soared down from the heavens, and tried to dismiss her conflicting fears.

"I may be just a simple gatherer, and I may not be able to explain all of what I have seen. But I am certain that you are the cause of our suffering, and I will never be a part of your flock!"

"Ugh," he muttered unhappily, "You really are very irritating, you know that?"

Sister Lyca summoned up a little more courage and kept her eyes locked on his through the darkness.

"Whatever's the matter, Seer? Did you not foresee that I would be like this?"

His eyes narrowed at this, the good humour on his face vanishing entirely for a moment. "Very funny," he tutted, before he peered around the side of the pillar and saw the tell-tale signs of the rash on her arm, "You know, some of your Brothers and Sisters think that sickness is a punishment. For those who aren't loyal enough to The Seer and his prophecy."

"If that's true," she countered, feeding off her growing confidence, "Then why is the sickness affecting all of the village? All of your flock? And perhaps even you, Seer?"

He visibly bristled at this, and stepped forward with an angry look before he stopped himself and regained his composure.

"Ok, you know what? Fine," he replied, readjusting his robes, "I've tried to be nice. But if you're going to keep trying to get in the way of my plans, then...goodbye, Sister Lyca. I won't be back."

With that, he turned and made for the door. As she saw him leaving her alone again, her confidence faltered. She pictured the skyship, and that part of her that now doubted her continued resistance to the prophecy wanted to call out, even to repent.

But she resisted those inner doubts. She remained proud and defiant in her protest against The Seer, as he walked out the door and it closed again. She kept up her resistance even as she heard the heavy wooden block being placed back across the exit on the outside.

And then, when she was completely alone, she slumped back against the pillar behind her, and began to sob.



“Keep her in there,” The Seer muttered dismissively at the two Makalite Brothers that stood watch either side of the door of the Bastille.

They nodded back unquestioningly, even as The Seer stalked away, his robes fanning out behind him and his usually serene face now like thunder.

He was thoroughly sick of this village. He was thoroughly sick of the Makalites. And he was definitely thoroughly sick of Sister Lyca.

As he walked on, he suppressed a wince. He glanced around to see if any Makalites were near, and ducked behind the side of a nearby hut.

Satisfied he was alone and out of sight, he pulled back the billowing sleeve of his robe to reveal his own forearm. A series of ugly red welts stared back at him. He took a moment to internalise the pain, and admitted that this was the worst part of it all.

He was thoroughly sick of being sick.

## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

Natasha picked her way through the undergrowth of the mysterious forest, doing her best to scan through the radiation with the ancient tricorder she had picked out from the Bounty's rather underwhelming manifest.

As they walked, she tried not to think too much about how, the last time she had been in a forest with Jirel and Klath, they had run into a pack of rogue Jem'Hadar soldiers. This was going to be a much better field trip than that one, she told herself.

So, instead, she pictured her late father, the archaeologist, boldly stepping through the overgrown ruins of an ancient civilisation, or searching for a clue to some long-forgotten interstellar treasure. Even if she didn't hold out much hope of finding either of those things on this particular planet.

Klath and Jirel followed in her wake. The Klingon had his trusty bat'leth slung behind his back, but aside from that, they hadn't seen the need to arm themselves.

They mostly walked in silence, save for an occasional growl of annoyance from the Klingon every time Natasha stopped for a closer inspection of a particular instance of the local plant life. It was something that was happening far too often for his liking.

"Wait," she exclaimed out of nowhere, as if to underline Klath's unspoken point, "I wanna get a closer look at this one."

Jirel diligently stopped and smiled as she carefully stepped over to the foot of a tree to their right, tricorder raised in preparation. His walking companion at his side found the scene significantly less endearing.

"This is insufferable," the Klingon growled.

"No," Natasha replied with a patient smile, "This is lunch."

She reached under one of the leaves of the plant that she had been scanning and snapped off three pieces of fruit, handing her companions one each. They eyed it dubiously. It was a small cylindrical object, deep blue in colour, with asymmetrical semi-circular lumps running along the outer skin. All things considered, it wasn't winning any prizes for its looks.

"Ok, granted, it doesn't look like much," Natasha conceded, "But the tricorder says it's perfectly safe."

"The tricorder that's not working properly cos of all that yummy radiation?" Jirel asked, "Also, cos it's one of our tricorders?"

She shook her head and gestured to the readings she had been able to gather. "Like Denella said, short-range scans seem to be mostly fine. It's just the wider stuff that's affected. And it says it's perfectly safe to eat. So, let's enjoy this little slice of an unexplored world."

She smiled in satisfaction, then took a healthy bite from the fruit in her hands. Klath and Jirel followed suit.

During his misspent youth with his adoptive parents on Earth, Jirel had once been challenged by a friend to eat a portion of B'kaazi reklar. A dish from the B'kaazi people which involved fermenting the meat of one of their most common farm animals under the sun for six days straight, completely unprotected from the elements, save for a simple wrap of aromatic plant leaves.

The resulting meal is considered a particularly choice delicacy by the B'kaazi, but to every other species in the Alpha Quadrant, the reklar's offensive smell and even more offensive taste renders it virtually inedible.

It remained the most disgusting thing that Jirel had ever eaten. Until now.

"Oh. God. No," he managed to splutter, before he spat out the entire mouthful of fruit onto the forest floor and hurled the rest of the offending foodstuff away.

He looked over to see Natasha hastily retreating behind the tree they were standing next to, and promptly vomiting loudly.

"Good find, doc," he coughed, "Your tricorder picking up any delicious natural springs of flesh-eating acid to wash that down with?"

After taking a moment to compose herself, she staggered back over with as much dignity as she could muster, waving an accusing hand at the tricorder. "It can tell if it's edible. Not what it tastes like."

The pair of them turned to see Klath still merrily munching on his own piece of fruit. After a second, he looked up, slightly puzzled by his sudden fascinated audience. "Delicious," he stated simply, "This may have been a worthy mission after all, doctor."

He reached down with a hulking arm and snapped off two more of the pieces of fruit, devouring the first one whole. Natasha felt a fresh wave of nausea rising in her body.

"Well," Jirel said weakly, "At least Klath's lunch is sorted."

Just as the Klingon tore into the other piece of fruit, he suddenly froze in position. His warrior instincts kicked in as he sensed something moving in the undergrowth.

"What's the matter?" Jirel whispered.

He was familiar with that look from his tactical chief. It usually meant trouble.

Klath dropped the second piece of fruit to the ground and reached for his bat'leth, as he scanned the undergrowth for signs of danger. He didn't offer an answer.

But Natasha did. Or at least, her tricorder did. "Um," she said, in shock, "I'm picking up lifesigns. Close by. Heading this way."

The former Starfleet officer realised in horror that they had landed on an inhabited planet. Potentially a pre-industrial planet. One of the biggest galactic violations it was possible to commit. She was equally horrified to see that Jirel seemed entirely unaffected by this news.

"Oh, is that all?" he replied, tapping Klath on the arm, "Hey, Klath, put the big scary bat'leth away, ok? The natives might be friendly."

"Why the hell are there natives here in the first place?" Natasha hissed as the Klingon reluctantly lowered his weapon, "Why didn't we check that before we landed?"

"Because, if you remember, we were kinda busy at the time. With the whole 'big explosion, lots of shaking about, oh crap we're going to die' thing we had going on."

"But," she shot back, "If this is a pre-warp civilisation, then we're potentially contaminating—"

"Relax, ok?" Jirel sighed, "We do this sort of thing all the time."

The stare he got from Natasha as he made that statement was sharp enough to cut him. He realised his mistake immediately, and managed an awkward cough.

"Did I say 'all the time'? I meant to say that we've never previously done anything like this before. Ever. So, um, lifesigns, you say?"

Natasha's stare got even more intense, as she felt a sudden urge to wrap the vintage tricorder in her hand around the Trill's head. But before she had a chance to do that, or to query his first answer any further, the impromptu away team found themselves surrounded. On all sides, light blue faces emerged from the undergrowth.

There were at least a dozen of them. They all wore simple cotton-like clothing and looked roughly humanoid in appearance, albeit with thin bony ridges running around the top of their head and disappearing underneath their hairline. And they were clearly from a pre-warp civilisation. By some considerable distance.

Natasha was principally worried about two things. Her primary concern was the fact that they were committing a fairly substantial act of cultural contamination just by being here. A human, a Klingon and a Trill marching through the backyard of a pre-industrial civilisation who were likely yet to fully comprehend the concept of their own planet, never mind anyone else's.

And her secondary concern was tangentially connected to that. If these people really had never seen a human, a Klingon or a Trill before, then why were they all smiling?

One of the aliens stepped forward as the others watched on. She looked around at them, and gave the scowling Klath a slightly wide berth, but she clearly wasn't afraid of them. Instead, she stepped straight up to Jirel and smiled even wider.

"Um," the Trill offered with an uncomfortable shrug, "We come in peace?"

"Oh, for the love of..." Natasha muttered under her breath, accompanied by a roll of her eyes.

The alien ignored the comment, and instead gently reached out her hand and ran her fingers down the spots on the side of Jirel's face, before turning back to her colleagues in excitement.

"It is him! The spotted man! He has come to us!"

Klath and Natasha shot confused looks at Jirel, who looked as perplexed as they were about the whole situation.

"I swear," he managed, "I've never seen her before."

All of a sudden, the rest of the blue-skinned figures came rushing out of the undergrowth towards him. But while Klath instinctively brought his bat'leth to bear on the potentially hostile hoard, he felt faintly ludicrous for doing so moments later. The aliens surrounded Jirel and hugged him warmly, before they took careful hold of him and hoisted him up into the air, onto the shoulders of two of the stouter male figures.

"Brothers, Sisters," the original alien continued, "The prophecy really is coming true! We must celebrate! All of us!"

Cheers of joy sounded out from the entire crowd of aliens, which echoed through the forest and bounced off the trees all around them. Natasha watched on with mounting horror as they began to carry the increasingly confused Trill off into the undergrowth.

As they walked off, Klath reached out and grabbed one of the aliens by their arm. The female alien looked up at the larger Klingon, a little wary, but not scared by the situation.

"You...know him?" Klath asked, gesturing at Jirel with a jerk of his head.

"Of course we know him," the alien replied, a little offended that she had to be asked, "We've been waiting for him. Waiting for our saviour!"

Klath didn't know what to do with that. Nor, despite her Starfleet training, did Natasha.

"Seriously," Jirel shouted out to them, as he disappeared into the trees, "Never seen them before in my life!"



## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

“Bored.”

Denella didn't reply, focusing instead on her efforts to seal the duranium sheet in front of her in place over the Bounty's starboard impulse casing using the laser welder in her hand.

“Bored!”

She sighed and wiped the sweat from her brow. As expected, the slightly higher gravity and the warming midday sun overhead was turning a theoretically simple repair job into more of a sweat-inducing grind. She could already tell that she was going to medically require a sonic shower by the time she was done.

“Boredboredboredboredboredbore—”

“Sunek!”

She finally snapped at the Vulcan standing next to her on the small anti-grav platform, as it hovered a few feet off the ground next to the ship's starboard impulse engine.

The extent of her unwillingly appointed lackey's role in the repair at this point was simply to hold the sheet in place while she securely welded it down. But even with a task as simple as that, Sunek had still decided to make his feelings on the situation very clear indeed.

“Could you just, please, be quiet?” she asked in exasperation.

The Vulcan seemed largely unperturbed by her angry, sweaty glare, and pouted back at her. “But I'm—”

“Bored. Yes. You've made that very clear. But, could you just let me work in peace.”

His pout didn't show any signs of leaving his face any time soon, but he nodded reluctantly and allowed silence to descend on the scene.

Denella suppressed a sigh of relief and returned to her work, carefully running the welder along the edge of the dark grey metal sheet.

Suddenly, she heard a distinctive tap-tapping sound, and her engineer's ear cocked up in concern. She stopped her welding work and grabbed her tricorder from her belt, running the device across the engine itself. “Crap. If that's coming from inside the plasma conduit, we're gonna need to replace the entire—”

It was then that she saw that Sunek was now staring off into the distance, idly tapping his fingers on the side of the Bounty's hull with his free hand as he did so.

“Sunek!”

He paused in the middle of his tapping and looked over to her, a picture of innocence.

“What?”

Summoning the deepest reserves of her strength of will, Denella resisted the increasingly strong temptation to introduce the laser welder in her hands to any number of Sunek's body parts, and instead powered down the small device for a moment.

“Ok, new plan,” she said, as calmly as she could manage, “I'm gonna finish off the work up here. On my own. And you can...go fix some lunch? I've had to power everything down while we're working, so you'll need to see what we've got in storage.”

Sunek raised an eyebrow. A universal symbol consistent across all Vulcans, from the most stoic Kolinahr graduate to the most emotionally fragile member of the V'tosh ka'tur, that indicated that the owner of the eyebrow was distinctly unimpressed. “Lunch? I'm a pilot, not a caterer.”

Keeping her strength of will as fully charged as possible, Denella disguised her irritation with the friendliest smile she could muster under the warmth of the sun. “Please? I'm starving. Besides, it'll be a hell of a lot less like hard work.”

Sunek considered this for a moment. He didn't much like the idea of fixing lunch. But he equally didn't like the idea of staying out working in these conditions. His laziness and his apathy had a brief tug of war inside his mind, before he nodded and started towards the edge of the anti-grav unit. Just as he was about to clamber down, he paused and looked back at the Orion woman.

“Wait. You're not—? To be clear, this isn't an order. I mean, you're not my boss.”

Denella paused in the middle of powering the laser cutter back up and sighed again, looking over at the Vulcan with her best ‘go and fix lunch’ glare.

“It's just,” Sunek continued, “What Jirel said before about—I just wanna be clear that I'm fixing lunch entirely of my own volition. Not cos you're, y'know, in charge of me or anything.”

“Ok,” she replied in exasperation, “Noted.”

“Good.”

With a look of satisfaction now that was settled, Sunek jumped over the railing at the edge of the anti-grav unit and dropped to the ground a few feet below, before slowly plodding back inside the Bounty via the ramp.

Denella took a moment to appreciate the bliss of the sudden burst of peace and quiet now being afforded to her, before she powered the welder on fully and picked up where she left off. Just as the tool made contact with the metal again, her communicator chirped out.

Her first response was to utter an untranslatable old phrase in her native Orion tongue, which the quadrant’s foremost linguists had termed ‘the most succinctly offensive curse in history’, due to its ability to crudely question the integrity of three generations of your family while graphically associating them with four different types of livestock in just six short syllables.

Her second response was to reluctantly flick the welder off again and grab the chirping device from her belt, before she had a chance to fully calm down.

“What the hell is it now?” she snapped.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite everything that was happening around her, Natasha was still taken aback by the Orion’s growled response over the comms link. She’d always seen the engineer as the calmest and most level-headed of the Bounty’s usually impulsive crew.

“Denella?” she managed to reply.

“I’m afraid Denella’s busy right now. You’re through to the Orion goddess of pissed off engineers,” the snippy response came back.

Natasha glanced at Klath where he stood next to her, the Klingon looking equally confused by their colleague’s tone, before she tentatively continued.

“Um, ok? Are the repairs done? Cos we might have a bit of a problem over here.”

A short pause. An odd clanging sound came back, which neither party on this end of the comms link could quite place, but a more discerning ear might have recognised as the sound of an old-style laser welder making heavy contact with a sheet of duranium.

“What sort of a problem?” Denella replied eventually.

“We’ve, um, accidentally encountered some of the natives of this planet,” Natasha explained with a sigh, “And they’re…”

She paused and looked around.

She and Klath stood to one side of the central square of the village they had been brought to, and although they were trying not to draw attention to the chunky communicator in her hand, in truth they were mostly being ignored by the villagers. Their attention was entirely on the ‘spotted man’.

Jirel had been carried all the way to the centre of the square, and was now sitting on a wooden chair in the centre of a long, elaborately decorated table, looking unduly pleased with himself. Villagers - Makalites, as Natasha had learned they called themselves - scurried around the table, laying out a number of clay jugs filled with drinks, woven decorations and other items in front of the Trill that they had inexplicably proclaimed as their saviour.

To one side of the green, a small band had started up, playing a quirky folk-style tune on a series of strange woodwind-style instruments. Some of the Makalites nearby had started performing a loosely choreographed dance, apparently also entirely for Jirel’s benefit.

As the music, the dancing, the drinking and the merriment continued, Natasha tried to convey the scene as accurately as possible over the comms link.

“They’re…having a party.”

There was a particularly long pause before Denella’s reply came.

“Ok, I’m gonna hang up now—”

“No, Denella, wait,” Natasha jumped in quickly, “Something really strange is going on. This is a pre-warp society, pre-industrial even. And yet they’re totally fine with us being here, and they’re even calling Jirel their…saviour!”

“…Our Jirel?”

“Exactly!”

“He claims to have never met them before,” Klath added helpfully from Natasha’s side.

Another pause, as the Orion took this unlikely information in.

“Well, clearly,” she replied eventually, “But, what’s your endgame here, doc? Cos I’m right in the middle of these repairs.”

Natasha suppressed her mounting frustrations at the reactions she was getting from the Bounty’s crew regarding the huge faux pas they were in the middle of committing with the Makalites, and tried to block out the sound of the seemingly tuneless woodwind melody coming from on the other side of the square.

I’m not in Starfleet any more, she reminded herself.

“Well, we obviously need to get out of here asap,” she concluded eventually, “Once the Bounty’s ready to go, we’ll find a quiet corner of the village, and you can beam us out. With any luck this’ll all just be remembered as a...mass hallucination or something.”

It wasn’t exactly the greatest solution, she knew. But given the resources they had, there wasn’t much more they could do.

“Yeah, can’t do that,” Denella countered, “All that radiation. Wouldn’t wanna try beaming you through that on our old transporter. If you wanna get out of there, then you’re gonna have to walk.”

Natasha grimaced, realising that the Orion woman was right. “Fine,” she sighed, “I guess we’ll try to make our excuses and...”

She paused, distracted by a new group of Makalites carrying enormous platters of colourful foods from one of the nearby huts and setting them down on the table in front of Jirel.

“Oh my god,” she whispered in horror, “There’s a buffet.”

Her palpable concern for the situation was interrupted by the sound of the comms link being terminated, as Denella finally hung up.

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

Despite the occasional evidence to the contrary, Jirel had never really considered himself to be a particularly vain man.

From his troubled upbringing as an orphan on Earth, to his failed attempt to join Starfleet Academy and follow in his adoptive father's footsteps, to his time flitting around the galaxy from odd job to odd job, and culminating in his time in charge of the Bounty, there wasn't a lot to be vain about.

He had a big enough ego, obviously. And was more than happy to depict himself as a swashbuckling space captain if there was a crowd to show off in front of, or a woman to try to impress. But he was the first to admit that said ego wasn't rooted in vanity, and had entirely been constructed as a defence mechanism, an act designed to cover for the fact that throughout most of his life flying through space by the seat of his pants, he had no idea what the hell he was doing.

Still, despite claiming an absence of vanity in his character, it turned out that being suddenly hailed as the saviour of an entire group of people was a pretty solid method for kindling that particular feeling inside.

He watched as the Makalite villagers danced, sang and played music in his honour, as he ate and drank from the wide selection of delicacies that had been willingly provided to him. He had been offered gifts of elaborate cloth and small jewels, and had lost count of the number of blue-skinned aliens that had approached to give him thanks or praise.

All things considered, the green shoots of vanity that were fomenting inside of him decided that he could definitely get used to all this.

Just as he settled back in his chair to watch the climax of the latest curious dancing display in the middle of the square, he was approached by the same alien that had led the group of Makalites back in the forest, the one that he had learned was called Sister Ryna.

"Oh, spotted man," she said wistfully, an adage that the Makalites seemed entirely unwilling to drop despite Jirel having told them his actual name several times, "Is there anything more that you desire, great and merciful saviour?"

Jirel resisted the temptation to ask if the Makalites had gotten far enough into their evolutionary cycle to have invented a half-decent brandy, and tried to indulge his curiosity instead.

"Um, well, I guess you could—I mean, I'm obviously your great and merciful saviour. And that's really, totally cool. Could not be more excited about that. But...just refresh my memory about, y'know, what that actually entails...?"

Sister Ryna was slightly perturbed by this question. He should already know that kind of thing as far as she could see. But she didn't let her confusion show. After all, whatever the case, she was still in the presence of the spotted man.

"It is just as The Seer has told us," she explained, "That you would come down from the stars, on your mighty skyship, and save us all."

The Trill mulled this over as he chewed on a piece of juicy fruit, significantly tastier than whatever Natasha had inflicted on them back in the forest. He didn't mean for it to happen, but Sister Ryna's words were definitely feeding his vestigial sense of vanity. This led to him unlocking his pre-existing ego, and deciding that, given the circumstances, a bit of Jirel Vincent, space adventurer, wouldn't go amiss.

"Well," he said, pulling his best swashbuckling captain smile, "It wouldn't be the first time I've saved the day, let me tell you—"

His ego was interrupted by the sound of a distinctly unhappy cough. He and Sister Ryna swivelled around to see Natasha and Klath glaring down at them where they sat.

Jirel felt his swashbuckling captain smile trying to make a run for it.

"Oh. Um. Hi, guys," he managed, "Just, y'know, making friends with the natives?"

He grabbed his smile before it evacuated his face entirely and rearranged it into one more in keeping with an apologetic teenager who had just been caught breaking curfew by his parents.

"Cute," Natasha replied, without a trace of amusement.

"Aren't I?" Jirel shot back, his grin gaining in strength as he chomped down on another piece of fruit and accepted a top-up of green-tinged liquid from a clay jug wielded by Sister Ryna.

"You should be careful," Klath cautioned, eyeing the Makalite woman with distrust, "The food could be poisoned."

Sister Ryna tilted her head at the Klingon with a look of innocent confusion. "Why would we wish to poison our saviour?"

"Yeah, Klath," Jirel retorted, taking a generous gulp of the sweet liquid, "Why would they want to do a stupid thing like that? Now will you two relax? You're the one who wanted to take a look around, remember, Nat? And here we are. Looking around. Trust me, this is not a problem."

Klath grunted unhappily, as Natasha rolled her eyes. She was becoming increasingly concerned by the way that the Trill seemed to be starting to ease into the role that the Makalites had created for him.



“Tell me, spotted man,” Sister Ryna continued, as she replenished his drink again, “Where is this great and mighty skyship of yours?”

Jirel took the question in his stride, wondering if that was the first time either of those words had been used to describe the Bounty, even as Natasha’s glare darkened a little more. “Oh, right,” he nodded, gesturing back towards the forest they had come from, “It’s, um, y’know, just over...yonder.”

Klath’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“Yonder?”

“I dunno,” Jirel shrugged back at the Klingon, “I’m just trying to fit in.”

Natasha suppressed another sigh and turned back to Sister Ryna, who seemed to be thoroughly elated by the news about the proximity of the skyship, regardless of the exact phrasing that had been used. Cultural contamination or not, she decided it was time to get some answers.

“Excuse me,” she said with a friendly tone, “What exactly is it that you need from the spotted man and his skyship?”

Sister Ryna looked confused again, wondering why both the spotted man, and his acolytes, seemed so unfamiliar with their roles in what was unfolding. “The Seer’s prophecy was clear,” she explained, fixing Jirel with a dotting look, “The spotted man will come in his skyship, and take us all to our utopia.”

She broke eye contact with Jirel for a moment, and looked up towards the heavens, gesturing with her outstretched hands and smiling widely.

“Way up there.”

Natasha stared open-mouthed at the cheery Makalite. Jirel choked on the piece of fruit he had been in the middle of eating. Even Klath looked a little taken aback. The Trill turned and offered an altogether weaker smile at his colleagues than before, his vanity well and truly fleeing the scene of the crime entirely.

“Ok,” he admitted, “This might be a teeny, tiny bit of a problem.”

\* \* \* \* \*

While the party continued in the square, The Seer watched on from the temple.

Behind him, dominating the expanse of the single room inside the metal structure, was a simple wooden table, virtually groaning under the weight of the many and various offerings to him that had come from the villagers. Jewels, gems and precious stones of all shapes and sizes had been added there over time, anything that the Makalites could find to pay their respects. Just as he had instructed.

And, with the ‘skyship’ having now arrived, The Seer had decided to forego the party, such that it was, in order to collect the riches the villagers had availed him with.

And then, just as he had been assessing some of the larger objects on the table, he had thought to pop his head outside to check that everything was progressing according to his plans. It didn’t take long for him to spot the newcomers. They didn’t exactly blend in with the blue-skinned villagers after all.

And when he saw them, his mood had instantly darkened.

He summoned up his most calming and serene expression and turned to the other two figures in the temple with arms outstretched in peaceful warmth.

Brother Falor and Brother Makan stood beside the groaning table, awaiting his words. The two Makalites had quickly become known as The Seer’s most loyal followers ever since he had arrived in the village, endlessly eager and willing to carry out the wishes of the man that was promising them so much.

They had no issues with the donated items in the temple. It was clearly important for everyone to each show their thanks for all that The Seer was doing for them.

They had never questioned The Seer whenever he had asked them to lock Sister Lyca away in the Bastille. After all, she was a heretic, one that stood against the words of his great prophecy.

And they didn’t mind being kept from the celebrations outside, even though the spotted man and the skyship was now amongst them. Especially given that The Seer had promised they would both have prime seats in the skyship for their ascent to the heavens.

They didn’t even care about the rashes on their arms. Because salvation was now at hand.

And so, they remained loyal to their all-seeing master, and they dutifully awaited whatever tasks he might have for them before they reached their utopia.

“Brother Falor, Brother Makan,” The Seer said to them in his becalmed voice, “Your Seer must, I’m afraid, furnish you with a task on this joyous day.”

“Of course, Seer,” Brother Falor replied eagerly, backed up by an enthusiastic nod from his fellow Brother, “We are happy to serve you.”

The Seer bowed his head slightly at them in respectful thanks, before shooting a glance back towards the doorway of the temple. “I need you to...keep a close eye on our guests for me. Can you do that?”

“But, oh Seer,” Brother Makan said with a note of worry, “For what purpose? This is all as your prophecy foretold.”

“Of course it is,” The Seer replied quickly, keeping his tone benign, “But you are both well aware that, on occasion, my prophecies can work in mysterious ways. And that I have always asked you to ensure that you both keep your faith, for the, um, good of the flock.”

The Brothers shared a look of confusion. It was true that, for as long as they had followed him, The Seer’s prophecies often did play out in somewhat contradictory ways.

Such as his forecast that their crops would prosper, only for the rains to fall and wash away their entire harvest. The Seer had pointed out that ground was now clear and fertile, ready for a bountiful crop to prosper next season.

Or when he had claimed that all would be well with Sister Toya’s father, days before the elder had succumbed to sleeping sickness. The Seer had clarified that all indeed was well, and that he was safely in the next realm.

So, even though The Seer now appeared to be asking them to spy on the very people that he had claimed were here to deliver them from the disease that was blighting the village, it made sense to both Brother Falor and Brother Makan that if this seemed wrong, it was only because they didn’t fully understand the prophecy itself. And that was clearly their problem, not the fault of The Seer.

After all, he had never guided them wrong before. Especially when he had appeared to have guided them wrong.

It was flawless critical thinking like that which had made Brother Falor and Brother Makan such excellent followers in the first place. So, instead of questioning his request, they both simply nodded back.

“Such loyalty to the flock,” The Seer smiled with benevolence, “And, if any of our guests go against the ways of the prophecy, you know what to do.”

They nodded again, and scurried out of the temple, leaving The Seer to return his attention to watching the celebrations for the arrival of the spotted man from afar.

He saw the trio of newcomers to the village once again, and he felt his mood darkening afresh. He wasn’t sure how it had happened, but what had happened was clear to him.

Someone had sent him the wrong Trill.

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

“What the hell is that?”

Denella shot out her comment just as Sunek ambled up the steps and entered the room, slapping a dusty ration pack down on top of the engineering console where she worked.

“Um, lunch, your majesty,” the Vulcan shot back, “Like you said, the replicator’s off until you power the ship back up again, so I had to go and dig these old things out of storage. They’re still good to eat.”

He paused and tentatively sniffed the dirty brown nutrient bar sticking out of the torn wrapping of his own ration pack and wrinkled his nose slightly.

“I think.”

Denella sighed patiently and gestured to the readouts on the console in front of her. “Not that. This.”

The Vulcan idly wandered around to take a look at what she was pointing at, taking a bite out of the corner of his ration bar as he did so.

Denella had nearly finished patching up the damage to the ship, and had specifically come back to the cockpit in order to make preparations to restart main power before heading back to the Bounty’s warp core to finish the job.

But while she was here, curiosity had gotten the best of her, and she’d decided to use some of the scant emergency power being used to keep the Bounty’s vital systems running in order to take a closer look at the radiation that was affecting both sensor scans and transporter operation.

It was partly curiosity, and also partly a slight sense of guilt about how she’d snapped at Natasha over the comms link earlier. Her frustrations had dissipated now, and she had decided to see if there was anything she could do about the transporter. But what she’d found was more perplexing than she’d been expecting.

“What’s all this?” Sunek asked as he glanced over the readings and chewed on his ration bar, not doing a particularly good job of making it sound like he cared.

“Jirel and the others are up to their necks in natives, apparently. So I thought I’d look for a way to beam them out.”

“What is it with us and natives, anyway?”

She ignored the question and tapped at the controls to bring up a full set of readings that she’d been able to pull together. “Now, I’m not getting much, because of all the interference. But what I am getting makes no sense at all. Look.”

Sunek continued to idly chew away as he looked over the readings. Eventually, he shrugged and looked over at her. “Yeah. Cool. Weird radiation.”

Denella sighed again. She’d known the Bounty’s thoroughly unorthodox Vulcan for long enough to know that underneath several layers of bad jokes, constant sarcasm, garish clothing and intense laziness, there still lurked a substantial Vulcan intellect. It was just that, most of the time, it took a gentle nudge in the right direction to get him to actually bother using it.

“It’s more than just ‘weird radiation’ though,” she mused, “There’s something off about it, but I can’t quite put my finger on it...”

She carefully framed her comment to leave the door wide open for Sunek to sweep in and fill in the blanks in her understanding.

Alongside her, he sighed in frustration. By the sounds of it, he’d already figured it out.

He swallowed his chunk of ration bar and reluctantly looked down at the console. A fresh conflict stirred up inside him, cannily jolted into action by Denella’s words, between his egotistical need to prove how clever he was and his equally strong desire not to do any work.

Eventually, his ego won the battle.

“I mean,” he shrugged off-handedly, “It’s pretty obvious what’s off about it. It’s not naturally occurring. Look at the way the intensity curve changes over distance. If it was a natural planetary phenomenon, it’d be way more uniform.”

“Which means?” she pressed, tipping his ego fully over the edge.

He sighed again, took another bite from his ration bar and started to quickly tap the controls with his free hand.

“Which means it’s a dispersal pattern,” he went on, finishing his work with the controls and tapping the screen that now displayed a zoomed map of the surrounding area, and an associated radiation pattern, “See? There’s your source. Other side of those hills we’re parked next to. Whatever’s over there is what’s causing all this radiation.”

Denella looked down at the screen with a nod of satisfaction, then back over at the scruffy Vulcan by her side. “See, why don’t you do stuff like this more often?”

“Cos it’s boring,” he shrugged as he swallowed his final mouthful of nutrient bar, tossing the empty ration pack wrapper straight onto the deck of the cockpit and earning an irritated tut from the Orion for his actions.

“Hrm,” she added as she studied the details on the screen, “You know, this seems like a pretty short hike.”

Sunek’s face dropped instantly. “Naw. Come on, Denella—!”

“I’m serious,” she insisted, “We’ve got plenty of time now the repairs are done, so let’s go do a bit of sightseeing. Shouldn’t take long to get over there and take a look. If we can figure out what it is, we might be able to solve our transporter problems.”

The Vulcan emitted a further annoyed whine, as Denella grabbed her tricorder and the other ration bar from on top of the panel and walked over to the cockpit steps, pointing at the discarded wrapper on the deck as she passed it.

“Also, pick that up.”

She paused for a second at the top of the steps and looked back at the Vulcan with a smile.

“And just in case you’re still worried about who’s in charge, don’t think of any of this as me giving you orders. Think of them more as strong recommendations.”

With that, she disappeared down the steps, leaving Sunek to grumpily look down at the silvery wrapper from the ration pack.

“See,” he called after her, “I go figure everything out, and this is how you thank me. That’s why I don’t do stuff like this more often!”

Getting no response, he continued to grumble to himself as he followed her down the steps, leaving the wrapper where it was.

He hated hikes.

## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Natasha stared down at her tricorder and shook it in frustration.

It wasn't the first time that she'd taken quite such an agricultural approach to a piece of kit she had sourced from the Bounty. Quite often, she had come to find that it was the only way to get any of it to work. But this time, she knew that it wasn't the tricorder's fault. This time, it wasn't working properly because of the radiation all around them.

Still, it felt satisfying to shake it.

"Anything?"

She looked up to see Klath approaching her, the Klingon looking around guardedly.

Having heard Sister Ryna's somewhat shocking explanation for the exact purpose of their supposed saviour's arrival, they had left the 'spotted man' to enjoy the rest of the banquet, while they did some digging.

They had walked a short distance away from the main square, stepping into the well-trodden dirt streets that fanned out into the village itself.

With the entire population of the settlement seemingly busy attending the festivities, the streets themselves were deserted, save for the odd Makalite flitting here and there, who tended to be more worried about missing the party than they were the sight of the human and the Klingon.

That aspect of their arrival was still troubling her. Not that she wanted to be seen as a terrifying visitor from another world in a way that would permanently scar the Makalite culture, but the way that they were so entirely accepting of them was unquestionably perturbing.

She forced herself to focus on their most immediate issue, and shook her head in response to the Klingon's question. "Not really," she admitted, gesturing to the tricorder, "The radiation is even more intense around here than it was back out in the forest. What have you got?"

She had suggested that they split up to gather as much information as possible. Klath had never struck her as a particularly keen anthropologist, and she had braced herself for more grumbled complaints like back in the forest, but she found to her surprise and satisfaction that he had readily accepted the plan. Unfortunately, as he delivered his report, she realised that perhaps she should have been a bit more clear on what sort of information he was supposed to have been gathering.

"I have completed a full tactical assessment of the area," he began, "The perimeter line is poorly defended, and their weaponry is primitive. Slingshots and stone projectiles. I do not believe that they pose us a serious threat."

Natasha stared back at the entirely serious face of the Klingon, as a stray villager scurried past carrying a particularly unthreatening tray of fruit, underlining his analysis.

"Klath," she sighed, "I meant information about the people, the culture, the—We're not planning an invasion here!"

"You asked me to see what I could find out," he offered back, "That is what I have been able to find out."

She sighed in exasperation and gave the tricorder in her hand an extra shake for good measure. "I meant, y'know, ask around. Find out who these people are, and why they seem to have been expecting us. Who's this 'Seer' that Sister Ryna mentioned, and what's going on with this prophecy of his that Jirel seems to be involved in. That sort of thing. Not a breakdown of their weaponry!"

Klath considered these points for a solemn moment.

"I do not see how that information will aid our attempts to leave."

Natasha was certain that she felt her cheek involuntarily twitch at that comment, and made a mental note to run a quick medical scan on herself when she got back to the Bounty for signs of stress-related issues.

"Ok," she replied calmly, "But we're not leaving just yet. I mean, you heard everything back there. Why the hell do these Makalites expect us to transport them somewhere? And why are they so accepting of the idea of starships and alien visitors?"

Another solemn pause, as Klath considered those points as well.

"I see," he nodded eventually, "Perhaps that has something to do with their disease."

He offered that information in an entirely offhand manner, as if it was entirely unimportant compared to the details about the village's defensive capabilities. Which, as far as he was concerned, it was. But that wasn't an opinion shared by the curious ex-Starfleet doctor.

"What disease?"

"Most of these... individuals have some sort of disease," he explained with a slightly reluctant grimace, "One of the males mentioned it to me, as I was enquiring about the existence of any armed outposts in the surrounding hillside."

She felt another involuntary twitch as she tried to work out why he thought none of this would be important, and idly wondered whether or not she was going to be the first person on record to suffer a tactical report-induced seizure.

“Ok,” she said eventually, summoning up the patience to continue, “I need to take a look at that for myself. That might give us an idea of what we’re dealing with here. In the meantime, you go back and get Jirel. We need to be ready to leave once we’ve figured all this out.”

“Understood,” Klath nodded, “I will continue my tactical assessment on the way.”

“Ugh,” she groaned, “For the last time, we don’t need to worry about the Makalites and their wooden huts—”

“Metal,” Klath pointed out, “The huts are wood and metal.”

Natasha paused and looked around, taking in the glistening pieces of metal that were distributed all over the village for the first time. Inwardly, she cursed herself for missing such a simple piece of information in her own investigations. She’d been so wrapped up in trying to interpret the frustratingly patchy tricorder data that she hadn’t really properly looked around at what she was trying to scan.

Must be getting rusty, she mused wryly.

“Do not worry, doctor,” Klath added to his observation, “They do not appear to have begun using such materials in their weaponry at this stage.”

She wasn’t really listening at this stage. Instead, she walked over to a nearby hut and started to examine the metal supports on either side of the doorway. They looked incongruous compared to the wooden construction of the building. She checked the tricorder data, but it was just as useless as any of her other scans, so she resorted to a visual inspection, and became intrigued.

“Hey, check this out,” she motioned to Klath, who stepped over to her, “This metal. It’s been machined and tooled. And this isn’t just a naturally occurring element. It looks like some sort of compound alloy.”

Klath wasn’t especially interested in those findings. But he had been working hard on his ability to swap small talk with the rest of the crew, given how much it seemed to inexplicably matter to them. So he knew she was expecting a response.

“Interesting.”

He was satisfied that was enough for the time being, and mentally congratulated himself on another fine piece of small talk in his growing repertoire.

“But,” Natasha continued, her focus still on the metal, “There’s no way a civilisation at this stage of development should be able to make something like this...”

“Interesting.”

As far as Klath was concerned, he was acing this particular conversation.

Natasha ran the tricorder across the metal sheet and tutted in frustration at the lack of a result. Even if she had been expecting it. “Ugh. If only we could reconfigure our scans. Cut through the radiation pattern somehow.”

Klath considered whether he should chance a third ‘interesting’ in a row. It seemed especially hypocritical when he was struggling to think of a topic he found less interesting than Makalite building construction. But in the end, he decided to focus back on more important matters.

“Perhaps...I should locate Jirel, as you suggested?”

This snapped her back into the here and now, as she clipped the mostly useless tricorder back onto her belt and stopped her investigation into the metal sheet. “Right,” she nodded, “And in the meantime, I’ll see if I can find out anything about this disease. At the very least, the last thing we want is to catch something while we’re down here.”

They set off in different directions, with Klath heading back to the town square and Natasha heading deeper into the streets of the village. Neither of them noticed as Brother Falor and Brother Makan emerged from behind a nearby hut and started to follow her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mmmf!”

Jirel grimaced at the unexpected force of the hands being pushed into his exposed back. He felt the impact hit him in between his shoulder blades and radiate out, the hands spreading across his back and crushing him as they went.

The Trill was now deeply regretting taking up Sister Ryna’s entirely innocent sounding offer of a traditional Makalite massage.

He hadn’t really fully thought through what such a treatment might entail on this planet as she had gleefully led him to a nearby hut and suggested that the spotted man should make himself comfortable on the large wooden table in the centre of the main room inside. Specifically, he hadn’t really factored in the effect that the slightly higher gravity of the Makalite planet might have on their concept of a delicate touch.

And so, he was in pain. Lots of pain.

“Hnggh!”

He squealed as the Makalite woman enthusiastically slammed the knuckles of her hands deep in between his shoulder blades.

"I have been trained in this practice by one of our healers," she explained with a merry innocence that belied the fact that Jirel was pretty sure she was about to dislocate his left shoulder, "It brings me such joy to be able to treat you, oh saviour!"

As she slammed her hands down again and again, Jirel tried to respond as best he could without hurting her ever-cheerful feelings.

"That's great, Sister Ryna. Really - Aack! - Really great. But is there any chance you - Gngh! - You could go just a tiny bit softer?"

Sister Ryna looked a little taken aback at this. After all, she had worked hard and studied for many hours to learn the ways of a true Makalite massage. "Am I hurting you, oh saviour?" she asked as she thumped the Trill's exposed back again.

"Not so much 'hurting' as - Agh! - Just, y'know, maybe a bit less...brute force?"

"But this is exactly how the healer—"

"Gaah!"

"—Taught me that it should be performed."

Just as Jirel was certain he had felt a vertebrae pop somewhere down his spine, the hut was treated to an extra display of brute force, as the door swung open with enough violence to nearly break it from its flimsy hinges. It was the fourth hut that Klath had walked into in his efforts to locate Jirel, and by this point he was allowing his frustrations to show.

The shock of the entrance caused Sister Ryna to jump back in shock, as Jirel awkwardly scrambled down off the wooden table, grabbing his tunic top where he had left it and holding it up to cover his chest in a curious display of instinctive modesty.

"Klath! Learn how to knock, maybe?"

The unimpressed Klingon glanced from the deeply embarrassed Trill to the mildly perturbed Makalite and back again. Jirel did his best to maintain a semblance of dignity as he pulled his top back on.

"Um," he managed, "Sister Ryna was just showing me—That is to say she was, um—"

"I was just trying to give pleasure to our saviour!" the Makalite blurted out before Jirel could get any further towards forming a coherent sentence.

He stifled a wince, as Klath folded his arms in front of him, now doubly unimpressed. "That's—She's made that sound a whole lot worse than it really is."

Sister Ryna took a step towards the Klingon, still only slightly wary around him. She offered a smile and gestured towards the table. "Perhaps, as you travel with the spotted man, I could—?"

"Perhaps not," Klath interjected before she could get any further with her suggestion.

"Hey," Jirel mustered, "You might actually like it. Hell of a lot of pain involved. I know you're into that sort of thing."

As Jirel tentatively swung his shoulders around, checking for broken bones, the Klingon shot him his best withering look, and gestured back out the door with a jab of his thumb.

"We are leaving."

At this, Sister Ryna looked genuinely scared for the first time since she had met them.

"But...not without us, surely? The spotted man is here to save us!"

"Yeah, Klath, we can't just—"

"We are leaving," he reiterated, "Now."

The insistent tone of the companion of the spotted man gave Sister Ryna cause for concern, as she stepped over towards the exit herself. "If we are all leaving," she persisted, "Then we must all prepare. We need to pack, and to—"

She stopped in the middle of her train of thought, shocked into silence by the sight of another visitor to the increasingly crowded hut.

Jirel and Klath both turned and tensed slightly when they saw the newcomer. A tall man, his face partially obscured by the hood of the flowing green robes he was wearing.

"Sister Ryna," The Seer said calmly, "Perhaps you can help your Brothers and Sisters to clear up after the festivities this afternoon. While I convene with our guests."

Klath and Jirel shared a withering glance at the oddly pompous air of his speech. Jirel found himself wondering if this was a piece of amateur dramatics, to go along with all the music and dancing that the Makalites had put on for him earlier. But Sister Ryna showed no signs that she was participating in whatever passed for improv theatre on the Makalite planet. In fact, she still looked downright scared.

"And then," The Seer continued, "Make sure to give some extra thanks in the temple on this joyous day, won't you?"

"Yes, Seer," she nodded, bowing down in deference before scurrying off out of the hut.

After she had left, The Seer turned back to Klath and Jirel.

“Sweet robes,” the Trill offered with an edge of sarcasm, “They come in any size, or just ‘stupidly large hotel bathrobe’?”

The robed figure didn’t immediately reply, though he did reach up and pull back his hood.

“What the hell?” Jirel offered, a sentiment that Klath silently agreed with.

The figure under the hood looked entirely unlike any of the other blue-skinned Makalites they had met so far. No bony ridges around his head, and his skin was more olive-toned than blue. If anything, he looked like a regular human.

Now they were alone, he also immediately appeared a lot less peaceful and serene. The benevolent mystic act had been well and truly tossed by the wayside, and replaced by a significantly less patient one.

“Don’t joke around with me,” he snapped at the perplexed Jirel, “Where’s Marel? And what the hell are you people playing at?”

He gestured dismissively at the equally perplexed Klath as he paced around the hut.

“I mean, a Klingon? You brought a Klingon with you? I was very specific about what I needed when I contacted your boss. Really, very specific indeed. The whole point was that you were supposed to be subtle!”

“Right,” Jirel managed, trying to maintain his best poker face while he figured out what was going on, “Sorry about that?”

If The Seer saw through his bluff, he didn’t show it.

“It’s bad enough that you’re a week late, and now you do this? You have no idea how much work I’ve had to do to explain…him!”

He pointed at Klath again, who, while being as confused as Jirel was, was also definitely starting to take offence.

After a few more moments of frustrated pacing up and down, The Seer paused and looked back at the pair of entirely baffled faces on the other side of the hut. He shook his head as the penny dropped.

“Hang on,” he chuckled wryly, “You two have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Jirel’s poker face, such that it was, remained in place. Klath’s didn’t.

“We do not,” the Klingon stated simply.

The Seer clicked his tongue a few times as he mulled this development over, then shrugged. “Well, any port in a storm, I guess. I suppose you’ll have to do.”

“We’ll have to do?” Jirel asked, his own poker face now collapsing under the weight of the unfolding situation, “Do what? Who the hell are you?”

The Seer extended his arms out on a peaceable gesture.

“My name, gentlemen, is Martus Mazur. And I’m afraid I need a lift.”



## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

"It's just gonna be some weird rocks."

It was the fourth time that Sunek had offered this opinion about the mysterious source of the radiation since they had started the climb, and Denella still wasn't buying it. The Orion engineer sighed in exertion and set off up the next rocky incline of the hills near to where the Bounty had landed, as she and the ever-complaining Vulcan continued to ascend.

"It's always weird rocks," Sunek continued, wheezing slightly as he followed her up a natural stone pathway that seemed to wind its way up to the top of the hill.

He had barely stopped whining since they had finished the last of their repairs and set off in the direction of the strange readings that Sunek had pinpointed earlier, but Denella was happy to ignore the complaints and enjoy the workout, which was combining steep inclines with heavier gravity.

Even though Sunek was probably right. It was probably just some weird rocks.

"I ever tell you about my Great Grand Uncle Rovik?" Sunek panted, "Served in the Vulcan Science Ministry his whole life. All two incredibly boring centuries of it. Spent all that time on science vessels, chasing every kooky radiation surge or energy reading they picked up, seeking some fascinating new discovery or breakthrough. And it was always just a bunch of weird rocks."

Denella paused to get her breath as they reached a more level section of the climb. Sunek stopped alongside her and surveyed the valley below them. "I spy, with my little eye," he sighed, "A bunch of stuff that sucks."

"I think it's nice," she countered, "Fresh air, a decent bit of exercise. We don't do this enough. You need to work out more, you know."

Sunek tutted and pointed across the hillside to a gentler path to the top a little way along. "Why didn't we go up that way?" he whined, "That looks way easier than this!"

"Cos there's a forest there," Denella replied, pointing out the thick tree line that covered a section of the shallower incline, "I don't do forests."

Without feeling the need to clarify her comment any further, she turned and pressed on, seeing that they were now in sight of the summit. After a moment, Sunek scrambled up behind her, and switched the topic of conversation in a way she wasn't expecting.

"Hey, while we're still alone," he sighed, "You know that whole dumb meditation thing we're doing? I mean, you haven't told anyone about that, right?"

She was surprised to hear this. Not so much him describing their calming exercises as 'dumb', but more the fact that he'd brought them up now.

She shook her head in amusement, assuming he was joking around. "Actually, I've rigged up some secret cameras in the cargo bay. Transmit every session to everyone's cabin. And to any passing ship in range."

"Funny," Sunek griped back, "Hey, how about we stick to our lanes, hmm? I'll do the jokes, and you do the whole 'Aw, my poor shippy-wip got a boo-boo on her warpy-drive' act."

"Do I really sound like that?"

"It's just...I've got a reputation to maintain onboard. Y'know, as second-in-command—"

She couldn't help but let out an audibly amused snort, which riled Sunek.

"Ok, seriously, what is so hard to believe about that?" he persisted, as they clambered on.

"Nothing," she said, off-handedly, "It's just, Jirel told me how he sees our little pecking order a while back. And, after all, I'm the one that keeps the Bounty in one piece."

"Really? You?" Sunek snorted, "Ugh, fine, whatever. Maybe you are second-in-command. But then it's me, right? Not Klath."

She glanced behind her and shot him a knowing glance, which made him bristle more.

"Oh, come on!" he scoffed, allowing himself to get more wound up as they climbed on, "So, what? I only get to boss Princess Starfleet around? She's only been onboard five minutes!"

Denella paused just shy of the summit. "Actually," she said with a slightly wicked smile, "Pretty sure Jirel promoted her ahead of you last week."

Sunek bristled further, then noted how close they were to the summit and allowed a knowing smile of his own to cross his face. "Hang on," he said, wagging a finger at her, "You're just winding me up with all this, right? So I'd stop complaining and get to the top of the stupid hill faster?"

Denella paused for a second. While she hadn't entirely made up Jirel's thoughts on the Bounty's pecking order, she had also been exaggerating it for precisely that reason. It was usually a lot easier to get Sunek to do hard work when he was suitably distracted. But she had also done it because after putting up with Sunek's constant complaining for so long, she was eager for a little payback. And she decided she wasn't quite finished yet.

"Ok," she shrugged, entirely innocently, "Let's say that's what I was doing."

With that, she began the final ascent, as Sunek scoffed and called out to her. "Nice. Really nice. You know, that's a pretty crappy thing to do to someone you're helping get over a bunch of residual anger issues!"

She paused and looked back, a little concerned. "I thought we'd made progress with the meditating? You said you were over it?"

"Oh, yeah," Sunek nodded with an overly casual snort, "I'm totally over all that, y'know? It's just...my point is that I don't want the others to know—"

"Sunek," she smiled, "Trust me. Your reputation, such that it is, is safe with me."

He let that latest jibe go, and smiled back, as the two of them came perilously close to the rarest of galactic events: Sunek saying thank you.

In the end, he simply nodded in satisfaction, then gestured back up at the final stretch between them and the top of the hill. "Come on then, we doing this, or what?"

They set off again as he continued to ramble on.

"Hey, you reckon we're the first people to ever climb this thing? Do we get a medal or an award or something?"

Denella went to reply, then stopped and stared.

They had reached the top of the hill, and now had an unfettered view of the valley on the other side, where the radiation pattern had been coming from. And there was no doubt to either of them that they had found the source.

"Huh," Sunek managed, "Not just some weird rocks then."

In the valley below them was the unmistakable form of a crashed starship.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I can see you haven't been fortunate enough to have heard of me."

Martus Mazur, the artist formerly known as The Seer, was still smiling, seemingly revelling in the situation despite the lack of recognition on the faces in front of him. Except, as Jirel started to put everything in order, he realised he did recognise the name.

"Huh. Actually, I have heard of you," he said, with a slight smirk of his own, "El-Aurian, right? And a great big galactic con artist."

The man in the green robes feigned a look of shock at this comment. "Really? That's what you've heard? I'm hurt. Really, I am."

"You know him?" Klath asked his colleague in confusion.

"Sort of, although I've never actually met him," Jirel clarified, "Remember I told you about that scam I got caught up in before I got the Bounty? Me and a bunch of stragglers fell for this plan to buy an old Vulcan supply ship. We were all gonna share the profits the thing made on a route to Ferenginar and back."

"Sounds like a profitable venture," the El-Aurian replied.

"Doesn't it just," Jirel continued with a glare, "Except, as soon as we'd all transferred the latinum, the guy who was supposed to be making the purchase mysteriously disappeared."

He jabbed his finger in Mazur's direction. Klath nodded in tacit understanding. He may not have known Mazur himself, but he knew the type.

"Hmm," Mazur offered, "That doesn't sound like me—"

"It was you," Jirel replied firmly.

"Ugh. Fine. If you must know, that was all a simple misunderstanding. When I went to make the purchase, it turned out that the Romulans had attacked the shipyards, and—"

"Yeah, I'm sure they did," Jirel scoffed, "Still, I always thought that was as far as you went for a con. Turning over little scams on colonies here and there. This is on another level. All this..."

He gestured to the elaborate robes, and then looked a little more confused.

"Actually, what the hell are you doing?"

Mazur shot the Trill a withering look as he smoothed down his robes. “Improvising,” he replied curtly, “Which I’ve been doing for the last two months!”

“Why?” Klath asked, which seemed like a perfectly valid question.

“Because the transport ship that was taking me to Ventriss IV suffered a warp core imbalance in this system and crash landed on this godforsaken backwards hell of a planet,” Mazur sighed, as if it should have been obvious, “I was the only survivor.”

“How fortunate,” Jirel replied, without mirth.

“Not really. The ship was a write-off. All I could do was use an emergency comms unit to get a message out to one of my contacts to pick me up. His pilot happens to be a Trill, a guy by the name of Marel Jan. You know him?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jirel deadpanned, “We all know each other.”

If Mazur felt sheepish for his comment, he hid it well, as Jirel continued to quiz him.

“So, what? You decided to get a little grift going while you were down here, almighty Seer?”

Mazur waved his hand dismissively, the sleeve of his robe flapping about as he did so. “Ugh,” he scoffed regarding his get-up, “I wish I could claim this was something so elaborate. Truth is, I needed food and shelter, and this was the first settlement I found. As for the...character I’ve put on, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t exactly fit in around here. So I had to come up with a backstory. I’m a traveller from the Southern continent.”

“Does this planet even have a Southern continent?”

“Who cares?” Mazur shrugged, gesturing back out in the direction of the Makalites, “They don’t know, do they?”

Jirel and Klath glanced at each other and shrugged. He had a point.

“So, yes, I presented myself as a traveller, cooked up a backstory, and it turns out these Makalites love a good prophecy. So here we are. I’m... The Seer.”

Jirel shook his head, still trying to piece everything together. “Ok, but, why give them this big story about taking them off to utopia? Why make me—I mean, whatever Trill you were expecting, some sort of saviour?”

Mazur rubbed the bridge of his nose, fending off a stress headache. He stepped over and peered out of the door of the hut, making doubly sure there were no Makalites in earshot, before turning back. “Because of this stupid disease they’ve all got!” he hissed, “Obviously their Seer didn’t see that one coming! And when you’re as backwards as this lot are, and some invisible threat starts killing your grandparents, the first thing you do is blame the newcomer. So I had to...”

“Improvise,” Klath grunted on his behalf.

“Glad you’re getting the picture. Not as stupid as you look.”

Klath felt a sudden desire to reach for the bat’leth holstered on his back and introduce the El-Aurian to the sharpest edge. But he held back for the moment.

“Um,” Jirel managed, “About this disease—”

“Oh, don’t worry. It only seems to affect the locals,” Mazur lied quickly, hoping that would stop any follow-up questions, “But I introduced the ‘spotted man’ to keep them off my back and hold out for their...saviour. Best lies are based on truth, and all that. Trust me, I have no intention of actually bringing these people with me.”

“With you?” Klath asked.

“Well, my contact seems to have sold me out on this one, but I’m assuming you have a ship?”

Jirel and Klath slowly nodded, eliciting a relieved smile from Mazur.

“In which case,” he said, “I’d very much appreciate it if you got me the hell out of here.”

## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Natasha looked over the red welts on the Makalite woman's arm with the practised eye of a medic, despite lacking her usual array of contemporary medical tools.

"You are a healer, then?"

The Makalite woman who owned the arm watched on a little fearfully as the newcomer to the village checked her rash. She was one of the younger women in the village, who had introduced herself as Sister Tula. And she was the first of the blue-skinned aliens that had allowed Natasha to examine her.

"That's right," Natasha said with her best reassuring smile, "Don't worry, I'm trying to help."

Sister Tula nodded, though she still seemed wary. But Natasha was used to that in patients from time to time, even from more enlightened species.

"You say this all started several weeks ago?"

"Yes," Sister Tula nodded, "Brother Yoran was stricken first, but it spread quickly. But The Seer tells us that the spotted man will rescue us all."

"So I've heard," Natasha said, wryly.

The more she had heard about The Seer, the less she trusted him. But before she could press on with her questions, Sister Tula had one of her own.

"Is it true that the spotted man's skyship can travel into the heavens themselves?"

Natasha's gut constricted at the reminder of exactly how many of the rules she had held so dear as a Starfleet officer she was breaking now, accidentally or otherwise. "I wouldn't worry about that," she managed to reply.

"Oh, I'm not worried," Sister Tula insisted, "I'm glad. More than any of the others in the village, my family provided the most offerings to bring him here."

"Offerings?" Natasha asked curiously, as she peered closer at the rash.

"At the temple. My family gave extra, every day, even when The Seer did not ask. All to bring the spotted man here to spare us from the sickness."

Natasha concluded that she didn't like the sound of any of that. And despite her lack of specialist medical equipment, she also concluded that she didn't like the verdict she had come to about the most likely cause of the welts on Sister Tula's arm.

They were a clear symptom of radiation sickness.

Which was good news for her and the other Bounty crew members, thanks to the hyronalin shot she'd thought to administer. But it was bad news for the Makalites. Because it meant they were all dying.

"Sister Tula, what is all this?"

The two women turned to see an older Makalite woman approaching them from further down the dirt street, regarding Natasha with clear mistrust.

"Oh, Sister Hyla," Sister Tula replied, "She is a healer. She came with the spotted man and she is looking at my sickness."

"For what purpose?" Sister Hyla immediately shot back, "You know the words of the prophecy. Our sickness will be cured by the spotted man when we leave for our utopia."

To underline her point, she stepped up and forcefully lifted Natasha's hand from Sister Tula's arm.

"We do not need anything from you. That is not the word of the prophecy."

Natasha forced herself to keep her irritation under wraps, and mustered a smile in the direction of the older Makalite. "Listen, I'm just trying to help. And I think I know what's wrong with you all--"

"Sister Tula," Sister Hyla said sternly, ignoring Natasha entirely, "Perhaps you should return to your family, and prepare for our ascent to utopia. That would please The Seer, I'm sure."

The younger Makalite nodded her head and smiled excitedly, before scurrying off down one of the side streets.

"You know," Natasha tutted, "Where I'm from, it's rude to burst into the middle of a consultation like that."

"And where is it that you are from?" Hyla asked, her eyes narrowing with distrust.

Natasha bit her tongue again before she blurted out something she regretted. Instead of going down the adversarial route, she tried to placate this new Makalite. “Maybe I could examine your...sickness, instead?”

She gestured down to Sister Hyla’s partially exposed forearm, redness visible across it. Ashamed, Sister Hyla pulled her sleeve down quickly. “I have seen many healers about my sickness already. And I know that only The Seer’s prophecy can save me. I keep the faith.”

“Trust me,” Natasha smiled, “I’m not like those other healers.”

A flicker of something passed across Sister Hyla’s face. A hint of desperation underneath her proud stare that betrayed to Natasha that she might not fully trust in whoever this Seer was. But it was only there for a brief second.

“You cannot tempt me from The Seer’s path. I trust only in him, and the spotted man.”

“But I’m with the spotted man...!”

Before Natasha could argue that point any further, Sister Hyla spun on her heels and walked off. She tutted again and returned her attention to her mostly useless tricorder, running what scans she could as she walked on down the street. There was at least enough information to tell her that the radiation levels were higher inside the village than they had been in the forest.

As she rounded a corner in the road and clipped the tricorder to her belt, she looked up and noticed a curious building on the edge of the village. One made almost entirely of metal.

She had no way of knowing that this was the building the villagers knew as the Bastille.

Equally, she had no way of predicting the sudden blow she felt to the back of her head, which sent her tumbling to the ground.

She was already unconscious by the time Brother Falor and Brother Makan, who had decided she was definitely stepping too far outside the will of the prophecy, began to drag her away.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I didn’t scream!”

“Sure you didn’t, Sunek.”

Denella suppressed a knowing smile as they walked on down the trashed remains of the corridor on the crashed ship. Behind her, Sunek stalked on, continuing his vocal denials.

“It was just a surprise, that’s all. We’d just walked a hell of a long way, I was really tired, and the last thing you expect when you open up some random ship’s airlock is for a gross hexapedal monster’s corpse to fall on you like that!”

“Tripedal.”

“What?”

“Three legs, three arms. Edosians are tripedal. Not hexapedal.”

“Great. Let me just file that away under ‘Things I’ll never, ever care about’.”

Denella smirked again, as Sunek grunted in irritation. He didn’t like being corrected, especially when he had definitely been wrong.

Still, ever since the Vulcan’s uncomfortable introduction in the airlock, it had been clear that the crashed vessel was Edosian. And it was proving tricky to navigate. Partly because of the damage from the crash landing, which had collapsed corridors and bulkheads all over the place, but also because it had understandably been primarily designed for crew members with more appendages than either the Orion or the Vulcan possessed.

“What a mess,” Denella mused to herself as they carried on walking down the corridor made out of a silvery metal.

Along with the crash damage, there were signs of further decay. Greenish grass and other local plant life was already encroaching through the gaps and gouges in the hull, making it clear that the wreck had been here for some time.

As they had hiked back down into the valley and got up close, she had started to appreciate just how large it was. When it had been spaceworthy, it would have been over two hundred metres in length, and almost as wide. It had an almost square design for a main hull, with evidence on the outside that two pylon-mounted nacelles had sprung out from the rear, though both appeared to have been wrenched off during the violence of the landing.

“Looks like it was some sort of transport vessel,” she continued as they walked, “It’s big enough, and it’s clearly not any sort of warship.”

“So,” Sunek offered by way of reply, as her tricorder chirped out another warning, “Exactly how close to the big bunch of super deadly radiation are we planning on getting?”

She glanced at the garbled readings on the tricorder and shrugged. “We should be ok, given what Natasha gave us. Let’s see if we can find main engineering. Or whatever’s left of it.”

They walked on, past two more lifeless Edosian bodies. All of them they had seen so far had been dressed in a sandy-coloured uniform. One neither of them could identify.

“Maybe some sort of civilian company?” she said as she gestured to the clothing.

“Had no idea Edosian pleasure cruises involved so many crash landings,” Sunek replied, “What do you think they do in the second week? Warp core breach or Borg assimilation?”

They continued past an access conduit that was still gently smoking despite the length of time since the crash, and turned a corner to see a large set of double doors, partially opened, with another body strewn close by.

“This is it,” Denella nodded grimly, squeezing in between the half-open and powerless doors with no small amount of difficulty.

Sunek followed her through, and they found themselves in a vast engineering section, where the vertical and long-dead warp core dominated the room. The core itself was surrounded by various panels and consoles, all equally powered down. There was a huge twisted gash in the far wall, through which Denella spotted a myriad of other broken vital systems.

It wasn't clear what had caused such a tear in the thick metal plating of that particular bulkhead, but she suspected that might well have been the cause of the crash.

She scanned around with her tricorder as best she could, and zeroed in on one of the control panels on the side wall of the room.

“Hopefully there's still some trace of emergency power left on this thing,” she muttered, tapping at the console to try and will some life into it.

Mercifully, after a moment, it powered up. Albeit with a flickering and fading display that showed what little was left of the once mighty ship's power reserves.

“Ok, I'm getting a fix on the source of the radiation,” she reported, “Looks like there's a leak in one of the microfusion reactors. Must've been damaged in the landing.”

Sunek stepped over to a console on the other side of the room and tapped it, powering it up. “Can you fix it?” he asked as he did so.

“I think so,” she nodded, “Just give me a minute.”

She tapped the controls again, then moved across to an exposed wall panel and grabbed a small engineering tool from the pocket of her overalls, getting to work. Meanwhile, Sunek tapped idly at his own computer display, not entirely sure what he was looking for. He spotted a curious headset next to the panel which was clearly designed for Edosian physiology, but he gamely placed it onto his own head and grinned.

“Hey, check this out. Looks like this is what they used for a comms link.”

“Sunek, don't touch anything,” Denella warned, as she continued to work.

“I'm just messing around,” he tutted, “Besides, it's not like I can break anything any more than it already is.”

She gestured behind him with her free hand, not taking her eyes off the panel she was working on. “The main antimatter storage pod is just on the other side of that wall behind you. You break that, and this planet becomes part of another star system.”

Sunek instinctively glanced behind him, though all he saw was the silvery metal wall.

“I'm being careful,” he muttered unhappily.

“If you really want to do something, try checking the database, see what the hell this ship is supposed to be.”

Sunek glared at the Orion woman's back for a moment, a little suspicious of her latest comment which sounded worryingly like another attempted order. But eventually, he started to tap at the console. To stave off the boredom, if nothing else.

After a moment, Denella ran her laser sealer back over the wiring inside the panel, and then walked back over to the wall console she had been using earlier. “Ok,” she nodded in satisfaction, “That's the worst of the leak dealt with. The seal's back in place for now, and it looks like radiation levels are already starting to drop, so we can—”

She was interrupted by an urgent chirping sound from the console that Sunek was working on. The Vulcan stepped back slightly as she fired an exasperated look across the expanse of the broken engineering section.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing, I swear! That wasn't me!”

“Then what is it?”

He cautiously stepped back up to the console, as Denella rushed over to him.

“Um,” he managed, “I think it's an incoming transmission.”

“Ok, before you answer it, let's just—”

“I've answered it,” Sunek grinned as he tapped a button on his headset, eliciting an even more exasperated look from his colleague.

“Why the hell did you—?”

He held his finger up to silence her, and gestured to the headset with his other hand. “Hey,” he said over the comms line, “This is Sunek.”

A pause. Denella waited impatiently as the inaudible response came back over the headset, and started to wonder how much chatter there was from the other end of the link, and how much Sunek was exaggerating to irritate her.

“Uh huh,” he nodded eventually, “Uh huh, yep. Ok, I’ll...just ask.”

He looked back at Denella, looking more than a little surprised. “So, it’s Edosian Internal Security,” he explained.

“And?”

“And they wanna know what we’re doing with their prison transport.”

**End of Part Two**

## Part 3A

### Part Three

Natasha slowly came round and opened her eyes. Only to find that, initially at least, her vision was almost as dark as when she'd been unconscious. It took a while for her eyes to get used to the dank interior she found herself in.

She felt the pain in the back of her head from where she had been struck, and gently shook her head to test for signs of concussion. She didn't know exactly how long she had been out, but it had clearly been some time.

Slowly, the darkness around her began to resolve, aided by a few streaks of sunlight permeating through the thatch of the roof. She could make out a modest, open plan rectangular room, with a series of stout pillars dotted around, which helped to support the roof itself. The ground underneath her feet was made of soft grass, though she could see that it wasn't a vibrant green, but a sickly brown.

She tried to stand up, but found that particular task was impossible, thanks to her being so tightly shackled to the wooden column behind her with some sort of woven rope material. She noticed that her tricorder was still attached to her belt, as was her communicator. As if her captors had no interest in them.

As she started to struggle against her bonds, she was caught off guard by the sound of an unmistakably female voice from somewhere behind her.

"Brother Falor ties them tight," the voice said.

Surprised, and suddenly on edge, Natasha managed to awkwardly slide her way around the pillar as best she could until she found the source of the voice. There was a weak-looking Makalite similarly trussed to another of the wooden columns.

"I did not mean to alarm you," the woman offered with an apologetic tone, "Good wishes to you. I am Sister Lyca."

"Pleased to meet you," Natasha replied with a distinct hint of sarcasm.

Recognising that the restrained woman wasn't a threat, she turned her attention back to her bonds, as Sister Lyca watched on with some curiosity.

"You came with the spotted man?"

Natasha resisted the temptation to roll her eyes at this and continued to work. Given how she was feeling after the blow to the head, she could have really done without another discussion with a local about the famous 'spotted man'.

"Let me guess," she grimaced, "You've been waiting for him to lead you to salvation?"

She did her best to hide the undertone of derision from her comment, and as she glanced back up at the other woman.

And then she saw, through the gloom, that there was no sense of wonder or delight on her face, as there had been with the other Makalites as soon as Jirel had been mentioned.

"No," Sister Lyca replied, with an edge of defeat, "I didn't—I don't believe in the prophecy. That is why I am in here."

Her comments caused Natasha to stop her attempts to extricate herself from her bonds for a moment, and immediately sparked up her old Starfleet curiosity over again. "Why don't you believe it?" she asked.

Inside, Sister Lyca felt more troubled than ever, discussing her disregard for The Seer's prophecy with someone who was apparently one of the spotted man's travelling companions. For all she knew, this might be some sort of trap, designed to further punish her.

But during her solitary incarceration, she had continued to debate her stance on the prophecy in her mind, especially now the skyship had indeed appeared. And after her last visit from The Seer, she was still convinced that her own beliefs were correct. Especially now that Brother Falor and Brother Makan had dragged the Bastille's latest occupant inside.

"I don't believe The Seer's words," she cautiously explained, "And I don't think that the spotted man will take us to our utopia. I believe that The Seer brought the sickness to us, and that he cannot cure us. And now you are here, I believe it more."

"Why?" Natasha pressed again, pulling at the thread of information in front of her like a good ex-Starfleet officer should.

"Because if the spotted man truly has come to save us, then why has one of his companions been locked away inside here with me?"

Natasha couldn't help but nod and smile, seeing the signs of some genuine critical thinking from one of the villagers. "Sister Lyca," she offered back to the apparently more level-headed Makalite, "Do you mind if I ask you a few more questions?"

The blue-skinned woman still looked a little tentative, but she eventually nodded.

"You mentioned the disease," Natasha began, "I've already examined some of the other villagers, but I need to know more. One of the other Sisters said it started several weeks ago?"

Sister Lyca's eyes widened slightly at this line of questioning. Natasha stifled a sigh.



"I'm...a healer," she added reluctantly, "Where I'm from."

"And where are you from?"

Natasha found herself biting her tongue at that question again. For a moment, she desperately racked her brain to try and remember if this planet had a Southern continent. Or were they already on the Southern continent?

In the end, she decided that Sister Lyca at least deserved the partial truth. "I'm from a place far away," she offered, "And we've come here in our...skyship. But you're right, The Seer didn't bring us here. As a matter of fact, I've never even met him."

The Makalite woman nodded in apparent understanding.

"But," Natasha continued, with a firmer tone, "Weirdly enough, I might actually be able to help your sickness. If you can tell me more about it."

"I see," Sister Lyca replied after a pause, "It is true what you've been told. The sickness began some weeks ago. When The Seer had been with us for some time. And for all of his visions and prophecies, it always got worse."

She paused and stifled a grimace, craning her head back to try and look at her arm. It was a look that Natasha's medical training immediately recognised, regardless of the species.

"Is the pain getting worse?"

Sister Lyca's head snapped back up to look at her, a little surprised at the instant diagnosis. But again, after a moment, she nodded. "It grows worse by the hour," she admitted with another wince, "I fear that it will not be long before I sing my song for the Beast of the Great Hereafter."

"The...what?"

The Makalite woman blinked across in confusion, as if that question was ridiculous.

"The Beast comes for you when it is your time to pass. It guards the entrance to the Great Hereafter, and only if your song is considered worthy by the beast will you be allowed to pass on."

Natasha stifled a grimace, reminding herself that, no matter how credulous Sister Lyca may appear on some topics, she was still from a very primitive culture. "Ok," she managed, "Well, I don't think it'll come to that, Sister Lyca. So long as we can get out of here."

She looked around the confines of the dark enclosure as best she could, a little confused.

"Where exactly are we? Are we still in the village?"

"Yes," Sister Lyca explained, "The Bastille is where the Brothers take those that have moved against the prophecy. I myself have spent many cycles here."

The name of the structure rang some alarm bells with Natasha, not to mention the apparent reason for its use. She looked around again and saw that while the columns they were secured to were simple wooden structures, the walls looked to be a similar metal to that she had seen outside. A few more connections started to fuse together in her mind as she pieced everything together.

"So," she queried, "The Seer built this place?"

"Yes," she nodded, "The Seer has changed a lot about our village. He oversaw construction of the Bastille, and the temple in the square. Both buildings were supposed to help with the prophecy. He would go off into the forest to gather the shiny material."

"Huh," Natasha mused as she glanced at the metal again, "Must have some funny trees growing around here. And the other villagers used this...material to help support their huts?"

"Yes. Many of the villagers had their huts improved as a reward by The Seer for the extent of their donations to the cause."

Natasha remembered what Sister Tula had mentioned earlier about the 'offerings' that her family had made. A few more alarm bells went off in her head.

"You see," Sister Lyca continued, "The Seer asks everyone to make regular donations at the temple. Treasures, jewels, whatever can be spared, or found out in the forest. He claims that only through such generosity will the prophecy come true."

"Yeah," Natasha couldn't help but mutter, "I bet he does."

She recalled plenty of historical cases that she had been taught about back at the Academy, where certain groups or individuals had, on occasion, sought to infiltrate and take advantage of less developed societies or cultures. Ekos, Planet 892-IV, Garrian VII, the list went on.

She had even been involved in some hands-on work to deal with some minor pieces of cultural contamination while she had served in Starfleet. It was a perpetual issue for any organisation with a sense of morals in a galaxy where so many species at different stages of development coexisted.

And there were plenty of red flags in what Sister Lyca was telling her. Without even having met The Seer, Natasha was seeing some fairly clear signs of exploitation.

But they weren't the telltale signs that seemed the most pressing as she looked back at Sister Lyca, and was able to discern through the gloom of the Bastille that she was looking increasingly pale, and seemed to be sweating.

On cue, Sister Lyca coughed loudly, the sound echoing around the hut. "I fear," she managed, "The Beast will be here soon."

"You're sweating," Natasha noted, "And pale. Are you also feeling sick? Nauseous? And it's got a lot worse since you were tied up in here?"

Sister Lyca looked over and nodded, confirming Natasha's earlier prognosis. Natasha studied her latest patient from a distance, and then looked at the walls again, shaking her head defiantly as her prognosis clicked into place. She also absently wondered how long the hyronalin compound she'd administered to herself some hours earlier would last for.

"Ok, Sister Lyca, the good news is I can help keep the Beast away from you," she said, "I think I know what's wrong here. And I think I can heal you."

"You can?"

"I can," she affirmed, "Although, the bad news is that, unless we get out of here soon, everyone in the village is going to die."

With that ominous statement, she redoubled her efforts to break her bonds.

Seconds later, a thoroughly shocked Sister Lyca joined in.

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

Of all the things that Jirel could accuse Martus Mazur of being, and ever since he had fallen for that Vulcan supply ship scam all those years ago, that was a fairly extensive list of things, it turned out that being a bad actor was not one of them.

As Mazur led him and Klath through the village square, past the Makalites clearing up what was left from the earlier festivities, he couldn't help but begrudgingly admire his commitment to his character. From the moment they had emerged from the hut, the El-Aurian had effortlessly slipped back into his role as The Seer, walking through his flock with a kind and peaceable demeanour, a million miles away from the frustration and anger there had been in private.

"My Brothers, my Sisters," he called out serenely, as the Makalites regarded him with reverence and awe, "Everything is proceeding as The Seer has foreseen. Our salvation is nearly here."

Jirel and Klath walked a couple of paces behind the overly grandiose performance, with the Trill beginning to feel a little uncomfortable about the way he was being so adoringly regarded by the villagers around them.

Being a saviour was a lot less cool now he knew the truth.

"He is quite the performer," Klath muttered to him surreptitiously as they headed across the square, "I do not trust him."

Jirel was more than inclined to agree, on both points.

"Do not fear," Mazur continued ahead of them, "The Seer will make sure that everything is prepared for. For all of you."

This somewhat empty comment seemed to be enough to keep the Makalites happy. The villagers that they were passing began to nod and chatter in excitement.

"Like my mother always said," Jirel offered back to the Klingon, "Never trust anyone who has a habit of referring to themselves in the third person."

They eventually reached their destination, the squat metal-walled building that some of the Makalites had referred to as their temple. Mazur, billowing robes and all, entered through the main doorway, and Jirel and Klath followed.

Inside, the temple was a fundamentally simple sort of design, much like the hut that they had come from. There was no proper floor inside the dank confines of the temple itself, meaning that they still walked on the dirty ground, albeit mostly bereft of grass and plants. Aside from the four main outer walls, the only other adornment was a long wooden table, with a series of candle-type lamps burning at strategic intervals in order to fully illuminate the room.

The table itself was covered in jewels and precious stones, while below the table were a number of substantially less glamorous items such as woven cloth, wooden sculptures, clay pots and even various bits of food. It appeared as though the Makalites had literally been donating anything they could to secure their salvation.

It seemed clear that they had now stumbled into the very heart of Mazur's latest scam.

"Amazing what a fancy speech or two and an authoritative enough voice will do to a group of people, isn't it?" Mazur chuckled as he gestured to the riches on display.

The El-Aurian quickly moved over to the table and produced a small knapsack from underneath his robes. He began to pick up some of the larger gems and jewels, examining them in the candlelight, before depositing those that passed the test into the bag. And as Jirel watched him sort through the mountain of ill-gotten treasure that his display as The Seer had managed to accumulate, he couldn't help but feel a palpable pang of guilt deep inside his gut.

"This is low, Mazur," he grunted, "Even for you."

In general, the Trill accepted that he was a man who had occasionally exploited a situation when it presented itself. It was sometimes a matter of necessity when you encountered as many sticky situations as he did. But what he was seeing now was something else entirely.

Mazur, for his part, didn't look back, continuing to deftly examine each jewel at a time. "Please, spare me the ethics lecture," he tossed back casually, "If I'd wanted one of those, I'd have sent a distress call to Starfleet."

At this comment, Jirel felt a slight pang of concern, as he suddenly realised that he hadn't seen their own former Starfleet colleague for a while. But before he had a chance to ask Klath about Natasha, Mazur continued.

"Besides. For all I know, given my luck, all of these'll end up being worthless."

He paused and held up a particularly large purple-tinged gem, turning it around carefully in the candlelight, and then shrugging.

"Eh, maybe not all of them..."

"So you're cutting and running," Jirel sighed, "Just like you did with that Vulcan supply ship stunt you pulled on me. You've got the Makalites to hand over all their possessions, and you're gonna leave them with nothing."

Mazur tossed the purple jewel into the knapsack, and gestured to the various objects on or under the table that he was paying no interest to. "I'm leaving them with plenty," he indicated, "Just helping myself to an appropriately sized payment. And I deserve it, because you have no idea what I've been through down here these last two months. I've helped these people out, given them hope, wasted so much time just... listening to their endless problems!"

"Thought you El-Aurians were good listeners?"

"We have our limits. So, I think I deserve a little something in return."

"Exploitation," Klath muttered.

"Reimbursement," Mazur countered.

"And what happens to the Makalites now, hmm?" Jirel pressed as another jewel was tossed into the knapsack, "You just leave them here, after everything you've promised them?"

"Would you rather give them all a lift?" the El-Aurian replied, before shrugging, "Besides, they'll get over it."

"You sure about that?"

"That's the beauty of dealing with people that are so easy to manipulate. They'll all move on from this as soon as the next movement, or religion, or wanderer with a powerful-sounding voice and some mystical-enough words stumbles past."

"Nice to see that legendary El-Aurian empathy shining through."

Mazur ignored Jirel's barbed comment and concluded his extensive examination of the various treasures inside the temple, lifting the clinking knapsack over his shoulder and walking back over to the door. "Whatever," he grunted, "I'd say it's time for us to get out of here, hmm?"

Jirel looked from Mazur to Klath and back again. He was still conflicted about the morals of the situation they had found themselves in. But equally, he knew that the Bounty and her crew weren't in a position to call themselves the galaxy's morality police. And everything that was happening down here was way outside of their pay grade.

"Fine," he sighed eventually, "But where's Natasha?"

"Who?" Mazur replied dismissively as he peered out of the doorway to see whether the coast was clear or not.

"Human lady, average height, overly friendly, red hair, irritating ability to turn every little thing into a grand ethical dilemma?"

Klath nodded along with this description at Jirel's side.

"Not familiar," Mazur shrugged.

Jirel reached for his communicator and tapped the controls to open a comms link. "Jirel to Natasha. Where are you?"

There was a crackle of static, but no response. The Trill looked at the Klingon with a note of concern.

"Could be the radiation?" he offered.

"Possible," Klath replied, in a subtle tone that suggested a significant part of himself didn't believe that for a second, "She was over on the other side of the village when I left her, still investigating the...disease."

At the doorway, Mazur sighed, clearly irritated by the latest delay to his increasingly improvised escape plan. "Look, we don't have time for this. The longer we wait, the more these village idiots will have started to pack up their things and join the queue for a lift. I'm sure your friend will catch up with us."

Jirel glared back at the man in the robes with no small amount of distrust. "We're not leaving here without her," he stated flatly, "So you're just gonna have to wait."

"I'm telling you," Mazur pressed, "We need to get—"

He suddenly grimaced in pain and staggered slightly, his legs half-buckling underneath him as he started to drop to his knees. Neither Jirel nor Klath moved at first, their sympathies for him not exactly running over. But eventually, Jirel stepped up and helped him back to his feet.

It was then that he saw the signs of the debilitating red rash on Mazur's arm.

"What the hell?"

The El-Aurian regained his balance and quickly pulled the sleeve of his robes back down, but it was too late to hide what Jirel had seen.

"It's nothing," he managed.

"The hell it is," Jirel shot back, now more concerned, "I thought you said this disease only affects the Makalites."

"Perhaps," Klath added, "It might be in your interests to locate the doctor after all."

"No need," Mazur grimaced as he internalised the fresh flare of pain from his arm, "Just...get me out of here."

Jirel grimaced as he considered the situation, then looked back at Klath. “Ok, here’s what we’ll do. You get the All-Seeing Eye back to the Bounty, and I’ll go and track down Natasha—”

“No,” Mazur countered, pointing at the Trill, “You should come with me.”

“Any particular reason?”

“The Seer and the spotted man parlaying together in the forest will be a lot easier to sell to the locals if we’re seen,” he pointed out, “So as not to arouse any suspicions.”

Jirel sighed again, frustrated by how completely and entirely wrapped up in Mazur’s little scheme he now was. He didn’t really want to openly admit quite how concerned he was feeling about Natasha’s absence, or how much he wanted to be the one to go and find her. But equally, he couldn’t see an obvious flaw in Mazur’s logic.

“Fine,” he nodded eventually.

The three of them made for the exit to the hut together, as Mazur worked on regaining his strength as fully as he could. He realised that his best laid plans were at risk of unravelling with these additional delays. And that he may be forced to take more drastic action to make his escape.

As Klath walked off towards where he had last seen Natasha, Mazur felt around under his robes, and smiled at the reassuring form of the concealed Edosian disruptor pistol.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunek let out a frustrated sigh as he lounged back against the dull wall of the Edosian ship’s engineering deck.

“Man,” he tutted, “These Edosians can really talk.”

He paused suddenly, tapping the headset he was wearing and seeming a little bit more concerned about whatever he was now hearing.

“Oh, you—You heard that, did you? Sorry, I thought I’d muted the—Yep. Shutting up.”

Denella stifled a smile as she checked the tricorder readings again, and started to look more satisfied with the work that she’d managed to do. Repairs to the microfusion reactor were complete, and the local radiation levels were already dissipating, as expected.

With Sunek busy with Edosian Internal Security, she had even been able to finish everything without being distracted by more of the Vulcan’s complaints. In fact, given how the other side of the conversation over the headset seemed to be going, for once it was Sunek who was having to deal with someone who wouldn’t stop talking.

“Yep, right, cool,” he babbled quickly down the headset, “I mean, not cool, obviously, cos...y’know, all the crew are dead, but—Tell you what, you just give us a shout when you’re in orbit, ok?”

With that somewhat awkward matter out of the way, and regardless of whether or not the overly talkative Edosian official on the other end was actually finished or not, he lifted the headset off his head and sighed.

“Ugh. Some people, am I right?”

Denella kept the various quips that jumped to the front of her mind to herself, and instead merely gestured to him for some sort of report.

“Ok, so, the good news is: They don’t think we were to blame for any of this.”

“Was that even an option?” Denella asked with a hint of a smile.

“Point being,” Sunek continued quickly, “This is an Edosian prison transport, supposed to be on the way to a penal colony on Farkas II. They lost contact with it about nine weeks ago, until some rugged, clever, handsome genius re-activated their comms beacon.”

Denella raised her eyebrow at this, for a number of reasons. “I thought you said you didn’t touch anything?”

“I touched one thing,” he shrugged back, considering the rest of the matter closed, “But, that means they’ve been able to pinpoint our location, and they’re sending another ship along to clean up the mess they’ve made. So, as the rugged, clever, handsome genius once said to his lackey: I think our work here is done.”

The Orion engineer kept her eyebrow raised, but shook her head. “Not quite,” she pointed out, “But the leak is sealed, which means we can work on getting those other idiots out of whatever mess they’re in.”

She gestured for Sunek to follow her, as they squeezed back through the doors to the engineering deck and back into the remains of the corridor.

“How are we gonna do that?” he asked as they walked.

“Radiation levels are already dropping around here,” she explained quickly, absently waving her tricorder at him as she talked, “Meaning that we can retune this to deal with the worst of what’s left. And...”

She led Sunek through another set of damaged doors, keeping an eye on her readings to confirm that they were in the right place.

“... We can also retune this.”

She gestured in front of them, and Sunek saw the telltale sign of a transporter pad. Denella walked over to the controls and powered them back to life. “We’ve still only got the dregs of emergency power,” she continued as she worked, “But that’ll hopefully be enough to get some juice into this thing. Just need to make those adjustments and we’re good to go.”

“Why don’t we just wait to get back to the Bounty before we beam them back there?”

“Who said anything about beaming them back?” she winked, gesturing at the pad, “Come on, let’s get this show on the road.”

Sunek’s face dropped slightly as he caught her drift, pointing to his chest.

“Me?”

“Who else?” she shrugged, “The radiation might be clearing up around here, but I still can’t get a proper lock on them way over on the other side of the next valley. So I’ll beam you over there, you round them up, and by the time I’ve hiked back to the Bounty, you’ll be getting back as well.”

Sunek reached for a string of ready-made excuses, but Denella was ready for them. “Or,” she added, “Do you wanna climb all the way back up that hill to get back to the ship?”

The Vulcan stopped and contemplated this valid point. Seconds later, he bounded over to the transporter pad.

“Thought as much,” Denella smiled in satisfaction as she finished clearing the interference, “Right, I’m getting a fix on the settlement. Lifesign readings are still a bit sporadic, but I’m definitely registering a Klingon.”

“Sounds like those kids of ours,” Sunek grinned.

Denella tossed the tricorder she had recalibrated to deal with the radiation over to him. He caught it first time.

“Take that with you, it’ll help pinpoint where they are,” she noted, “Also, I’m gonna set you down just outside the village. Don’t want to make any more of a nuisance of ourselves, do we?”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Ok,” Denella finished up, “Now, the radiation levels are still high over there, but it should be safe to re-materialise you.”

Sunek’s face immediately dropped. “Wait, ‘should be’—?”

Denella allowed herself a slight smile of satisfaction, as the suddenly-terrified Vulcan disappeared.

## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

Klath liked to think of himself as a patient man. He worked onboard a ship with Sunek, after all.

He knew that Klingons had a reputation for being short-tempered and antagonistic at the best of times, and from dealing with his fellow officers during his time in the Klingon Defence Force, he knew there was some truth to that. But he also believed that there were exceptions, and that he was one of them.

Still, even Klath's own Sunek-approved levels of patience were being tested as he stalked down the streets of the Makalite village.

"And tell me, is it true that the spotted man has the power to make sure we will never go hungry again?"

Klath rolled his eyes to the heavens. In his wake, Sister Ryna had attached herself onto his impromptu tour of the village as he searched for the missing Natasha.

He hadn't asked her to join his search. In fact, he had been very careful not to ask her anything. But the Makalite woman, who had been entirely taken with Jirel throughout the feast and the impromptu massage earlier, was showing no sign of losing that interest.

"That is not for me to say," he managed to reply, as he turned a corner and walked on down the next street, looking this way and that for any sign of the red-haired human.

He had offered a similarly straight bat to all of Sister Ryna's questions so far, but the complete lack of any sort of concrete information didn't seem to be putting the curious Makalite off from continuing her overly polite and cloyingly friendly interrogation.

"Some have said that the spotted man's skyship will allow us to pay a visit to the Great Hereafter, where our ancestors now reside. Is that true?"

Klath growled slightly and glanced back at the innocent face of Sister Ryna.

"Unlikely."

Undeterred, Sister Ryna followed him as he turned down yet another street.

"You are sure that nobody has seen my colleague?" he continued, turning the questioning back on his Makalite shadow for a moment.

She shook her head. Klath growled unhappily again. He was beginning to wonder if he had already searched this section of the village. To him, all of the huts and buildings around him looked pretty much the same. One street of wood and metal huts were the same as the others.

"And when we get to our utopia," Sister Ryna began to ask, "Will we—?"

His carefully curated patience now exhausted, Klath whirled around and glared fiercely at the Makalite, baring his teeth in anger.

But she didn't react how people usually reacted in the face of his aggressive side. There was no fear or concern on her features, just the same happy smile. After all, she was in the presence of one of the spotted man's colleagues. No harm could come to her here. The prophecy was quite clear on that.

The Klingon quickly recovered from his surprise at her complete lack of reaction, and despite part of him really wanting to double down on his aggressive side to try and scare her away, he reluctantly opted for diplomacy. "I cannot answer your questions," he insisted, "Now, if you have not seen my colleague, then perhaps you could leave me to—"

"Hey! Klath! There you are!"

It was an instantly familiar voice, and one that told Klath that his levels of patience were not finished being tested just yet.

He turned to see Sunek, tousled hair, garish Hawaiian shirt and all, bounding over to him from one of the side streets. The Vulcan had his trademark grin plastered on his face, despite being faced with the deepening glower on Klath's own features.

"Stupid transporter set me down half a mile away," he continued as he stifled a yawn, "And you could have made yourself easier to find."

"I was not aware anyone was looking for me," the Klingon noted.

"Ugh, fair point," Sunek continued, "Anyway, the ship's fixed and we've figured out the radiation issue, so Denella's sent me to round you guys up."

He paused, and ran over his phrasing of that comment in his head, before correcting himself.

"I mean—I say Denella sent me to do that, but it wasn't, y'know, an order or anything. Cos she's not, like, my boss. Right?"

Completely unaware of, and unconcerned with, the reasons behind Sunek's interest in the Bounty's pecking order, Klath kept his attention on the more pressing issue. "Jirel has already departed. I am...still searching for the doctor."

He gestured around with a note of frustration, as Sunek shook his head patiently and unclipped the tricorder from his belt. "Honestly," he

chided, "I have to do everything around here."

"The tricorders are not—"

"This one is, cos I fixed it," Sunek grinned back, skipping over some of the details and misappropriating all of the credit for the retuned device.

After a moment, the tricorder began to beep gently.

"There we go. One human. Thattaway."

He gestured down one of the side roads that led towards the outskirts of the village.

"So now," he continued, "We just need to—"

It was then that he saw Sister Ryna. And he suddenly looked perturbed. Klath followed the Vulcan's gaze to the Makalite. She had been with them throughout their exchange, and had been so silent that Klath had forgotten that she was still there. Which was somewhat surprising given her previously irritating omnipresence.

But she had been there. Silent, and completely fixed to the spot.

Frozen in fear.

"Oh," Sunek offered as he made his own first contact with a Makalite, "Hey there."

Sister Ryna stared back at the Vulcan.

And then she screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel grimaced as he walked through the forest undergrowth.

A few hours ago, aside from the occasional interaction with some of the native fruits and vegetables, his initial walk through the same forest had been a pleasant enough way to waste a bit of time as they waited for Denella to finish her repairs. But now, as he plodded on and left the Makalite village behind him, the sharp grasses around his legs and the hard soil under his feet felt altogether rougher and more unyielding, and there was something a little foreboding about the towering trees around him.

He wondered how much of that was down to the company he was now keeping on the return leg of the journey. Because instead of his friends, he was now stuck with the only person who apparently wanted to be in the forest less than he did right now.

Except for maybe Denella. She hated forests, after all.

"Ugh. If I ever so much as hear about this place again, I'm looking for someone to sue."

Martus Mazur walked awkwardly alongside the Trill, finding the going even more difficult in his outlandish costume, not to mention the heavy knapsack slung over his shoulder.

"You could have changed, you know," Jirel pointed out, "Don't tell me you crash landed down here dressed like that."

Mazur decided not to go into too much detail about how he'd been clothed when he'd first got here, before he'd managed to get one of the elder Makalite Sisters to stitch him something a tad more befitting of his character. Admitting that he'd been dressed in an Edosian prison uniform when he'd unceremoniously arrived on the Makalites' planet might rather have given the game away.

Jirel noted the silence, but didn't put too much thought into it. As he walked, he found himself more worried about what might be going on back at the village, and wishing that he'd ignored the logic of Mazur's plan and insisted that he stayed behind to look for Natasha.

He knew that she could more than handle herself. She'd proven that on countless occasions since teaming up with him and his motley crew. But he knew he'd rather be looking for her than stalking back through the forest with his present company.

"How much further is it to that ship of yours?" the El-Aurian at his side grouched, as he clambered over a tree root.

"Does it matter?" Jirel retorted, "You got somewhere to be?"

"Yes, actually. A little place called 'anywhere but here'."

Jirel managed a mirthless smile as they stumbled on through the undergrowth, but remained a little intrigued about Mazur's wider plans. "Seriously, though, where is it you're headed, Mazur? Just so I know how long I've got to put up with you."

The El-Aurian tutted as the sleeve of his robes snagged on an errant tree branch, and he stopped to untangle himself. "If you could get me to the Exigan system, I'll make sure you're suitably reimbursed," he shrugged offhandedly, finishing extricating himself and gesturing to the knapsack on his shoulder.

"Afraid we don't accept stolen gems as payment. And before you ask, we don't accept kooky fancy dress costumes or the concept of listening



either.”

The robed figure snapped an irritated look at Jirel, looking increasingly annoyed with his perpetual attempts at not especially friendly conversation. “Don’t worry. I’ve got plenty of latinum stashed away across the quadrant as well,” he replied, “And the sooner we’re off this godforsaken rock, the more there’ll be for you.”

As they walked on towards the Bounty, and Jirel began to contemplate how many different ways Mazur might attempt to scam them out of payment between here and his destination, a thought suddenly occurred to him. “Hang on, the Exigan system?” he said cautiously, “I thought you said the transport ship was taking you to Ventriss IV?”

A con artist as seasoned at juggling lies as Mazur took the oversight in his stride. “Change of plans,” he said quickly but calmly, gesturing to the knapsack again, “I know a jewel guy on Exigan II.”

“Of course,” Jirel scoffed, “You’ve got a jewel guy—”

Before the debate could proceed any further, Jirel was stopped by a chirp from the communicator on his belt. Keeping his eyes on Mazur, and hoping for news from Klath, he grabbed it and clicked one of the buttons on the side.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Denella’s voice crackled over the comms link, “Where the hell are you all?”

Jirel internalised the fresh pang of worry he felt about the ongoing radio silence from the village before he responded. “We’re heading back now. Me and, um, Martus Mazur.”

“The con artist?” Denella asked immediately, eliciting a withering tut from the El-Aurian.

“Everyone’s a critic,” he muttered.

“I think he prefers ‘village mystic’ these days,” Jirel replied with a smile, “His transport ship crashed here, so we’re gonna give him a lift back.”

“Huh,” Denella replied with an edge of concern, “Um, me and Sunek found a crashed ship. That was where all the radiation was coming from. But it wasn’t a transport. It was a prison ship.”

Jirel glanced down at the communicator in his hands in shock. Which, he instantly realised, was a huge mistake on his part.

For one thing, the device was audio only, so it really didn’t matter where he was looking. But more importantly, looking down meant that he had taken his eyes off Mazur. By the time he looked back up, he saw that there was now a stubby disruptor pistol pointed directly at him. Mazur grabbed the communicator and flicked the channel closed.

“Yep,” Jirel sighed in defeat, “There’s always a disruptor...”

## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

After what felt like a very long time indeed working on the bonds on her hands, Natasha had to admit that all she was doing was giving her a nasty rope burn.

She groaned in frustration and leaned back against the wooden pillar behind her.

"I do not think I can break the twine," Sister Lyca offered from the next pillar along.

"Yeah," Natasha grimaced ruefully, looking around the empty interior of the Bastille, "I've kinda come to the same conclusion over here. Guess there's no point screaming for help?"

"There will be guards outside," Sister Lyca replied, "Some of the more loyal members of The Seer's flock. Our voices will not travel beyond them."

The Makalite woman paused and coughed hoarsely several times. Natasha's medical ear didn't like the rattling sound of the cough at all, and felt doubly frustrated that the cure for the Makalite's disease was so simple and yet so far away.

"I feel," Sister Lyca managed eventually, her voice sounding weaker all the time, "The Beast of the Great Hereafter may be approaching me. I can only pray that my song is enough to let me pass on through and join the rest of my ancestors."

Natasha felt a fresh pang of emotion, for Sister Lyca's plight, and for the reminder of the simple culture that had been so entirely torn asunder on this planet. "Sister Lyca, please trust me," she said, "I promise I can cure your disease. The Beast of the Great Hereafter isn't going to come for you today."

She was interrupted by the sudden sound of two shrieked wails from outside the Bastille's only entrance, followed by the unmistakable sound of a pitched scuffle. Moments later, the substantial metal door of the structure was literally ripped off from its hinges, causing both women to flinch against the sudden burst of sunlight that shone into the previously darkened room.

It didn't take long for Natasha to make out the two familiar outlines silhouetted in the doorway.

"Doctor," Klath grunted in satisfaction, "There you are."

"We totally just beat those two guards up," Sunek added from his side, "Well, Klath did a lot of the beating up. But, y'know, I supervised. Cos I'm kinda in charge of the whole operation—"

As Sunek embarked on his latest defence of his position in the Bounty's pecking order, Klath sheathed his bat'leth, having used the blunt side to incapacitate the guards, and stepped over to untie Natasha's bonds.

"Thanks for the rescue guys," she smiled, "We need to—"

The entire Bastille suddenly reverberated with a new noise. An ear-splitting and plaintive wail, coming from Sister Lyca.

As Klath finished untying Natasha, she instinctively flinched at the sound of the shrieking Makalite, who was staring at Sunek with wide-eyed fear.

"Ugh," Sunek grimaced, covering his sensitive ears, "They've all been doing that!"

"Be quiet!" Klath boomed.

Sister Lyca continued to wail for a moment, then paused and looked back at Natasha with a sad, but slightly accusing glare. "You said you would keep The Beast away, that he would not come today, but you were wrong. The Beast is here...and I am ready."

She sank her head down to the ground in front of Sunek. Natasha's mouth dropped open, as she realised what the Makalite seemed to be implying.

"Oh crap..."

"What?" Sunek managed, as he saw the Makalite bowing, "What the hell's that supposed to—?"

"Please," Sister Lyca said softly, keeping her head bowed, "I beg for passage to the Great Hereafter."

Natasha grabbed Sunek's arm and pulled him over to a corner of the Bastille, followed by an equally confused Klath. She turned to them and kept her voice deliberately low. "Ok, so, let's not panic here, ok? But there's a...fairly strong chance that Sister Lyca thinks Sunek is the guardian of the Makalite afterlife."

Klath simply grunted at this statement, wondering if this was an opportune moment for another of his famous 'interesting's. Meanwhile, Sunek's face widened into the widest grin in his repertoire.

"You mean, like...a god? Well, well, local kid makes good—"

“Not exactly,” Natasha countered, slamming the Vulcan’s entirely illogical ego into reverse before it had a chance to get going, “From what she’s told me, you’re more of a...guard dog.”

The grin immediately transferred from Sunek’s face to Klath’s. The Klingon was now legitimately finding the conversation interesting for the first time so far.

“You know,” Natasha offered as further explanation, “Kind of a great big hideous beast that protects the gates of the next realm.”

“A great big...hideous...beast?” Sunek repeated, emphasising his least favourite part.

Natasha shrugged apologetically, while Klath did his best to swallow the smirk on his face and offer his colleague a slow shrug of his shoulders.

“Perhaps,” he offered, “It is the ears.”

Sunek’s ego, which felt like it had been under sustained fire ever since they had arrived on the planet, with the emergency landing, then the pecking order and now this, decided on a swift counteroffensive.

“Wh—? But, what about him?” he said, gesturing to the Klingon.

Klath and Natasha looked back at him with visible confusion, but his ego persisted.

“I mean, if these stupid people are gonna start running around calling people hideous beasts, what about ScaryGuy McForehead over here? Hmm?”

Despite the situation, Natasha glanced over at Klath and shrugged. “I dunno,” she mused, “I’ve always thought Klath was very handsome.”

The Klingon took the compliment with an appreciative nod of his head. He’d always thought the same thing as well.

Sunek just stared at the pair of them with incredulity. “Ok, I see,” he sighed with a knowing shake of his head, “You’re both messing with me as well. Nice. Really, really nice. So, I’m gonna go over there, and—”

He took one step away from them, back towards Sister Lyca, before the panicked Makalite began to wail again, seeing the Beast of the Great Hereafter approaching once more.

“Ok,” Sunek corrected himself, “Not gonna go over there.”

As Sunek’s ego continued to simmer gently, Natasha turned back to Klath and gestured to the Makalite woman, who was still restrained around the other wooden pillar.

“Still, we can’t just leave her here. She’s dying.”

“What do you suggest?” Klath asked, as the wailing continued.

Natasha paused. There was a plan forming in her mind, but it wasn’t exactly one that was going to get Starfleet banging on her door begging for her to come back any time soon. Still, it wasn’t like they had many other options, from what she could see.

“I think,” she replied eventually, with a grimace, “We’re gonna need some help from The Beast.”

Sunek raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Klath looked a little confused.

All the while, Sister Lyca continued to wail.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella sighed in frustration and started on another lap of the Bounty’s empty cockpit.

It had been over an hour since she had beamed Sunek to the others, and she still hadn’t heard anything back from him since a rather curt message to confirm the beam-in had worked.

Meanwhile, she also hadn’t heard from Jirel since his earlier comment that confirmed he was on his way back, apparently with Martus Mazur for company. That comms link had closed unexpectedly, which the Orion was blaming that on the residual radiation.

So, she was left alone on the Bounty, unsure as to what was going on with any of the others.

She usually preferred to be in the thick of things, rather than being kept in the dark. And while she had at least had the chance to double check her repairs without Sunek’s distractions, that had only temporarily interrupted her worrying,

She considered trying the comms links again to the various communicators that were now out there, but instead she paused as she passed Sunek’s pilot console and made a few pre-flight checks. Not that Sunek couldn’t have handled them himself when he got back, but the growing unease she was feeling inside made her instinctively feel it might be in everyone’s best interests to prepare for a quick getaway.

Besides, she’d found that assuming the worst in any given situation was a fairly sensible position to take throughout her misadventures on the

Bounty.

As she worked, she saw a blip show up on the external sensors. Two lifesigns making their way back up the ramp at the rear of the ship. A Trill and an El-Aurian.

She felt the knot in her stomach loosen slightly. At least someone was back onboard.

Within moments, she heard the sound of footsteps coming up the metal steps at the rear of the cockpit, and she turned to greet them.

“Finally. What the hell took you so long—?”

She stopped in her tracks, and the relieved smile slipped from her face.

At the top of the steps, she saw Jirel standing with Mazur alongside him, boasting a disarming smile on his features. And she also saw the disruptor pistol that was pointed squarely at the Trill’s side.

For his part, Jirel mustered an altogether more sheepish smile.

“Hi honey,” he offered, “I’m home.”

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

“Seriously, shut up!”

Natasha and Klath shared a knowing glance as they considered the irony of Sunek making that sort of a statement to anyone, but they didn't say anything out loud.

Sunek had directed the comment at Sister Lyca, now indelicately slung over Klath's right shoulder, as they walked on through the forest. Even though her body was weakening by the minute thanks to the radiation exposure she had been through, her vocal cords still seemed strong, and she was continuing to wail in Sunek's direction as they made good their escape.

Despite the fact that the noisy singing was not exactly making them inconspicuous.

With the guards subdued, the Bastille's location on the edge of the village had made their getaway that much more straightforward, and with the retuned tricorder now in Natasha's hands, they were making good progress back to their ship.

“Please, oh Beast of the Great Hereafter,” Sister Lyca shivered as she temporarily stopped her wailing, “I must complete my song. My death song. It is my offering to you.”

Sunek went to fire off an especially critical review of her offering, but before he could say anything, the Makalite's wailing resumed, as she powered into the next stanza of her death song.

“Ugh,” Sunek griped at Natasha instead, “Why did we have to bring her with us?”

“Because she's dying,” Natasha reminded him, “And it turns out she listens to you.”

“So?” Sunek grumbled, “What happened to that whole ‘don't interfere’ policy you Starfleet lot are always banging on about? Feels like this definitely counts as interference.”

Natasha suppressed another grimace. She had plenty of misgivings about what they were doing, especially feeding Sister Lyca's belief that Sunek was the guardian of their afterlife. But based on everything that she had seen in the village, and the extra information her colleagues had now provided about Mazur and the crashed ship, she was equally sure they didn't have much choice.

“Whatever version of the prime directive I'm still following, it was already out the window down here. This Martus Mazur character saw to that. Non-interference doesn't count when the interference has already happened. We need to help the villagers, and Sister Lyca in particular. Her symptoms are worse than any of the others I saw. I guess because she spent so long inside the...Bastille.”

“What difference would that have made?” Klath asked, his voice booming over the top of the singing coming from over his shoulder.

Natasha shrugged. The jigsaw was now fully assembled in her head. “Because it was almost entirely made of that metal that Mazur had been bringing over there. Which he was presumably stripping from the crashed ship that was saturated in radiation. Based on what I've been told, it sounds like he'd ‘reward’ the villagers that donated the most to his temple with extra metal for their huts, which would just have accelerated their symptoms, and presumably caused them to donate even more to try and show enough faith to ward off their sickness.”

“Huh,” Sunek mused, “These guys really are too stupid to live, aren't they?”

“It's not their fault,” she countered, “Any species at this stage of development would be susceptible to that sort of manipulation. Even all of our own species, once upon a time.”

“Ancient Klingons would not be fooled by such blatant trickery,” Klath countered with a proud glare.

“Yeah,” Sunek nodded in agreement, “And you're not gonna pull the wool over a bunch of logical Vulcan eyes either. We've always been smart. Most of the time.”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she stepped over a tree branch. “Believe that if you want, but I'm telling the truth. I'm not too proud to admit that there were plenty of times in Earth's history when we were suckered in by someone who sounded plausible enough in a time of crisis. Too many times, to be honest.”

Sunek glanced up at Klath, as the Klingon and the Vulcan shared a moment of common understanding between their two species.

“Always said humans were the dumb ones,” Sunek muttered, eliciting a nod from his colleague.

Natasha let that one slide, but she looked back at Sunek with a serious glare. “The point is that where I'm from, it's considered rude to crash on a planet, expose the population to deadly levels of radiation and then leave them to it. It's possible that Makalite physiology makes them especially susceptible to this type of radiation, but whatever the details, we need to treat it.”

As they continued to bicker between them, Sister Lyca's focus remained on completing her song.

She was still confused about a lot of what was happening, such as how the friends of the spotted man could also know the Beast of the Great Hereafter. But the rational part of her mind that had served her well against The Seer had now been entirely subsumed. So instead of questioning what was being said, or where she was being taken, she kept her efforts on her singing, praying it would be enough to please the

Beast.

Sunek winced a little more as her wailing started to intensify. "Ok, fine," he said to Natasha, "But can you give her a sedative or something? I really don't wanna hear the rest of her greatest hits."

"We need to let her do what she needs to do," Natasha countered, much to the Vulcan's annoyance, "That way, it'll be easier to get her back and treat her."

At this, Sister Lyca stopped wailing, and weakly craned her head around to Natasha. "I do not understand," she admitted, "The Beast has come to me. I am headed for the Great Hereafter. There is no more to be done, oh healer."

Natasha sighed again, feeling her frustrations grow. She tried to toe the line between doing the right thing for Sister Lyca and damaging the situation on the Makalite planet any further. "Sister Lyca," she managed eventually, "The thing is that...The Beast wants me to heal you. Right?"

She nudged Sunek in the side, who looked more than a little disinterested in whatever she was talking about, and not especially Beast-like.

"Oh, right. Yeah. That."

Sister Lyca's eyes widened slightly, as Natasha pulled Sunek away from the Makalite on Klath's shoulder to mutter to him.

"Look, I hate to say this, but is there any chance you could try that again? Bit more commitment, maybe? Y'know, a bit more...Beast-like?"

Sunek rolled his eyes and sighed. Then, a thought crossed his mind. If she wants commitment, why not give it to her. He turned back to the Makalite and thrust his arms out wide in a dramatic display.

"Yes, puny mortal!" he bellowed in a considerably deeper voice than usual, "Listen to me, the great Beast, and heed my words! I command you to listen to what the overbearing and profoundly irritating healer is telling you!"

Natasha suppressed a fresh flinch of concern as she saw the repressed amateur dramatics major she seemed to have summoned up from within the Vulcan. But it seemed to do the trick. Sister Lyca nodded back wordlessly.

Sunek turned back to her with a suitably smug grin on his face. "That enough commitment for you?"

Before she had a chance to fully critique his performance, the tricorder in her hand began to chime out a warning. At the same time, Klath tensed up again, just as he had the first time they had walked through the forest earlier in the day. The Klingon's reaction meant that Natasha didn't even need to check the tricorder to know what was happening.

Seconds later, there was a rustling sound, coming from all around them.

They all stopped on the spot. Klath cursed the fact that he couldn't get a clear path to draw his bat'leth with Sister Lyca still over his shoulder.

And then they emerged. Makalite faces, all light blue and curious, peered out of the undergrowth around them. Dozens of villagers, who seem to have raced to track them down. In the middle of all of them, Klath and Sunek recognised Sister Ryna.

"You see," she said to her fellow Brothers and Sisters, "It really is the Beast of the Great Hereafter! He has come for us all on this day!"

On cue, each of the Makalites around them began to wail loudly, each singing their own unique death song in Sunek's direction.

Klath grunted unhappily, while Sunek turned and looked at Natasha.

"Um" he said awkwardly, "You think I should do the voice again?"

## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“We’re not leaving without them.”

Jirel maintained his position in front of the pilot’s chair in the Bounty’s cockpit, with Denella standing just as defiantly beside him. They both stared back at the ugly disruptor pistol that Mazur was pointing at them, but neither of them flinched.

After all, they’d both spent enough time travelling on the Bounty to have become used to people pointing disruptors at them. For some reason, it seemed to happen quite a lot.

For some, this situation would be terrifying. For the Bounty, this was a Tuesday.

“I’m telling you,” Mazur persisted, keeping his grip tight on the pistol, “I really want this crate up in the air right now.”

The El-Aurian had been very clear about that particular point since he had arrived onboard. Disruptor or no disruptor.

Inside, Jirel again cursed himself for how slow he had been to see the danger signs from Mazur. As someone who spent as much of their life as he did having disruptors pulled on him, he really should have read the signs.

And yet, despite knowing that Mazur was untrustworthy, and that he was itching to leave, and having seen what he had done with the Makalites, he hadn’t expected him to go this far.

Still, the wealth of experience he had gathered in the troubling field of having disruptors pulled on him also gave him a sixth sense when assessing the intentions of whoever happened to be the one pulling the disruptor. He knew that, a lot of the time, the person with the weapon didn’t actually mean to fire it. That the act of having the weapon was intended to be enough of a threat.

Because, despite the amount of death and destruction that went on around the galaxy in the average week, the truth was that most of the souls in the universe had no interest in being killers. And Jirel could see in his eyes that Mazur was one of those souls. He may have been a con artist, a grifter and a man of a thousand scams, but he wasn’t the sort of man that actually went around firing disruptors at people.

So, while he was clearly desperate to leave this planet, Jirel felt that he was safe enough to stall for long enough for the others to get back. And hopefully for him and Denella to regain control of the situation in the cockpit.

“Seriously, Mazur,” he replied, calmly but firmly, “We’re still short three people. And we’re not leaving until they’re onboard.”

Mazur didn’t flinch, though he was struggling to keep his slightly laboured breathing a secret. He was keenly aware that his condition was worsening by the minute.

“You...seem to be forgetting which one of us is armed.”

He waved the Edosian disruptor, a slightly curious design clearly meant for a different physiology, to underline his point. But, Jirel noted, he didn’t get any closer to actually firing it. So he continued with his distraction, as he glanced over at Denella.

“A prison transport, you said? Sounds like someone’s been a naughty boy.”

“A misunderstanding, nothing more,” Mazur muttered with a smile bereft of mirth, as he nodded at Denella, “But I assume if you’ve found the ship, you’ve told them where it is. Which means I’d definitely prefer to get moving now.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Jirel grinned back, “But—”

He was immediately silenced by a sudden blast of dirty green energy that spat out from the disruptor and slammed into the deck of the cockpit next to his right foot, leaving a smoking scorch mark behind on the metal.

“Hey!” Denella snapped back at him, seeing her precious ship being wounded, “Careful with that thing!”

For Jirel’s part, the blast caused him to momentarily reassess his initial read on Mazur. But still, even though he hadn’t expected him to fire the weapon at all, he also noted that he had deliberately avoided shooting either him or Denella, even to injure them. In a weird way, the entirely unexpected disruptor blast actually soothed the Trill. Mazur definitely wasn’t a killer.

“Consider that a warning shot,” the El-Aurian snapped, a little more on edge than before, “And let me put this another way: I’ve spent the last two months on this hellhole with all those villagers. So, I’m very much done listening to idiots. If you catch my drift.”

Mazur took a step forward, keeping the disruptor tightly in his grip. Jirel kept an eye on it, wondering if it was close enough for him to dive for it.

“Besides, the way I see it, you don’t have much of a choice here,” he continued, “Either you do what I say, and we leave your friends behind. Or I shoot you, take your ship by force, and also leave your friends behind. Either way, you’ll note the part where they’re left behind.”

Jirel kept his defences up, even as Mazur gestured at the pilot’s controls at their side with the weapon in his hands.

“So,” he concluded, “Feel free to choose the option where you don’t get shot.”

"I'm not doing it," Jirel said firmly with a slow shake of his head, "So I guess we're gonna have to wait—"

The disruptor fired again. But this time, the green bolt of energy didn't hit the deck itself next to Jirel's right foot. It hit him on the right foot itself.

The Trill screamed out in pain and dropped down to the deck.

"Agh! Son of a Tellarite miner!"

Denella instinctively dropped down to where he had collapsed with concern and tried to help him back up. She noted that it had been a glancing blow on the side of his foot, but also noted the burn mark and the smell of burnt flesh that meant Jirel's pain was very much real.

For his part, Mazur immediately flinched and stepped back away from the scene of the crime, the Edosian disruptor dropping down to his side as he looked both shocked and contrite at what he'd just done.

"Oh, crap," he managed, "I swear, I was just trying to shoot the deck again! It wasn't supposed to hit you—!"

"Well it did!" Jirel bellowed in pained anger, "It definitely hit me!"

He was especially angry for two reasons. One, because he'd just been shot in the foot. And two, because he'd allowed himself to completely underestimate Mazur again.

He wasn't supposed to have actually shot him.

For a few more seconds, Mazur seemed to have lost control of the situation. He genuinely hadn't intended to hurt anyone, though the scent from Jirel's disruptor wound that was filling the cockpit rather undermined his intentions. So instead, the quick thinking mind that had gotten him out of so many worse scrapes in the past got to work, and decided that he had to make the most of this situation.

"Well," he said, raising the weapon again and nodding at Denella, "Now you've seen how serious I am, maybe you'll be so kind as to get us out of here. Unless you want your friend to lose any more limbs?"

"Haven't actually lost a limb," Jirel coughed as he sat prone on the floor, "Which...I appreciate isn't that big of a brag."

Mazur ignored his comment and kept his focus on Denella. Reluctantly, she glanced at Jirel and nodded, before standing back up and stepping over to the pilot's controls.

"Hey," Jirel managed, "Denella—"

"He's right, Jirel. We don't have a choice. I guess we'll have to come back for the others some other time."

Jirel's eyes widened, and he was about to argue the case further, but he saw something in the Orion's eyes as she stepped away from him that reassured him.

She had a plan.

"There," Mazur sighed in relief from the other side of the cockpit, "If I'd have known that was all I needed to do to get you to shut up and cooperate, I'd have shot you an hour ago."

He smiled smugly at Jirel, who winced again and propped himself up against the base of the pilot's console.

Above him, Denella tapped away at the controls, and the hum of the Bounty's thrusters began to fill the cockpit. She kept a close focus on the controls, knowing that she needed to be very careful with what she did next. Making it look like the Bounty had just suffered a catastrophic failure, without actually making it suffer a catastrophic failure.

She just prayed that among all his other dubious talents, Mazur wasn't also a qualified pilot. He had threatened to fly off in the ship himself, after all.

"Come on," the El-Aurian muttered, "Let's get going already!"

She licked her lips and gently eased up on the thruster inputs, not wanting to damage the Bounty any more than was necessary. After a moment or two, she had started to overload the aft thrusters, and the entire ship began to shake and shudder. She quickly powered the whole engine assembly before it shook itself apart, and let out a frustrated grimace.

"Ugh, that's just great!" she snapped, "See, this is what happens when you rush me!"

"What?" Mazur asked, with a look of distrust.

"I had to do a lot of repairs after we set down here, and I hadn't finished all the pre-flight checks. We've got a potential fracture in the aft thruster casing."

Mazur's eyes narrowed further. One of the advantages of spending your life conning others was that you developed a sixth sense for when you were being conned yourself. "Ok, nice try," he scoffed, "Is that the plan? Fool me with some engineering mumbo jumbo to give your friends, and the Edosians, time to get here? Well, I'm not buying that, so power everything back up and—"

"I'm serious," she said, spinning around in the pilot's chair and fixing him with a determined glare, "It's not a difficult repair, but we need to check it out. Otherwise, if the crack's bad enough, then as soon as we take off, there'll be enough of a shimmy for the ship to break apart in the



atmosphere. I'm assuming that's not part of your escape plan?"

"Ugh," Mazur grimaced, "What kind of piece of junk is this ship?"

Denella kept her emotions in check at the latest slight against the Bounty, as Jirel shifted his weight and muttered through the pain in his foot.

"The sort of piece of junk you need to get off this planet in something other than a prison uniform," the Trill fired back knowingly, "So you might wanna think about being a bit nicer to the only person around here that can fix it."

Mazur kept his focus on Denella, but after a moment, the disruptor barrel lowered a tad. "Ok, fine," he sighed, gesturing to the panel, "Hurry up and fix it."

"Can't do it here," she replied calmly, "I'll need to go check the assembly itself."

"Well, nice try, but I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Despite the sight of the disruptor in his hand, Denella shrugged and stood up from the pilot's console. "Fine. Come with me."

Mazur's eyes narrowed again. He licked his lips slightly as he felt his best laid plans once again going awry. "Where?"

Denella decided to twist the knife a little bit, enjoying the sudden look of discomfort on their adversary's face.

"Outside."

## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“Oh, and booze. You need something from The Beast? Can't go wrong with booze.”

Natasha grimaced inwardly as she listened to Sunek setting the Makalite village even further off their natural course of evolution. The amount of cultural damage being inflicted on them seemed incalculable.

She had to remind herself that this was going to be for the greater good. That right now, curing the Makalites of their radiation poisoning was a bigger issue than the latest hard turn their belief system seemed to be taking thanks to a particularly significant case of mistaken identity.

“Food as well,” Sunek continued, “The Beast loves food. So if any of you have got, like, a sandwich or something on you, that'd be—”

“Ahem,” Natasha coughed from next to the Vulcan, “Dial it back a bit?”

He glanced at her and with a wide innocent smile. After initially being offended by the role that the Makalites had cast him in, his inner showman now seemed to have grown into the role. Especially after they had gained a wider audience than just Sister Lyca.

The three Bounty crewmates, along with Sister Lyca still slung over Klath's shoulder, stood where they had been ambushed in the middle of the forest, surrounded by a dozen or so Makalites, including Sister Ryna. They all sat cross-legged on the ground, enraptured by the Vulcan's words, like a group of school kids gathered around their teacher for story time.

Except, the story they were currently being spun by the guardian of the afterlife didn't appear to have any sort of moral at the end.

“Food,” Sister Ryna nodded, looking around at her fellow Makalites, “The Beast of the Great Hereafter wishes for food. Quick, we must forage!”

“Yes!” one of the Makalite Brothers called out, “And then we must sing our songs to him again!”

At this, Sunek winced slightly. “Ah, yeah, I meant to talk to you about the singing, actually. See, The Beast actually has very sensitive ears, and—”

“Sunek—I mean, mighty Beast,” Natasha muttered again, before they were delayed even further by an impromptu foraging party, “Perhaps now's a good time to get everyone moving?”

He looked a little miffed to have his entertainment curtailed, but reluctantly turned back to the Makalites with a sigh, ratcheting up the theatre of his performance. “No time for sandwiches, puny mortals, it is time for us to move!”

The Makalites looked at each other, and stood up obediently, before Sister Ryna took a cautious step towards the Beast. “We will go wherever you wish us to, oh great Beast. Even if you are to take us to the Great Hereafter itself.”

“We trust in you,” another Makalite called out, “The Seer has forsaken us. And so has the spotted man. They were no longer in the village.”

“Yeah, well,” Sunek shrugged casually, “That's what you get for putting someone other than me in charge.”

“But when I told everyone I had seen the Beast of the Great Hereafter,” Sister Ryna continued, “We had to come and find you for ourselves. To help us find our salvation!”

Natasha felt as though her face had become a permanent grimace as the full details of the situation were spelled out to them by the Makalites. But it did at least give them the chance to fix the most pressing issue. “We can do a lot better than salvation, can't we, mighty Beast?” she chimed in, “We can heal your sickness.”

“Is this true?” Sister Ryna asked excitedly, directing her question to Sunek.

“The Beast was already preparing to cure me,” Sister Lyca chimed in from Klath's shoulder, “I am sure he can cure all of you as well, Brothers and Sisters.”

“Yes! Of course!” Sunek pompously bellowed, back in full Beast mode, “The great, mighty and incredibly handsome Beast will order his weak and feeble servant here to cure you all of your foul and wretched disease!”

As well as her grimace, Natasha found that her withering glare was getting a serious workout today.

“Right,” she managed eventually, “So we should get moving.”

“Yes,” Sister Ryna nodded, “We should be swift, for more are following from the village.”

“What's that now?” Sunek asked, a little less Beast-like.

“More are coming,” Sister Ryna repeated, “Brother Falor, Brother Makan, Sister Hyla, and many more. They still trust in The Seer and the spotted man, and they did not believe my words about the Beast's visit. They forbade us from leaving, and when they find us gone, they will surely follow.”

Natasha mentally added the charge of causing a religious schism to the rap sheet that a theoretical Starfleet tribunal would be handing down to them.

“Well,” Sunek shrugged at her and Klath, “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Natasha checked the retuned tricorder in her hand and nodded. The Bounty wasn’t far away, but she could also see a number of Makalite lifesigns now bearing down on their position.

“Perhaps,” Klath motioned to the Vulcan, “The Beast should lead the way.”

Sunek turned back around, and saw that the dozen or so Makalites were still staring at him, waiting on his every word. “Oh, right,” he nodded, “Come, simple peasants. Follow your noble Beast!”

He swaggered off into the forest, followed by Sister Ryna and the other Makalite believers, many of them still excitedly chattering to each other in hushed voices. Klath shared an unhappy glance with Natasha before they followed in the wake of the over-acting guardian of the Makalite afterlife.

“He is giving me a headache,” the Klingon muttered as they walked through a deeper patch of undergrowth, still carrying the ailing Sister Lyca on his shoulder.

“Could be worse,” Natasha offered, “At least they haven’t started singing yet—Ow!”

She stopped suddenly and hissed in pain. Looking down at the source of the pain, she saw a small purple thorn from one of the plants she had brushed past that was embedded in her leg, having pierced clean through her trousers.

“You are hurt?” Klath asked as he saw her leg.

She reached down and gently pulled the thorn out, before giving both the offending object and her leg a cursory scan with the tricorder. “Just a scratch,” she offered back, “Between this and that fruit I found earlier, I’m kinda getting used to the local flora not agreeing with me on this planet.”

Klath nodded and continued walking. Natasha carefully slipped the thorn into her pocket for later study, deciding that she may as well have something to show for her first proper away team mission in a year. Then, satisfied that there was nothing but the flesh wound to be concerned with, she resumed walking behind Klath.

She was far more concerned with the number of lifesigns that were approaching them from behind.

Not to mention what might be awaiting them further ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This would have been a lot easier if you hadn’t shot me.”

Jirel grimaced slightly again, as he propped himself up against one of the Bounty’s landing struts to rest his injured foot.

To his side, Mazur stood in the grass, largely ignoring him. His focus, and his disruptor, were both trained on the more mobile of his prisoners, as Denella worked on the thruster assembly. A gentle breeze blew across the clearing where the Bounty had landed, whipping up the stalks of grass, and the sky overhead was still clear and green-ish, though the sun was now much lower in the sky as sunset slowly approached.

The tranquility of the scene was entirely lost on the armed man in the robes.

“Do you even know how to use that thing?” he shouted in frustration at Denella, as she ran the coil spanner across the hull.

As far as he was concerned, she didn’t actually seem to be doing any proper work. If anything, she just seemed to be waving the bulky metal tool around the thruster housing without any sort of rhyme or reason.

Once again, his senses told him that he was being conned in some way.

The Orion engineer, for her part, ignored the slight against her technical prowess and continued to work.

The truth was that, while she did know how to use the coil spanner, and had done since she was a small child being taught how to fix vintage shuttles by her father on the Orpheus IV colony, there weren’t actually any repairs to conduct. But she had to follow through with the fictional damage that she’d set up back in the cockpit to buy them some more time, and so she was keeping up the pretence that there was something in the aft thrusters that needed repairing.

By waving the bulky metal tool around the thruster housing without any sort of rhyme or reason.

She couldn’t help but take a small amount of smug satisfaction from the way she was able to fool him. As far as she was concerned, that was what you deserved for not understanding the basics of engineering.

“Nearly finished,” she reported back to the El-Aurian, as she casually flicked her finger over the set of controls on the side of the spanner, causing a dark red light at the end of the device to gently pulse on and off.

To the uneducated Mazur, it looked like the implement was doing something. Even though she was simply cycling the coil spanner's torch attachment through a partial diagnostic program.

"Make sure you are," Mazur grouched.

Despite the pain in his foot, Jirel was finding some enjoyment in the improvised piece of theatre that Denella was putting on. But he felt he should help out with the ongoing distraction. "Feeling the Edosians getting closer?" he offered, "What sort of scam did you try to pull with them, anyway?"

"Like I said, a misunderstanding," the El-Aurian shrugged.

Though he did also glance up at the sky in a moment of paranoia, as if he might be able to spot another Edosian ship in orbit.

"Fair few misunderstandings given the crash side," Denella chimed in, as she kept her attention on the torch diagnostic.

"Hey," Mazur shrugged, "It's not my fault their ship hit an ion storm and couldn't cope with it. And it's certainly not my fault that their species is so fragile."

Denella paused for a moment and looked back at him with an accusing glare. "They all died in the crash?"

Mazur met her accusation with a knowing glance. "Come on now. I'm not a killer, ok? I don't even like to use guns—"

He stopped and awkwardly gestured to Jirel's injured foot with the disruptor that had done the damage.

"Y'know. Normally."

"So glad you decided to make an exception to that rule," the Trill grimaced.

The El-Aurian switched his attention back to the work that Denella was still doing, pacing around with an ever-decreasing amount of patience. "Whatever. You've got ten minutes to finish whatever the hell you're doing. Or maybe I'll shoot his other foot. Even things out."

Denella looked over at the already crippled Jirel and sighed, giving him a look that suggested she was all out of stalling options. They'd bought as much time as they could.

Jirel looked around. Mazur was too far away, and he was too injured to consider any sort of surprise attack. They needed something else.

Then, he glanced behind Mazur, over at the tree line, and he smiled.

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“They’re right behind us!”

As Sunek issued his report, a particularly large stone went whizzing past Natasha’s head, impacting on a nearby tree trunk with some force. She hadn’t really needed the report.

“Yep, got it,” she called out, “Everyone keep moving!”

The other villagers had closed them down more quickly than they had been expecting. The Makalites moved significantly faster than the Klingon, Vulcan and human thanks to their familiarity with the environment, and Natasha knew they had slowed their own group down. And she also knew that the other villagers had brought weapons with them. The slingshots that Klath had assessed to be of no real threat during his impromptu tactical analysis of the village earlier.

What he hadn’t factored in during that analysis was the impact that the slightly higher gravity of the planet would have on the ability of the natives to propel the simple projectiles with rather more devastating force than one might expect.

The dent left behind in the tree trunk to their right as another stone whizzed past and slammed into the bark clearly underlined that.

Klath staggered over another tree root, doubly frustrated that he was having to retreat from the onslaught with Sister Lyca still on his back, and that her presence was still preventing him from grabbing his bat’leth and turning to fight. “This is becoming annoying,” he growled as another stone whistled past.

“Ah, you say that every time people start throwing rocks at us,” Sunek quipped as he vaulted over a fallen tree trunk.

Up ahead of them, one of the stones being hurled from behind struck one of the Makalite Brothers squarely in the back, causing him to fall to the ground with a yelp of pain. Despite the danger of the situation, Natasha’s medical training overrode everything else, as she stopped to help the blue-skinned man back up.

“You ok?” she asked, as another couple of stones impacted nearby.

The Makalite Brother managed a pained nod as she helped him back to his feet. With the pursuing pack getting ever nearer, they followed the rest of their group back through the undergrowth.

It didn’t take them long to catch up. A few more paces further on, they found that the dozen or so other Makalites, headed by Sister Ryna, had stopped right at the edge of the clearing. Much to the continued frustration of Sunek and Klath.

Why they had stopped was immediately clear, despite the danger from behind. The Bounty was visible across on the other side of the clearing, nestled under the mountain range behind. Natasha felt a slight pang of comfort as she saw the now-familiar shape of the ship she had begun to call home.

But that was nothing like the feeling it had evoked in the Makalites.

“The skyship...” she heard Sister Ryna whisper.

But aside from that, they stood in venerable silence.

Because not only was the skyship there, but so was The Seer.

\* \* \* \* \*

“My flock?” Mazur spat at Jirel.

The Trill kept his eyes focused on the El-Aurian. “Yeah, your flock,” he replied, a little louder than was strictly necessary given the short distance between them, “I assumed you might want to do something for them before we left, given all they did for you. Especially now we’re back at the...skyship.”

The implication in his comment passed Mazur by entirely. Instead, he let out a cackle of laughter.

“My flock! Those stupid backward villagers? You really think, after all I’ve been through, I’m going to go back and help them?”

Jirel patiently maintained eye contact with the armed man, but didn’t say anything, allowing the amateur dramatics of the professional con artist to play out. And letting him loudly dig his own grave. Metaphorically speaking.

“You have no idea how annoying this entire mess has been for me, do you? How utterly boring, how tedious and pointless! Trapped in that dreadful village for weeks on end, listening to those morons going on and on about prophecies, and diseases, and all their other problems! Having to make up a new vision every day just to shut them up!”

He tutted and paced up and down under the Bounty. Denella had stopped in her fictitious repair to watch the speech play out.

“They just wouldn’t stop complaining! About anything! ‘Oh, Seer, my crops won’t grow!’ or ‘Oh, Seer, the rains haven’t come yet!’ or ‘Oh, Seer, my elbow hurts!’.”

“Seems like that’s the sort of thing The Seer should be dealing with.”

“Psh, yeah, well, good thing I’m not The Seer any more, isn’t it?”

“No,” Jirel grinned knowingly, “You’re Martus Mazur. The greatest swindler in the galaxy. Reduced to peddling lies to the Makalites.”

“Precisely,” Mazur nodded pompously, appreciating the unexpected ego massage.

He appreciated it slightly less when he saw a wide grin spreading across Jirel’s face, as the Trill’s focus shifted from Mazur himself to something behind him.

That shift of focus wasn’t lost on the El-Aurian. Nor was the distant, but unmistakable sound of excitable chattering coming from behind him.

With a sinking feeling, he slowly turned around to the tree line, and saw the large gaggle of Makalites gathered on the edge of the clearing.

Also visible among the number of blue-skinned aliens were the unmistakable forms of a human, a Vulcan and a Klingon.

Some of the Makalites were armed with stones and slingshots, but they had paused in their assault once they had seen the skyship in the clearing. And heard The Seer speaking.

And now all of them, from the smallest Makalite to the burliest Klingon, looked thoroughly unhappy with him.

“Ah,” Mazur sighed, “Crap.”

He felt a familiar sensation inside. A sensation that he had experienced plenty of times as he had bounced around the cosmos from trick to scam and back again. The game was up. The grift was well and truly over.

So distracted was he at the collapse of The Seer’s facade that he didn’t even notice a familiar object come arcing through the air towards him. He only became aware of it when it impacted heavily on the back of his head.

Martus Mazur dropped the Edosian disruptor and crumpled to the ground in a becalmed, and deeply unconscious slump.

Denella stood over his now immobile form, gripping her trusty coil spanner in her hand and smiling in satisfaction. “See?” she said to the unconscious Mazur, “I do know how to use one of these.”

She turned back to Jirel, who smiled back at her.

“And all’s well that ends—”

But he didn’t get any further with his comment.

Because then the first stone, propelled from somewhere along the tree line of the forest, thudded into the ground next to them.

\* \* \* \* \*

During The Seer’s little speech, and his subsequent incapacitation, the Makalites gathered on the fringes of the forest had been struggling to process what was happening.

For the umpteenth time in the last few weeks, their system of beliefs was being turned on its head, and they all had different opinions on the developing situation.

“The Seer has forsaken us!”

“The spotted man’s companion has assaulted The Seer!”

“What of his prophecies? He said they were lies!”

“The spotted man and The Seer were abandoning all of us!”

“This is blasphemy!”

The splinter group that had been fleeing from the village with Sunek, Klath and Denella, and whose belief and trust in The Seer had been overtaken by their trust in the Beast of the Great Hereafter, who had visited them to cure their disease, took The Seer’s words as vindication of their decision, and proof in Sister Lyca’s long-held belief that The Seer had been a false prophet.

Which made them angry, because for a long time before the Beast had shown up, they had been following him just as much as the others.

Meanwhile, the larger group of villagers led by Brother Falor, Brother Makan and Sister Hyla, the group that had remained faithful to The

Seer's prophecy and to the spotted man's skyship, were splintering further.

Some were angry with The Seer, for his hurtful words and his spiteful actions that seemed to undermine everything he had told them since he had arrived in their village, now he had admitted freely that he wasn't the man he claimed to be.

Others were too blinded by their devotion to The Seer to pay attention to what he'd actually been saying. His actual words had stopped mattering to them a long time ago, because they were often so confusing and contradictory that attempting to rationalise them completely was a hopeless task.

Their faith was all that mattered now.

And they were angry because they had seen the green woman, who none of them had seen before, but who also appeared to be travelling with the spotted man himself, attack The Seer and knock him to the ground.

Whichever of the expanding collection of splinter groups each Makalite belonged to, one thing was common amongst all of them.

They were all angry.

And before Natasha, Klath or Sunek realised what was happening, that anger began to escalate all around them.

"The Seer's prophecies were false! He said so himself!" Sister Ryna called out, "Just as Sister Lyca told us!"

"The Seer and the spotted man were going to leave us!" Brother Falor bellowed, especially angry seeing as how The Seer had promised him such a prime seat onboard the skyship when it made its ascent to the heavens, in return for his loyalty.

"They have both forsaken us!" Brother Makan, equally miffed at how his prime seat offer had been set to come to nothing.

"The Seer has been struck down!" Sister Hyla, committed to the words of the prophecy to the bitter end, retorted, "We must ignore this blasphemy, and save him!"

"No!" Sister Ryna shot back, "We must stop him!"

And then, as the angered words escalated, the crowd moved. Forwards, into the clearing. Those with weapons brought them to bear.

"Oh no," Natasha managed, "No, everyone, listen—!"

Before she could get any further, the first stones left their slingshots.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella helped the injured Jirel towards the rear ramp of the Bounty as best she could, even as more stones whistled past them.

She had left Mazur where he had fallen, reasoning that she'd come back for him later. At least she was sure that he wasn't going anywhere for the time being. And besides, they had more important things to worry about. Namely the dozens of blue-skinned aliens racing across the clearing towards them, flinging stones about with deadly force.

"What the hell are they doing?" she managed, "I thought you said they liked you?"

"They did!" Jirel insisted, gesturing out at one of the approaching Makalite women, "That one even gave me a massage—You know, I don't come across great in that story. Ignore that."

Denella had no time to query that further, as a particularly large stone slammed into the metal of the ramp, just inches away from them.

And then they heard a familiar voice.

"My people! Please! Stop this attack!"

Despite their situation, Denella and Jirel couldn't help but glance at each other.

"Was that...?"

"Definitely sounded like..."

Their confusion deepened as the Makalites obeyed the commanding sound of the voice, the entire pack coming to a halt immediately and turning back to the source of the voice. Even the few remaining true believers of The Seer, led by Sister Hyla, looked up from where they had rushed to attend to their unconscious saviour.

Behind them, in the middle of the clearing, Sunek stood and bellowed out at the crowd.

"Listen to the Beast of the Great Hereafter! Your brave, wise and perfectly proportioned Beast! Do not attack the feeble and destitute spotted man, or his measly skyship!"

A few of the Makalites began to chatter amongst themselves, even as Sunek calmly approached them. His arms were extended wide, in a

similar manner to how Mazur had presented himself, though his face was less serene and peaceable, and more deeply smug.

Further back, Natasha and Klath, with Sister Lyca still on his shoulder, followed the Vulcan.

“It appears to be working,” Klath noted with a grunt.

“Depends on how you’re defining ‘working’, I guess,” she sighed.

It had been the only play they had left, to send Sunek out to stop the Makalites. That didn’t mean that she had to like it.

Sunek walked on through the awe-struck Makalites. Even the former followers of The Seer now believed what Sister Ryna had been telling them. The Beast was here.

“The supremely intelligent and sexually potent Beast is pleased you are listening to him,” Sunek continued as he walked on towards the Bounty, “Now he demands that you return to your homes, while The Beast deals with the spotted man and his skyship. Once and for all.”

The Makalites looked at each other again. Then, as Jirel and Denella’s jaws dropped in unison, the entire hoard, even those tending to The Seer, turned back and headed towards the forest.

The flock obeyed their new master.

They passed by Klath and Natasha, barely paying them any notice.

And as the Makalites disappeared, save for the one on Klath’s shoulders, Sunek triumphantly stepped up the ramp to where his stunned colleagues were standing.

“What?” he said with the most casual of shrugs, “Turns out I’m a god. Don’t act so surprised. At least there are some people in this big old galaxy of ours who know my proper place in the pecking order.”

With a final flourish, the latest con artist to ply his trade amongst the Makalites stepped past them and swaggered his way back into the ship.

After a moment, Denella turned to the still-stunned Jirel. “I forgot to mention. He’s got some HR issues he wants to discuss with you.”

“Clearly,” Jirel managed.

They were joined by Natasha and Klath, along with his passenger. He managed a weak apologetic smile at the deeply unhappy human doctor.

“Seriously. We don’t usually do this sort of thing.”

“Uh huh,” she replied with a raised eyebrow.

She walked on into the ship, as Jirel hobbled after her, still supported by Denella.

“Hey, also, could you take a look at my foot? Kinda got a bit shot—”

“Get in line,” she fired back, “First up, we’ve got a village to save.”

The pain from his foot made him consider arguing his case further, but he reluctantly agreed with her order of priority. They carried on up the ramp.

“By the way,” he added, “Who the hell made Sunek a god?”

**End of Part Four**



## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### Part Five

There were times since she had joined the Bounty's ramshackle crew that Natasha had felt that she could use a medical assistant or two. But this wasn't exactly what she had in mind.

She crouched on the banks of the stream that flowed past the Makalite village, carefully emptying the contents of the flask into the water, and checking the resulting concentration levels of the anti-radiation compound with her tricorder. All the while, Sister Lyca crouched next to her, watching on in awe. While a short distance away, Sunek leaned against a tree and yawned.

They were a little way upstream from the village, and partially shrouded by the early evening gloom that was setting in. Her scans had shown the stream to be the source of the well inside the settlement, which Sister Lyca had confirmed was the main water source for the entire population.

And therefore, this was the best place to subtly and swiftly cure them of their radiation sickness, without having to bring each Makalite back to the Bounty, as she had been forced to do with Sister Lyca's more severe condition.

"And this will cure the others?" the Makalite woman asked, craning her neck back around to Sunek as she posed the question.

The Vulcan rolled his eyes and sighed. Predictably, the universe's most skittish man was starting to find his role as the Beast of the Great Hereafter a little annoying ever since he had been dragged back out here by Natasha. Still, she felt she needed to include him. Her instructions to Sister Lyca to help cure the other villagers were far more likely to be carried out if they carried the seal of the Beast.

"Yes!" he called out as pompously as he could, "The great Beast will cure you all! For he is so very powerful! And, also, you should direct any further questions at my feeble subordinate!"

He gestured to the nonplussed Natasha and returned to his yawn. Sister Lyca turned back to Natasha with an eager look that suggested she did indeed have further questions.

While she had been treating her, she had been sure to check Makalite physiology in more detail, and had been disappointed to find that their genetic makeup precluded any sort of memory wiping technique she would have been capable of performing. The old Starfleet cheat code when it came to cultural contamination wasn't going to work this time.

"Perhaps I can learn to be a healer, like you?" Sister Lyca asked, as Natasha concluded her scans, satisfied with the dispersal process of the compound.

"I'm sure you could," she replied as she stood up, "And you can start by making sure everyone drinks plenty of water from the well for the next day or so, right?"

Sister Lyca nodded enthusiastically, but then persisted. "Perhaps...if the Beast allows it, you could teach me how to be a healer?"

"I'm fine with that," the Beast muttered off-handedly as he idly picked a fleck of dirt from under his nail.

Natasha suppressed a sigh and shook her head patiently at the innocent face of the blue-skinned woman. "I'm sorry, Sister Lyca. But me and the Beast need to get going."

"Where?"

Natasha paused for a moment, silently cursing herself for still not checking if the planet had a southern continent or not.

Her silence caused a ripple of understanding to spread across Sister Lyca's face. "I see," she replied sagely, "You must leave. In your skyship."

"Right," Natasha nodded back, "But I'm sure you'll do fine without us. And you remember what else the Beast told you to do back in the village, right?"

"Yes," she replied quickly, "We must rid ourselves of The Seer's belongings."

Natasha nodded in satisfaction. It wasn't an ideal solution, but with the anti-radiation meds now flooding through the village, she hoped that leaving the Makalites to remove the scrap metal from their village was the right thing to do. At least for the time being.

"Praise to you, Beast," Sister Lyca called out, "And praise to his divine healer."

Sunek didn't even bother looking up despite this praise, but Natasha flinched with worry.

"Sister Lyca, please, you don't need to praise us—"

"But you travelled here with the Beast of the Great Hereafter! And you showed us the truth about The Seer! You even cured my sickness!"

She held her arm up as proof of her final point, now devoid of the ugly rash that had been there for so long before, before gesturing down at the stream.

“And now you are curing all of us. Surely these are the acts of a saviour?”

Natasha sighed again, glancing at Sunek for some kind of backup on this one.

“Hey,” the Vulcan shrugged, “I say we take it. How many chances in life do you get to go down as an actual saviour?”

Devoid of support from the tousle-haired Vulcan, she shook her head and turned back to the enthusiastic Makalite. “Sister Lyca, please, we’ve talked about this. I’m just a...healer. And if the last few weeks have proved anything, with The Seer, the sickness and everything else, it should be that you don’t need to look for saviours any more. Do you understand?”

The Makalite woman paused and considered this for a moment, cocking her head at an odd angle as she looked down at the stream where the healer had released her cure.

“Yes,” she replied eventually, “I think I do understand. Good wishes to you, healer.”

She didn’t really understand at all. She didn’t understand a lot of things about the Beast’s healer, from a place she couldn’t possibly comprehend. But she could see from the healer’s expression that this was important to her.

So, out of respect for her saviours, Sister Lyca decided to lie.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Two hundred bars of gold-pressed latinum!”

Jirel stood on his freshly healed foot and glanced over at Denella and Klath, then back at Mazur, where he stood inside the Bounty’s cargo bay. The El-Aurian was shackled in a replicated set of handcuffs, but that wasn’t stopping him from at least trying to wriggle out of the situation verbally.

“What do we reckon? Is the great con artist good for two hundred bars?”

“Unlikely,” Klath offered with a grunt.

“For a start,” Denella pointed out, “Those jewels he brought with him were barely worth the price of the bag he was carrying them in.”

The jewels, worthless as they were, had been returned to the Makalite village. Mazur rolled his eyes and tutted. “You don’t have to rub it in, you know. And I don’t have two hundred bars on me, obviously, but if you get me out of here, I can make a few calls, and—”

His latest proposal was interrupted by a chirp from the communicator on Denella’s belt. She checked it and nodded. “The Edosians are in orbit. They’re ready to retrieve their prisoner.”

“Ugh,” Mazur grouched, shaking his head and waiting for the inevitable, “All you idiots had to do was take off. And you couldn’t even do that right.”

“Look at it this way,” Jirel grinned, “At least you’re finally getting off this planet.”

“Cute,” Mazur griped.

Jirel looked over to Denella and nodded at the communicator. “Guess we’re ready down here. Tell them to collect whenever they’re ready.”

“Three hundred!” Mazur suddenly blurted out, “I just remembered a Ferengi contact in the Agoras sector that owes me a debt. I can make it up to three hundred bars!”

He gave the three Bounty crew members his best plaintive look to go along with his latest offer, but given the time they’d had on the Makalite planet, none of them were in a charitable mood.

“I guess we could think about helping you out,” Jirel mused, “For...eight hundred?”

Mazur’s face slumped.

“Four. Four hundred!”

Jirel glanced at his colleagues again and grinned. “I definitely said eight hundred, right? You both heard that?”

“That’s what I heard,” Denella nodded.

“Tsk,” Jirel sighed theatrically, “And he calls himself a good listener...”

Mazur’s glare back at the Trill was fuelled by a combination of defeat and withering dissatisfaction.

“You know,” he said eventually, “This whole thing with the Edosians really is just a big misunderstanding. And I’ll get it straightened out. Just

like I always do.”

“Have fun doing that,” Jirel shrugged.

“Oh, I will,” Mazur nodded, “And then, once I’ve got all that sorted, I’ve got plenty of friends around the quadrant who I can call on to sort out any other...problems I’ve got.”

Jirel’s face dropped slightly at the implication, even as the Edosian transporter beam began to take effect, and the El-Aurian started to dissolve. As he slowly vanished inside the dark green beam, he offered them a false smile.

“Be seeing you...”

He left behind a moment of contemplative silence, which Jirel eventually broke.

“You, um, don’t think that’s gonna come back to bite us in the ass one day, right?”

He tried not to read too much into the rather more prolonged silence that followed his question.

\* \* \* \* \*

The process of removing all traces of The Seer’s influence was taking a long time. But the healer’s cure at least seemed to be working.

As Sister Lyca carried the latest piece of metal out of the village and back into the forest, she allowed herself a smile of satisfaction at the sight of the other villagers, already looking stronger and healthier, as they worked on disposing of the rest of The Seer’s materials.

The Bastille remained standing for now, but the temple had been demolished, and the treasures inside returned to their rightful owners. With most of the huts now stripped of their metal supports, it wouldn’t be much longer until everything was back to normal.

She dropped the metal on the accumulation of scrap that they had made in the forest and started back to the village. After a few steps, she paused to look up into the night sky, staring at the twinkling objects in the heavens. She wondered if the Beast, the healer and the skyship were up there right now, watching over them all.

Eventually, she was distracted by an excited shout from the village. She looked over to see Brother Falor and Sister Ryna beckoning her over with eager looks on their faces.

“Good wishes to you both,” Sister Lyca smiled as she reached them.

“And good wishes to you, Sister Lyca,” Sister Ryna replied, “Our day’s work is done. The takarti root soup is ready. Perhaps...it is time?”

Sister Lyca smiled and nodded. Brother Falor and Sister Ryna led her back through the deserted streets of the village, back to the main square.

As they arrived, she saw that there was a larger audience around the fire than she had been expecting tonight. Even Sister Hyla and the other Makalites who had stayed loyal to The Seer until the bitter end were in attendance, having been forgiven and allowed to rejoin the rest of the flock.

It felt like so long ago that she had been the outcast, shunned by the villagers and locked away inside the Bastille. Now, she was the talk of the town. Sister Lyca, who had followed the Beast and the healer all the way back to the skyship, and returned with the news that the village’s sickness would be cured. And as Brother Falor and Sister Ryna joined the excited audience and left her standing alone in front of them, illuminated by the flickering fire, she didn’t feel nervous. She felt content.

A reverential silence descended as she prepared to speak.

“Brothers and Sisters,” she began, “Let me tell you again of the Beast, and the Great Healer. And tell you of their teachings...”

She paused for a moment.

The truth was that, while she had been invited to tell her stories as soon as she had returned to the village, there really wasn’t much to say. Neither the healer nor the Beast had given her any real teachings to impart on the others. But having been invited to speak, and having basked in the attention of her audience, she had quickly found that the half-truths, the exaggerations and the lies had come a lot easier than she had been expecting.

“The Great Healer told me many things,” she continued, “This summer, she foretold of a great and bountiful crop...”

Perhaps The Seer had been more of an influence on her than she realised. Or perhaps she was just happy to have been welcomed back into the fold, and was enjoying the unexpected attention. Either way, Sister Lyca continued to speak the fictional words of the Beast of the Great Hereafter and his equally Great Healer.

And once again, the entire belief structure of one small village of Makalites was completely and thoroughly rewritten.

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha sat in the Bounty's dining area and glanced over the message on the padd in front of her.

"Thought you'd be getting some rest?" Jirel asked as he walked into the room and made a beeline for the replicator.

"Couldn't sleep," she admitted as he joined her at the table.

"Starfleet guilt again?"

She fixed him with a deeply unimpressed glare. "You don't feel bad at all? For everything that happened back there?"

Jirel set his jumja tea down on the table and shrugged. "It could have gone better," he conceded, "But I've told Sunek he's not allowed to do any more comet slingshots."

"Really? That's your takeaway from all this?"

"One of them. Besides, I'm not sure he'll listen to me anyway. Kinda feels like being worshipped as a divine being might have had some lasting effects on the guy's ego."

Natasha was inclined to agree with that point.

"But," Jirel continued, "It's not like we could have fixed it, right? I mean, the damage was done way before we showed up."

"True," she admitted, gesturing to the padd, "And that's what this is for. My latest message...back to the admiral."

Jirel's quizzical look gave way to one of grim understanding.

Admiral Jenner. The Starfleet officer who had made an unofficial request for Natasha to keep him updated on their journey after she had resigned her commission several months ago. The man who had indirectly brought them together by slipping the Bounty's crew a mission to track down and salvage the black box of the late USS Navajo.

And the man that, unbeknownst to the rest of the Bounty's crew, was Jirel's mostly estranged adoptive father.

"Really?" Jirel snorted, "You're gonna tell my dad on us? What are you, twelve?"

"No," she replied patiently, "But Starfleet has resources for dealing with cultural contamination like this. Hell, they've caused enough of them down the years, it's only right that they've learned a thing or two."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah, so I've suggested they coordinate with Edosian Internal Security to recover the wreckage, and also send a team to monitor the village."

She paused and wiped her brow, surprised by how warm she was suddenly feeling, and absently wondering if there was something wrong with the ship's environmental systems. It would make sense. There was always something wrong with the Bounty.

"Do what you gotta do, Nat," Jirel offered, "But...if you are telling my dad about all this, can you leave out the bit where I let the villagers throw a feast in my honour? I mean, I don't want the guy to start respecting me too much..."

She managed a smile and nodded back. "Don't worry, oh spotted man. I'm blaming it all on Mazur. He caused the problems, after all. The rest of the details will just get stored away on the personal blackmail file I've got on you."

"Hrm," Jirel mused, "That's not filling me with confidence."

He smiled back, as she started to itch the back of her neck. A curious sensation was rising up inside of her that she couldn't quite pinpoint.

"You ok?" he asked, with an edge of concern, "You look a bit...pale."

She felt herself getting warmer. Visible beads of sweat formed on her forehead. "Yeah," she managed, feeling a little weak, "I think I just need to—"

She went to stand, and immediately faltered. A sudden stabbing burst of pain spread through her leg. She looked down at the limb, and with growing horror, remembered the plant thorn that had embedded itself there earlier.

"Seriously," Jirel persisted, "What's wrong?"

"Back on the planet, there was—"

She winced in pain and grabbed the table for support. Jirel rushed over to try and support her.

"There was what?"

"A plant. It didn't show anything on the tricorder, but..."

Her vision started to fade. She felt herself going limp, falling into Jirel's arms as they both slumped down to the ground.

"Hey! Denella! Klath! Sunek!" she heard the Trill call out, "We've got a problem down here!"

Even though he was right next to her, it felt like his voice was coming from a far distance. Blackness closed in on the periphery of her vision, like she was disappearing down a tunnel. She felt the vague sensation of being picked up. She thought she heard him say something else, but it was a faint whisper.

And then she drifted away entirely. And she couldn't see, or hear anything. She was gone.

Her comatose form flopped lifelessly into Jirel's arms.

### **To be continued...**

#### 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 deals a lot with first contact/pre-warp civilisations. And specifically, how a civilian crew like the Bounty's deals with getting involved in something like that (i.e. not very well). In general, the whole approach to pre-warp cultures in Trek felt like it had a lot of grey areas. Obviously the Federation's policy is to leave them well alone, but is that a universal approach? It certainly isn't for the Borg, for example. And what about the Orions? The Breen? The Klingons? The Gorn? Is it just pre-warp civilisations fortunate enough to be living on planets in Federation territory that get to quietly evolve on their own? Everyone else gets conquered or destroyed? I'm probably thinking too much about this. It's a TV show, after all. But it does confuse me. I'm easily confused.

Martus Mazur has the dubious honour of being the first established canon Trek 'guest star' in a Bounty story. Given the smaller scope of the Bounty series, clearly it would be too much of a stretch for them to be bumping into Q, or Captain Janeway, or the Borg Queen all the time (though never say never!). But I was still eager to throw in the odd established character here and there. Similar to how the Lower Decks TV show will bring back a random one-off character or species from time to time. Just enough to keep the Bounty tethered to the existing Trek universe without their involvement in the bigger picture becoming too improbable. And, in line with the foreboding final comments by Mazur as he is beamed away by the Edosians, I'm sure that's not the last time the Bounty will cross his path...

The first reference to this episode in my notes/brainstorms suggested a plot that involved the Bounty setting down on a planet and getting "caught up in a religious fanatic's plans to bring down an entire empire". Which sounds more like an episode of TOS or TNG than ST: Bounty. Another example of an early brainstorm where I was still figuring out how the Bounty series would work, and how they wouldn't get involved with anything on that sort of a scale. Changing a religious fanatic to a con artist and an entire empire to a village full of naive townsfolk is much more on the Bounty's level.

An early full draft of this story spent significantly more time on Jirel in his 'role' as the saviour of the Makalites, getting into mischief in the village itself. Which made the whole plot a lot slower paced, and also didn't leave much room for Sunek and Denella to do much in their subplot. Originally, Mazur had just been in a personal shuttle when he crashed and sought shelter in the Makalite village while he waited for rescue. But making it so that he'd fallen foul of some legal issues with the Edosians gave an extra dimension for Denella and Sunek to then investigate, meaning that a lot of the 'Jirel the saviour' bit was cut out. Probably for the best. There's a slight cheat in the way that the Edosians on the prison transport all happened to die in the crash landing, leaving Mazur as the only survivor, but let's just skim past that.

The development of the Sunek/Denella side of the plot also allowed Sunek to get a satisfying little arc with his hang ups around his status within the Bounty's crew ending up with him being hailed as a god (or god-adjacent) figure by the Makalite villagers. And the scenes of Sunek as the 'Beast of the Great Hereafter' were a lot of fun to write. While there was an element of Denella winding Sunek up in the scene where she suggested what the Bounty 'pecking order' was (Jirel, Denella, Klath, Natasha and then Sunek), that is also roughly the order in which I imagine 'command' would pass. Something that comes to light a little later on in the Bounty series.

As well as establishing Martus Mazur into the Bounty universe, this episode also furthers Sunek's deeper 'Dark Sunek' arc, as well as his efforts with Denella to quell his unwelcome feelings inside from Sokar's mind meld back in 103. And it also reiterates the ongoing plot with Natasha's messages back to Admiral Jenner, which also gives a nice little bookend to the whole cultural contamination issue with the Makalites. Just leave it for Starfleet to fix it all. Somehow.

This episode features the Bounty series's first proper 'cliffhanger', tying this episode in with 107 that follows. Really, the two episodes are mostly self-contained. But the inciting incident for 107 happens at the end of 106, so I took that as being worth a 'To be continued...' and a (1 of 2) / (2 of 2) identifier in the summary.

The title of this one comes from the Song of Solomon 2:16. Referencing both the cult-ish tone that the stranded Mazur builds with his followers, as well as Jirel's initial appearance as the 'saviour' of the villagers.

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