

## Star Trek: Bounty - 107 - "One Character in Search of an Exit"

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## Star Trek: Bounty - 107 - "One Character in Search of an Exit"

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

(2 of 2) Having been infected by a mysterious plant toxin, Natasha finds herself trapped in a web of her own memories, with only an unsettling mind meld from Sunek giving her a chance to diagnose her own illness.

# Prologue

## Prologue

*Splendour Island Resort, Wrigley's Pleasure Planet*  
*Stardate 47984.3*

Natasha Kinsen felt satisfied.

She flopped back into the cosseted luxury of the fine silk bed sheets and felt the subtle movement of the reaction-sensitive mattress as it immediately re-moulded itself underneath her body.

When the predictive ergonomic material had been explained to her by the talkative holographic concierge that had welcomed her to the suite several days ago, it had sounded a tad unnerving. But now, she wondered how she had survived for so long without this bed in her life. It felt like a perpetual hug, following her around throughout the night. She had already looked into whether it would be possible to replicate one for her quarters once she returned to duty.

Next to her, the equally pampered form of Salus Hadren lay on the same snug mattress, his chest rising up and down as he got his breath back, and his deep black eyes blinking quickly as he tried to fully process the experience of the last few minutes.

"Wow," he said, "I mean...wow."

Natasha stared up at the palatially-high ceiling and allowed herself a slightly proud smile. "Yep," she replied knowingly.

Salus shook his head slightly, still clearing up the whirlwind of thoughts buffeting around in his head. "No, I mean, I told you yesterday how extra heightened a Betazoid's senses get when we're being this...intimate. And the thoughts I just sensed from you were..."

He paused, a little overwhelmed. Emboldened, she propped herself up on her arm and lazily draped the other one across his chest.

"Oh, I remember. That's why I made my thoughts extra spicy this time. You're welcome."

He glanced back at her, still working on getting his breathing back to normal following the multiple sensory experiences his body and mind had just been through. For a moment, he struggled for an appropriate response. Eventually, he found it.

"Wow."

"So, what now?" she asked with a mischievous look, "We have to start calling each other 'Imzadi'?"

"Um, you know, that sort of bond is really only built up over time—"

The bewildered Salus Hadren stopped himself midway through his flustered reaction, as he saw the amused smile spreading across her face.

"—And you're messing with me, aren't you?"

"You tell me," she giggled, "You're the telepath."

He managed a laugh back and gently shook his head again for effect. "After all that, I think it's gonna take a while before my senses are back where they should be."

"Well, relax. I might not be a telepath, but I can recognise a holiday fling when I'm in one."

She leaned over and kissed the still flustered Betazoid, before rolling back into the gentle embrace of the mattress and grabbing a padd emblazoned with the resort's logo from the bedside table.

"Now," she continued, flicking through the padd's menu display, "I don't know about you, but all this has made me super hungry. So how about we hit room service? Hard?"

She idly scrolled through the padd's screen, before allowing her gaze to wander to the astonishing view through the window at the foot of the bed.

Natasha had arrived on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet four days earlier with three of her best friends from the USS Tripoli, after hitching a ride on a Federation transport from Starbase 27.

The timing of their trip was part of an unofficial tradition among Starfleet's junior officers. Every year, each starship's crew fought tooth and nail for any shore leave availability around the turn of a new Earth calendar year. It may have been meaningless superstition, but it was considered bad luck among the rank and file of the fleet to be onboard a starship at that time of year. Bad things seemed to have a way of happening around then.

Even on their trip over here, there had been reports on the UFP newswires about some trouble brewing around the Bajoran Wormhole.

Still, superstition or not, this year Natasha and her friends had struck the jackpot in the annual lottery, and had all secured two weeks of shore leave together. And what had always been planned as a girls-only vacation had been given extra meaning shortly before they had left the

Tripoli when Ensign T’Vess had unexpectedly broken up with her long-term partner.

Now it was incumbent on them to show their friend a good time to get over her loss.

But Natasha had bumped into Salus Hadren almost immediately. Quite literally, as she’d been racing through the resort’s reception to meet T’Vess and the others at the outdoor wave pool with her head buried in a padd and he had been walking the other way, in conversation with a colleague.

He had apologised immediately, even though even her most conservative estimate put at least seventy percent of the blame on her shoulders, and had introduced himself as he helped her gather up her things that had gone flying across the floor as they had collided. And before she knew it, three days had passed, and she couldn’t remember the last time she had seen any of her friends.

Salus, she had learned, was part of an independent delegation from Betazed, who had been here for several days already for talks with the resort’s owner about opening a new meditation facility along the white sand beaches of Splendour Island’s north shore.

She really hoped he hadn’t been a critical part of the delegation’s pitch. Because if he was, the facility was never going to happen. He had barely left her suite since they had met.

Still, she didn’t feel guilty about that. Or about abandoning T’Vess and the others. As she watched the crimson sun setting across the clear waters of the bay through the window, she just smiled.

She really had never felt more satisfied.

Eventually, a rumble from her stomach tore her away from the view and back to the extensive room service menu in front of her.

“You got any recommendations?” she asked as she scanned down the list of options.

“Actually,” Salus replied, “I’ve mostly just been using the replicator.”

She paused in her interrogation of the menu to turn and stare at him, not quite believing what she was hearing. “The replicator? This place will cook up almost anything you want, on demand, and deliver it right to your suite? And you’re using the replicator?”

The food was undeniably one of Splendour Island’s biggest selling points, front and centre of every promotional leaflet she’d seen. An army of chefs and caterers working tirelessly to prepare hundreds of different hand-made dishes that were then brought to you by an infantry of waiting staff.

And while anything prepared by a replicator would be superior in nutritional content, and undeniably faster to get to them, Natasha knew there was always something special about eating real food. Especially when you were on vacation.

Salus offered a slightly apologetic shrug back to her. “I was just grabbing meals here and there,” he pointed out, “Technically, I’m here to work, after all.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy yourself,” she countered as she returned her attention to the menu, “Speaking of which, I’ve been told the Elaysian salads are to die for. Melt in the mouth, apparently.”

She dropped the padd down to her stomach and screwed up her face in a moment of thoughtful contemplation.

“But I kinda fancy pizza. Is it weird that I fancy pizza?”

“Whatever you want,” Salus replied, stifling a tired yawn.

She couldn’t help but turn to him again, an impish smile returning to her face. “Pretty sure you can tell what I want…”

His dark eyes opened a little wider as he sensed a fresh flood of thoughts coming from her.

“Pizza’s fine,” he managed.

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged, “Spoilsport.”

She turned back to the bedside table and reached out to activate the comms unit that was built into the design. As she did so, her hand brushed past her silver and gold Starfleet combadge. “Ok, one extra large ham and pineapple coming right up. And if you say a word about my choice of toppings, you can kiss goodbye to any chance of me—”

She stopped herself, her finger hovering over the comms panel. A flicker of something in the back of her mind started to trouble her.

Something wasn’t right about all of this.

It didn’t feel real.

She stared down at the combadge again, picking up the tiny object and turning it around in her hand to study it curiously. The silver delta symbol on the golden oval backdrop was so familiar, and yet there was something oddly eerie about it. It was a sensation that she couldn’t quite place. Her mind seemed to go fuzzy even as she tried to focus on precisely what the problem was.

And then it dawned on her.

Starfleet.

For some reason, she was sure that she wasn't in Starfleet any more. Even though she was definitely in Starfleet, on shore leave from her posting the USS Tripoli. And she was equally sure that she wasn't visiting the Splendour Island Resort on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet right now. Even though she was clearly visiting the Splendour Island Resort on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet right now.

She shook her head in confusion and turned back to the man lying alongside her in bed. And she gasped in shock.

Salus Hadren's body was still lying next to her. After all this time together, she'd have recognised that chest anywhere. But now, instead of the familiar chiselled features of the Betazoid's face staring back at her, she saw a completely different face altogether.

A face that she instantly recognised. Even though, from her perspective, she hadn't met him yet.

The face of a smiling Vulcan.

"Welp," Sunek offered, "I guess this is gonna take some explaining."

## Part 1A

### Part One

“Hey! Denella! Klath! Sunek! We’ve got a problem down here!”

Jirel supported Natasha’s limp body where she had fallen into his arms in the Bounty’s dining area, struggling to lift himself up from where they had both collapsed and pick her up properly.

He looked away from the disconcertingly blank expression on her face and her unblinking eyes, not wanting to give a second’s thought to the possibility that even as he was calling for help, it might already be too late to save her.

It had all happened in an instant.

One second, they had been talking about their misadventures back on the Makalite planet, where they had made an impromptu stopover to repair the Bounty, only to get caught up in an improvised scam at the expense of the pre-industrial population by stranded con artist Martus Mazur. The next, Natasha had started to look unwell. Jirel had barely had time to stand up from the dining area’s table and catch her before she had slumped down to the floor.

He staggered through the door, grunting with exertion as he carried her unmoving form the short distance to the ship’s medical bay.

He had just placed her onto the bay’s single bed before the others arrived.

“What the hell happened?” Denella, the ship’s Orion engineer, asked as she raced through the door.

In her wake, the rest of the Bounty’s motley crew followed. Sunek, the rangy and uncharacteristically emotional Vulcan pilot, and Klath, the burly Klingon weapons chief. Even they, usually the last to show too many outward signs of worry for other people, looked concerned by what they saw.

“I dunno,” Jirel babbled as he desperately powered up the medical computer, “She just collapsed. She said something about a plant? Or a thorn? On the Makalite planet?”

“She was injured by something,” Klath recalled, “When we were returning to the ship. But she did not seem concerned at the time.”

The Klingon had been with Natasha when she had been pricked by some of the local plant life back on the planet they had just departed from. But he also remembered that she had quickly checked herself with a tricorder and determined that there was no cause for alarm.

“Really am gonna have to remember to leave that place a bad review when I get a chance,” Sunek quipped.

Despite his usual jokes, as was his reaction to most things since he had opted to embrace his emotional side, the Vulcan moved over to Jirel’s side to work on the medical scans.

“Hope you know what you’re doing,” Jirel muttered.

“Me too,” Sunek replied, this time without a trace of humour.

In truth, he was the best option they had. Before Natasha had joined the crew, he’d been the ship’s unofficial field medic, utilising his core of Vulcan competence and logic that still lurked underneath the external barrier of laziness and bad jokes. He certainly wasn’t a doctor. But given that the Bounty’s entire roster of qualified medical personnel was currently unconscious, he knew he had to step up.

After a moment, the computer returned the results of the first set of scans, accompanied by a worrying series of urgent alarms. Sunek’s informal report only added to the mounting sense of worry in the room.

“Ok, so, what the hell?”

“What is it?” Jirel snapped back at the baffled Vulcan.

Sunek took a second to pore over the results again, but failed to improve on his initial diagnosis.

“Sorry guys,” he signed eventually, “I can’t make head or tail of this. Computer says she’s in a coma, I guess? Most of her vital signs are super weak. But...there’s an insane level of brain activity. Like, totally off the charts. Look!”

He pointed at one section of the readouts on the screen as the other three craned their necks to take a look, though the details he was referencing may as well have been written in ancient Iconian for all the sense it made to any of them.

“Meaning?” Klath boomed out.

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“That is not useful.”

Sunek sighed in frustration and looked over at the persistent Klingon. “Ok, Klath, let me tell you the story of how I got all my medical degrees. Don’t worry, it’s gonna be a really short story—”

“We don’t have time,” Jirel butted in.

It wasn’t an annoyed comment directed specifically at Sunek, more of a general statement delivered with an air of detachment. His focus was entirely on where Natasha lay prone on the bed.

“Klath,” he continued, “Get back to the cockpit and find the nearest medical facility. A starbase, a ship, a friendly port. Hell, I’ll take an unfriendly port if they’ve got a doctor on their books.”

The Klingon nodded and silently exited the room, feeling a little more comfortable inside himself now he was able to actually proactively assist in some way.

“We’re not exactly in a busy sector here,” Denella pointed out with a worried expression, “Could be a day or two from the nearest port.”

Sunek looked up from the scans, obviously pointing out the part of the problem that Denella had deliberately left unsaid. “Not sure our patient’s gonna hang on for a day or two—”

“Yep, got it!” Jirel snapped immediately, shutting the Vulcan up for the moment as his previously benign demeanour evaporated in an instant.

The Trill forced himself to relocate some residual traces of inner calm, momentarily pulling his gaze away from the comatose figure on the bed and across to Denella.

“Any chance we can get something more out of the warp drive? For when Klath does find us somewhere to head to?”

Denella picked up on the plaintive edge to Jirel’s expression, and allowed an understanding smile to cross her face. “Are you kidding? I can always get something more out of the warp drive.”

Jirel mustered a smile back as his engineer departed the scene, leaving him with just Sunek and the comatose Natasha for company. He looked back down at her immobile form and instinctively balled his fists up in frustration, feeling a wave of familiar feelings surfacing inside.

He still wasn’t sure how genuine the feelings he had for her were, and how much they were just a combination of the loneliness of space coupled with the night they had spent together shortly after the Bounty had rescued her. The night he may have misinterpreted as meaning something more than it really had. The night that she had insisted had merely been her scratching an itch after spending six months marooned and alone on a hostile planet after escaping the destruction of the USS Navajo.

Either way, ever since then, his feelings had shifted around and evolved in different ways, but they had never threatened to disappear. And right now, they seemed stronger than ever.

“There has to be something else we can do,” he said eventually, looking across and gesturing to the confusing brain scans on the screen, “There has to be some way we can figure out what the hell all that means.”

Sunek looked from the worried face of his colleague back to the maelstrom of brain activity on the scans. And his occasionally unreliable sense of tact decided that it probably wasn’t the best time to offer the latest quip that he had on the tip of his tongue.

Instead, the Vulcan simply sighed. Because the truth was that one idea did occur to him. An especially stupid and risky idea.

And he had a horrible feeling that Jirel was desperate enough to go for it.

## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

*Splendour Island Resort, Wrigley's Pleasure Planet  
Stardate 47984.3*

“So, yeah, that’s about the size of it,” the face of Sunek on the body of Salus Hadren concluded as a perplexed Natasha listened on, “The good news is that none of this here is real. And right now, you’re actually back on the Bounty, in the medical bay, in a coma.”

He paused and ran his entire summation back over in his head.

“I mean...some of that was the good news.”

“So, you’re saying that this,” Natasha replied, gesturing to Sunek’s oddly blended appearance, “Is a mind meld?”

“It was kind of a Hail Mary,” Sunek shrugged using Salus’s broad shoulders, “Although, honestly, this is like no mind meld I’ve ever initiated before. Usually it’s like, I dunno, a great big murky soup of thoughts and memories and feelings. But as soon as I melded with you, I was here.”

Natasha blinked to try and clear her mind. Or whatever her mind was in this situation. She did her best to make sense of what was going on, now she knew where she was. She was in her own mind, inside one of her own memories, with the Bounty’s irrepressibly emotional Vulcan pilot for company.

She was here, with Sunek.

In bed. With Sunek.

She quickly pulled the sheets tightly up to her neck in a rush of embarrassment. The thin silk material, which had previously felt so decadent and soothing, now felt cold and fragile. She felt her face burning red.

“Yeah,” Sunek inevitably grinned at her reaction, “I was gonna get around to asking about the whole nakedness aspect of the situation...”

His attention drifted down to the impressive body he had found himself attached to, and he prodded at his new chest with one of his new fingers with no small amount of appreciation.

“Also, how’d this guy get muscles like this? I mean, this has gotta be genetic engineering, right? Or does he have some medical condition where he has to do six thousand pushups a day otherwise his head explodes?”

Ignoring the sensation of her ever-reddening face, she pulled the thin sheet even more tightly around her and kept her focus on the considerably more pressing issue.

She was dying.

As unsettling as the sensation of finding herself lying in bed with Sunek might have been, she had to admit that stark fact was significantly worse.

“But,” she managed, looking back at the Vulcan/Betazoid hybrid alongside her, who had moved on to flexing his new biceps with curiosity, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Sunek forced his attention back over to her and shrugged again. “Like I said, Hail Mary. We’re trying to get to some sort of medical facility, but we’re not sure you’re gonna...y’know. Last that long.”

Natasha suppressed a shudder, but accepted the Vulcan’s candour, even as he started to inspect his new, perfectly manicured fingernails.

“So,” he continued, “All we had to go on was the mass of crazy brain activity the scans had picked up on, and I suggested the meld as a dumb idea to see if I could figure out what the hell it all was. Apparently, it was...”

He paused and took in the intimate scene that he had unwittingly gatecrashed.

“This.”

Natasha was now sure it wasn’t possible for a human being to get any redder without spontaneously combusting.

“Still,” the Vulcan continued breezily, “This might actually work to our advantage. I mean, we’re back on the Bounty, desperately searching for a medical opinion. And here you are.”

She stared back at him, a little nonplussed. “You want me to diagnose myself?”

“Best person for the job, right? I mean, who else is there? I know my way around a medical scan, but that’s about it. Klath’ll just ramble on about Sto-vo-kor, you know what he’s like. Denella’ll probably end up wiring you into the impulse engines. And Jirel’s too—”

He stopped himself, recalling the Trill's clear and overtly personal concern for her back on the Bounty, and surmising that this might not be the time to get into all of that.

"Jirel's too what?" she asked.

"Oh. He's, y'know, too much of an idiot."

Natasha shrugged and nodded at the entirely plausible cover story that Sunek had come up with.

"Point is," he continued, "We could definitely use someone to tell us what to do back there. And we don't exactly have a lot of time."

She sighed, again feeling assaulted by the disconcerting situation she had found herself in. But she quickly realised that the Vulcan was right.

"Ok, if what you're saying is—On the assumption that what you're saying is true, then...I need to think this through. And I'd really, really appreciate it if we got dressed while I did that."

She looked around her memory of the suite and saw her clothes where they had been frantically discarded on the other side of the room some hours before, in the throes of passion. Sunek followed her gaze and grinned.

"Hey, be my guest, doc," he replied, gesturing at the long, undignified journey she had in front of her to recover her clothing.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Grow up."

With practised grace, she kept a tight hold of the silk sheet, swung her legs off the side of the bed and walked over to the pile of clothes, pulling the entire sheet along with her, still wrapped around her body. Leaving Sunek lying in bed, with an entirely different display of impromptu nudity than the one he had been hoping for.

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha emerged from the bathroom a few moments later, now clad in the light blue dress she had retrieved from the floor. The one she remembered she had replicated for this particular vacation all those years ago.

She returned to find Sunek, still in the body of her ex-lover and still very much naked, flexing in front of the suite's full-length dress mirror.

"Seriously," she sighed, "Get dressed."

"What?" Sunek replied innocently, as he continued to strike a series of elaborate Mr Universe-style poses, "I've never had a body like this before. It's interesting. Hey, you got anything around here I can use to measure this guy's—"

"Get dressed!"

With a fresh flush of embarrassment, she picked up Salus Hadren's trousers from the carpeted floor of the suite and flung them at Sunek. The Vulcan looked at them, raised a reluctant eyebrow, and started to pull them on.

"Fine," he grunted, "But, mind out of the gutter? I was gonna say biceps. Anything to measure his biceps. Not his—"

"Hippocampus."

"Excuse me?"

"You wanted a diagnosis. I've thought about everything you've told me, and you should target the scans on my hippocampus."

"Why?"

"You said my brain activity was off the charts, even though everything else pointed to a coma. Well, that's the area of the brain that deals with managing memories. And that's clearly still working."

She gestured around at the scene as Sunek buttoned up the dark grey trousers and pulled on Salus's tight short-sleeved top.

"Ok. And how will that help?" he asked eventually.

"I remember, just before I collapsed, I felt a tingling sensation in my leg. Exactly where I was stung by that thorn back on the Makalite planet."

Sunek nodded, remembering what Klath had mentioned about that incident.

"I scanned myself at the time," she continued, "And the tricorder didn't detect any toxins or poisons, but there was still a lot of residual radiation around. It's possible the scan missed something, and...I didn't think to check when we got off the planet."

Inwardly, she cursed herself for that. Back in her Starfleet days, she performed those checkups after an away mission on countless occasions. It was standard procedure. And even if one crewman forgot, there was a tight chain of command that would correct any oversight.

But life on the Bounty wasn't like that. And she wondered if the lack of protocol onboard was starting to rub off on her. She was definitely



getting sloppy.

“Ok,” Sunek replied, “Weird plant. Got it. But what are we scanning for?”

“Anything the computer sees as out of the ordinary. Specifically, get a full toxicological profile. Look for any trace of a foreign compound or substance. Whatever toxin might have gotten into me, I’m betting it’ll be most concentrated around that brain activity.”

Sunek raised an eyebrow at this, and nodded in apparent understanding as she continued.

“There’s plenty of biological toxins throughout the galaxy that have psychoactive or psychotropic properties that target the brains of the infected. If the computer can isolate a sample, then it can hopefully synthesise an antidote. Or at least tell you what you’ll need to make one.”

She paused for a moment, certain that there was something else she was forgetting. Oblivious to her additional concerns, Sunek shrugged his borrowed shoulders.

“Ok, sounds like a plan. I’ll just—”

“Sunek,” she said quickly, ignoring whatever it was she might have forgotten and looking to address a different concern she had, “Can you—If that doesn’t work, will you be able to come back? Meld with me again?”

She tried to keep the question as professional sounding as possible, but she couldn’t help but allow a modicum of fear to creep in. Now she knew where she was, and what was happening, she didn’t want to be left alone. Trapped in her own mind.

“Wish I could tell you,” Sunek replied, betraying no evidence he’d picked up on the deeper aspects of her question, “Like I said, this is a weird one. There are examples of Vulcans sharing specific memories with others via a meld…”

He tailed off for a moment, suppressing his recent experience of such a procedure, when one of his old colleagues from the V’tosh ka’tur had forcibly melded with him to share a number of painful memories which had effectively brainwashed him into joining his quest for vengeance.

Satisfied that he’d buried that particular issue, he focused back on the immediate situation.

“But, um, that’s not what happened here. I guess when I initiated the meld, I just tapped into whatever was going on in your brain right now, this one vivid memory.”

Natasha nodded, without entirely understanding. She knew that, while mind melds had been practised for thousands of years on Vulcan, there was still an awful lot that medical science couldn’t fully explain about them.

“Y’know,” Sunek continued with a telltale grin, “A vivid memory of the time you hooked up with a Betazoid with a huge—”

“Sunek.”

“Fair enough. That time I was actually referring to his—”

The Vulcan’s latest lewd comment was interrupted by a sudden loud knock on the door. Natasha froze in horror as she immediately recalled the rest of this particular night, and suddenly all her fears about Sunek leaving her alone disappeared.

“Hey! Assholes! I know you’re in there!”

The slightly slurred shout was accompanied by another angry knock, punctuated by the odd scratching sound.

Natasha whirled back to the Vulcan/Betazoid, eyes wide with urgency. “Ok, Sunek, you need to break the meld. Now.”

Before Sunek responded, a helpful computer panel on the wall of the suite activated automatically, displaying a video feed from the other side of the door. It was another perk of the Splendour Island resort, allowing guests to see who was calling for them without even tapping a button.

In this instance, the screen displayed an image of Ensign T’Vess, impatiently clawing at the door.

The Caitian was teetering uncertainly on her feet, her usually perfectly styled fur was matted and unkempt, and her light summer dress was creased and ruffled. All of which suggested that the young ensign had enjoyed plenty of the resort’s available intoxicants before this impromptu visit.

“I said open up, Nat! I wanna word with you and your loverboy!”

Natasha glanced up at the ceiling and sighed, idly wondering if it was possible for her to forget the rest of this memory.

“You never told me you were friends with a Caitian,” Sunek grinned, ignoring the earlier suggestion for him to leave, “I’ve always had a bit of a thing for Caitians.”

“This was supposed to be our vacation!” T’Vess continued to rant through the door, “We were supposed to be sti—hic!—cking together! Just us girls!”

The angry ensign paused for a moment. The video feed showed her doubling over and making an unfortunate sound that was either a very drunken belch or a very badly-timed hairball.

“Sunek, please,” Natasha persisted, “You really, really need to leave. Do the scan, and start the treatment.”

“Ok, But weren’t you worried about me not being able to get back if—”

"I've changed my mind," she said quickly, grabbing his arm for effect, "You're not seeing any more, ok? This is absolutely not something I want you experiencing with me."

She wasn't quite sure why she had grabbed his arm. It wasn't like she could frogmarch him out of her own mind. Still, she wanted to keep him away from the door.

"If you keep ig—hic!—noring me," T'Vess persisted, "I'm gonna tear this door down!"

To back up her threat, she returned to clawing at the metal of the door with her claws.

"Come on, doc," Sunek offered, "Let the nice cat lady in. What's the worst that could happen? It's not like the three of us are gonna end up—"

He paused as he saw a flicker of something on her face, and he grinned wider than he ever thought possible. She groaned softly as she realised she'd betrayed the truth.

"Fine, yes, ok! There's your memory! Me, her and him! Happy now?"

She paused and rubbed her face, trying to ignore quite how happy Sunek did indeed look now.

"I felt guilty about ditching T'Vess on our vacation. So I invited her in, we talked it out, we had some more drinks—a lot more drinks, as it happened, and—Ok, I was young, I was having fun, and I'm not gonna have you shaming me for my sexual history, ok?"

"Hey, who said anything about shaming? This is amazing!" the grinning Vulcan replied, "You know, I had you down as being kinda boring—"

"I mean, the first thing I did when I met you was take you on a treasure hunt, but ok?"

"—But now, I'm seeing you in a whole new light."

"Sunek," she sighed, "Please, just break the meld and run the scans?"

"Ah, I'm sure I've got five minutes to say hello—"

"Now!"

Just as her eyes flashed with exasperated anger at the Vulcan, she heard something. Not coming from him, or the drunk ensign on the other side of the door, but from somewhere else. She couldn't pinpoint the source exactly. It echoed in a slightly unsettling manner, and in a way that didn't match with the acoustics of the suite itself. But regardless of where it was coming from, she recognised the sound itself immediately.

It was the whine of a starship's red alert siren.

She winced slightly as she felt the beginnings of a headache coming on, and turned back to the man alongside her in confusion.

"You hear that—?"

She stopped herself in an instant. Looking back at her, atop the body of Salus Hadren, was the face of Salus Hadren.

Sunek was gone.

And then she felt a surge of pain in her head. Her vision blurred, The whole scene around her started to distort. The alarm sound grew louder.

She screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

Just as she had stumbled nearly a year ago.

Natasha was struck by the horrible clarity of the memory. The smell of burning, the distant screams of pain, the violent twitches of the Navajo's shuddering death throes as shot after shot of Jem'Hadar ordnance struck home on the hull of the once mighty vessel.

One second, she had been at the Splendour Island Resort, and now she was here, aboard the Excelsior-class starship.

"No," she whispered to herself, "Not this..."

She was reliving the destruction of the ship. The deaths of all her colleagues. The disaster that only she was destined to escape from. To run

away from.

She was reliving the one part of her life she never wanted to relive.

“This is the bridge,” she heard the voice of Captain D’Vora sound out over the alert sirens, just as it had done at the time, “I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods.”

The captain’s voice was exactly as it had been. Calm, measured and clipped. A picture of dignified and orderly serenity to the bitter end.

The deck shook again. Another scream sounded out from somewhere in the chaos.

She knew that in reality, she had continued to walk on. That just around the next corner would be a bank of escape pod doors, all lowered and ready for boarding.

And he would also be there. The bloodied and dying junior officer that she had left behind. The ensign in the corridor.

“Warning,” the Navajo’s dispassionate computer sounded out, “Structural integrity failure in progress.”

She screwed up her face and forced herself to concentrate. To concentrate on anything but the memory that was playing out all around her. If she really was dying, she was damned if this was going to be the last thing she remembered.

As the Navajo burned all around her, she felt the headache return with a vengeance, and the scene began to distort.

And she kept on running.

## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

“Seriously, why are you grinning so much?”

Sunek’s demeanour had a tendency to annoy at the best of times, but given the circumstances right now, it was seriously getting on Jirel’s nerves.

Since he had broken the meld with the unconscious Natasha, the aforementioned grin had remained resolutely plastered on his face, and he seemed in no hurry to explain it. Despite how little about their current situation seemed to merit such a reaction.

They were working side by side at the medical computer. Or, more accurately, Jirel was watching on as Sunek worked to put Natasha’s diagnostic plan into action by focusing the scans on the hippocampus. Their patient remained motionless on the bed in front of them, but Jirel was finding it too difficult to look directly at her, so he kept his focus on the computer screen.

And on Sunek, and his grin.

“No reason,” the smiling Vulcan shrugged as he worked, “Just, y’know, thinking about how there’s three of us in here at the same time. Three people, all together. That’s cool, right? When there’s three of you?”

Jirel had no idea what to do with any of that.

He knew that it had to be at least the tenth time that Sunek had made an unsubtle reference to the number three since he had broken the meld, and he was beginning to wonder whether it was some sort of hidden code that Natasha had somehow managed to imprint on the Vulcan. A code that needed to be cracked in order to solve the mystery of her ailment.

But before the Trill had time to venture much further down that rabbit hole, the computer chirped out an urgent sound, indicating that the tests were complete. Jirel’s hopes of a swift resolution to the crisis were immediately extinguished by Sunek’s grin giving way to a look of confusion as he studied the results.

“Huh,” he mused as he chewed his cheek.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jirel urged, peering at the mostly unintelligible series of charts and readings that were displayed on the screen.

“Computer can’t find anything around the hippocampus. Nothing conclusive enough to give us a full analysis anyway. Tox screen, chemical breakdown, nothing worked.”

“So?”

“So, this plan sucked.”

Jirel shot daggers back at Sunek, making his opinion on that comment abundantly clear.

“What?” the Vulcan said defensively, gesturing to the unconscious Natasha, “Don’t look at me, it was her plan.”

The Trill shook his head in frustration, still avoiding looking down at the patient.

Truth be told, he had kept a close watch on her all the time that Sunek had been in the meld, while he had been the only fully conscious person in the room. At one point, the swirling mass of worries he was feeling inside even caused him to reach out and clasp her hand, to try and offer some sort of support to the immobile patient.

Almost as soon as he had done it, he had thought he heard a noise outside, and had quickly pulled his hand away again, doing his best to adopt the demeanour of the sort of person who would never consider holding a coma patient’s hand for moral support. Still, in a weird way that he couldn’t quite fathom, just for that second or two, it had felt like he was helping.

As he contemplated their latest dead end, he felt a sense of palpable frustration join the worry he had inside, but he elected not to take it out on Sunek any further.

The Vulcan, while he could be lazy, and insubordinate, and annoying, and everything else, was clearly trying his best on this one. And right now, he was the only available medical option the Bounty had.

“So,” Jirel sighed in the end, keeping his tone measured as he idly itched his spots, “We’ve still got nothing?”

Sunek felt the need to check over the results again, but he soon looked back at the Trill with his best approximation of an apologetic face. “Sorry buddy,” he offered, with more than a hint of sincerity, “There’s definitely some sort of foreign compound in there wreaking havoc, but the computer can’t get enough data on whatever it is to get a full picture. It’s like it’s...hiding from us or something.”

Jirel suppressed a shudder at that comment, and felt his tone growing a little less measured. “So that’s it?” he grimaced, “We’ve got no plan? No ideas?”

Before Sunek could reply, another alert chimed out from the computer. And even Jirel knew that this one hadn’t been planned.

“Crap,” Sunek reported, “It’s worse than that. Her lifesigns are dropping again. Like, way down. Whatever the hell she picked up from that stupid plant, it’s spreading.”

Jirel gripped onto the side of the computer monitor with enough force to make his knuckles glow white. It wasn’t an action that was lost on the observant Vulcan.

“We’ve got to do something,” the Trill muttered, half to Sunek and half to himself.

Sunek sighed deeply and mustered a shrug.

“We do have one option,” he pointed out, “I could go back in.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella bounded into the Bounty’s cockpit, her face streaked with its usual coating of grime and dirt after a prolonged period of engineering work in the Bounty’s small engine room.

“Try increasing speed now,” she said as she slid behind her engineering station at the rear of the cockpit.

At the front of the cockpit, Klath sat somewhat incongruously at Sunek’s usual pilot’s console and tapped at the controls in front of him. After a second, there was a slight, but perceptible shift in the procession of stars streaking past the cockpit window, and Klath turned back to her with a satisfied nod.

“It worked,” he reported, “Our speed has increased by 4.7 percent. ETA now 19 hours.”

Denella couldn’t help but smile with pride. Not so much at herself for managing to squeeze out another improvement from the Bounty’s ageing systems, but for the Bounty itself.

“Attagirl,” she said with satisfaction, gently tapping the top of her console for effect, “I said you could do it, didn’t I?”

Klath stood from the pilot’s chair now their course was steadied, and made his way to his tactical console to re-check the latest sensor information.

It hadn’t taken long for him to locate a destination for them. They were headed for a well-established neutral port facility in the Beta Ramis system, where they were sure to find medical help. But he wanted to keep a close eye out for anything he might have missed. Because both he and the Orion alongside him knew that they were still a long way off their target, and it was unlikely Natasha would last that long. Even if Denella had managed to trim some three hours off their flight time.

Their efforts were, in a lot of ways, performative. But as neither had been able to offer much assistance in the medical bay, at least here they could feel as though they were being useful. Even if they had both conceded in their own minds, perhaps not useful enough.

As he sat down at the more familiar tactical console, Denella continued to butter up the ship.

“You never cease to amaze me, you know. Always got a little bit more to squeeze out of that warp drive of yours, haven’t you?”

Klath couldn’t help but express a grunt of amusement at the continuing theatrical performance from the engineer. A grunt that wasn’t missed by Denella herself.

“Problem?”

Klath paused in his latest check of the sensors to glance over at the green-skinned woman.

He had always been baffled by the apparently universal predilection for engineers and technicians, regardless of what fleet they served, to anthropomorphise their vessels. Even Klingon engineers were not immune. During his time in the Klingon Defence Force, he had once served on the same ship as a chief engineer who insisted on performing the Death Howl whenever he heard one of his former ships had been destroyed in battle.

He had never dared ask whether he truly believed that a Bird of Prey could enter Sto-vo-kor.

Klath knew that Denella’s own relationship with the Bounty wasn’t quite that delusional. But on occasion, he felt it might be a close run thing.

“Your conversation is...unnecessary,” he offered to her as an explanation for his grunt.

“Hey,” she said defensively, “It works, you know? The old girl definitely responds better if you say the right thing to her.”

“The ship is not responding to you, Denella,” he countered, feeling himself slipping into the argument despite himself.

“Then explain the 4.7 percent increase in speed. Yeah, ok, a bit of tinkering, maybe. But also a hell of a lot of compliments. And you deserved every last one, didn’t you?”

She patted the console again, as Klath rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “I suspect,” he offered, “The...tinkering had the more substantial effect.”

Having got his comment in, he quickly snapped his attention back down to the sensor readouts, before she could offer a further retort. Instead,

a moment of silence descended.

“We’re still too far away, aren’t we?” Denella said eventually, entirely more seriously.

Klath considered her comment as he tapped the sensor controls. He knew that it was important for him to temper his reactions to such medical emergencies onboard the Bounty.

Back before his discommendation, such crises rarely afforded too much concern inside the Defence Force. If a warrior was badly injured or sick, either they would recover to fight another day, or they would not, and instead gloriously enter the afterlife. It was usually as simple as that. But he knew that those options offered no comfort for the Bounty’s crew. So, instead, he took a moment to find some appropriate words of support to ease Denella’s concerns.

“She is a strong fighter,” he pointed out, recalling what he had seen of Natasha since she had joined the Bounty’s ragtag crew, “I am sure she will endure against this disease.”

“Still,” she persisted, “We’re nearly a day away. That’s a hell of a long time to endure.”

Klath went to offer another response, but then spotted something curious on the long-range sensors that gave him reason to pause and verify the readings. “Perhaps,” he grunted, “Not as long a time as that.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, jumping up from her own station and bounding over to check the readings for herself.

“I have detected a ship, six hours away. Intercepting them would take us off course for Beta Ramis, but I believe it is likely they would have the facilities to assist us.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Klath gestured down to the sensor readings as Denella arrived next to him, and she immediately realised that Klath might be onto something.

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

“The Son’a?”

Jirel stared back at Klath and Denella with a distinct lack of credulity as they stood side by side in the doorway of the medical bay.

“Makes sense to me,” Denella shrugged, “We need medical assistance, and who better to ask than a bunch of people whose lives are one long medical procedure?”

“Yeah,” Sunek quipped from next to Natasha’s unconscious form, “But isn’t their field of expertise more in the, y’know, facelift area? I know you’re getting on a bit, but we haven’t exactly got time to stop for a nip and tuck.”

Denella patiently ignored the Vulcan’s predictable comments and persisted with her dubious pitch. “You know what their ships are like. Huge sickbays, trained staff, medicines, drugs. Plus we can be there way faster than we’ll get to Beta Ramis. Or anywhere else.”

Jirel reluctantly forced himself to consider the facts.

It was true that, when you needed as much treatment as the Son’a did, their ships would be filled with the most advanced medical facilities in the quadrant. They would be hard pressed to find a vessel better equipped to deal with their emergency this side of a Federation hospital ship.

But it was also true that the Son’a were not exactly the most friendly and understanding of people to deal with. Decades of increasingly desperate efforts to extend their lifespans and treat their ailing bodies meant that they could never be entirely trusted. And whatever their ships possessed in terms of treatment facilities, it was usually matched by what they possessed in terms of weaponry.

In summary, he definitely had some issues with Denella and Klath’s plan.

“What kind of ship are we dealing with here?” he asked eventually.

“It is a small cruiser,” Klath reported, having diligently completed a tactical analysis as soon as he had identified the ship as a possible destination, “It will be heavily armed, but we will be able to signal our intentions before we enter their weapons range.”

“Plus, we should have enough spare parts onboard to bargain with,” Denella added, “Even if we’re a little short of latinum right now.”

Jirel still didn’t look convinced. He itched his spots thoughtfully. “And this’ll all put us further off course for Beta Ramis?”

“Yes,” Denella admitted with a tight nod, “But, even if we keep on that course, you know there’s a good chance that she won’t...”

She didn’t finish her sentence, but she didn’t have to. The implication was clear.

Jirel looked down at Natasha, suddenly feeling the pressure of every set of eyes in the room waiting on him to make the call.

Sometimes, he hated being in charge.

“Ok,” he nodded eventually, keeping his focus on the patient, “Alter course. And signal the Son’a ship as soon as we’re in comms range. If they’re not gonna play ball, I wanna know right away so we can get back on our old course.”

Klath and Denella both nodded back at the Trill.

“And in the meantime,” Sunek piped up from the other side of the bed, “I’ll see if the doc has any other ideas up her sleeve.”

He theatrically cracked his knuckles and lined up his fingers across Natasha’s face.

“Boy,” he muttered to himself, “I hope that Caitian’s still there.”

The others in the medical bay glanced at each other. None of them really wanted an explanation for that particular comment.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Starfleet Medical Academy, San Francisco  
Stardate 45459.8*

Natasha Kinsen felt stressed.

She could feel her heart pounding inside her chest, and the sweat beading on her brow. There was a sense of isolation hanging over her, a feeling of choking, restrictive pressure building up around her with every passing second.

She licked her lips and tried her best to keep her hands from shaking, as she looked down at the body on the operating table in front of her.

Despite every rational part of herself knowing exactly what she was in the midst of, she found herself having to remind herself that this wasn't real. The body in front of her was merely a holographic representation of a patient, specifically designed for her final practical exam for this course.

As a general rule of thumb, Starfleet didn't let even their final year medical students operate on live patients.

"Cadet Kinsen," the man at the head of the operating table motioned, "We are ready to begin."

She looked over and managed as confident a nod as she could muster, despite the turmoil of worry that raged inside her.

Doctor Rahman had been her teacher throughout the duration of this intense final year course on non-humanoid surgical procedures. Under the stern tutelage of the grouchy but brilliantly gifted grey-haired man, she had learned how to successfully identify, diagnose and operate on a myriad of common ailments from species all across the galaxy.

"This examination will count towards 33% of your final grade on this course," Rahman continued.

She had repaired a ruptured bile duct in a juvenile Gorn, reset a damaged Tholian exoskeleton while inside a specialised pressure suit, and even performed emergency surgery on a female Horta to remove a blockage in her cloaca and save an entire clutch of eggs.

Doctor Rahman's course was considered to be the most difficult course in the entire Academy prospectus, and given the rarer lifeforms covered in it, it was not a required section of any cadet's path to graduation. Indeed, almost everyone who graduated and went on to serve in the fleet could go their entire careers without once having to treat a single one of the species covered in the course.

But Natasha had signed up for it immediately. Out of a sense of confidence, given how high her marks in all of her other classes had been so far, and also out of the need to be challenged.

But, deep down, there was another reason she had jumped at the chance to take part in this most taxing of courses. One that she didn't entirely want to admit to herself. Ultimately, when all was said and done, she was actually finding life as a cadet far less interesting than she'd been expecting. And more than anything else, taking Doctor Rahman's course was an attempt to alleviate that growing sense of boredom.

Right now, given the stifling panic she felt inside, she had to begrudgingly admit that she'd been successful on that front. Of all the things she was feeling right now, boredom was certainly not one of them.

The operating room, just as fake as the patient in front of her, was empty save for Rahman and herself. He was in position to assist with the procedure, and ultimately to grade her work. It was a holographic facsimile of a standard Starfleet operating area, all antiseptic white and meticulously clean, efficiently laid out and stocked with all the supplies and equipment she would need for the forthcoming surgery.

It was far from the best facility that the fleet had to offer on the latest ships or starbases, but part of Rahman's philosophy throughout his course was to drill into his cadets that, in the real world, things will never be perfect. All the better to prepare them for their long careers in the fleet. He knew that, from more than twenty years of service on a variety of transport ships and border cutters, that doctors in the field never had the perfect conditions, or the perfect patients, at their disposal.

"The patient requires a triple heart bypass," Rahman explained, continuing his briefing for the upcoming procedure, "He is sedated with 20 ccs of diphenylmethane, administered ten minutes ago, and has been prepared for the procedure. You may commence with your initial incision."

Natasha nodded back at him, taking a moment to try and calm herself and let her heart rate settle before she turned her attention to her patient.

The Bzzit Khaht male lay in front of her. An amphibious species, the body was still slick with water from the preoperative soaking to maintain skin moisture. Or, at least, that's what would have happened had this not all been a projection.

She reached for the small laser scalpel that had been prepared for her, and carefully checked the detail of the readings on a computer screen to her side to locate the correct entry point. Just as she had practised and rehearsed.

It was set to be a long procedure. A triple bypass for a Bzzit Khaht wasn't a reference to the number of heart vessels to be operated on, but the number of hearts themselves. But she had been preparing for this for weeks. She could do it.

She took a deep breath and flicked the scalpel on, bringing it down towards the damp skin of her patient.

And then she paused, just before starting to cut.

This didn't feel right.

She had an unerring feeling that, not only wasn't the patient or the room around her real, but she wasn't real either. Nor was Doctor Rahman.

There was a flicker of something in her mind. A memory of being somewhere else. Of being on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. Which didn't make sense, because from Cadet Natasha Kinsen's perspective, she'd never been there.

Or had she?

"Please proceed, cadet," Doctor Rahman intoned from her side, entirely oblivious to whatever existential crisis she had stumbled into.

She felt her heart rate quicken again. Licking her lips, she brought the scalpel back down to the incision point.

And then she felt something else. A memory of being onboard a Ju'Day-type raider. And Cadet Kinsen was definitely sure she'd never been onboard one of those.



She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and tried to focus on the procedure. She gently cut along the pre-planned entry point, making the first incision into the Bzzit Khaht's damp skin. And then, as she finished the incision, she happened to glance back up at the patient's face.

And she saw, to her horror, that his eyes were open. And, more importantly, that the patient's face was no longer that of a Bzzit Khaht.

Sunek looked down at the fresh incision in the chest of his latest newly adopted body and winced.

"Gotta be honest, doc," he managed, "I preferred being the other guy."

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

*Starfleet Medical Academy, San Francisco*  
*Stardate 45459.8*

“Sunek...?”

Natasha pulled the laser scalpel away from the site of the incision in shock, staring at the entirely incongruous form of the Vulcan’s face on the Bzzit Khaht’s body.

It all came flooding back in an instant. The hotel suite. Salus Hadren. Ensign T’Vess. The Bounty. The plant thorn. In an instant, she realised where she really was, and where she really wasn’t.

While she wrestled with that sudden flood of information, Doctor Rahman behaved as if there was nothing out of the ordinary happening. Apparently none the wiser about the sudden change in their patient, he acted as he had done at the time in his role as surgical support and simply cleaned away the sticky brown-green blood that oozed from the fresh incision.

“Continue with the procedure please, Cadet.”

But Natasha wasn’t listening. Her focus was entirely on Sunek, now she knew where she was. “The scan?” she whispered, “What happened?”

The Bounty’s pilot did his best to ignore the seeping wound in his new holographic body, and the fact that he now appeared to be some sort of brownish amphibian, and returned his attention to the woman standing over him, holding a laser scalpel.

“Oh, good, you remember,” he nodded, “So, good news: You’re still in a coma, we ran the scan on the hippocampus, but it didn’t bring back anything conclusive. And we’re on our way to intercept some Son’a ship to see if they’ll help us out.”

He paused for thought.

“Yeah, just gonna start calling it ‘news’, I think...”

Natasha processed this fresh flurry of information as best she could, not really liking the sound of any of it. “The Son’a?” she managed.

“Any port in a crazy coma, doc.”

Sunek tried a cheeky grin, but it didn’t fill her with any comfort. To her side, she heard the still oblivious Doctor Rahman cough slightly.

“Cadet, please continue. Unless there is a problem?”

She didn’t have any idea how she would start to articulate what the actual problem was, especially to a memory of a man in her own mind. So, instead, she did as instructed. And she returned to the operation, finishing off the incision in the Bzzit Khaht.

“Um,” Sunek managed, “What are you—?”

“It’ll help me concentrate. So...why are you back here?”

At this, Sunek’s grin slipped. He wasn’t a fan of delivering serious information at the best of times, but he also recognised that this particular situation very much called for it. “Cos your lifesigns are fading. A lot. Whatever’s inside of you is spreading, fast. And the toxicological scan didn’t give the computer enough to go on to suggest a treatment, even if we get to the Son’a in time.”

She suppressed a shudder at the Vulcan’s report, as she reached for a more delicate exoscalpel and widened the cavity with Doctor Rahman’s assistance. Seeing the three distinct hearts inside, she sized up her task. Both the one in front of her on the operating table, and the one that was unfolding back on the Bounty. Back in reality.

For a second time, she set about diagnosing herself.

“Do you remember anything about the brain scans?” she pressed, “Anything significant? Anything at all?”

Sunek reluctantly engaged his Vulcan intellect, quickly sifting through his own memories, even as he remained a part of hers. “So, there was —” he looked down at his holographic chest, as Natasha delicately began to work on the first heart, “Is this really necessary?”

“Like I said, it’s helping me.”

“It’s really not helping me.”

She ignored his complaints, and kept her focus on her work, getting the medical cogs of her brain fully turning. After a moment, Sunek sighed and continued.

“Ok, so the scan showed spikes in activity around your hippocampus, but also through the limbic system as a whole, and around the prefrontal cortex. The tox scan definitely suggested there’s some sort of foreign body in there, but it can’t get a complete scan. And without that, we got

nothing.”

Natasha couldn't help but look up at him as he delivered his surprisingly dispassionate and thoroughly extensive report.

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“Nothing,” she said, mustering a flicker of a smile, “Just...I guess, sometimes I forget how Vulcan you can be.”

“Was that racist? That sounded racist.”

Seeing the return of normal Sunek-ian operations, she returned to the operation.

“Besides,” he continued, “I've always been very clear that I've got all my regular Vulcan qualities in place. I've just improved on perfection, is all.”

She shook her head as she finished up the first bypass, focusing back on Sunek's report, and once again feeling a nagging sense that she was missing something. Something important. “We've got to get more on the toxin,” she sighed as she moved on to the second heart, “But if you can't get anything from my brain, then...”

She tailed off as she reached for the auto-suture kit to her right to deal with a bleed on the second heart's main valve and earned a satisfied nod from Doctor Rahman for her troubles.

“This was supposed to be my final exam,” she muttered regarding the memory they were in.

“Supposed to be?” Sunek asked with a raised eyebrow.

She checked that the bleed was under control, and recalled what had happened back in San Francisco when this whole scene had actually played out.

“I failed it,” she explained as she continued to work, “I got as far as the third and final bypass, and then I nicked the main arterial connection. Nothing else I could do but watch him bleed out on the table. Holographically speaking.”

“Huh,” Sunek offered, idly wondering what that was all going to feel like from his perspective.

Natasha felt her heart pumping faster, just as it had all those years ago. A bead of perspiration formed on her brow, despite the climate controlled conditions of the holodeck.

And she still felt like she was missing something, somehow.

“The pressure got too much. It was too complicated a procedure. More complicated than anything I'd ever have to deal with in reality. And I ended up having to resit the entire year, because I picked a course that was too damned hard.”

She finished her work on the second heart and stiffened slightly. One to go.

“Not gonna change any of that now, doc,” Sunek pointed out, “This is just a memory. Maybe focus on the patient you can save?”

She knew which patient he was referring to. The one back in the medical bay on the Bounty. And she also knew she was still missing something. What the hell was it?

“Move on to the final bypass,” Doctor Rahman offered with measured calm, still blissfully unaware of Sunek's unnerving presence, “Your time is still good, cadet.”

She moved on to the fateful final stage of the operation, wondering if, even though this was all just a memory, she could somehow do it right this time.

“I'm serious,” Sunek continued, “Which, I appreciate, isn't something you can say about me very often. But unless you've got a time machine in your pocket—”

“Yes!” she yelped.

The penny dropped. That was it. That was what she was forgetting.

Doctor Rahman didn't react. Sunek just looked confused.

“My pocket!” she said quickly, “I saved the thorn, the one that pricked me! I was gonna do some more tests on it, but—It's in my pocket! Back on the Bounty!”

“Huh,” Sunek the Bzzit Khaht nodded, “So we can—?”

“So you can - carefully - run that through the medical computer. If you can't find the toxin inside me, then you can find it at the source. Use that to get the computer to synthesise an antidote.”

“Ok. Thorn. Pocket. Computer. Antidote. Badda-bing, badda-boom. Anything else?”

Natasha felt as though she was on a roll. She moved on to the second valve of the third and final heart as her self-referencing treatment plan continued. “If my lifesigns get weaker, check the medical cabinet. There's a batch of cordrazine onboard I picked up at that Ferengi trading post last month. Give me a hit of that. 10 ccs should be enough to keep me going without pushing things too far.”

“Cordrazine? You sure about that?” Sunek asked with uncharacteristic concern, “This isn’t one of those ‘this’ll probably kill me’-type deals?”

“Trust me,” she replied, “I’m a doctor.”

She felt a wave of relief, as palpable optimism flooded through her. She started to wonder whether she really could cure her own memory. Whether she could actually succeed at the operation that she had failed all those years ago.

She didn’t have to wonder for very long.

A thick stream of Bzzit Khaht blood suddenly spurting out from the opening in the holographic chest of the patient, splattering over the operating table and coating her arms in brown-green flecks.

“Holy crap,” Sunek managed.

“Warning, main arterial connection punctured,” the eerily familiar computer voice rang out, “Patient’s lifesigns have terminated.”

That was the other problem with surgery on a Bzzit Khaht. They didn’t survive long once things started to go wrong.

Natasha looked miserably down at the patient’s chest, which was now rapidly filling with blood, as the memory unfolded just as it had happened at the time. Glancing back up, she saw a familiar disapproving look on Doctor Rahman’s face. The one that had stayed with her for weeks after the actual exam.

“Well,” Sunek offered, “Who am I to question your medical credentials, doc?”

She turned back to the Vulcan, ready to snap something back at him. But she saw that now she was just looking back at the features of the now-deceased holographic Bzzit Khaht.

She returned her attention to Doctor Rahman, just as the grey-haired man opened his mouth.

“This is the bridge,” he said, with the voice of Captain D’Vora, “I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods.”

She blinked, absently wondering when she had started perspiring quite so much. “Wh—What did you say?”

“Very disappointing,” Rahman said in his usual voice, and more in keeping with her memory of the scene.

The sweat pooled on her forehead. She felt the entire scene starting to blur.

\* \* \* \* \*

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn’t help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

“No!”

She heard herself scream out, even as she mistakenly took in a full lungful of the smoke-filled air and immediately descended into a rasping coughing fit.

All around her, the USS Navajo groaned and creaked.

Her head was throbbing with pain, though not from the carnage around her. From something else.

She forced herself to remember that this wasn’t real. None of this was real. Just as Doctor Rahman and the Bzzit Khaht hadn’t been real. Just as Salus Hadren and Ensign T’Vess hadn’t been real.

Except it all felt real. Horribly real. The sight, the sound and the smell of death stalked through the corridors of the Navajo as she staggered forwards, even as the deck pitched underneath her again as another volley of Jem’Hadar torpedoes hit home.

She paused as she reached the same corner as before. The one beyond which lay the escape pods. And the ensign in the corridor.

“Warning,” the computer patiently reported, with the same tone it used to confirm the required replication parameters for a bowl of tomato soup, “Structural integrity failure in progress.”

She gripped onto the sharp edges of the corner of the corridor’s wall. But she didn’t walk on. She couldn’t.

The headache increased in intensity, searing pain spreading through her temples. She forced her mind elsewhere.

Behind her, further back down the corridor, a plasma relay exploded.

The scene began to distort. And the Navajo faded from view.



## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

"I wasn't."

"You definitely were."

"I definitely wasn't!"

The debate, such that it was, had been continuing in this vein for some time, as Jirel and Sunek waited for the Bounty's ageing medical computer to finish its latest scan.

Once Sunek had broken from the latest meld and explained the new plan, they had removed the thorn from her pocket with a pair of medical tongs, and set it up for a complete analysis. And then they had waited, and Sunek had turned his attention back to something that he was sure he had seen Jirel doing just as he had broken the meld.

This time, the Trill hadn't been fast enough to cover his tracks.

"You definitely were," Sunek persisted with a typically amused grin, "You were holding her hand. Y'know, the hand of the unconscious lady? The one in the coma? The one that you totally have a thing for—?"

"Yes, I'm familiar with her. And I don't have a—That is to say, I wasn't holding her—"

"You know, it's getting kinda insulting that you're still lying about this. I know what I saw."

The Trill sighed and looked back at the still-grinning Vulcan at his side, not comfortable with his talkative pilot knowing quite as much about his personal feelings as he was threatening to. He had no way of knowing that, when all was said and done, Sunek was a lot better at keeping personal secrets than anyone gave him credit for.

He was still the sole confidante onboard who knew the full details of Klath's discommendation from the Klingon Empire. And while he may have alluded to a few of the spicier aspects of what he had seen in Natasha's memories, he hadn't actually revealed any specific details.

Still, Sunek's talkative reputation was more than enough to make anyone doubt his ability to keep things to himself. So Jirel continued to try his best to shrug off what the Vulcan had seen.

"Fine, ok, I—There may have been...an element of hand-holding," he managed, not quite as casually as he'd hoped, "But I'm just worried about a member of the crew. That's all. I'd be just as worried about any of you."

"Even me?"

"Even you, Sunek."

The Vulcan considered this for a few seconds.

"Would you hold my hand—?"

"Is this thing finished yet?" Jirel sighed, gesturing to the medical computer in a final effort to derail Sunek's attempts at conversation.

"It'll tell us when it's finished."

Jirel held back the grimace of frustration as that attempt to move the discussion on ran into a dead end, and instead picked up the small empty hypodermic from next to the bed. "This was definitely what she asked for?"

"Yep," Sunek nodded, his tone sounding immediately more serious, "Big old hit of stims. And I guess she knows what she's doing, cos all that cordrazine looks like it's pulled her lifesigns up for the time being."

Jirel mustered a nod, but couldn't help but feel somewhat concerned at the idea of pumping drugs and medication into her system based on, from his perspective, Sunek's say so.

Just then, the computer chirped, and the Vulcan immediately tapped the controls. "Well, kick me off the north face of Mount Seleya," he muttered to himself, "We actually got something."

"What?"

"There was still enough of the toxin left in that thorn to get a full breakdown of the chemical markup," he explained as he worked, "Whatever it is, looks like it's got some freaky psychotropic properties, which I guess explains all the..."

The galaxy's most talkative Vulcan stopped himself again before he started to reveal too much about Natasha's memories.

"Y'know," he continued instead, "All the...weird mind meld stuff."

This seemed to satisfy Jirel, whose focus was understandably more focused on the latest baffling set of readings on the screen in front of Sunek.

“So? Can we cure it?”

Sunek tapped a few more commands into the console, and his optimistic face soured slightly. “Well, the computer’s put together the formula for an antidote. But there’s a buttload of stuff in this recipe that we’re not gonna have onboard.”

The Vulcan looked back at the Trill and offered a shrug.

“Guess we’re gonna need to go shopping with the Son’a after all.”

“So long as we’ve got time,” Jirel replied worriedly, “And so long as they’ve actually got what we need.”

“Those guys are walking pharmacies. They’ll have what we need. And if not, they’ll be able to cook it up for us. Right?”

Jirel managed a slight smile and a nod, forgetting all about his attempts to pretend as though he wasn’t feeling personally involved in this crisis.

“And we should have time,” Sunek added with a shrug, “Provided nothing else goes—”

The alerts that flared out from the medical computer suggested that there was little point in him trying to complete that particular fate-tempting comment.

“Crap,” he said instead, furtively working at the console to try and figure out the cause of the new alarms.

“What now?” Jirel pressed.

“Well, if I had to take a guess, I’d say something else just went wrong.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Archanis IV, Archanis sector, Klingon-Federation border  
Stardate 50029.3*

Natasha Kinsen was scared.

More than that, she was terrified. Perhaps more than she had ever been before. And with very good reason.

She cowered behind her scant cover and felt another disruptor blast shoot past her and smash into the rock face behind with deadly force, forcing her to cover her eyes as she was peppered with dozens of tiny shards.

With a great deal of effort, she squirmed around to try and get her bearings, while still ensuring that she remained covered from the endless incoming fire. Given the amount of dust and dirt being thrown up by the blasts that were raining down, she struggled to see clearly in any direction.

As far as she could tell, there was no sign of the rest of the away team at all. Wherever they were, she hoped they had at least found cover of their own. Though part of her doubted that they could all have been so lucky, given the sudden shock of the attack.

She steadied herself on a dusty brown rock and focused on her combat training. She unclipped her phaser from her belt with one hand and grabbed her tricorder with the other. Another green disruptor blast skimmed past her position, and she heard a distinct scream from somewhere far away. She prayed it wasn’t anyone she knew.

The USS Navajo had arrived in orbit of Archanis IV just over four hours ago, their orders simply being to assist in preparing the remaining Federation research teams down on the surface for their planned evacuation. Just a couple of days ago, Chancellor Gowron had shockingly declared the start of a new Klingon-Federation war in a broadcast across the quadrant, and specifically named Archanis IV as one of the first targets for his battle fleet.

The evacuation had been going smoothly, and Natasha had joined one of the final away teams down to the planet to help catalogue and package the last few stashes of medical supplies ready to be taken by a Federation survey ship en route to the system.

While she could have spent the entire mission onboard the ship in orbit, helping the cataloguing process from there, she had volunteered to be part of the away teams. After all, it wasn’t every day that a lowly junior medical officer got to stretch their legs planet-side.

And besides, she hadn’t been onboard the Navajo for long, and as a newly promoted Lieutenant Junior Grade, she was still trying to make a good impression on her new crew.

She had never managed to do that back on the Tripoli. Buried deep in the sickbay’s relief crew roster, she may as well have been invisible. Only once had she caught sight of Captain Sochi in the flesh, and then it had been a glimpse of the back of her head as she had entered a turbolift. And, if she was being completely honest, it might not even have been her.

But she had been determined to make the Navajo a clean slate. The Navajo was going to be different. This was the posting where she was really going to show everyone the sort of officer she was. She just sensed it.

And that was why she had volunteered for away team duty, and had been delighted to have been assigned to the one being led by Commander Calvin, the Navajo's first officer. And even more delighted to find that he had remembered her name from when he had first welcomed her onboard at Starbase 37. She had even offered, without being prompted, a surprisingly inventive suggestion for storing a set of fragile Archanian spore samples that nobody else on the team had considered. It had all been going so well.

And then the Klingons had arrived a day early.

Neither she, nor any of the rest of the away team, had any idea that the attack had been coming. They had been checking through some of the outpost's long-term storage units in a mountainous region to the north of the main settlement when the call had come. A terse message from Captain D'Vora was all they got.

A message that informed them that Klingon ships had decloaked inside the system, and the Navajo had gone to red alert, fending off an entire battle wing of Birds of Prey. Until further notice, with the shields up and the ship concentrating on fending off waves of attacks, the away team and the remaining research staff were on their own.

Which meant she and the other lightly armed members of the away team were all that was protecting the hundred or so scientists and researchers that remained from the Klingon landing parties that had arrived on the surface of Archanis IV.

Choking back lungfuls of dust, she desperately checked her tricorder scans. There were lifesigns all around. Some human, some Klingon and others from a plethora of Federation worlds. With a tinge of sadness, she noted that there were already substantially fewer non-Klingon lifesigns than there should have been.

But the more relevant issue that she noted was the complete lack of an escape plan.

Whatever cover she and the others had managed to find might have been keeping them alive for the time being, but they were cut off from any realistic fallback paths back towards the settlement by the landscape of the mountainside.

Their current position, nestled in a slight valley between two of the higher peaks, couldn't have been less defensible. The attacking force had entirely surrounded them. Which meant that she knew there was no other choice. She couldn't stay here forever.

She had to fight.

She licked her lips and gripped her phaser tightly, looking up at the top of the rock she was crouched being, as the disruptor fire continued all around.

Just as she was counting down in her head, preparing to break from her cover and try to somehow fend off dozens of armed Klingon warriors, a figure leapt over the rock and landed next to her, accompanied by a fresh volley of disruptor fire. She whirled around and raised her own weapon in panic, only to see a dirt-streaked but reassuringly familiar face looking back at her.

"Lieutenant," Commander Calvin called out over the cacophony, "Are you hurt?"

She wondered whether he had assumed she was injured as an explanation for why she had remained behind her cover for so long, rather than trying to help. As Starfleet officers should. But the situation was far too fraught to worry about saving face at this point.

"No sir," she replied, forcing all traces of fear from her voice, "But, sir, where are the others—?"

"No time to worry about that, Lieutenant. I believe most of them found cover."

"Most of them, sir?"

Calvin didn't directly respond to that, his craggy features inscrutable at this point. Instead, he turned and fired a series of phaser blasts back over the rock at the advancing enemy. "Defend your position for now, Lieutenant," he ordered, "With two of us, we may be able to advance forwards."

She ignored the chill she felt from his reading of the situation, and crept forwards through the dirt to join him in firing back over the line of their cover, into the thick of the hopeless battle.

"How many Klingons are there?" she asked, as they both ducked back down to avoid another volley of enemy fire.

"Irrelevant," Calvin responded, "We still need to try to peg them back and then make a break for a more advantageous position, nearer to some of the civilians. The Navajo will beam us up as soon as they have a window to do so."

She found herself feeling reassured by his voice, despite the bleakness of their situation. And while she didn't know Commander Calvin well, she had been told plenty about his bravery and his abilities as an officer, which comforted her as they continued to fight. She now believed that there was a way out, as long as he was there with her.

But was he there with her?

She dismissed that thought almost immediately. Of course he was here. He was here with her, fighting off a hoard of marauding Klingons.

But was she there?

She looked down at the type-2 phaser in her hand, and her dust-covered uniform. It suddenly felt odd to see all of this, as if it had been a long time since she had held a Starfleet phaser, or worn a uniform. Which was insane, because she'd worn this uniform, in one iteration or another, almost every day of her adult life.



“Lieutenant Kinsen,” Calvin called out as he fired again, “We need covering fire. I can see Ensign H’Kar trying to fall back with some of the research team.”

Natasha ignored him. Her focus was still on the phaser and the uniform.

This wasn’t right.

She felt a stabbing pain in her temple, which seemed equally familiar somehow. Even though she couldn’t remember the last time she’d suffered from such an affliction. Inside her chest, her heart started to pound so fast it felt as though it was about to burst free.

She found herself picturing a memory of her visit to Wrigley’s Pleasure Planet, over two years ago, back when she was on the Tripoli. Though for some reason, it felt a lot more recent than that. She also found herself recalling a splatter of sticky green-brown blood, which she couldn’t quite place.

And then she recalled an ensign. Lying in a corridor.

She shook her head to try and fend off the headache. Nothing was making any sense. As another burst of Klingon disruptor fire flashed above their position, she turned to Commander Calvin.

And then everything made sense. And she knew precisely where she was.

Because it wasn’t Commander Calvin looking back at her any more.

“Huh,” Sunek managed, as a disruptor blast whistled past his head, “Well, at least I’m wearing clothes this time...”

## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

The Bounty streaked through space, running at far too high a speed for the venerable warp drive within, but nevertheless hanging on thanks to the ship's ever-resourceful engineer.

In the cockpit, as the ship resolutely flew on under autopilot, Klath and Denella were gathered around a small monitor on the Klingon's tactical console, both grimly staring back at the face that was displayed on it.

It was, in fairness, the sort of face that invited grim stares.

"This is quite a list," Ahdar Lit'eh of the Son'a vessel Syatonen mused from the other end of the comms link, "Quite a list indeed."

Denella tried not to focus too much on Lit'eh's features as he spoke. Like all Son'a, it showed the eerie combination of scars, wrinkles and patches of unnatural tautness that showed off their never-ending attempts to further their lifespans by any means necessary.

Some of the prodigal Son'a had peacefully returned to their home planet of Ba'ku out in the Briar Patch a couple of years ago, to reconcile with their former peers and return to the invigorating radiation the planet offered. But while the reconciliation seemed to offer exactly the life-preserving impact that the Son'a had sought for so long, many had turned their backs on the idea of peaceful reintegration into the society that had once shunned them.

Instead, they had remained out in deep space, briefly consorting with the Breen and the Dominion during the war, and now continuing their efforts to live forever while dreaming of taking the Ba'ku planet's resources by force one day.

In summary, if you met any Son'a away from their home planet, they tended not to be the ones you wanted to spend any time around. And yet, the Bounty was warping straight towards the Son'a vessel Syatonen.

On the screen, Ahdar Lit'eh finished scanning the complete list of medicines, chemicals and preparation techniques that Klath had transmitted to them, the results of the medical computer's scans on the thorn's toxin. The wizened Son'a returned his focus to the screen.

"But, I believe we should have everything you are looking for in storage," he nodded agreeably.

His words might have caused an outbreak of relief in more naive spacefarers. But both Klath and Denella had been travelling around the less hospitable areas of the quadrant for long enough not to get suckered in so easily. And while neither of them had ever dealt directly with the Son'a before, they were both well versed with the archetype.

"We're glad to hear it," Denella replied, in a tone that didn't quite match her words, "If you want to transmit a pricing estimate to us, we'll see what we can do before—"

"Forgive me," Lit'eh interrupted with a dismissive gesture, "But while it may be extensive, your list is hardly the most complex of orders. Given the reason for your haste and the condition of your patient, I'm happy to...overlook any charges."

Denella paused, a little thrown by this response. She didn't look at the Klingon next to her, but she could tell that Klath had tensed up slightly. "Oh," she managed, "I mean, you don't need to make a special effort on our part—"

"It is no effort. I happen to be of the belief that my people have taken too much from this galaxy of ours over the years. Think of this as me, in some small way, giving something back..."

Lit'eh smiled as warmly as his decaying features would allow. Which wasn't nearly warm enough to offer Denella any sort of reassurance.

"Well," she replied after a pause, "That's...very generous of you."

Lit'eh's unnerving smile didn't waver. Nor did the emptiness leave his eyes. "I look forward to your arrival," he concluded with a nod, as the comms link terminated.

Denella stared at the suddenly blank screen for a second, before turning to the unhappy face of her colleague. "I take it you don't think it's gonna be that easy?"

"Do you?" Klath responded with a knowing glance.

Denella sighed and shook her head.

Klath grunted and tapped his console, bringing up the latest long range sensor readouts from the ship they were racing towards. She didn't need to ask what he was doing. It was exactly what she would be doing as well. He was sizing up their opponent.

"The Syatonen is not one of the Son'a's larger vessels, but they outmatch us in terms of weaponry and defensive systems."

"I mean, I kinda assume that about most ships we come across."

As soon as she made the comment, her eyes suddenly widened, and she looked around at the expanse of the Bounty's cockpit apologetically.

"No offence, old girl."

Klath rolled his eyes at this latest foolishness from the Orion, refusing to be drawn back into that particular argument, and continued to dig into the tactical readings. "If there is to be a battle," he pointed out, "We will need to be prepared."

Denella chewed her lip and considered the situation, before shaking her head. "Nah, from what I've heard about the Son'a, they don't seem the type to just lure us over there to shoot at us. If they're being this generous, it's because they want something in return."

"I am inclined to agree," Klath nodded thoughtfully, "But the question is: What?"

Before Denella could guess at an answer, the Bounty shook slightly, and an alert chimed out from Denella's engineering station. "Damnit," she sighed as she bounded over to check the alert, "See? This is what happens when I say something bad about her."

Klath bit his tongue yet again, even as she continued to swiftly tap at her controls to re-align the Bounty's overstressed warp field.

"Hey, hey, hey," she said soothingly as she worked, "I didn't mean it, ok? You could totally take out that stupid Son'a ship."

As the gentle shaking subsided, Klath decided against asking her how much she believed the problem had been solved thanks to her work on re-aligning the warp field, and how much was down to the words of comfort she had offered to the inanimate object they were travelling in. That was an argument that he would be sure to win some other time.

Instead, he stood up and made for the steps at the back of the cockpit.

"I will...leave you two alone."

Denella cooed at the Bounty for another few moments, as Klath disappeared down the steps. It took her a while to look up and turn around.

"Huh? You say something?"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was an unerring sight, but one he was getting oddly used to.

Jirel couldn't remember how long he'd been staring, but it had been some time. He couldn't recall whether this was the longest one yet, but it felt like it.

In front of him, Natasha lay as she always had, unmoving, on the single bed. Next to her, Sunek sat with his fingers carefully placed across her temples, his own face a blank canvas, as it had been since he had initiated the meld. The Vulcan was lost in thought. Just not his own.

He had considered leaving the medical bay while the meld was ongoing, if only to get some sort of sustenance. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten anything.

But he didn't want to take his eyes off what was happening, even for a moment. Even though he could barely understand the readings, he kept himself close to the screen that displayed Natasha's lifesigns, with a second hypospray of cordrazine to hand in case they suddenly dropped again.

The lifesigns had settled down slightly after they had suddenly gone haywire, with the computer reporting several bigger spikes in brain activity than before.

She had still been in a coma, but her heart rate, brain activity and other functions had risen up to dangerously high levels, for reasons that neither Sunek nor the medical computer could properly explain. The only solution the computer suggested was a dose of sedatives, of a similar strength to the stims that they had already given her. One seemed to counteract the other, and brought her lifesigns back down from the redline.

But that just left them back with the same issue they had before. Her condition was dangerously weakening all over again.

That was why Sunek had initiated another meld. And why Jirel was keeping another shot of stims close to hand, albeit a lower dose than before. He wasn't sure if it would work any better than it had previously, but he knew that if things got worse with her readouts, he would have to try something.

So he kept watch, with one eye on the computer's readings and another on the patient. And his worries inside him continued to fester.

Eventually, even though he'd been caught out the previous time, he found his free hand once again reaching out towards Natasha's own hand.

The door to the medical bay opened, and he quickly snapped his arm back.

"I wasn't holding her hand!"

Klath stood in the doorway and regarded the Trill with a look of confusion. He had simply come down to the medical bay to offer an update on their efforts to reach the Son'a vessel.

"What?" he offered.

Jirel scrambled around for some sort of semblance of dignity. Though, if he was being entirely honest, he found himself landing some way short of that lofty aim.

“Um, I just—Y’know, I was just going to—Nothing. I wasn’t doing anything.”

He squirmed slightly, as the Klingon’s look of confusion deepened. After an awkward silence, and noting the jittery look in his friend’s eyes, Klath recognised the signs of fatigue without needing to ask any more questions.

“Perhaps you should get some rest.”

“I don’t need to rest,” Jirel lied, before gesturing to the odd sight of Sunek and Natasha, “Besides, someone’s gotta keep an eye on those two.”

Klath regarded the two prone forms, still mid-meld. “I could...keep watch,” he offered eventually, with more than an edge of discomfort.

Jirel forced a smile, but shook his head defiantly. “No dice. You and Denella need to focus on the Son’a, right?”

There was another silence. A long silence.

For a moment, Klath considered arguing the point further, even though he really didn’t want to get involved with the medical side of their predicament if he could help it. He had, in fact, only made the initial offer through a basic understanding of the social contract in place at that point in time. Klingons weren’t exactly renowned for their bedside manner, after all.

So instead, satisfied that he had at least made the offer, he nodded back at Jirel and turned to leave the medical bay.

“Ok, fine,” Jirel sighed, buckling under the unrelenting pressure of Klath’s intense interrogative silence, “I guess I don’t want to leave because...I’m worried about her. Ok? Is that weird? That’s not weird.”

Klath, who had no idea how powerful his interrogative silence had been, or indeed that that was what he had been doing, also didn’t know what to do with this sudden burst of honesty. Torn between his desire to exit the room and return to more pressing tactical matters, and an inner desire to support his troubled friend, he remained standing by the door, as another long silence descended.

Jirel grimaced, silently cursing the thoroughly professional way that Klath was always able to use his silences to get the truth out of him.

“I know,” he continued, “It’s just that...I guess I feel kinda useless right now. Everyone else is busy, you’ve all got work to do, ways to help, and I’m just...here. Staring at a medical computer I don’t even understand.”

Klath shifted uncomfortably on his feet, entirely unaware of the power that his silent approach was having in forcing Jirel to open up to him.

This latest silence was the worst one yet as far as the Trill was concerned. A probing, incisive silence designed to undermine any efforts he was planning on covering up the truth any more.

“I mean,” he sighed, “Someone’s got to be here. Just in case. And I wanna say that I’d be acting just the same way if it was any one of you on that bed. But...I guess I can’t pretend that I don’t have deeper feelings for her.”

Another silence. This one was more understanding and supportive. It relaxed Jirel slightly, even as he looked down at Natasha’s comatose form.

“And I’m pretty sure she doesn’t feel the same way. Hell, she’s told me that much. And that’s fine. But I’m still allowed to worry about her, aren’t I? I’m still allowed to have feelings?”

A contemplative silence. One that Jirel felt was designed as a supportive gesture.

“I know, I know,” he nodded, “I should just talk to her about all this. I guess she’s not interested in—I mean, she said she doesn’t—I just...hope I get to talk to her about it. Or about anything.”

A more delicate silence, showing a surprising level of sensitivity for a Klingon.

“Yeah, I know. I’m sure I’ll get a chance. She’ll pull through. She can fight this, can’t she? Just like she’s fought crazy Vulcans, or the Orion Syndicate, or Nimbosian cowboys, or whatever else has come our way.”

Jirel looked back up at his friend and smiled, as an agreeable silence was unleashed from the Klingon’s arsenal of silences.

“Thanks, Klath. It’s been good to talk all this out with someone.”

Klath’s latest silence was accompanied by a look of complete bafflement. He had no idea the power he had just wielded, simply by remaining silent.

In a different universe, he would have made an excellent ship’s counsellor.

## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

*Archanis IV, Archanis sector, Klingon-Federation border  
Stardate 50029.3*

"You're going to be dead in ten minutes."

It was a strange sentence to hear, and an even stranger one to contemplate. Even in an age of such medical advances as the late 24th century, very few people got that sort of precision diagnosis.

Not that being in such a position made hearing it any more comforting. The finality of the statement simply served to make the situation even more surreal.

"Huh," Sunek managed in reply, as he looked down at the Starfleet uniform his latest adopted body was wearing, "Bummer."

Around them, disruptor fire still rained down, but all of her previous fears about the situation on Archanis IV had been replaced by an entirely different fear. As soon as she had seen Sunek's face, everything had come flooding back to her. She remembered where she was, what was happening, all of it.

And suddenly, the memory of trying to hold back a marauding Klingon army paled in comparison to the actual crisis she was in.

"Not sure if I want to know the answer to this," Sunek continued, "But what actually happens to me if I die in one of these things?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Let's not turn this into any more of a metaphysical nightmare than it already is?"

"Fair point."

A distinct shrill cry of agony rang out from somewhere nearby. Just as she remembered hearing at the time. Sunek glanced around, still taking in the situation he had found himself in.

"We were caught completely unawares," she offered by way of explanation, "The Klingons steamed in, attacked the Navajo, and slaughtered half the remaining researchers before Captain D'Vora was able to break free of the battle in orbit, use the planet itself as cover to drop the shields and beam everyone to safety."

She paused and gestured back at the body of her commanding officer.

"And before that happened, Commander Calvin was cut down. Hit by disruptor fire as he tried to make a break for Ensign H'Kar and the others."

Another blast rocked past them and impacted on the rocks behind them. It startled Sunek, but now she knew where she was, Natasha had been expecting it.

"But I survived," she added with a quieter voice, "Because I didn't go with him. I stayed back, gave covering fire. For what use it did."

"Huh," Sunek managed again, "Bummer."

Another cry of pain flared up from somewhere, which seemed to focus Sunek back onto the bigger picture. "Ok, doc, we're still in the middle of a diagnosis back in reality. We got the details we needed for an antidote from the thorn, but the cordrazine caused your whole brain to go crazy, so the computer advised us to calm it down with a sedative. Which...kinda puts us back where we were."

Natasha processed this quicker than before. She was now getting used to the situation with every passing interaction with Sunek's unerring features inside her own memories.

She considered the sensation of her heart beating faster and faster in her chest, and wondered whether that had anything to do with her wider condition in the real world. Certainly, even though she had been terrified during the battle in reality, she was sure she hadn't been this scared.

Or maybe she had been. And she'd just suppressed the worst of the terror.

Sunek waited impatiently for a response, flinching with every stray disruptor blast now that he knew that one of them was destined to kill the body he was in sooner or later. Eventually, she gestured away from the scant cover they were crouched behind, out into the firefight itself.

"We need to move," she urged.

"Um, no...?"

"You're going to die in about seven minutes, but in about thirty seconds, a concussion grenade hits this patch of cover. Commander Calvin just about got us away in time. A thin rocky outcrop, twenty metres northeast."

Sunek winced as another disruptor blast fizzed by, not looking like he was in love with her plan.

"I remember what we did," she pointed out, "Plus, in a weird way, I'm assuming that you're kind of invincible for the next...six and a half minutes."

The Vulcan/human gestalt in front of her seemed to perk up at this interpretation of his current situation, and just as Calvin had all those years ago, tore off towards the outcrop as bursts of green fire hailed down from above. She followed closely behind, stumbling in the last few metres and ending up in a dusty and undignified heap at the tall commander's feet. She spluttered slightly as the two of them readjusted to their new cover.

"Ok," she coughed, "The stims sent my lifesigns off the charts, but they brought me some time. Have some more ready just in case."

"Already on it. Jirel's standing over you right now with a hypospray."

She paused for a moment, a little unnerved. Sunek clocked her expression and shrugged.

"I mean...not in a creepy way or anything. It's just that I guess he's not really left your side ever since you collapsed. Again, not in a creepy way."

Sunek considered whether he should continue with his increasingly uncomfortable explanation of Jirel's role back on the ship, before a passing disruptor blast offered the perfect distraction to back out rather than rambling on for any longer.

Natasha wasn't entirely sure what to do with this new information, especially the unexpected sense of comfort she suddenly felt. Given the more pressing issues at hand, she compartmentalised those thoughts away, decided that it was a good thing from a practical perspective that someone was keeping a close eye on her condition while Sunek was in the meld, and left it at that.

"Ok," she said, "How long until we have an antidote?"

"We're bearing down on the Son'a ship," Sunek replied, "And they're playing ball so far. But it could still take a few hours to get the supplies and get the antidote ready."

"And the medical computer doesn't think I have a few hours?"

"I guess we can keep hitting you with stims and sedatives to bounce you between nearly dead one way and nearly dead the other way, but I kinda figure that's not a medically viable solution."

She racked her brain, trying to remember what else was available in the Bounty's meagre stash of medical supplies. She had built up a modest stash over her time with the crew, but she still wasn't exactly working with a starship sickbay.

"So, we need to hit me with enough cordrazine to keep my lifesigns up, but not so much that it completely overwhelms my brain..."

Another cry of pain from somewhere. Then, she remembered.

"Promazine! We've got a few shots of that onboard."

"So?"

"It's an antipsychotic. Give me 5 ccs of that, along with a half-dose of the cordrazine. Might be enough to perk me up without frying my brain."

"You sure about—?"

Sunek stopped himself and offered a wry understanding grin.

"Yep, right. You're not really sure about any of this."

She offered a slight smile back, ignoring the growing feeling of despair that was building up inside of her.

"Ok, we'll give it a go," Sunek continued, "And we can also—This is the bridge."

Natasha felt a chill pass down her spine. A stab of pain flared up in her head.

"Wh...What did you say?"

Sunek looked confused. All he'd said was 'And we can also keep the sedatives handy'. Which, given what had happened before with the cordrazine, seemed like a perfectly rational suggestion. He shrugged and repeated himself.

"I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

All Natasha could hear was Captain D'Vora. She felt sweat forming on her brow, and her heart rate increasing all over again. The scene began to blur.

She was barely aware at all when Sunek's face was replaced by that of Commander Calvin.

Nor when the disruptor blast hit him squarely in the chest.

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

This time, she didn't scream out.

The familiar flare of pain in her temples increased all over again, but she gritted her teeth and blocked it out as much as she could. Her attention was entirely on the corner she was approaching. Or, more specifically, on getting as far away from the memory of that corner as possible.

Through the wail of the alarms, the toxic atmosphere, the distant screams and the carnage, she focused on anything other than the scene unfolding around her.

She tried to focus on Salus Hadren. Or Doctor Rahman. Or Commander Calvin. Or Ensign T'Vess. Or even Sunek.

This isn't real, she told herself.

She reached the corner once again, and gripped the wall of the corridor tightly, both to keep herself standing as the deck bucked and tilted from another attack, and to try and stop herself from going any further.

But this time, she did go further. This time, she couldn't leave.

While her mind wanted to be anywhere else, her body inexorably moved forwards, turning the corner just as she had done a year ago.

She saw the escape pods, lined up in a row, with their doors invitingly open and ready for boarding.

Ready to facilitate desertion.

And as she staggered over to the nearest pod, she heard the cry.

"Help me!"

She didn't want to turn back to look. She wanted to keep her focus on the controls for the escape pod doors. Or even on escaping from this memory. But something compelled her to look.

Even as smoke filled her vision, she could see the ensign in the corridor. His frail ashen features staring back at her exactly as she recalled. His twisted, broken body was clearly beyond saving, but his arm despairingly reached out to her for comfort. Comfort that her medical training told her she should have provided. But instead, she had left him behind. She had abandoned him.

And once again, she didn't move. She didn't react to his cry of need.

"Doctor," he croaked, "Help me!"

Tears formed in her eyes. The pounding in her head became crippling.

She felt herself reach out for the pod door controls.

From somewhere, some other memory, she heard the voice of Doctor Rahman echoing inside the corridor.

"Very disappointing."

The pod door began to close. The ensign's face stared at her. The pain in her head reached a crescendo.

And then everything disappeared.

**End of Part Two**

## Part 3A

### Part Three

Denella had become supremely confident in her own abilities to defend herself during her time onboard the Bounty.

She had built on her basic knowledge of self-defence from her youth ever since she had been rescued from the Syndicate, and had reached a point in her training where she backed herself to come through most situations. Indeed, it had only been a couple of months since she had single-handedly taken on and defeated the Syndicate boss that had once owned her, on a profoundly personal quest for vengeance.

Still, while she was sure of herself these days, she was also happy to admit that she was even more confident when she had Klath for company.

The two slightly dishevelled members of the Bounty's crew stood next to each other inside what seemed to pass as the Syatonen's ready room. As soon as they had beamed aboard, as agreed, two Son'a officers had escorted them here.

On the other side of the room, reclining in a comfortable padded chair set behind a wide desk, sat Ahdar Lit'eh. Their two escorts, meanwhile, remained standing behind them, either side of the only door to the rather large room.

Both Denella and Klath stood as casually as they could, but both were visibly armed with their preferred weapons. Klath's trusty bat'leth was sheathed on his back, while Denella's Orion dagger was conspicuously clipped to the belt around her waist. Neither had made any effort to draw their weapons when they had arrived. It wasn't that sort of a meeting, after all. But equally, neither had remotely considered the possibility of beaming over here without them.

Lit'eh, for his part, seemed entirely at ease with the situation, weapons or no weapons. Although Denella strongly suspected that she'd be just as at ease if she had a crew of fifty-six loyal Son'a in the immediate vicinity.

"Are you sure you won't eat?" the Son'a commander asked with practised indifference.

He idly gestured to the side of the room, where an elaborate and seemingly permanent buffet table ran alongside one wall. The table itself was made with thick wood and was covered in all manner of appetising food and drink. But unsurprisingly, neither visitor from the Bounty was especially hungry. Primarily because nothing said 'obvious trap' to either of them like a random buffet table of free food.

"Thanks for the offer," Denella replied with a thin smile, "But we're in a hurry."

Just as he had been on the comms link, Klath was again happy for her to do the talking. The Klingon instead kept his senses trained on their immediate surroundings, especially on the two Son'a men behind them, trying to anticipate the first sign of trouble.

"Ah, yes," Lit'eh nodded, "Your poor, sick crewmember. A frightful business."

Denella wasn't sure if Lit'eh was aware of how obvious the lack of genuine concern was in his words, but it was very obvious indeed.

"Glad you understand," she replied with as much diplomacy as she could muster, "So, as you can imagine, we really can't stick around."

Lit'eh nodded again, waving away her concerns with a dismissive flourish of his hand. "Yes, yes, of course. As we speak, my devoted medical staff are preparing the compounds that you require. They will notify me momentarily. When everything is ready."

Without even exchanging a glance, Denella and Klath unknowingly shared the same thought. One of growing concern.

After all, they had shared the list of medication that they required with the Syatonen's crew some hours ago, which would have given them plenty of time to make the necessary preparations well before the Bounty had even entered transporter range.

Which wasn't overly troubling in and of itself. The Son'a didn't exactly come across as the galaxy's biggest group of workaholics. Nobody who prioritised cushioned furniture and buffet tables this highly could ever claim that prize.

Still, there was enough in Lit'eh's words to put both Bounty crew members on edge.

When everything is ready. That was how he had phrased it.

"A fascinating medical case you have here, despite your colleague's peril," the Son'a commander continued, "Which planet did you say this... toxin was from?"

"We didn't," Klath replied curtly.

It was the first time he had spoken since they had arrived, and his booming voice was enough to send a hint of worry rippling across the stretched and haggard features of Lit'eh's face.

Denella stifled a smile. That was another reason she felt more sure of herself when she was alongside Klath. No matter how much she worked on her combat training, she knew that she would never possess that same ability to unnerve a potential enemy.

She was often able to use her own appearance to her advantage, admittedly. Many an adversary had underestimated her having been unable to look past the allure of the green skin. But she would definitely rather have had the effect that Klath had on people. When the hulking Klingon showed up and stared you down, it felt like he'd landed the first blow before the fighting had even started.



Lit'eh gradually recovered from the invisible punch that Klath's response had landed. "Well," he managed with a slight shrug, "Perhaps that is for the best."

This time, Klath didn't offer an answer. He didn't really need to. Ahdar Lit'eh seemed very clear that he shouldn't think too much more about that particular line of enquiry.

For her part, Denella suppressed a shudder as she considered what the remaining nomadic Son'a might do with that sort of chemical. She couldn't imagine there would be many applications for it to extend their lifespans, which only left the potential for more nefarious uses.

The uncomfortable silence that descended was punctuated by a shrill chirp from the comms panel recessed into Lit'eh's polished desk surface.

"Ah," he smiled, not bothering to directly acknowledge the message, "Sounds like everything is ready for you."

There was that wording again, Denella noted.

"Listen," she replied with a courteous tone, "I know you said you don't want payment for this, but we do have some latinum, or some supplies to—"

Lit'eh's latest dismissive wave stopped her in her tracks. "Please, no need. As I have said, I do not require your latinum, or to barter."

Denella didn't allow herself to relax at the casual generosity of his comment, even as Lit'eh lazily stood up and gestured back to the door. The two escorts either side of the door stepped aside with calm deference.

"Now," he continued, "Let me show you the way."

This time, Denella and Klath did share a glance. They'd both assumed that Lit'eh's staff were bringing the supplies to them.

"Um," the Bounty's engineer asked on behalf of both of them, "The way to where, exactly?"

Lit'eh smiled widely, his painfully stretched and scarred skin twisting grotesquely into an even uglier leer. Regardless of what sort of emotion he had been intending to convey with the gesture, it was far from a welcoming smile. "My people have your supplies ready to go," he explained, "It will be fastest if we collect them on our way back to the transporter room. If you'll come with me."

Lit'eh kept smiling as he walked to the exit. Klath offered Denella a glare which gave her a pretty clear indication of what he thought about this new development.

She was more than inclined to agree, but given their situation, she merely offered a shrug back at him. They didn't have much of a choice.

With a slight growl, the Klingon followed the Son'a commander out of the room, with Denella falling in behind. As they walked, Denella couldn't help but double check the dagger on her belt, and wonder whether all Son'a were as bad at bluffing as Ahdar Lit'eh appeared to be. She also considered exactly what trap they were walking into.

And more than anything, she was very happy that she had Klath for company.

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

*Cochrane Park, New Berlin  
Stardate 52483.2*

Natasha Kinsen had a headache.

Which was strange, because she was sure she wasn't supposed to have a headache.

Which, in turn, was even stranger. Because how could she possibly know that she wasn't supposed to have a headache? In fact, what did that even mean?

But she didn't have time to worry about any of that for too long, because all of a sudden, a strawberry was pushed into her mouth.

She bit down on the juicy red berry and smiled as she chewed, ignoring the nagging pain for the time being, regardless of whether it should or shouldn't have been there. On the other end of the strawberry, Blake Aldridge smiled back at her. In an instant, she found herself reflecting on how much she liked that smile. In fact, she didn't just like it. She loved it. And she was pretty sure that she loved the man the smile was connected to.

And today was the day she was going to tell him. To hell with her orders.

They lay on the fertile green banks of the lake that dominated the largest park inside the habitation dome of New Berlin.

Originally the entire region had been known as Mare Tranquillitatis before the colonisation of the surface had been completed. New Berlin, and Cochrane Park in particular, sat in the natural valley provided by that region.

Way above their heads, the gently curved transparent aluminium dome that separated the cosiness of their surroundings from the harsh lunar surface reflected down warming sunlight.

Underneath them was a thin patterned rug which they had carefully laid out on the grass, and they were surrounded by the simple picnic that Blake had put together.

Both of them lay back as they picked at the feast, their hair still damp and tangled from the impromptu swim in the lake they had enjoyed before settling down to eat. Although neither of them were eating with much haste. They were both too busy staring into each other's eyes.

If she was in love with his smile, she was doubly in love with his eyes.

She knew it now. She was in love. For the first time since her marriage to Cameron had collapsed. And, truthfully, since a few months before that point as well.

And she knew she had to tell him. Not about her orders. About her feelings. If the end of her marriage had taught her anything, it was that honesty was a precious and all too rare commodity in the universe.

They ignored the passers-by walking past, many of them taking a moment to gawp at the slightly soggy couple as they ate and giggled at each other in the middle of the busy park.

Natasha finished her bite of strawberry and felt her smile grow involuntarily wider. It was time.

"I love...these strawberries! How did you find a replicator pattern this good?"

Or maybe it wasn't time. Not quite yet.

Blake, blissfully unaware of the complicated issues bubbling away inside the woman alongside him, offered a pleasant shrug. "Full disclosure? I didn't. These are the real deal."

Her face lit up even more. For a Starfleet officer used to deep space missions, a non-replicated strawberry was a delicacy as rare as ambrosia. Or even a custom-made ham and pineapple pizza from the Splendour Island Resort on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet.

Which was an odd thing for her to think about, she suddenly realised.

Blake's reaction suggested that she had betrayed no outward sign that she was really thinking about pizza, his face creasing with a slightly bashful look. "Yeah, I've kinda got a strawberry guy. Friend of a friend gets a regular delivery from back down on Earth. One of the perks of being a senior civilian administrator up here."

He puffed out his chest in a thoroughly self-deprecating display of false pride, and she couldn't help but laugh.

She had first met him onboard the Navajo last year, when he had served as a liaison on a mission to resupply and protect a group of Federation colonies near the Badlands. While their relationship had blossomed onboard, they had both known that there was a transient element to it. He was never going to be a full-time presence aboard, and once he returned to his more permanent role back on the Moon, their time together became fragmented.

They both knew that was going to be the case going into the relationship, and they had accepted that eventuality. And it hadn't stopped her feelings from growing. The feelings that it was now definitely time to tell him about.

"I love...that you have a strawberry guy."

Or maybe it wasn't time. After all, she had her orders.

Blake chewed on a strawberry of his own and leaned back on the rug, staring up at the dome above their heads. For a moment, they lay together in contented, strawberry-infused silence.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked eventually, keeping his focus on the dome.

"Sure."

"Where are you, right now?"

The question threw her slightly. The pain in her head increased another notch. Even though it shouldn't have been there. "Huh?" she mustered with a scoff, scrunching her face up in confusion, "Is that a trick question?"

"I mean, in your head," he continued, glancing over at her, "Cos there's been something distracting you ever since you got here. What are you thinking about?"

Natasha was shocked. She'd been so caught up in her own thoughts that she hadn't considered that she was being that transparent. "I didn't realise you were a telepath," she managed.

As soon as she said that, a vision of Salus Hadren, the Betazoid, jumped into her head. Which was very strange, because she hadn't thought about him for years.

Or had she?

"I wish I was, dating'd be a hell of a lot easier," Blake offered, before turning more serious, "But, like it or not, I feel like I know you pretty well now, Nat. And I can tell when something's bothering you."

She sighed and picked up another strawberry, twirling it in her hand and staring at the mottled fruit to keep focused, and distract herself from the ever-developing headache. Now had to be the right time to tell him. To get everything out into the open.

Except, she couldn't bring herself to get what she wanted to say out into the open. Because she was a Starfleet officer. And she had her orders.

She set the strawberry aside, and sadly wondered just how long it would be before she got to taste another real one.

"We're shipping out again," she said eventually, "The Navajo's been fully repaired and refitted, and we're heading back to the front lines."

He sat and listened. Seeing no response forthcoming, she felt compelled to fill the silence with further details.

"Our orders are to head out and rendezvous with the fifth fleet. Somewhere near the Kesmet Sector, I think—"

"How long?"

The question was delivered firmly, but with an air of defeat. She noticed that his gaze had drifted away from her and out across the lake beside them. She took a deep breath. This suddenly seemed a lot more difficult to do than the last time it had happened.

"Two days," she said quietly, "And I—I know I should have said something, but..."

She didn't know how to finish that sentence. Also, she was a little confused. What had she meant when she had thought this seemed a lot more difficult to do than the last time it had happened? This had never happened before.

Or had it?

She winced again. The pain in her head combined with the aching sensation in her heart. She had to tell him how she felt. Even if she was shipping off again.

"So," Blake replied eventually, still not looking at her, "What are you saying?"

She had to tell him.

"I—I'm saying..." she began.

I love you.

"I'm saying...I think it's best if we break up."

Close enough.

Her heart broke as he turned to her with a look of despair. Tinged with an undercurrent of anger.

"Really?" he managed, "That's what you want to do? With us? You want to run away from all this?"

“I’m not—!”

She wanted to explain. About how she really felt. About how she loved him. About her fears about the war, and the experience she’d been through with Cameron, and how she didn’t want to have anything else hanging over either of them now she was heading back to the front. She wanted to find some justification for her actions that proved she wasn’t just running away. To herself, as much as to Blake.

But she didn’t manage any of that. Because he opened his mouth again.

“This is the bridge,” he said, “I repeat: Abandon ship…”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. She saw Blake, sitting next to her on the rug. But she also saw Salus Hadren again. And Ensign T’Vess. And Doctor Rahman. And Commander Calvin. And a curiously grinning Vulcan.

And she knew where she was. And where she was going.

“...All hands to the escape pods.”

Except she knew she couldn’t go back there. She couldn’t go back to the Navajo. She forced herself to think of anything else.

The blazing pain in her temples reached critical mass. She screamed.

“No!”

\* \* \* \* \*

*London, Earth  
Stardate 27245.2*

Natasha Kinsen was happy.

Even though she had a headache.

She sat at an antique wooden table, swinging her short legs off the side of one of the high-backed chairs that surrounded it. The table itself was now bare. Breakfast had been cleared away, though the smell of the freshly baked bread that had formed a staple part of the feast still hung in the air.

And the clear space on the table was the reason she was so happy. It was ready for her father’s work to be laid out. Today he had promised to show her everything he had found on his latest dig.

Professor Reynard Jennings, the eminent archaeologist currently tenured at the Royal Academy, had only recently returned from his latest grand field trip, a three month stay with a Federation science team to a set of ancient ruins recently discovered on Garrick II.

To be honest, Natasha didn’t really understand what a lot of that really meant. Her mother had shown her the star charts, pointing out where Earth was, and where Garrick II lay on the fringe of Federation space. She had explained how long it took to get there, and shared the holomages and recordings that her father had sent back showing the ruins themselves.

But the nine year old Natasha hadn’t really taken much of that in. What she was really interested in was the fact that whenever her father came home, he always brought her a present. So she eagerly sat and waited for him to return to the kitchen table with whatever he had brought back for her.

She felt comforted as she looked around the expansive living area on the ground floor of her family’s townhouse. She had always felt comfortable here, surrounded by the old wooden table of the dining area and the antique furniture of the sitting area.

And then the little girl’s face scrunched up. Why would she have felt especially comfortable here? Compared to what? She’d always lived here, hadn’t she?

But then, if that was true, how had she been on Archanis IV, fighting Klingons?

She shook her head to get rid of that particularly strange thought and returned her attention to swinging her feet under the table. She heard footsteps coming down the stairs of the old house, and a smile crossed her face. She wondered what the present might be this time.

But then she stopped herself, as a deeper confusion set in. She winced at the pain in her head, and tried to remember how long she’d had a headache. Moments, or hours?

And what was she doing here, anyway. Wasn’t she supposed to be on shore leave? Or was she supposed to be performing surgery on a Bzzit Khaht?

Surely she couldn’t be. She had no idea what a Bzzit Khaht was, for a start.

Forgetting about the approaching footsteps, she jumped down from the chair and shook her head, blinking intently as she looked around the eerily familiar room, and trying to square this picture of childhood innocence with the swirling memories inside her head.

And then she saw him.

In the middle of the room, as if out of nowhere, lay an incongruous, twisted human shape.

“Help me!”

The ensign in the corridor stared back at her, reaching out a burned, bloodied hand. His mangled form looking completely out of place in the comfort and safety of her family home.

Regardless of how old she might have appeared, the image terrified her to the depths of her soul. She screamed and ran.

She sprinted out of the room, into the hallway. Leaving the broken man behind, even as she remembered everything that was happening to her.

How she was dying.

And then she ran straight into a familiar pair of legs dressed in a dark brown material, walking the other way down the hall. Her father’s legs.

“Daddy...!” she sighed, momentarily feeling safe again.

She looked up at him with relief, already feeling a little calmer about everything that was happening now that he was here. And then all of that sense of relief vanished. Because she found herself looking at someone else entirely.

“Um,” Sunek grimaced, as he looked down at the nine year old girl hugging his legs, “I think things are getting weirder...”

Her headache intensified. In the background, drifting in from somewhere, she heard the distinctive wail of a red alert siren.

And then everything went blurry again, and all of her family comforts vanished.

## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

The Son'a officer flew through the air in a perfect parabolic arc, landing with spectacular style on top of a workstation, sending various medical implements flying across the local vicinity.

The growling Klingon that had sent the officer on his trip had no time to take in the dramatic results of his efforts, as he was immediately grappled from behind by another of Ahdar Lit'eh's men.

On the other side of the vast medical bay, Denella felled one of the Son'a medics with a forceful elbow to his stomach, combined with a quick sweep of his standing leg.

The Son'a had been able to keep the details of their trap a secret until they had arrived at one of the Syatonen's numerous medical bays. Even though the cruiser was small, a significant volume of its internal space was taken up by various treatment rooms, rehabilitation areas and surgical bays.

And, while Denella and Klath had followed Lit'eh down to the bay in question, ostensibly to collect their medication, things had quickly become more complicated.

Although Lit'eh had been insistent that he didn't expect any sort of payment for the help he was providing, they discovered that wasn't quite true. While the Son'a commander didn't want their latinum or their supplies, it had become apparent as soon as they had entered the bay and seen the ugly weapons that Lit'eh's waiting medical staff had been holding that they definitely wanted something.

Precisely what hadn't been clear. Their blood, their skin, their plasma, something that the Son'a seemed aware they were going to have to take by force.

Except the Son'a medics, along with Lit'eh and the two officers that had followed them from his ready room, had all reckoned without the Klingon and the Orion's determination not to have their bodily fluids forcibly removed for whatever life-extending experiment the Son'a were cooking up.

Klath ran backwards and slammed the Son'a that was grappling him into the gunmetal wall of the bay, forcing the breath from his body and causing him to sink to his knees. He broke free of the man's grip and rendered him unconscious with a swing of the blunt edge of his bat'leth.

Denella landed a punch on another of the Son'a as he charged at her, pausing slightly when the force of her blow had the unfortunate secondary effect of splitting open a section of stretched skin on the other side of the man's face, sending a splatter of dark blood across the deck.

"Ew," she managed, as the stunned medic slumped to the ground.

She spun back around in time to see Klath's bat'leth making contact with one final Son'a, who was sent careening over another stack of medical equipment. The Klingon swiftly returned to a defensive posture, but there was no need. The battle was won.

He met Denella's gaze, who silently nodded in the direction of the far side of the bay. Klath turned in that direction to see the formerly proud and welcoming Ahdar Lit'eh cowering in the corner, one arm outstretched towards a comms panel on the wall.

In an instant, Klath raced over and brought the sharpened edge of his bat'leth up to Lit'eh's face.

"I wouldn't," Denella called out with a tight smile.

The Son'a commander reluctantly retracted his hand from the panel, his last desperate attempt to call for reinforcements having been thwarted. "W—We were not going to kill you!" he stammered, "We were just going to extract some of your genetic material!"

The look on Lit'eh's face suggested that he genuinely didn't consider that to be an unfair request, while the look that Klath shot back at him suggested that he was wrong in that assumption.

Denella glanced around at the unconscious forms of the other Son'a, and shrugged. "We didn't kill any of your men either," she pointed out.

"But you—!"

Whatever the latest protestation was going to be, a slight nudge from Klath's bat'leth was enough to make him think twice about continuing.

"So, we're gonna be keeping our genetic material today," the Orion engineer continued, "But, more importantly, we're gonna need that medication we came for. And please don't tell me and my friend here that you were lying about having that."

Klath deepened his glare, fitting right into the bad cop role. It was a role he often found himself playing, and one that he usually took on with relish.

Lit'eh managed a slight nod, and slowly extended a shaking arm out, gesturing across to the other side of the room. "O—Of course. It's all over there."

Denella walked over to where he had gestured and picked up a small container, seemingly undamaged from the fight that had just raged.

Still not trusting the terrified commander, despite his obvious tactical disadvantage, she grabbed the tricorder that was clipped to her belt and gave the container a quick once-over, verifying the results against the list of supplies the Bounty's medical computer had requested.

"It is all there?" Klath asked, keeping his attention, and his weapon, trained in Lit'eh.

"Tricorder thinks so," she replied with a guarded shrug, praying that there was no further piece of treachery at play. Given her absence of medical knowledge, she had no choice but to trust the tricorder's interpretation of the vials and chemicals inside the container.

Klath nodded, but replied back to Lit'eh himself. "We will be taking that which we came for," he explained patiently, "And you and your crew will not attempt to stop us."

Lit'eh considered the possibility of trying again to call for additional men to overwhelm their incongruous adversaries. After all, his last stretching treatment had not gone well. His own chief medic suggested that his skin was reaching a point of no return. That soon, he wouldn't be physically able to undergo any further treatments.

Which was why Lit'eh had turned his attention to the more extreme types of medical research, looking for willing - or often unwilling - volunteers from other species whose genetic material might hold the key to prolonging his life further.

He had placed Klingons and Orions near the top of his lists of species to study. After all, both were among the strongest species in the galaxy. If he was looking for the key to boosting his own ailing body, they seemed like ideal candidates to start with. And how fortunate that he had not only found a relatively underpowered ship with one of each of them onboard, but that they were actually desperate enough to come straight to him.

The good news hadn't stopped there. Another species he had identified as a study candidate were Vulcans, known for living for two centuries without much need for medical intervention. And what were the odds that this ship also had one of those onboard as well.

So, on the one hand, Lit'eh potentially had the key to extending his life right here in his grasp, which was surely enough reason to risk the lives of more of his men.

But, on the other hand, while he only had a finite number of treatments left available to him without some sort of genetic intervention, at least he would still be alive. A trait of his that he might not be able to guarantee if he pushed matters with the armed Klingon any further.

"That all sound good to you?" Denella added as she strode back over to them, "We'll leave you alone now, in return for what we came for?"

After a moment of further contemplation, Ahdar Lit'eh decided that he was still more of a pragmatist than a gambler. After all, there were plenty more Klingons and Orions out there.

He nodded back meekly.

"A wise choice," Klath noted.

Denella couldn't help but agree. Though as she looked down at the priceless container of medicine, her bigger worry wasn't Lit'eh or the Son'a any more.

It was whether or not they were going to get back in time.

## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

*Merchant ship Bounty*  
*Stardate 52049.2*

Natasha Kinsen should have been uncomfortable. Deeply uncomfortable.

But she wasn't uncomfortable. She was way past uncomfortable. Given everything that she'd been through, uncomfortable was a dot to her. Because she was fully aware that regardless of where it may seem like she was, she was actually in the medical bay on the Bounty.

She was sick. And she was running out of time.

And everything else that was happening, wherever it seemed like she might be, was just a random moment from her own memory. She wasn't really on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet, or Archanis IV, nor was she at her family home in London, or in San Francisco, or New Berlin.

She wasn't even where she thought she was now.

Which was actually reassuring. Because as far as her memory was concerned, right now she was onboard the Bounty, mere hours after she had first come aboard.

Specifically, she was inside Jirel's cabin. Shortly after she had made what she was now sure had been the mistake of choosing to seek a night of companionship with the Trill after her rescue from six long months alone on a desolate planet in the Kesmet system following the Navajo's destruction.

When the previous memory of her childhood back in London had started to fade and her headache had intensified, she was sure she was destined for the same memory onboard the Navajo all over again. But this time, instead of forcing herself out of that memory when she was in it, she had managed to avoid it altogether. Somehow.

If she had been fully in control of where her mind was taking her, she probably wouldn't have chosen this particular moment as an alternative. Especially given who she was sharing said memory with once again.

Fortunately, the good news was that she was well past being uncomfortable.

"All I'm saying, doc, is that this is now two of these memories of yours where I've ended up in bed with you..."

With a sigh, the mostly comfortable Natasha forced herself to look at the latest incongruous form she was tasked with interacting with. Namely Sunek's face on Jirel's body.

This time, she hadn't needed to explain any of the context to him. The familiar ship, the spots on his newly adopted body, and the fact that her night with Jirel had quickly become common knowledge on the Bounty meant that it didn't take all of Sunek's Vulcan intellect to piece it together. And once pieced together, he had reacted to her latest unintentional moment of oversharing with a typically Sunek-ian level of immaturity.

But she was determined not to feel uncomfortable. Because she wasn't uncomfortable. So, instead, she decided to give as good as she got.

"I mean, if we're keeping score like that, you've also ended up dead in two of them."

Sunek's grin faltered slightly as he mulled this over.

"Touche," he nodded eventually, switching his attention to glancing around the cabin, "So, this is the time when you—?"

"Scratched an itch. Yes. Let's move on."

She took a moment to reluctantly take in the memory. Remembering how she had chosen this cabin based on a simple coin toss in her search for a moment of companionship. How brash a wannabe space captain he had initially been, and still could be. How awkwardly he had jumped to the wrong conclusion about that night, and how she had had to let him down, not entirely gently.

But she also thought about what Sunek had told her. About how Jirel was now apparently watching over her back on the Bounty. And how strangely comforting that felt. Not for the first time, she struggled to square all of that together in her head.

Still, there were significantly bigger issues to worry about.

"I'm dying, aren't I?"

For once in his life, Sunek seemed to think before he replied, not entirely sure how to respond. At the very least, the doctor's sudden moment of frankness served to pull him right back into the serious side of their situation, all thoughts of trying to cheekily discuss this latest personal memory entirely forgotten.

"Well, you're, um...yeah," he managed in response, "How could you tell?"



She sighed again and stared down at her toes poking out of the end of Jirel's bedsheet. She felt oddly becalmed for someone who was dying. "Just a hunch," she offered back, "The memories have been...I don't even know how to describe it. Breaking down. Bleeding into each other."

She didn't go into any more details as far as which one in particular was bleeding across her other memories most strongly. Even given all that Sunek had already seen of her private side, she was praying that she could keep the Navajo's final moments from him.

"How do you mean?" the Vulcan asked.

"Just...some parts of my memories are starting to get mixed up with the others. And it feels like I'm jumping between them a lot faster."

Sunek considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Well, I didn't wanna say anything, but it is getting harder to...find you in here. Like I said, first time, I just initiated the meld and ended up in one vivid memory. But this last time, I had to do a bit of...searching."

Natasha forced herself not to think too much about what that meant. About how many of her other memories he might have already seen. She rubbed the side of her head as a sharp needle of pain lanced through her temples.

"You ok?" Sunek added, "I mean, aside from the whole...dying thing."

"Just a headache."

"Heh. If I had a slip of latinum for every time I'd heard that when I was in bed with a girl, I'd—"

One of her patented withering glares stopped the Vulcan's latest train of thought.

"—Not the time. I know."

As the pain in her head increased, she started to wonder whether this was it. Whether this was how she was destined to die.

Right here. In bed with Sunek. Again.

No, she decided to herself with renewed conviction, there's no way that it ends here. She swivelled back to the uncomfortable mash-up of Bounty crew members next to her with an altogether more determined look in her eyes.

"Ok, Sunek, I need more information. What's changed about my lifesigns? My brain patterns? What about the Son'a? Anything?"

Sunek paused in the middle of his inspection of yet another set of borrowed fingernails, these ones considerably less manicured than most of the others. "Ok. Right. Yeah. The Son'a? Klath and Denella are working on that. But we need to buy some more time. We gave you the antipsychotic, just like you said—"

"The promazine?"

"—That's the one. Gave you that, and your brain activity seemed to stabilise. I guess."

"You guess?"

Sunek shrugged Jirel's shoulders. "All the readings on the medical computer dropped back from the redline. Even the spikes around the hippocampus seemed to calm down. Everything looked good."

Natasha couldn't help but feel some detached amusement at the roundabout way that Sunek/Jirel was leading her to his conclusion. She always assumed this sort of medical report was something that doctors like her developed over years of training.

"But then...?"

"But then, I guess, something else happened," the Vulcan shrugged, "Weird readings, lots of alarms, and your lifesigns took another nosedive."

She suppressed a sigh, sitting up in the cramped bed and glaring at Sunek intently, trying to will some more detail about the situation back in reality out of him. "What sort of weird readings? Give me something to work with here—!"

She flinched as another stab of pain lanced through her head. Sunek watched on with a surprisingly sympathetic look.

"I don't really know," he sighed, "Neither did the computer. But it was similar to the first sets of readings we got. Just, I dunno, more intense? Like it was—"

"Like it was spreading," she whispered.

"Um, I guess?"

Her brain, or whatever passed for her brain in this sort of context, kicked into gear. She realised with a sense of dread what was happening.

"The toxin," she continued, "It's spreading. We tried to stop whatever it was doing in my brain with the antipsychotic. But...what if that was the wrong call? What if that was stopping it from spreading further, somehow?"

"How?" Sunek asked, slightly perplexed.

"No idea. But the diagnosis was all wrong. The promazine is only treating the effects, not the cause. I think all we've done is speed up whatever else the toxin is doing to me."

“Oh. Whoops?”

She didn't react to that assessment. Because she already knew what this all meant. It meant that she'd made the wrong call. And she might be about to pay the ultimate price.

“The antidote, Sunek. How long?”

The Vulcan looked back at her with a rare serious expression. She didn't even really process how odd it was to see a look of stoic solemnity on this particular Vulcan. “Honestly?” he sighed, “Denella and Klath are getting the materials now. We hope. After that, we're still gonna need a couple of hours for the computer to do its thing and get the whole thing prepared for you.”

“Ok. So I need to hold on for that long.”

“Might help,” Sunek offered, still without any overt humour.

She drew the bedsheets up around her and chewed her lip thoughtfully. The headache flared up again.

“Stop the antipsychotics,” she said eventually with a firm nod, “Hopefully that'll slow down the spreading. And go back to Plan A.”

“Right,” Sunek nodded, before adding, “Um, which one was Plan A, again?”

“The cordrazine. Give me a bigger shot of the stims than last time. Start with 20 ccs, and give me a second shot if you need to.”

Sunek studied her face, seeing something underneath the overt determination of her plan. “You sure?” he asked warily, “Given what happened last time we did that, it kinda sounds a bit...suicidal?”

“I'm dying,” she pointed out, “Feels like we're at the point where I've got nothing to lose. Besides, this isn't a treatment. We're getting that from the Son'a. All this is gonna be is the best way to keep me alive for long enough for you to give me the antidote.”

She paused for a moment to hold back the latest wince-inducing lance of pain in her head.

“Last time, the cordrazine gave my lifesigns a shot in the arm, and seemed to slow the toxin down. That's what I need right now.”

“So,” Sunek mused, “Instead of letting the toxin kill you, we're gonna let the stims kill you?”

She mustered a wry smile. “At least this way, I'm in control—”

“Warning. Structural integrity failure in progress.”

The sound of the Navajo's computer filling the air sent a fresh shiver down her spine, and a fresh stab of pain through her skull.

It was happening again.

On the other side of the bed, the Vulcan/Trill hybrid seemed entirely oblivious to what she had just heard. And she still wanted to keep it that way. “Go, Sunek,” she urged, “Now.”

Sunek took one last look around the latest memory she had unwittingly shared with him. But she was still way beyond being uncomfortable. At least about this particular memory. She was far more uncomfortable about the memory she was heading for.

The red alert sirens got louder, as she put all of her focus back into trying to end up anywhere but the corridors of the Navajo again. Just as she had done to get here.

She thought she saw Sunek's mouth move, as if he was saying something else to her, but she couldn't hear him any more.

And before she could try to say anything back, everything started to blur...

\* \* \* \* \*

If he'd felt somewhat useless before, Jirel definitely felt useless now.

With Sunek in the middle of his latest meld, the Vulcan positioned next to where Natasha lay in the middle of the medical bay, and Denella and Klath away on the Son'a vessel they had intercepted, he was still in exactly the same place. Uselessly worrying himself sick about the safety of their unnervingly tranquil patient.

Once again, he had found himself holding her hand. He was still self-conscious about the act, but had passed the point of caring too much if he was caught again doing something quite so curiously irrational.

He wished that the readings on the medical computer would improve, even as they were slowly growing even weaker. He wished that they had never altered course for the Son'a, and had kept their focus on reaching a proper trustworthy medical facility.

Above all else, he just wished he could talk to her.

And then, something curious happened. For reasons that he couldn't entirely rationalise to himself, even as it was happening, he started talking

to her. To the woman lying unconscious on the bed in front of him. The one who was still clearly in a deep coma.

“Hey,” he heard himself say to someone who couldn’t possibly hear him, “You’re gonna be ok, you hear me? We’re gonna fix all this. Trust me.”

He stifled a smile at those words, even as the entirely somnolent Natasha offered no reaction from where she lay. The coma still preventing her from responding to his words.

“Heh,” he continued, “Remember the first time I asked you to trust me? When we were after the Jewel of Soraxx, trapped in the middle of some weird ancient temple full of booby traps? We were staring death in the face, so I fixed you with my best space captain look, and asked you if you trusted me. And you just flat out said no. I mean, what was I supposed to do with that? I was trying to be a big hero!”

He mustered a chuckle. The woman in the coma remained understandably silent.

“Guess you had me down as an idiot right from the start. Which is probably accurate. But...you know what?”

The woman in the coma didn’t answer. Which was fine. He’d meant the question rhetorically.

“We got through those booby traps. Somehow. We got through all that. Somehow. And we’re gonna get through this as well, ok? Somehow. So, if you—I mean, I’m pretty sure you can’t, but—if you can hear me saying this then...please, trust me, ok?”

He paused, not entirely sure what sort of reaction he was expecting to get from the woman who had been entirely unresponsive to stimuli for the last eighteen hours.

In the end, he didn’t get any reaction. Which he figured was the reaction he should have expected. Still, apparently undeterred by the slightly farcical nature of the one-way conversation, Jirel felt his voice starting up again.

“Also, I guess I have something else to tell—to say to you. In case you don’t—I mean, you’re definitely gonna wake up, ok? I just went over that. I was very clear about—”

He took a moment to contemplate the added ludicrousness of him not even being able to talk to her about his feelings when she was in a coma.

I am really bad at this, he sighed.

“It’s just—And I know you don’t feel the same way. But I’ve been thinking about it a lot, about how I feel, and I think—I mean, I’m pretty sure that I—”

The door to the medical bay opened, and Denella and Klath hurried in, both looking a little more bruised and bloodied than the last time Jirel had seen them. He instantly shut up and let go of Natasha’s hand, swinging back around to them with all the casual innocence of a teenage Ferengi getting caught with his hands in his father’s tin of imported beetle snuff.

“I wasn’t talking to her.”

Denella gave him a mildly amused look as she strode over to the medical computer, while Klath merely looked at him with confusion.

“What?”

“Um,” he managed, “Nothing. I was just—I wasn’t doing anything. That’s all.”

Klath’s look of confusion deepened.

“I remember when I used to think you were cool,” Denella couldn’t help but chime in.

Jirel suppressed a wince and deflected the Orion’s quip by gesturing to the state of the pair of them as a means to move the conversation on. “What the hell happened to you?”

“The Son’a drove a hard bargain,” Denella offered, as she held up the small container she was carrying, “But we got what we needed.”

“They gonna make things any more difficult for us?”

Even as she began to unpack their supplies, Denella’s mouth curved into a slightly satisfied smile. “They could try,” she replied, “But we’re warping back away from them, and Ahdar Lit’eh is going to be without his weapons for a while.”

“Huh,” Jirel nodded at his engineer, “An encryption program?”

“A bat’leth,” Klath replied with a proud nod, indicating that it wasn’t just Denella who had the proficiency to sabotage another ship’s weapons controls.

In different circumstances, Jirel would have allowed himself a moment or two of further banter with the gruff Klingon, whether Klath had wanted to or not. But he made do with a nod and a smile before joining Denella at the computer.

“You sure we’ve got everything for the antidote?”

“Bit late to go back now,” she replied as she finished unpacking their somewhat ill-gotten gains and placed the vials into the medical computer’s prep area, “Just got to hope the computer can work through the recipe.”

Jirel bit his lip with worry as the Orion tapped the computer’s controls. “How long?”

“Little bit longer every time you distract me.”

The Trill reluctantly took the hint and took a step back. He contented himself with the fact that things were starting to move in the right direction.

And then a familiar voice chirped up from behind him.

“Might wanna hurry that up.”

The trio of conscious Bounty crew members turned to see Sunek, post-meld, gesturing down at Natasha on the bed.

“Things are getting worse in there.”

Jirel left Denella at the computer and stepped over to the Vulcan. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means she’s running out of ideas. She’s asked for another hit of stims.”

Sunek idly reached over to a hypospray sitting next to the bed and double checked what it was filled with. Just as he was about to press the cordrazine to Natasha’s neck, Jirel reached out and grabbed his wrist.

“Why would we do that?” he growled, a little too intensely, “It nearly killed her last time!”

Sunek raised a quizzical eyebrow. While Jirel was hardly causing his Vulcan physiology any pain with his grasp, his harsh tone was doing some minor damage to his feelings. “This is what she wants us to do. She knows it’s dangerous, but she thinks it’s the only hope we’ve got of slowing down the toxin’s progress. And she knows if we don’t do this, she’ll be dead before we’ve got our antidote.”

The frankness of Sunek’s comments carried enough weight to cause Jirel to grind his teeth.

“That’s what she said?”

Sunek nodded. But he hadn’t needed to. This had been another rhetorical question from Jirel. He knew that Sunek wasn’t messing around. Slowly, Jirel released his grip around the Vulcan’s wrist and allowed him to proceed.

Even though the entirety of the Bounty’s usually talkative crew were present inside the medical bay, the only sound in the room was the hiss of the hypospray.

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

*Starbase 218, Callax Sector  
Stardate 50893.2*

Natasha Kinsen was at peace.

The medical basis for the five stages of grief had been hotly debated ever since it had first been proposed on Earth in the late 20th century, and the current prevailing medical opinion was that the entire concept was too simplistic and reductive.

Firstly, centuries of research had failed to uncover any real empirical evidence to back up the existence of such a theoretical process, from denial, through anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Nor had any psychological studies suggested that such a process happened organically in grieving individuals.

And then there was the wider issue that such a rigid model simply no longer made sense in the context of the wider universe.

Space exploration had uncovered a myriad of differing approaches to grief. From the Klingon Death Howl, to the Ferengi ritual of pre-selling one's own remains, through to the Rakahki people of Rakhar VII, whose best psychiatrists had developed a theory that grief was actually a thirty-nine stage process, meaning that it was common among the Rakahki for one to pass away from old age while still in the middle of grieving one's great-grandparents.

All of which rendered the Terran-centric five stage model somewhat archaic in the modern day Alpha Quadrant.

Still, some therapists made use of the old system from time to time, as a jumping off point if nothing else. The ship's counsellor onboard the Navajo had helped Natasha to get over her father's death some months ago by using the five stage model as a framework for their sessions.

And right now, Natasha was using it herself. And she felt that she had definitely reached acceptance. Both inside this particular memory, and in the wider context of her plight. She wasn't disorientated, even though it felt like only moments ago she had been in Jirel's bed. Or in her family home on Earth. Or any number of other places. She knew what was happening.

She was dying. And, as she told herself, she had reached a point of acceptance with that.

She also knew what was happening in this particular memory. The latest trip that her brain had sent her on as she had somehow steered herself away from the Navajo. And she remembered that when she had been here in reality, she had reached acceptance as well.

She sat alone, at a table in one of Starbase 218's outer lounges. Along the inner wall was a bank of self-service replicators, while the main floor area of the lounge was filled with tables and chairs, as well as some more casual sofas in various orthogonal arrangements.

Next to her, the outer wall of the lounge was one huge curved sheet of transparent aluminium, offering an unimpeded view of the inky blackness of space. The Navajo was out of sight of the lounge, the Excelsior-class ship ensconced on one of the base's spindly docking arms towards the bottom of the main cylindrical structure.

But she could see another Federation ship from here, tethered to the end of another of the base's docking arms. The unmistakable shape of the Cheyenne-class USS Ticonderoga.

Her husband's ship. And also, as it turned out, the ship of Lieutenant Gina Ramirez.

He'd be here soon. She'd arranged to meet him right here, in this very bar, once the Ticonderoga had docked and he had been cleared to head station-side.

Or, at least, that was what had happened when this had happened in reality. What was happening now wasn't actually happening.

And that was fine. She had accepted that as well.

Still, as far as Lt Commander Cameron Kinsen was concerned, he was heading for dinner with his wife, who he hadn't seen for several months. And then he was planning to take her back to the executive quarters on the base he'd managed to wrangle for the duration of their layover.

It had been a typical Cameron move. On the face of it, thoughtful and romantic, getting both of them away from their stuffy starship accommodation to turn this frustratingly rare crossing of paths into something memorable. But there was something else that she could now see underneath that thoughtfulness. It was also a chance for him to show off. The newly-promoted second officer of a Federation starship pulling rank to score the fanciest quarters available to underline his status.

As she contemplated this particular memory, she had to admit that, had everything been equal back on Starbase 218, she'd have gone along with it. That was the man she had married, after all. The red flags had been there all along, and she'd chosen to ignore them.

They had even been there when he had proposed. He hadn't chosen a personal or private moment to pop the question, or chosen a specific location with any personal meaning to them. Instead, he had gotten down on one knee in the middle of his own brother's birthday party, during shore leave back on Earth. In front of his extended family, while she had been wearing the little black dress and the Folnar jewel necklace he

had bought for her just days before.

The whole thing had been as much an exercise in him showing off in front of everyone, and stealing his brother's thunder, than it had been about the two of them.

And, in fairness to him, it worked. The proposal, and her saying yes, had delighted everyone present at the party. With the possible exception of his brother. And she had accepted it all. She had said yes. Because she loved him.

Even as she had felt like she was being shown off to everyone, with her elegant dress, her dazzling necklace, and now an engagement ring topped off with a gemstone the size of a small asteroid on her finger, she had accepted it all. Because she was sure that people could change. At least, that was what she had told herself.

Except Cameron hadn't really changed. And neither had she. Looking back around at this particular memory after so many years had passed, she could now see that she had never really fully trusted him. Which, in an odd way, had proven fortunate.

In front of her was a small padd, containing the evidence that was going to end her marriage.

Because, while Cameron was expecting dinner and a night in the executive quarters, he was actually heading for something quite different.

As she stared at the padd, she wondered if Sunek had given her the cordrazine yet.

She had first become suspicious about Cameron and Lt Ramirez some weeks ago, and it hadn't taken much digging to confirm those suspicions. It turned out that Cameron's healthy ego seemed to give him a zealous amount of overconfidence in everything he did, to the point that he had barely even bothered to cover his own tracks.

The final piece of the puzzle had been delivered via one of her old Academy friends onboard the Ticonderoga, who had let slip the fact that she had seen Cameron and Ramirez spending more and more time together onboard.

Apparently, things had come to a head when a holodeck malfunction had forced a team of engineers to spend hours rescuing the pair from what had turned out to be a couples massage program. The malfunction, precipitated by a spatial anomaly that the Ticonderoga had been studying, caused the holomatrix to fuse that program with one designed for advanced tactical training.

And while she had gained some small amount of amusement at the mental image of Cameron and Ramirez, clad in little more than paper-thin towels, suddenly finding themselves having to spend several hours fending off a hoard of armed Gorn soldiers with massage oil and seaweed wraps, the story merely served as confirmation of what she already suspected.

He was cheating on her. Their marriage was over.

Still, for some reason, she hadn't informed him via subspace, or sent him a simple message. Instead, she had carried on as normal, waiting for their rendezvous at the starbase.

She winced slightly as she felt another headache starting up, wondering what carnage the extra boost of stims were wreaking on her physical body right now.

In the distance, she heard a red alert siren.

Trying to keep her focus on this memory, she focused back on the padd. Remembering why she had decided to handle Cameron's infidelity in person.

In truth, she had done it for the irony. After he had proposed in such a public manner, and spent most of their relationship favouring performative actions over genuine ones, she had decided to at least take satisfaction in finishing things in a similar way.

Still, even though the look on his face when she had calmly, but firmly, explained what she had found out had been particularly priceless, it hadn't satisfied her as much as she had hoped. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, it always felt like part of her had died on that day. And now, she thought with a hint of irony, the rest of her was joining it.

She felt another surge of pain in her head. The alert siren was becoming persistent.

She heard footsteps approaching from behind her. Just as she had heard them back when this had really happened. She looked up to see Cameron's reflection in the window as the smiling second officer of the Ticonderoga reached her table.

Part of her had almost been expecting to see Sunek's face instead of Cameron's. But the Vulcan was nowhere to be seen. She recalled what he had said about it being harder to 'find her' with the last meld, and suppressed a shudder as she contemplated whether or not she was now completely cut off. All alone, inside her own memory.

Cameron leaned down and kissed her cheek. She didn't react.

The red alert siren grew in intensity. Her head began to pound.

Her husband sat down opposite her at the table. He began to talk.

"Warning. Structural integrity failure in progress."

And she knew she couldn't hold back the sirens any longer.

“It’s not working, is it?”

Jirel didn’t direct the question at anyone else in particular. His focus was on the freshly loaded hypospray in his hands. Another shot of stims. On standby. In fact, the tiny vial of liquid inside the hypospray represented the remains of the cordrazine supply on the entire Bounty. That was all they had left from the Bounty’s meagre supply.

Elsewhere in the medical bay, Denella stood over the computer, waiting on the synthesis of the antidote, while Sunek watched the readings from Natasha on a separate screen. Klath had temporarily left the room, returning to the cockpit to get the Bounty back to maximum speed towards the medical facility on Beta Ramis.

It was far too late for them to get there in time now. They were entirely reliant on the supplies they had taken from the Son’a. But still, they had to fly themselves somewhere, and that seemed as good a place as any.

After a moment, Jirel looked up, and repeated his question.

“Is it?”

Denella didn’t answer, keeping her focus on the progress on the screen in front of her. Sunek glanced up from his own screen and shrugged.

“She’s getting worse,” he reported glumly, “The stims don’t seem to have given her lifesigns the same boost that they did before.”

“Why?”

Sunek bit his tongue before offering a more productive answer than the sarcasm that his brain had initially planned to opt for. He didn’t need to remind Jirel that anything he told him was mostly going to be guesswork. “Dunno,” he shrugged apologetically, “But I’d assume it’s got something to do with the toxin spreading further after we gave her the promazine. The stims aren’t controlling the situation as well, now there’s more to deal with.”

The Trill looked down at the hypospray in his hand, then back up at the Vulcan, who picked up on the details of the unspoken question.

“If we give her another shot, I have no idea what that might do to her.”

“If the toxin has spread,” Jirel countered, “A bigger dose might help to fight it.”

“True,” Sunek shrugged, “It might also completely overload what’s left of her systems. Still not a doctor, but my honest advice would be to maybe save that shot until her lifesigns really start to flatline.”

Jirel grimaced and chewed his cheek, looking over at Denella. “How long on the antidote?”

Denella decided against reminding him that it had only been a few minutes since he’d last asked her that question. Like Sunek, she could tell that it wasn’t really the time. “About an hour, give or take.”

Jirel fixated on the hypospray again, as he considered how much the crew had come together in this particular crisis. How quickly Natasha had become such a vital part of the crew as a whole, for everyone on the Bounty.

As he thought about that, and Denella and Sunek returned their attention to their respective screens, the door to the medical bay opened and Klath returned.

“We are sixteen hours away from Beta Ramis,” he announced.

None of the others took much visible solace from that news, with good reason. Klath acknowledged the silence, and then stood awkwardly in the doorway, not entirely sure what else he could offer the current situation. Eventually, and more than a little reluctantly, he stepped across the room, over to Jirel and the hypospray.

“The remaining stimulants?” he asked, gesturing at the device in the Trill’s hand.

Jirel nodded back, forcing himself to look up at the hulking Klingon. “We were just...debating whether to give them to her or not.”

Klath considered the matter in silence for a moment. Another of those silences that he didn’t realise held such power over the rest of the Bounty’s crew.

And then, something curious happened. The least medically-minded person on the entire ship, possibly in the entire quadrant, offered a diagnosis.

“You should give them to her.”

Jirel stared back at the looming face of the Klingon, even as Sunek turned back from his screen with an edge of displeasure.

“Hey, Doctor Bat’leth MD, maybe now isn’t the best time to start your pitch for the chief medical officer vacancy?”

Klath didn’t look over at the Vulcan, keeping his attention on Jirel, though he did acknowledge his general point. “I cannot offer a medical opinion,” he conceded, “But I can offer that of a warrior.”

“Yeah, cool,” Sunek’s sarcasm persisted, “Don’t tell me, we should try to hit the toxin with really sharp objects.”

“I do not understand a great deal about medicine,” Klath continued, in what was a strong contender for the understatement of the century, “But I do know plenty about how to fight. And that seems to be what the doctor needs to do with this...toxin. We should give her every chance to win.”

“This shot,” Jirel half-whispered, twirling the hypospray around in his hand, “Could also kill her, Klath.”

“Any warrior knows that is a possibility in battle. She is no different.”

Klath looked over at the human woman on the bed, as Jirel regarded his Klingon confidante. After a thoughtful second, he turned back to Denella and Sunek, who had both looked up from their respective screens.

“He does know his battles,” Denella pointed out, “And we need to buy ourselves at least an hour.”

“Just FYI,” Sunek offered as a counterpoint, “If I’m ever in a dire medical emergency, I do not want Klath operating as my primary physician. And I will put that in writing.”

Jirel considered the range of opinions he’d been offered. And then he looked down at Natasha’s still-prone form on the bed.

And he prayed he wasn’t about to make a big mistake.



## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

And despite the sudden disorientation she felt, she was exactly where she had expected to be.

For whatever reason, wherever her memory had taken her, whatever treatment or drug she had been given, she had always ended up back here. And once again, even though she knew everything around her was just a memory, from the noxious fumes to the wildly pitching deck, she still felt terrified.

Her head pounded, both from the trauma it had suffered from the impact with the wall, and also from the now ever-present headache. She choked back a lungful of the toxic soup that now passed for atmosphere on the stricken starship.

"This is the bridge," Captain D'Vora's measured tone sounded out through the havoc, "I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

She staggered on along the deck, approaching her darkest moment all over again.

From somewhere down the corridor, back the way she had come, she heard a plaintive cry of agony that triggered a fresh rush of guilt inside. She remembered it from when she had been here in reality, one of several such cries that she had ignored. Because she had been too busy running away.

She grabbed the corner of the intersection she was at as the Navajo pitched around again.

I don't want to be here, she thought to herself. If I'm dying, I don't want this to be the last thing that I remember.

But maybe this was the only place she deserved to be.

She stifled a rush of emotion and felt the ever-present pain in her head. She had stopped trying to guess how her symptoms inside her mind might have corresponded to her deteriorating condition back on the Bounty.

She made out the vague shapes of two crewmen desperately scurrying about through the smoke, running back the way she had come. Back into the fight, not away from it. At this rate, the growing sense of shame she was now feeling was threatening to finish her off long before the toxin had a chance to.

Another volley of weapons fire smashed into the ship, and the deck fell away from underneath her as the entire vessel lurched violently again. She hit the ground with a thud, and felt the snap of the same rib that had snapped back in reality.

Even if it was just a memory this time, the fresh rush of pain felt real enough.

"Warning," the voice of the computer calmly reported amidst the ongoing wail of the red alert sirens, "Structural integrity failure in progress."

She gritted her teeth, slowly but surely forcing herself back onto her feet, and struggled on towards the intersection. Once again, she prepared herself for what awaited her just around the corner.

Despite where she knew she was, despite the fact that this was all just a memory, she wondered if she could change it this time. If she could actually bring herself to do the right thing, and help the desperate ensign in the corridor.

It seemed ridiculous to even contemplate. After all, this wasn't happening to her because of time travel, or because she had wound up in an alternate dimension. This was just her own memory, apparently tormenting her to the bitter end.

As another choking plume of smoke from a nearby plasma fire threatened to overwhelm her, she staggered forwards and around the corner.

And she gasped in shock.

"You know, you were totally right. Ham and pineapple, it just works."

The smiling form of Salus Hadren, dressed in a luxurious silk robe from the Splendour Island Resort, calmly stood amongst the fiery carnage of the Navajo's final moments, holding out a slice of pizza in his hand.

She stared at him, mouth agape.

And then she felt herself falling.

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

She shook her head in confusion. Hadn't she just been here? Or had she just been on Archanis IV? Or Starbase 218?

Her head pounded in searing pain as the choking smoke filled her vision. Almost through muscle memory alone, she staggered onwards all over again, on the well-trodden path towards the next intersection in the corridor. Towards the bank of escape pods. And the dying ensign. And the ham and pineapple pizza.

No, she thought to herself, that's not right.

"This is the bridge. I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

Captain D'Vora's words pulled her back into the immediacy of the memory. She grimaced and clung on for dear life as the once proud starship pitched to one side once again, as another volley of weapons fire tore into its body.

She clung on for dear life, just as she had done in reality. But she couldn't stop herself from being thrown to the ground, where she landed with a sharp thud and the sound of snapping bone, just as she had done in reality.

Trying to ignore the pain, she clambered back to her feet with renewed determination.

She could picture the ensign, just around the next corner. And she no longer cared that this wasn't really happening. This time, she was going to save him.

She didn't care that this was all a vivid memory. This time, she was going to drag that battered and bloodied young officer into the escape pod with her. She was going to do what she should have done. She wasn't going to leave him behind.

She reached the fateful intersection and gripped the corner of the wall tightly. The precise timing of the computer voice's monotonous interjection was so familiar that she found herself mouthing along to it.

"Warning, structural integrity failure in progress."

She took a deep breath, and turned the corner. She saw the body.

Except it wasn't the bloodied ensign. It was a Bzzit Khaht. Or a holographic recreation of one, at least. Complete with a wide opening in its chest cavity, and an ugly splatter of dark brown-green blood all around it.

Standing next to the dead patient was Doctor Rahman.

She gasped.

"Very disappointing," he said with a slight shake of his head.

She had no time to respond. Because suddenly, she was falling again.

\* \* \* \* \*

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

And the cycle continued.

## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“Readings are off the charts!”

Sunek called out the warning over the sound of several alerts chiming out of the computer monitoring Natasha’s condition.

At the same time, the comatose woman, who had remained eerily still for so long on the bed, started to gently shake and convulse.

“Crap,” Jirel snapped, “What the hell’s happening?”

“Brain activity is spiking again,” Sunek replied, “Must’ve been that extra shot of cordrazine.”

Jirel stared down at the empty hypospray in his hand in horror, then looked helplessly back up at the shaking form of Natasha on the bed. “So...what the hell do we do? Go back to the sedatives?”

Sunek looked over at the Trill and found himself unable to offer much more than a shrug. He was well and truly out of answers.

In desperation, Jirel raced over to the stack of hypospray vials on one of the medical bay’s counters and began to search for another shot of sedatives. As he searched, he felt a bulky Klingon hand land supportively on his shoulder.

“We should not interrupt the battle, Jirel—”

“It’s not a battle, Klath!” he snapped as he tried to place a vial into the hypospray with a shaking hand, “It’s a goddamn medical emergency!”

Klath was unperturbed by the passion and anger in his friend’s voice. “We have given her the strength to fight on until the cure is ready,” he pointed out, “If you weaken her again, she will lose the fight.”

The Trill stared up at the towering Klingon, fighting to control his own emotions while simultaneously wondering when exactly he started taking Klath’s medical advice as gospel. Although, based on Sunek’s response, he didn’t seem to be the only one doing that.

“I really hate to say it,” the Vulcan offered, “But the big dumb idiot might actually have a point.”

As Klath decided precisely how he was going to take that most backwards of compliments, Natasha seemed to settle slightly on the bed, and Sunek gestured to the hypospray to clarify his point.

“We don’t have any more stims left, remember?”

Jirel looked back down at the dose of sedatives in his hand, then to their patient. “So, what the hell do we do?” he asked eventually, his voice sounding quiet.

Neither Sunek nor Klath had much of an answer to that question. But fortunately, Denella had one ready to go.

“We could give her this?”

She turned around from the medical computer and held up another vial of liquid.

“The antidote?” Jirel asked, his eyes widening with hope.

To his side, Sunek couldn’t help himself. “No, she’s scored some street grade Trellium-D and wants us all to take a bong hit. Of course it’s —!”

Before Sunek could finish his unnecessary comment, Jirel shoved his way past the Vulcan and grabbed the vial from Denella’s hand, jamming the tiny container of liquid into the waiting hypospray in his hand with fresh urgency.

“Just remember,” Denella managed as he turned back to their patient, “The core of the Bounty’s medical computer is getting on for thirty years old. This might not be perfect.”

She capped off her comment by looking around at the ship itself.

“No offence, ok?”

Jirel ignored that part of her comment, though Klath found time to roll his eyes again.

“We don’t have any other options,” the Trill pointed out, as he stepped over to the bed and placed the hypospray next to her neck.

He said a silent prayer, though he wasn’t sure who he was saying it to, and depressed the button with a gentle hiss.

For a moment, nothing happened. Nothing seemed to change. Natasha lay where she was, still slightly convulsing.

“Now what?” Denella whispered, cutting through the nervous silence that had descended with an edge of concern.

Sunek rushed back over to the readouts on the console next to the bed and studied them with as much confidence as he could muster in his

own abilities. "It...might be working," he concluded.

"Might be?" Jirel snapped.

"Again, I'll walk you through my medical qualifications later. But the computer is definitely detecting a slight drop in toxin levels around her brain. Which is better than anything else we've done."

Jirel glanced at Sunek, and then at the positive smile on Denella's face, and he felt himself relax slightly. But not by much.

To his side, Klath looked down at their patient and nodded proudly.

"She is fighting."

Jirel fought off the urge to fire back another retort at Klath's continued efforts to frame the ongoing crisis in more Klingon-style terms. Because he was too busy staring helplessly down at Natasha, slowly realising that there was now nothing more to do but wait and hope. Hope that she could win the fight.

"Yeah," he managed back to the Klingon eventually, "I guess she is."

"She's on her own now," Denella whispered.

Jirel began to nod, then stopped himself and looked back up at Sunek, who raised a curious eyebrow.

She didn't have to be on her own.

\* \* \* \* \*

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

Natasha didn't know how many times that had happened to her now. How many times she had banged her head, how many times she had staggered through the corridor, how many times she had struggled around the corner, and how many times she had been confronted with a fragment of another memory.

But she did know that she didn't want to be here.

Whatever the physiological reason was for her being stuck in this memory loop as it crumbled around the edges, she reasoned that it couldn't possibly be good. It felt like a clear sign that her sense of reality was starting to disintegrate.

"This is the bridge," Captain D'Vora intoned for the umpteenth time, "I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

She was dying.

She reached the intersection again, and braced for what was inevitably about to happen. Seconds later, she was thrown to the floor, her rib snapping with unerringly precise timing.

The pain barely registered anymore. It had happened so often. Even the ever-present thumping headache had faded into the background. Instead, she tried to prepare herself for whatever lay around the corner this time. What out-of-place piece of her own past might be there.

Possibly Salus Hadren. Or Doctor Rahman. Or Commander Calvin, or T'Vess, Jirel, Blake, Cameron, Denella, or whoever else her mind decided to throw at her.

"Warning, structural integrity failure in progress."

She gritted her teeth. That was her cue.

With some effort, she lurched around the corner. She saw the bank of escape pods, waiting to be boarded. She staggered over to the nearest one. And then she heard the voice from behind her.

Except, once again, it wasn't the cry of help from the ensign she had heard when this had played out in reality. Nor was it a confusing non sequitur from another face from her past.

Instead, it was a confused voice from her present.

"What the hell?"

In an instant, her face turned ashen. Her stomach churned. She forced herself to turn around from where she stood next to the pod door. And instead of the terrified and bloodied face that had been burned into her memories, she saw the face of the Bounty's pilot.

He was here. Exactly where she had never wanted him to be. His face, etched onto the broken and twisted body of the ensign she had left behind.

Her darkest memory, now laid completely bare in front of Sunek.

She knew that she had already confessed the details of this memory to Jirel, but for all of his other foibles she was at least sure she could trust the Trill to keep a secret like that. She couldn't say the same thing about the Vulcan.

She watched him trying to figure out where he was, and who he was. He stared down at the remains of the body he was now inhabiting, taking in the plasma burns on the skin of his temporary host, the twisted legs that dragged behind him, and the bloodied stump of an arm at his side.

All things considered, he should have been in agony. The fact that he wasn't was equal parts relieving and disconcerting.

Natasha remained near the door to the escape pod. Pod NC-12. The same one that she had made her escape in during the Navajo's real last moments. As Sunek returned his attention back to her, she couldn't help but look away in shame.

"Hey, doc. No idea what's going on here, but it took some serious work to find you, and I have no idea how long this meld'll hold for. But we've given you the antidote. So you need to hang on, ok?"

She didn't answer. Her hand rested lightly on the smooth control surface of the door to Escape Pod NC-12.

"So, yeah," Sunek awkwardly concluded, "That's what he wanted me to come here and tell you."

She looked over at him, drifting back into the conversation.

"Who?"

"Who'd ya think?" the Vulcan replied with an out-of-place grin, "The dumb Trill idiot that hasn't left your side all this time. No matter how completely useless he's been in that medical bay."

Her hand came off the panel, as she slumped down to the floor of the Navajo. As the thumping in her head intensified, a tear escaped her eye.

It felt as though time was moving slower now. Like the memory was slowing down.

Sunek mustered an awkward cough as he glanced around again, through the smoke-filled confines of the corridor, with the alarms and sirens ringing out.

She thought about Jirel, picturing him back in the medical bay, keeping watch over her. And thought about what Sunek had told her about Denella and Klath's quest to retrieve the supplies they needed from the Son'a. And even considered the work that the Vulcan himself had been putting in to keep in somewhat unorthodox contact with her.

None of them had given up on her. Like she had given up on the ensign in the corridor.

The fresh flash of shame hurt almost as much as the headache.

"Point is," Sunek added, "It's working. We're nearly there. I think. You just need to...keep fighting."

She wasn't sure she could keep fighting. But as she contemplated the possibility that she wasn't going to get out of this one, she felt a fresh urge, despite who she was talking to. A deathbed confession. Something that she owed the young man she had failed.

"Daniel Cartwright."

"I beg your pardon?"

She looked away from Sunek and the ravaged body again. But she kept talking. "That was his name," she explained, fighting to hold back more tears, "Ensign Daniel Cartwright. Graduated from the Academy in 2374. Engineering specialist, majored in warp field dynamics and antimatter flow calculations. The Navajo...was his first posting."

Sunek took in the scene again, and began to piece together where he was. "This is the Navajo—?"

"He was 22 years old," Natasha forced herself to continue, "His parents were back on Earth, his sister worked for a civilian science group. He even had a partner. Lieutenant Paul Kelleher, posted to the USS Triton."

A distant explosion from somewhere in the bowels of the ship punctuated her monologue.

"And I left him to die," she concluded, failing to stifle the latest sob as she reached the crux of her confession, "Right there. On the deck of the ship. I ran and...left him to die."

Sunek, for all of his emotional experiences in his life, struggled to figure out the best response to the turn that their conversation had taken. But he managed to hold up his tattered stump of an arm. "I dunno, doc. Looks like he's done for either way."

"Doesn't matter. I left him there. And he deserved better. Triage. Palliative care. Comfort. Something."

Sunek dropped the stump back to the ground, looking for a different angle. "How come you know so much about him? Were you close?"

Natasha stifled a bitter sigh and wiped a tear away. "I'd never even met him. Didn't even know his name when it happened," she managed, "But, as soon as I resigned my commission, I started searching back through the list of the deceased from the Navajo's loss. I knew his face, at

least. That never leaves me.”

Another explosion. The pulsing in her head ratcheted up.

“So, I searched and searched. And one day, I found him.”

The walls of the corridor started to buckle.

“Sunek, if I don’t make it, there’s a...letter. On file, back in my cabin. I wrote it to his parents. And I’ve never—I guess I’ve been too scared to send it.”

“Hey, doc, come on. You’re gonna—”

“And I know why. I told myself it was because it felt like nothing I could say to them could ever make any difference. But...”

Further down the corridor, a bulkhead collapsed.

“...It was because I was scared. Of what they’d think of me.”

She stifled another, significantly more bitter sob.

“I didn’t send it because, even after everything that happened, I was still just...worried about myself.”

She sighed and leaned back on the doorframe of Escape Pod NC-12, staring up at the ceiling of the corridor, even as a huge rent opened up in it. “If I don’t make it, Sunek,” she managed, as everything began to collapse, “Make sure they get that letter.”

“Hey, um, I’m sure you’ll be able to—”

“Please. Sunek. Promise me.”

She looked back at him. A plasma conduit ruptured somewhere nearby.

A rare solemn look crossed the Vulcan’s face. And he nodded back. “Yeah, ok,” he said, “I promise.”

She felt a fleeting moment of peace. But it didn’t last.

The scene began to distort. Sunek’s face disappeared, replaced by the agonised features of Daniel Cartwright. The pain in her temples flared white hot.

And, for one last time, she felt herself falling.

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

*USS Navajo, Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space  
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

No matter how many times this scene had played out, she had never found a way to stop herself from stumbling. She had never found a way to stop any of this.

Everything around her still felt so visceral. The choking smoke, the wailing alarms, the lurching deck under her feet, and the screams of the dying all around her.

"This is the bridge. I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

If she hadn't been through this exact same memory countless times already, she would have believed it was all really happening.

A fresh spike of pain lanced through her head. She fought against it, trying not to wonder whether that was good or bad news given what Sunek had told her about the status of her treatment. Inside her memory, she staggered onwards. Towards the intersection. Just like she always did.

Another pitch of the deck. Another tumble to the ground. Another snapped rib. It didn't matter. Not any more.

"Warning, structural integrity failure in progress."

Because this time, she was going to save him. To hell with her memory. She was going to save Daniel Cartwright, if it was the last conscious thing she did.

She reached the intersection and turned the corner.

And again found herself staring down at a Bzzit Khaht hologram, bleeding out.

"Very disappointing."

She spun around in shock. Doctor Rahman stared impassively back at her in the burning remains of the starship, shaking his head slightly.

"But—I tried my best!" she heard herself call out down the Navajo's corridor.

Except it wasn't the Navajo's corridor any more. She was in San Francisco. At Starfleet's Medical Academy.

Except, she wasn't there either. She was in London. Her father handed her a gift. Reynard Kinsen's kindly weathered face smiled as she excitedly grasped the wrapped-up object in her small nine year old hands.

"Open it, Tasha," he whispered.

She tore into the wrapping and opened the varnished wooden box inside. And picked out a slice of ham and pineapple pizza.

"This was supposed to be our vacation! We were supposed to be sti—hic!—cking together!"

She whirled around inside her suite on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet, to find Ensign T'Vess pointing an accusing claw at her. "I'm sorry!" she blurted out, "I just wanted to—!"

Her head started to spin.

Maybe this is what dying feels like.

"That's what you want to do? With us? You want to run away from all this?"

Blake Aldridge appeared next to T'Vess, staring across the suite at her.

"No! I don't want to—!"

She was in Cochrane Park, in New Berlin. T'Vess had vanished. She took a step towards Blake, and felt something squelch underfoot. She looked down at the ruined strawberry, then back up at the memory of her ruined relationship.

"I'm sorry, Blake, I didn't mean to—"

A disruptor blast flew past her head. She felt her legs starting to buckle.

This had to be what dying feels like.

“Lieutenant Kinsen,” Commander Calvin called out, “We need covering fire. I can see Ensign H’Kar trying to fall back with some of the research team.”

“Commander! Don’t—!”

It was too late. Calvin made a break for Ensign H’Kar’s team. The disruptor blast tore through him.

She felt as though her head was about to explode. Was she on Archanis IV? Or Earth? Or onboard the Navajo?

“Very disappointing,” she heard Doctor Rahman say again, from somewhere.

She tried to focus on one memory alone. Something to give clarity to the tumult she was trapped in.

“Open it, Tasha.”

She wanted to go back there. To her family home. To the comforts, and the warmth of her parents.

“You know, you were totally right. Ham and pineapple, it just works.”

But she knew that there was only ever going to be one memory strong enough to latch onto. The one memory that plagued her every night. The one that she had been running away from ever since it had happened.

The red alert siren grew clearer. She forced herself to grip onto it, even as wherever she was right now started to blur and fade.

“Warning, structural integrity failure in progress.”

Everything began to coalesce. The Navajo’s final moments began to resolve. And this time, she told herself again, she was going to save him.

She found herself standing next to Escape Pod NC-12. Her hand was instinctively reaching out for the door controls, just as they had done before.

“Help me!”

Fighting back tears, she turned around. The ensign in the corridor stared back at her, reaching out towards her with his one remaining arm in desperation as he lay prone in the midst of the carnage.

Daniel Cartwright.

Her hand wavered above the control panel. Her head felt like it was about to burst.

“Doctor, help me!”

This time, I can save him, she told herself again with fresh determination. It doesn’t matter that this is all just a memory. I can fix this.

Ensign Cartwright grasped for her, his bloodied face a canvas of fear.

She felt her index finger moving down, gently making contact with the cold surface of the control panel.

“No!”

She cried out at herself, more than anyone else. She tried to move, to race over to help him, just as she should have done.

But that wasn’t how memories worked. She couldn’t fix this.

The pod door began to close. The young ensign stared up at her. She stared back.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered tearfully, “I’m so, so sorry...”

Her head pulsed in agony. Her vision started to fade. The pod door thudded closed, and a cacophony of voices rang out from all around her.

“This is the bridge. I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods.”

“We were supposed to be sti—hic!—cking together!”

“We need covering fire.”

“Warning, structural integrity failure in progress.”

“Doctor, help me!”

“Very disappointing.”

She heard herself screaming.

The Navajo exploded.



Darkness. Endless darkness.

Then, a flicker of light began to permeate through. Blurry forms started to coalesce. A scene began to form in front of her. She heard a voice call out.

“She’s coming around!”

The scene fully resolved itself, and Natasha saw four familiar faces staring down at her.

“Hey, Nat,” Jirel continued, “Can you hear me?”

Her eyes flickered slightly, and then fully opened. She blinked a few times at the harsh lighting shining down from the ceiling of the Bounty’s medical bay.

She tried to speak, but her throat was arid. So she just nodded instead. Denella handed her a small canteen of water and smiled.

“Welcome back.”

She mustered a weak smile, as Jirel helped her to sit up and take a sip of water. Sunek glanced over at the readouts on the screen next to her and nodded.

“Looks like the toxin’s almost flushed out,” he confirmed, “Guess we should send the Son’a a thank you card.”

Natasha looked around at the others, still feeling groggy and decidedly weak. “How long was I out?”

“Day and a half, give or take,” Jirel replied, offering her a freshly relieved look and forgetting himself for the moment, “You had me worried.”

He paused and self-consciously corrected himself.

“I mean—You had us all worried. All of us. Even Klath.”

The Klingon looked over at the Trill with a fresh look of confusion. “I was not—”

“Not now, Klath,” Jirel interjected quickly.

Natasha couldn’t help but smile. In relief, more than anything else. She never thought she’d be this happy to see the Bounty’s tattered medical bay.

“So?” Sunek asked, “You feeling better?”

She paused and considered everything that had happened. The tangled mess of memories she had just been trapped inside. Everything she had just been forced to relive. She looked back at the Vulcan. The one person who now, whether she liked it or not, probably knew more about her than anyone else in the galaxy.

“Yes,” she lied, “I’m feeling better.”

**End of Part Four**

## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Part Five

The Bounty continued on course for Beta Ramis.

Although the immediate crisis was over, everyone onboard the Bounty still felt it was a sound plan to get Natasha checked over at a fully staffed medical facility, just to be on the safe side. Besides, they needed to stock up on medical supplies.

Natasha sat in the medical bay, now on her own. All of her own checks seemed to suggest that the treatment had successfully eradicated the toxin, and whatever aftereffects remained could be dealt with fairly easily.

The physical ones, at least.

She stared down at the small petri dish in front of her. Inside was the thorn from the Makalite planet that Sunek had retrieved from her pocket. On the medical computer's screen alongside the dish were the results of the full chemical analysis that she had completed on the thorn. Or as full a chemical analysis as the Bounty's systems could provide her with.

As she considered the tiny object in the dish, she heard the door to the bay open. She turned to see Jirel cautiously enter, trying too hard to look casual.

"Hey," he smiled, "How're you feeling?"

She considered his question for a moment, and decided that there was no point in lying. She was far too tired for that, both literally and metaphorically.

"Terrible."

He offered a supportive smile and seemed to relax slightly at this frankness, then gestured at the offending thorn in the dish in front of her. "Thought you'd have chucked that thing out the airlock."

"I still might," she shrugged, "I just thought I'd try and pull a more detailed analysis first. And before you say anything about my 'Starfleet showing' again, that's just a good idea. In case we've missed something."

He nodded in understanding, as a silence descended. Jirel shuffled from foot to foot near the door as she stood and began to pack away the dish.

She hadn't wanted to have this particular conversation, at least not right now, but she could also see that he wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon. So she may as well get it over with.

"Heard you were holding my hand."

Jirel tried not to allow the comment to catch him off guard, but he couldn't help but flinch slightly. "Sunek," he sighed ruefully, "That guy just can't keep a secret..."

Now it was Natasha's turn to forcibly stifle a sinking feeling in her stomach, though if Jirel noticed her reaction, he ignored it entirely in favour of his own awkward situation.

"Ok, look," he began, "It's true that there was some—I mean, I might have—I was just trying to—I think I read somewhere that if you hold a coma patient's hand, they have a better chance of—"

She decided to step in before the Trill could embark any further downwards into the hole he was digging in the middle of the medical bay. "Ok, I get it. You were worried about me. As a member of your crew."

For the briefest of moments, Jirel considered protesting that explanation. After all, he knew it wasn't true. He hadn't just been worried about her as a member of his crew. But the words wouldn't come. And he finally decided that he'd embarrassed himself enough for one day. So he nodded.

"Yeah. Obviously. All part of the, um, captain...thing. Y'know, I'd have done the same for anyone."

"Right."

"Right."

"Even Sunek."

"Even...Yep. Anyone."

He flinched again. She stifled a smile and regarded the Trill that she'd once seen as just a brash and overconfident wannabe space captain. A lot had changed since then.

But she didn't allow herself to dwell on that particular issue for too long. She had bigger problems that she still had to deal with.

“Well,” she said eventually, rescuing Jirel from his latest flinch, “Thank you. For being such a thoughtful captain to your crew.”

His face shifted into an altogether more relieved, and entirely dorky, smile. He idly itched at his spots as Natasha went to leave. Just as the doors opened, he found himself calling after her. “Um, hey, also,” he managed, “I was—I really wanted to say that—I mean, this might not be the right time for it, but—”

“No,” she butted in, a little too quickly, “It’s probably not the right time for it.”

Something in her reply caused a flicker of Jirel’s old wannabe space captain grin to return.

“Probably not—?”

“Definitely not,” she added, with more finality.

“Got it,” he nodded back, the grin disappearing as quickly as it had arrived as she walked on through the doors.

Jirel was left in the empty medical bay, feeling more than a little ridiculous all over again.

“Ugh,” he muttered into the empty room, “I am really bad at this...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“There really is something to it, you know.”

“You are mistaken.”

The Bounty’s cockpit was less empty than it had been for a while, though still emptier than usual. As a result, the back and forth bickering between Denella and Klath had been allowed to continue unimpeded for some time.

“I’m serious,” Denella retorted from her engineering console, gesturing proudly at the readouts in front of her, “I was just in the engine room, nothing I tried could shift that damn drop-off in the power transfer rates. Then I paid her a compliment or two, and now look: 93% efficiency.”

She patted the Bounty’s hull plate behind her for effect and turned her cooing up to eleven.

“Because who’s the best ship in the whole galaxy, hmm? Yeah, she knows it.”

Klath watched the nauseating, and entirely one-sided conversation unfold from behind his own station with undisguised contempt. “The ship is not responding to you, Denella,” he grunted, “You are definitely mistaken.”

“Then where did our new-found power transfer efficiency come from, hmm? We’re gonna make it to Beta Ramis four hours ahead of schedule at this rate.”

“Perhaps one of your repairs had a delayed reaction to the transfer coils,” the Klingon pointed out, “Or perhaps it was a temporary issue which self-corrected.”

“Or perhaps the old girl likes it when people are nice to her,” she grinned back.

Klath felt himself starting to grind his teeth. He was sure that his friend was simply winding him up. But still, ever since the argument had first started to fester during their efforts to help Natasha, he knew that his pride would never allow him to back down and acknowledge her ridiculous point.

Instead of repeating himself, though, he opted to fight fire with fire, and began to theatrically tap at his bank of controls.

“Excuse me, I must conduct a full scan of the air circulators for evidence of contaminants.”

“Why?”

“There is a further medical issue onboard. First Jirel believed he could speak to the doctor through her coma, and now you believe you can talk to our ship. These are troubling developments.”

Denella smirked and folded her arms in front of her. “All I’m saying is, it always has a positive effect on the ship. And the Bounty’s got a computer, the computer’s got some level of intelligence. Who’s to say there isn’t something to it?”

“Everyone unaffected by the contamination of our air supply,” he retorted.

“Come on,” she insisted, gesturing to where Klath’s ever-present bat’leth hung behind him, “I bet you do the same thing with your bat’leth. I can tell.”

Klath fixed her with an especially withering glare, in lieu of a vocal response.

“Fine,” she sighed, standing and throwing her hands up in a clear display of resignation, “Don’t believe me, see if I care. I’m gonna head back to the engine room and see if I can’t talk us up to 95% efficiency.”

She stopped at the cockpit door and patted the Bounty's hull again for effect.

"Cos I bet you can make 95%, can't you? Yeah, you can do anything..."

She disappeared out of the room, still apparently talking to the ship all the way back to the engine room. Klath watched her go with a deep sigh and a shake of his head.

"She is a fool," he muttered, to nobody in particular.

Moments later, when he was sure he was alone, he retrieved his bat'leth from where it was hanging and lovingly ran his eyes across its freshly sharpened blade with pride.

"But you...are a mighty slayer of enemies..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha sat alone in the Bounty's dining area, picking at the food in front of her. She was hungry, but she was struggling to eat. Even when the repast in front of her was a double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings).

Her mood only got worse when the door opened and Sunek sauntered in, grinning widely as he saw her sitting at the table.

She let out a long sigh. She hadn't been looking forward to this. Of all the people in her life that she might have considered sharing quite so many of her private memories and darkest secrets with, the laughing Vulcan pilot of the Bounty would have been at the bottom of her list.

He walked over to the replicator and ordered a bowl of plomeek soup, before sitting opposite her at the table, still smiling. But when he saw her nervous and skittish look back at him, his grin disappeared.

"Nice," he sighed, "I see. You don't trust me."

He shook his head and took a slurp of soup as she considered the best way to reply to that unexpected opener.

"If the situation was reversed, would you trust me?" she settled on.

Sunek set his spoon down in the bowl and considered this for a moment. It didn't take the more traditional part of his Vulcan brain long to locate the most logical response. "Ok, fine, I get it. It's been a weird couple of days, all things considered. And I guess I've got a reputation for talking a lot. And while I can promise you that I really can keep a secret when I need to, nothing I can say would make you believe that."

She went to respond, but felt a little rude to spell it out like that, so she just offered a shrug.

The Vulcan took a moment to consider the irony that he could prove his point by mentioning the secret of Klath's discommendation, which only he knew about. But actually telling her that would rather undermine his whole point. So, instead, he opted for a more logical approach. As far as he was concerned.

"Ok, so, when I was a young guy, back at the ShiKahr Learning Institute, that's when I first started hanging out with the V'tosh ka'tur."

Natasha stared at him in confusion at this apparent non sequitur, as he continued to ramble.

"And one of the things you had to do to, y'know, join the gang, was some kind of dare, or prank. For me, that involved sneaking a bunch of recording equipment into the changing rooms of the annual women's parrises squares tournament and broadcasting the footage across campus. Turns out, emotions or no emotions, you can still humiliate Vulcan women pretty well."

"Sorry," Natasha managed to butt in, "Why exactly are you telling me this horrible story?"

"Yeah, ok, I'm not proud of it. Still, about a year later, I started getting friendly with this new V'tosh ka'tur member. T'Shar, her name was. She was incredible. Funny, clever, and I swear, she used to walk around in these catsuits that were as illogical as they were—"

He noted Natasha's increasingly unimpressed glare and opted to skip over those details.

"Good point. Not important. But, anyway, things finally seemed to be getting somewhere one day. We were on campus late one night, and she suddenly pulls me into a supply room and she's, like, all over me. Except, what I didn't know was that T'Shar was one of the women from the parrises squares tournament the year before."

He suppressed a surge of embarrassment and swirled his spoon in his soup, then pressed on.

"So, yeah, she undresses me, she blindfolds me, I kinda like where things are going as you might imagine, and then she takes my hand and leads me right out a door on the other side of the room and...into the middle of a packed night school lecture on the metaphysical teachings of Kiri-kin-tha."

Natasha failed to suppress a smirk at the mental image. Sunek nodded back.

"Yep. Exactly as humiliating as that. Worse, actually. A lecture hall full of stoic Vulcans doesn't go mad when something like that happens. They just sorta stare at you in silence and raise their eyebrows in unison."

“So...what happened?”

“I just had to turn around and waddle out of there, naked as a Betazoid groomsman,” he shrugged, “Perfect revenge. Plus, I’m pretty sure those lectures were broadcast planet-wide, so there’s probably actual footage of it happening somewhere.”

He suppressed a shudder, then focused back on her.

“So, there you go. You’re welcome.”

“I...don’t follow,” Natasha admitted, not entirely sure what his point was.

“That is the single most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me. If the others knew about that, it would finish me on this ship. I’d literally have to pack up and move to a different quadrant. And now you know all about it.”

Natasha finally mustered an understanding smile, seeing the logic of Sunek’s plan. “Right. So if you ever tell anyone about my secrets...”

“You can bring me down with you. We’ve both got each other’s self-destruct codes. Mutually assured compliance.”

She toyed with the remains of her meal and mustered a smile. “You know,” she mused, “In a very, very weird way, that might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. Thank you, Sunek.”

He grinned back and returned his attention to his soup, apparently satisfied with the resolution of her problems.

Except, she knew she had other problems. Her smile disappeared. “I tried to save him,” she whispered, causing Sunek to pause mid-slurp, “After you broke the meld, the memory repeated again. And I tried to save Ensign Cartwright. To do things differently. But...I couldn’t. I still just ran away.”

Sunek shifted uncomfortably in his seat, entirely less satisfied now the conversation had taken a more serious turn. “Well, um, you know it— Like you said, it was just a memory, right? How could you change it? It had already happened.”

She contemplated that statement with a fresh burst of sadness. It had definitely already happened. Again and again over the last few days.

“And,” Sunek ventured, “If you want my advice, which I guess you probably don’t, I’d say you’ve gotta leave all that behind somehow, you know?”

She looked back at him as he stirred his soup, looking oddly sage all of a sudden.

“I mean, what’s done is done, right? And you’re never gonna change that. Not even in your own head. So, I dunno, you’ve gotta do what you need to do to forgive yourself. Cos nobody else can do that for you. Right?”

She considered the strange logic of his words again, and mustered another nod. She had a pretty good idea of what she needed to do. “I guess you’re right,” she sighed, as she stood from the table, “Thanks. Again.”

“Any time, doc,” he grinned back, as she made for the door, “And, hey, you ever run into that Caitian friend of yours again and both get a bit tipsy? You know where my cabin is.”

She paused at the door and shot a look at the grinning Vulcan.

“Come on,” he smiled, “I’m taking your secrets to my grave. Gotta let me get one hit in.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunek returned to his cabin after finishing his soup whistling a jaunty tune.

All things considered, he was pretty impressed with himself. He’d given Natasha some great advice, even if he did say so himself. He’d never really considered himself to be much of a ship’s counsellor before, but he was starting to wonder if he might have missed his calling.

After all, it was great advice.

It was a good thing to let things go. Not to let things eat you up. That was just basic common sense. It was logical.

He was in such a good mood that he continued whistling all through his usual pre-bedtime routine, as he jumped in and out of the sonic shower, cleaned his teeth in record time, and pulled on an especially garish t-shirt adorned with an obscene Andorian slogan from his wardrobe.

Then, just as he was ready to turn in, he realised that with everything that had happened onboard just recently, he had missed today’s meditation session with Denella. But he was in such a good mood that he decided to fit it in right here and now.

Moments later, he stood on the deck of an ancient sailing ship, on the Voroth Sea back on Vulcan. The scene was calm, still and at peace. He was, even though he may not have always demonstrated it, in control of his emotions.

And as he stood in perfect balance, he focused on his breathing, or on the stillness of the air, or the smell of the saline water.

He focused on anything, in fact, apart from the storm off on the horizon. The tumult in the distance that was still raging away.

He was, Sunek decided, very much a 'do as I say, not as I do' sort of ship's counsellor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha sat and stared at the computer screen in her cabin, at the single simple text file displayed on it. She had read over it enough times to know it off by heart. There was no need to read it again. Still, she found herself scanning over it again.

The same text as ever. The letter to Daniel Cartwright's family.

Ever since her research had yielded the young ensign's name, and she had traced his family back to Earth, she had worked on writing it. But, as she had admitted to Sunek while on the brink of death, she had never sent it.

Now, though, she felt compelled to do it.

She had written and rewritten it over and over again. There really was nothing more to be done on the editing front. It simply told them what had happened to their son, and explained how well he had fought, even to the end. Even though she hadn't known him on the Navajo, she had done her best to underline his bravery and his strength of character, embellishing slightly where necessary.

She still couldn't tell whether she wanted to send it out of hope that it would give his family some closure, or that it would bring her some. In truth, both answers were probably valid.

She still wasn't completely sure that it was the right thing to do, but after hearing what Sunek had said, she felt like this was the only way for her to find some peace.

Without allowing herself to question the letter any more, she moved her hand and tapped the panel to send it.

In an instant, the simple message rushed off through a succession of subspace channels and hubs on its long way back to Earth.

Natasha sat for a moment and wondered what the young ensign's parents would make of what she had said. Whether they would hate her for bringing their son's death back up, or whether they would appreciate her words. She even wondered if they would hate her, or blame her. After all, she had left him behind.

As she stood and walked over to her bed, she silently acknowledged that it didn't really matter what they thought about her.

It couldn't be any worse than how she felt about herself.

She settled down in bed. As she started to drift off to sleep, she heard a voice rattling around in her head. One that she had heard a lot recently. The voice was Doctor Rahman's, but that was largely incidental. The words were what really mattered.

"Very disappointing."

**The End**

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