

## Star Trek: Bounty - 108 - "A Klingon, a Vulcan and a Slave Girl Walk into a Bar"

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## Star Trek: Bounty - 108 - "A Klingon, a Vulcan and a Slave Girl Walk into a Bar"

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

The Bounty's crew are betrayed by an old friend of Jirel's, forcing Klath, Sunek and Denella to pull off a daring raid on a Ktarian mining colony while Jirel and Natasha are left strapped to a bomb onboard the ship.

# Prologue

## Prologue

It was always raining on Varris IV. At least, that was how the old Ktarian saying went.

Actually, as the more well-read and considerably less interesting people at dinner parties across Ktarian space would explain, given half the chance, the planet only experienced a slightly higher annual rainfall level than the average Class M planet with similar climatic conditions and orbital periodicity. It certainly wasn't always raining by any reasonable definition of the word 'always'.

But what Varris IV did have was a doozy of a rainy season.

The planet's curious geography saw it divided almost completely in two at the equator. The southern hemisphere contained one single unbroken landmass, while the northern hemisphere was a vast saline ocean. And once a year, when the ocean hemisphere had spent long enough tilted towards the heat of the system's star, rain clouds the size of continents formed and descended across the land. And stayed there for weeks on end.

Right now, it was a particularly inclement evening in the main settlement of Varris IV, with heavy drops of rain thundering down from above and surface water cascading off the sloping streets and into the extensive drainage system that criss-crossed the entire settlement and groaned under the strain of another deluge.

Anyone remotely sensible had sought shelter indoors, or was getting to wherever they needed to go in the relative warmth and comfort of an atmospheric shuttle.

Only three individuals seemed to lack the common sense to do either of those things. A trio of figures walked down the main street of the settlement, protecting themselves from the endless downpour with thick cloaks pulled over their heads.

The weather was one explanation for the cloaks, at least. The other was that these particular visitors to Varris IV didn't want to be seen for the time being. They kept a good pace through the rain, splashing through puddles of water in heavy waterproof boots. They clearly had a specific destination in mind.

The colony on Varris IV had once been a proud emblem of Ktarian society, one of the first mining colonies set up by the Ktarian central government after they had discovered the immense potential of faster than light travel.

Initially, it was a shining beacon out in the cosmos that represented a pioneering moment of heroic exploration. A noble symbol of what a truly united Ktarian people were capable of. But further discoveries had revealed the true extent of the teeming galaxy to the Ktarian people, and first contact with the Federation had revolutionised their society in ways the first settlers on Varris IV couldn't possibly have imagined.

Now, as fledgling Federation members, Ktarians could travel the length and breadth of the Alpha Quadrant in the blink of an eye, visiting all manner of exotic new star systems, lush new worlds and wonders that had to be seen to be believed.

And compared to those significantly more impressive options, Varris IV suddenly became less of a shining beacon and more of a pointless irrelevance. A silly childhood doodle that had once evoked a sense of pride in the artist, but now looked more than a little embarrassing alongside the galaxy's existing collection of masterpieces. When you could jump aboard a transport ship and be whisked off to Risa, or Betazed, or the Suspended Gardens of Callias Prime, why would anyone want to come to an old mining colony in Ktaris's own backyard?

Especially when it rained all the time.

So now, Varris IV was a forgotten footnote. Most of the more reputable colonists had moved on, and all that was left were a few hardy mining operations extracting the last dregs of useful material from beneath the surface and a scant few crumbling settlements. And an awful lot of crime.

Illicit activities had thrived on a place like Varris IV, with what remained of the weary and understaffed security force mostly powerless to challenge them.

And that was why nobody either indoors or in a passing shuttle was really paying the three cloaked individuals too much attention as they hurried through the endless rainstorm.

Chances were that they were up to no good.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Confront!"

The gleeful tone of his opponent's voice made Tegras Pel grind his teeth with audible force. The angry sound cut through the quiet conversations around the bar, and the patter of rainfall on the windows, and made most of the other players around the table wince.

Across the table from him, Palmor Fot smiled greedily and gestured for Tegras to reveal his cards.

They were sitting with four other Ktarians around a Tongo board in the corner of a downtrodden bar of the main settlement called the Ktarian Moonrise.

Most of the other patrons that had braved the weather that night had already headed home, and the long-suffering grey-haired bartender was hoping to close up on time for once. But this particular game had been carrying on for most of the evening, and was showing no sign of ending any time soon.

“Come on Tegras,” the woman to his right, a grime-streaked miner called Evina Jix, groaned, “Just show him your hand and we can move on to another round.”

On the other side of the table, Palmor’s greedy smile showed no sign of waning from behind his stack of winnings. “Oh, I’m sorry Evina,” he offered, without a trace of sincerity, “Are we not enjoying ourselves?”

Palmor’s eyes, deep yellow in colour with a horizontal slit like all Ktarians, had a twinkle that betrayed just how much he was enjoying his winning streak.

As far as Tegras Pel was concerned, Palmor Fot was the worst person in the entire galaxy. A wealthy mining boss with a stake in just about every remaining operation on Varris IV, from the mostly legal to the entirely illegal.

His more shady dealings were an open secret, at least in the bars of the main settlement, but Palmor had cultivated a standing, and paid enough latinum to the right people, to ensure that none of it was provable. At least by the scant remaining security forces on the colony.

And his obvious successes made Tegras’s own failing business, a single exhausted magnesite mine further inland on the continent, all the more difficult for him to take.

Unfortunately, both men were also keen gamblers, and it was a small colony. Which meant that they crossed paths far more often than Tegras would have liked.

Palmor glared at him from across the table and continued to mock the older Ktarian, who had a line of thinning grey hair along the distinctive curved forehead of their species.

“Come on, old man,” he persisted, gesturing to Tegras’s game area on the board, “No more Evade tokens to play, nowhere to hide, now show me your hand. Confront!”

Tegras grimaced and reluctantly lowered the set of circular cards in his hand down to the table. He hadn’t been playing this game for long, and was still struggling with some of the intricacies of the rules and strategies, but he knew enough to suspect that a Flushed Market wasn’t an especially competitive hand given the current board situation.

“Pah!” his adversary cackled, confirming his suspicions, “Is that all you’ve got?”

He revealed his own hand with an unadulterated flourish, spreading the cards out to reveal the telltale pattern of a Full Consortium.

A chorus of groans rang out from all sides of the table. Tegras’s teeth grinding reached new levels of intensity, as his frustrations reached boiling point.

“Guess I win again,” Palmor added unnecessarily, as he grabbed the healthy pile of latinum from the centre of the table.

“I’m bored of this game,” Tegras snapped, “Why are we playing this Ferengi nonsense anyway? It’s all we seem to do any more!”

“Sounds like someone’s a sore loser,” Palmor replied off-handedly, deftly stoking the anger of his adversary with practised skill as he carefully stacked his winnings.

Tegras felt his hackles rise further, just as Palmor had intended. All night long, the younger Ktarian had won almost every hand. And while Tegras was still a novice at the game, it seemed extremely unlikely to him that one player could have a run like that. There were too many elements of chance for that to be realistically possible.

But, much like the Varris IV security forces couldn’t prove anything about Palmor’s illicit business practices, he couldn’t prove any outright cheating. And he knew that accusing him without evidence really would mark him down as a sore loser. So he settled for another round of teeth-grinding.

To his side, Evina leaned over and muttered to him. “Calm yourself, Tegras. Don’t give him the satisfaction of seeing you like this.”

It was friendly advice from one of the more agreeable regulars in the Ktarian Moonrise. But it was also advice that he largely chose to ignore.

“I’m only losing because I’m not used to this stupid game,” he persisted, jabbing a finger at his gleeful opponent, “How about we break out the old Mak-To board, hmm? Then we’ll see if your luck holds out.”

The weary bartender ambled over to the table upon hearing this, shaking his head. “No, no, no. It’s late, you’re not starting any new games now. Haven’t you people got homes to go to?”

Shaken out of their tunnel vision, the players looked around as the persistent rain hammered on the windows and noted just how empty the bar had become, with only five other customers scattered around the room, finishing their drinks.

“Ah, well,” Palmor smiled, as he began to diligently pocket his winnings, “There’s always tomorrow night. Same time?”

Tegras nodded defiantly, as a couple of the other players stood and stretched their hunched backs. “And this time,” he affirmed, “We’ll play a

proper game!”

“Bring whichever game you like. I’m sure the result will be much the same as—”

Palmor paused and looked up. The others followed his gaze to see that, even at this late hour, the Ktarian Moonrise had three new patrons. The newcomers stood dripping wet in the entrance to the bar, as the door slowly slid shut behind them with a gentle hiss.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” one of the figures called out with a little too much gusto, “Sorry to interrupt your evenings, but we’re gonna need your attention for a few moments.”

The trio removed their heavy, soaked cloaks in one swift motion, revealing themselves to the rest of the room. It was a startling enough sight to cause a few gasps of shock.

There was nothing unusual about a group of stragglers in damp overalls making it to the bar this late. Plenty of Ktarians worked long hours in the mines, and would often rush to the bars of the main settlement to thirstily grab a drink before closing.

But on a forgotten, crumbling, crime-ridden Ktarian mining colony in a dead sector of space, it was most unusual for the group of stragglers in damp overalls to consist of a Klingon, a Vulcan, and what looked to everyone present like an Orion Slave Girl.

The bartender took an uncertain step forward, looking at the three exotic newcomers with clear confusion.

“What the hell is this? Some sort of joke?”

This time, everyone gasped in unison, as the trio pulled disruptors from their belts and aimed them around the room.

The Vulcan took a step forwards, fixing the bartender with a surprisingly determined stare, accompanied by an even more surprising grin.

“Sorry pal,” said Sunek, “Guess again.”

## Part 1A

### Part One

The patrons of the Ktarian Moonrise went through several phases of emotions as they processed what was happening to them at the end of an otherwise unremarkable rainy evening.

Firstly, there had been shock. Not only at the identities of the strangers, but at the sight of the weapons they had produced.

That had immediately given way to panic. A couple of the customers had screamed. Tegras himself had found himself reciting an old Ktarian good luck chant, even though the very same chant had failed to provide any of what it promised during the Tongo game.

The bartender's own rush of panic had seen him instinctively race over to try and retrieve his faithful plasma rifle that he kept behind the bar, but he only managed to get as far as straining a despairing arm across the polished wooden surface before the burly Klingon yanked him back.

There then followed a brief phase of bargaining. Specifically from Palmor, who had attempted to use his winnings from the Tongo game to secure his freedom, and his freedom alone. An attempt that fell on deaf ears.

Eventually, even if it hadn't been the smoothest of entrances, the armed newcomers had managed to get a grip on the situation. The dozen unfortunate Ktarians that had been present for last orders in the Ktarian Moonrise had been successfully corralled into one corner of the room, where they were now being watched over closely.

It was dawning on them that this wasn't a simple robbery, or a random act of violence. This was a hostage situation. And as this realisation set in across the group, several of them wondered whether it was appropriate to return to their earlier state of panic.

The sight of the Vulcan, who hadn't stopped grinning since he had removed his cloak, seemed to add further weight to that proposed course of action.

"Thanks for being so cooperative, folks," Sunek, the Bounty's emotional Vulcan pilot said as he paced in front of the group, idly waving his disruptor around, "Trust me, if you keep on behaving, this'll all be over really soon."

On the other side of the bar, Denella, the Bounty's Orion engineer, set a small disc-shaped device onto an empty table and tapped a sequence into the glowing buttons along the side. "Ok," she nodded to her colleagues, in a tone bereft of her usual warmth, "Transport inhibitor's set. We should be free from any interruptions."

Over by the hostages, Klath, the Klingon weapons chief of the Bounty, nodded back, before turning to the hostages themselves.

"L—Look," the bartender stammered, "This is an honest business, ok? We don't want any trouble—"

"Good," Klath boomed back at him, ending that moment of attempted negotiation before it could go any further.

Sunek took it upon himself to fill the resulting silence as he continued to pace back and forth. Even by the Vulcan's own standards, there was an extra layer of pomposity to his voice.

"Yeah, see, we really don't want to hurt anyone. Me and my friends really aren't that sort of people, you know? We're just here to run a little errand for an...associate of ours. Nice and simple, if you catch my drift—"

"Are you ever going to shut up?" Denella cut in as she rejoined the group, without the layer of playful banter the Bounty's crew normally worked with.

"What?" Sunek replied with lofty innocence, "I've gotta commit myself to the role. And you should know that old Trelok here is a bit of a talker."

Denella paused for a moment and stared at the Vulcan.

"...Trelok?"

"Oh, yeah, that's my cover name," Sunek nodded eagerly, "I'm Trelok. A gritty, hard-nosed vigilante from the Cerris Nebula. Men fear him, women love him. Sometimes multiple women at the same time—"

"Ok, gonna put a stop to that there. What the hell are you doing?"

Sunek looked at Denella, then over at Klath. Neither seemed to be appreciating the effort he'd put into developing Trelok's character in his head on their walk to the bar.

"Um, guys, we need cover names, yeah? That's the least we can do. Everyone in here's seen our faces now. There's probably recording equipment all over the bar. And it's not like we don't stand out around here as it is. With my ears, and your skin, and his...everything."

The hostages glanced from one of their captors to the next, silently agreeing with Trelok's point.

"So," Sunek continued, "Given that what we're doing down here is a teeny tiny bit not entirely legal, I thought it might be an idea to..."

He tailed off and looked at his two colleagues again, who still seemed perplexed.

“Wait, you’re telling me you were just gonna use your real names? In front of the hostages?”

“I wasn’t planning on being around long enough to get on first name terms,” Denella countered, entirely reasonably.

From within the gaggle of fearful Ktarians, Tegras managed to find his voice, speaking out with as much authority as he could manage. “If we really are hostages, what is it that you want from us—?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll get to that,” the Vulcan groused, dismissively waving his arm at the Ktarian and keeping his focus on his crewmates, “Guys, seriously, cover names.”

“I’m not doing that—” Denella began.

“Palmor Fot,” Klath grunted.

This blunt statement elicited looks of confusion from most of the hostages. Mainly because they all knew that particular name was taken.

But this wasn’t Klath’s pitch for his own character. His focus was entirely back on the hostages themselves.

“We are here for Palmor Fot,” he clarified.

“Hey,” Sunek persisted, “Cover names first, then we—”

“We do not have time,” Klath replied curtly, “Let us complete our mission.”

In the middle of the gaggle of hostages, Palmor himself remained mute. If he had been a more popular character on Varris IV, his tactic to avoid detection by the gaggle of disruptor-toting hostage takers might have had a slim chance of succeeding. Perhaps one or two of his fellow hostages could have even played along, feigning ignorance, or suggesting that the man they wanted was in a different bar on the other side of the settlement.

But Palmor was not a popular character. And as soon as the scowling Klingon announced that he was who they were here for, just about every other one of the dozen hostages turned and looked straight at him.

“That’s our guy,” Denella nodded, pointing to the man at the centre of all the attention.

Klath stepped over to where Palmor was sitting, the Ktarian immediately switching tactics as he saw the menacing Klingon approaching. “Who do you people think you are?” he cried out, “This sort of thing won’t be tolerated, you know. Varris IV is a Ktarian world, a colony of a Federation member, and I have plenty of friends in high places who can—”

“You are Palmor Fot?” Klath asked as he reached the rambling individual.

“I don’t have to tell you anything—!”

“He is,” Tegras answered on his behalf, quietly enjoying the sight of the worst person in the entire galaxy now squirming in terror.

“Wh—? Psh! No, he’s—I’m not—I’ve never even heard of—!”

Before Palmor Fot could offer any further denials about being Palmor Fot, Klath grabbed him by his shoulder and forced him to his feet, virtually dragging the Ktarian back over to where Denella and Sunek were waiting.

“Well, well,” Tegras called out with no small amount of glee, “What have you got yourself into, Palmor?”

To his side, Evina gave him a worried nudge, still keenly aware of their precarious situation. But it wasn’t enough to stop his gloating.

“I don’t know who these people are,” Palmor protested, entirely truthfully, “I swear!”

“I’ll bet you don’t,” Tegras scoffed, “What is it this time? Gambling debts? Drugs? Weapons? I warned you, it was only a matter of time before you crossed the wrong people.”

Sunek glanced at Denella and shrugged, as Palmor continued to squirm in Klath’s grasp, despite the disruptor pointed at his side. “Sounds like our guy.”

“Yep,” the Orion nodded back grimly, “Guess it’s time for us to call in…”

## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

“How is this my fault?”

“How is this not your fault? He’s your friend!”

“Ah, no, he’s an acquaintance. I was very clear about that. Plus, he’s never done this before.”

“Really? He’s never done this specific thing before?”

The argument rattled around the confines of the Bounty’s cargo bay with no sign of stopping, as the Ju’Day-type raider hung in high orbit of Varris IV.

Since she had joined the ship’s ramshackle crew, having officially resigned her commission from Starfleet, Natasha Kinsen had found herself in plenty of uncomfortable situations.

In the past few months, she had battled rogue Jem’Hadar for a precious lost treasure, fought a gang of Vulcan psychopaths hell-bent on a vengeful quest to destroy their homeworld, been kidnapped by the Orion Syndicate’s most terrifying slave trader, fended off gun-toting outlaws on Nimbus III and nearly died after being infected by a psychoactive plant venom on a pre-industrial world.

She did wonder whether Admiral Jenner, the Starfleet officer who had asked to be kept informed of the Bounty’s movements as a personal favour, was starting to think she was making it all up.

Either way, it hadn’t taken her long to come to terms with the fact that, when you were a part of this crew, uncomfortable situations were par for the course. But even then, this particular uncomfortable situation was taking the biscuit.

She and Jirel, the unjoined Trill who served as the Bounty’s de facto captain, as well as being Admiral Jenner’s mostly estranged adopted son, were sharing this situation together. They were both sitting on the deck plates in the middle of the cargo bay with their backs to each other. Their hands were cuffed together, linking them around a large metal cylinder.

And they were both dressed only in their underwear.

Yes, Natasha thought to herself, as she shivered slightly from the cold deck below her, this is probably a new low.

“No, actually, he’s never done...this specific thing before,” Jirel fired back from behind her, gamely keeping his side of the never-ending argument going, “So how was I supposed to know—”

“Nope,” she butted in, shaking her head, “Oh, no, no, no, don’t even think of trying to get out of any responsibility like that. This guy was your friend—”

“Acquaintance.”

“—You’re the one that convinced us to take on this job he was pitching. And thanks to all of that, and specifically thanks to you, I’ve now been drugged, shackled to a naked idiot and left trussed up next to a cabrodine bomb!”

Jirel paused for a second, realising that his defence was on slightly shaky ground. “Still not entirely convinced it’s a bomb,” he offered instead.

“You really wanna test that theory?”

Another pause.

“Not right now,” the Trill replied, in an altogether less confident voice.

The metal cylinder in between them had initially been brought onboard as the sole item of cargo for their trip to Varris IV. Supposedly nothing more than a container filled with electrical equipment for one of the remaining mining operations on the surface. However, it had since been revealed to be something quite different. A bomb, designed to detonate at the whim of a trigger finger, should the Bounty’s crew not do as they were told.

Like Jirel, Natasha also had some doubts as to the validity of the claim. For a start, she wasn’t sure why such a simple explosive device needed to be quite so large. But equally, she also wasn’t eager to test that theory either.

“Look,” she sighed deeply, “Can we please just focus on getting the hell out of this?”

She backed up her request by starting to struggle against her end of the bulky metal handcuffs around her wrists.

“Oh, yeah, ok, I’ll get right on that,” Jirel shot back, “Because, little known fact about unjoined Trills, although we don’t get the belly slug, or the sixteen lifetimes of memories, we do at least have the ability to melt steel.”

Natasha stopped struggling, silently acknowledging the futility of her efforts. She shivered again and suppressed a deep sigh. “This is still your fault,” she muttered.

“It’s not my—”

Before the circular argument could get rolling again, they heard two sets of footsteps approaching the cargo bay down the main corridor of the ship. They both turned around to see their captors entering the bay.

Natasha once again found herself noting how different the two Ktarians were. They really were the unlikeliest of criminal couples.

The shorter of the two was Jirel’s friend/acquaintance. A Ktarian called Devan Gol who the Trill had worked with at the Tyran Scrapyards before he had acquired the Bounty. He carried himself with a slightly passive stoop, accompanied by a nervous tendency to wring his hands together.

Jirel had originally been delighted when he had got in touch with him out of the blue, and had not only been keen to meet up with his former colleague, but had also promised them a lucrative supply run to Varris IV as well.

Initially, Devan had seemed harmless enough to Natasha. He was friendly, if a little shy and unsure of himself. Compared to the fake bravado that Jirel’s wannabe space adventurer personality tended to give off, she struggled to reconcile the two as friends.

And speaking of polar opposites, next to Devan strode the second Ktarian. A significantly taller man called Mizar Bal.

When the two of them had beamed aboard with the cargo, Mizar had been introduced as a senior representative of the mining company that the electrical equipment was destined for. And nobody onboard had thought to question this statement. Which now seemed like an oversight, after he had actually turned out to be a criminal, and Mizar and Devan had seized control of the Bounty and her crew thanks to a rogue canister of anesthizine gas slipped into the air supply.

Natasha tried not to focus too much attention on the taller Ktarian as he strode into the bay. He was broad-shouldered and impeccably dressed, not to mention dashing handsome, with an elegant head of dark brown hair and a not entirely dissimilar air of self-confidence to the one that Jirel often tried to project. Except in Mizar’s case, it was entirely justified.

And she had been taken in by pretty much all of those qualities of the Bounty’s new passenger on the journey to Varris IV. Back when she thought she was dealing with a senior representative of a mining company.

Which, as she sat tied up in an undignified half-naked heap next to an explosive device, she grimly conceded had been another oversight.

“Well now,” Mizar smiled at the two ungainly figures, “I know this has been a very stressful day for all of us. But you’ll be pleased to hear myself and my colleague are about to leave you in peace. Relatively speaking, at least. There’ll still be a great big bomb here.”

Jirel ignored the sneering attempt at humour, and kept his attention on his former colleague. “Hey, Devan,” he said, “Listen, whatever the hell you’re trying to do, we can help, if you—”

“That’s enough out of you, Captain Nobody,” Mizar interrupted, glancing back at the nervous Devan at the same time, “Let’s not let ourselves get distracted, hmm? It’s time to get to the shuttle.”

“What shuttle?” Jirel pressed, earning a smug smile from the Ktarian.

“You think we planned this without alternative means to get away from this dreadful little colony? It’s your crew running riot down there, and this is the ship they’ll be traced back to. Besides, once we’re out of harm’s way, it’ll be a lot easier to detonate that thing if your friends don’t do as they’re told.”

He gestured at the device in between Jirel and Natasha, as the Trill bristled from his impotent position on the floor of the cargo bay.

“S—Sorry, Jirel,” Devan managed to get out in a quiet voice, “I know you won’t understand, b—but I had to do this.”

“This?” Jirel offered back incredulously, doing his best to gesture at the mildly farcical scene he was a part of, “You had to do this?”

Devan didn’t find a response for that, and instead began pacing back and forth down the length of the bay, chewing on his fingernails.

Mizar, meanwhile, had idly stepped around to Natasha’s side. She continued to try and keep her focus elsewhere, silently hoping that the handsome man she had so regrettably been taken in by wasn’t about to add any extra discomfort to her latest uncomfortable situation.

“Listen,” he offered with a winning smile, “It really is important to me that you understand this isn’t how I normally like to treat a lady.”

Natasha suppressed the fresh pang of regret, as she tried her best to find her own right knee a fascinating enough object to deserve her full attention.

“Especially the morning after a night like we had.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. Discomfort levels were now at critical mass.

“I’m sorry, what?” the inevitable sound of Jirel’s voice came from the other side of the bomb.

“Jirel,” she growled, “Don’t even think about making this a thing.”

She already knew it was too late. The Trill’s jealousy tanks were primed and full, despite the attempt he made to disguise it. “I’m not making—Who’s making this a thing?” he replied.

A pause.



“Making what a thing, anyway? I mean, I’m not making it a thing, as we’ve already clarified, but, um, what exactly is it that I’m not making a thing, just so we’re all on the same page?”

Natasha groaned slightly and leaned back, resting her head on the metal cylinder behind her. For his part, Mizar’s face creased into a superior smile as he stepped back over to Jirel and offered him a knowing shrug. “Hey, a gentleman never kisses and tells.”

“Ok, so there was kissing—?”

“Jirel!”

“Not making it a thing.”

Before Jirel could not make a thing out of it any further, and just as Natasha began to wonder if the fiery devastation of a cabrodine bomb explosion might be preferable to spending the next few hours shackled to the Trill’s jealous streak, the communicator on Mizar’s belt chirped out. The taller Ktarian glanced over at his colleague, who rushed over. Both of them were very much back in business mode.

“What is it?” Mizar barked into the device.

A reassuringly familiar voice replied. Albeit one that seemed to be affecting an even more pompous and belligerent tone than usual.

“Hey there, team leader. This is Trelok, head of strike team alpha, checking in from the target location.”

Even over the slightly patchy comms link, everyone in the cargo bay picked up on the sound of an annoyed Klingon growl in the background. The two Ktarians shared a confused glance.

“Who?” Mizar asked eventually.

“Ugh,” Sunek tutted, “You know, Trelok! The gritty, hard-nosed vigilante from the Cerris nebula! Men fear me, women love—”

The impromptu character bio was interrupted by a sudden scratching sound, indicating that a short battle had broken out for control of the communicator. Seconds later, Denella’s voice came over the link, positively spitting her words back at the Bounty’s new commanders.

“Alright, listen to me, we’ve done what you said. We’re at the bar, and we’ve found this Palmor Fot. What the hell do we do now?”

Jirel managed to take a break from thinking about how best to continue not making it a thing to spot a flicker of something cross Devan’s face when he heard Denella say that particular name. A flicker of familiarity, mixed with something darker.

“Th—They’ve got him,” he whispered to Mizar, “We need to—”

“Not yet,” the bigger Ktarian chided, “One thing at a time.”

Devan backed off immediately. Jirel couldn’t help but notice how much more meek and passive his old acquaintance now was compared to back at the scrapyards, even as the more confident Ktarian continued to bark orders into the communicator.

“Now, listen carefully,” Mizar explained, “I want you to talk to Mr Fot, and get him to take you down to the basement of the bar. I’m sure with a bit of gentle persuasion, he’ll give you what I’m after.”

“What exactly are you after?” Denella queried.

Unseen by the Orion, the Ktarian’s face twisted into a greedy smile. One that gave away the answer to her question a split second before he verbalised it.

“Latinum.”

## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

“Latinum.”

Tegras’s voice echoed around the confines of the Ktarian Moonrise as he continued to mock Palmor despite his own hostage status.

“Of course,” he continued, “It always comes back to latinum with you—”

“Be quiet.”

Klath didn’t deliver the comment with any particular menace or threat, but the grunted remark from the towering Klingon was more than enough to silence Tegras’s gloating.

As he shrank back in his seat amongst the other hostages, Evina subtly leaned over and hissed at him. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Because I’ve waited years for the day that Palmor Fot finally got what’s coming to him.”

“We all have,” she pointed out, keeping her voice low and her focus on the Klingon that was guarding them, “But you’re going to get yourself killed if you’re not careful.”

Tegras shook his head as he regarded the unlikely trio of criminals that had barged their way into their evening. “I don’t know, Evina,” he muttered, “Don’t you think there’s something a little unusual about these people?”

Before she could point out precisely how ludicrous a question that was, he pressed on.

“You know what I mean. They clearly just want Palmor. Not us. And these people don’t strike me as the hostage-taking type.”

Evina paused to take in the Klingon, the Vulcan and the Orion. And this time, she had to silently concede that there may be some truth to his last point.

While they continued their surreptitious debate, Palmor himself was engaged in a substantially louder conversation as he wriggled uncomfortably under the gaze of their captors.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s going on here, but there’s clearly been some sort of a misunderstanding. I don’t—”

“He has a safe,” Mizar’s calm voice came back over the comms link, “In the basement of that fleapit of a bar. It’s where he stashes his winnings at the end of every night. Whatever he tries to say, trust me. It’s down there.”

“That true?” Denella motioned at the quivering Palmor.

“I—I mean, it’s not as simple as—”

“It’s true.”

The voice came from the bartender, silencing the defeated Palmor once again. It seemed that there was no end to the number of people in the room willing to sell him out at this point. The Orion shrugged in satisfaction at this second-hand confirmation. She wasn’t entirely sure why everyone was so keen to rat this particular Ktarian out, but it was definitely making their job a lot easier.

“Alright,” she nodded at her colleagues, “I’ll take our friend here down to the basement. You two keep an eye on the others.”

“But—!” Palmor began.

“Save it,” she grunted with a wave of her disruptor.

With his latest protestations silenced, she grabbed him by the arm and marched him away.

Klath returned his focus to the remaining hostages, fixing them with enough of a glower to suggest to every Ktarian present that he would prefer it if they waited in silence, aside from the sound of the rain hammering down outside.

Sunek didn’t get the same message, and instead returned to what he was increasingly convinced was an award-winning performance as Trelok, the Vulcan vigilante. And, seeing as he was enjoying role-playing so much, he decided to help his gruff colleague out with a clever cover story of his own.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, while we wait, I should introduce you to my friend here. This is Korgan, Son of Bretath, a fearless warrior from the depths of the Empire. And the first thing you should know is that, while we don’t have a formal rank structure, I’m kinda his boss...”

Klath began to grumble under his breath, as Sunek’s latest insufferable monologue continued.

"Listen, I'm telling you, you don't need to do this."

Denella ignored the latest protest from Palmor as she roughly shoved him in the back to force him further down the metal steps into the basement. The Ktarian reacted to the shove by picking up the pace. Both of his steps and his protests.

"Ok, you're working for someone, right? Whoever that was on the comms link back there. Well, whatever he's paying you, I can double—No, no, I can triple it!"

"Sorry friend," Denella replied, "Really not that kind of situation."

"S—So, what sort of situation is it? Who are you working for? A Ferengi consortium? Karemman traders? The Orion Syndicate—?"

"Definitely not them," she fired back with a grimace.

"Then who?"

She didn't bother to reply, even as they reached the bottom of the steps, surmising that there was little point trying to explain the situation now.

The basement itself was a gloomy rectangular room directly underneath the bar itself, with dirty stone walls and a drab metal floor. Various crates and other supplies were piled around the room, and the air smelt unmistakably musty.

"Come on then," Denella motioned, "Where's this safe of yours?"

"I'm telling you, there's nothing down here!"

She prodded him in the back with her disruptor, and the Ktarian slowly and reluctantly walked over to the far side of the room.

"Ok," he continued, trying a different tactic, "You don't want money, then what? Hmm? Supplies? Weapons? Drugs? I can get you anything you need!"

"All I need is that safe of yours."

They reached the far wall, as Palmor turned back to his captor. "Yes, well, you see, the thing with the safe is that—"

"Look, Mr Fot, I'm sorry this is happening to you. It sucks that we're here, and we're holding you hostage, and we're gonna take all of your latinum. But trust me when I say that there's nothing you're gonna be able to say or do that will stop any of this from happening. So...the safe?"

The Ktarian stared into the Orion's determined eyes, and then looked down at the disruptor in her hands, and admitted defeat. He reluctantly gestured over to a particularly dark corner of the basement with a nod of his head.

Denella impatiently dragged him over there, and they were soon standing in front of a metal door recessed into the wall, with a shiny black touchscreen access panel embedded next to it. For a moment, Palmor made no attempt to do anything, his brain still running at warp speed trying to think of another angle to talk his way out of what was happening.

"Come on," Denella motioned eventually, "Open sesame, already."

"L—Look, before I do that, I just want to say—"

"No time for that."

"But, after I open it, what's to stop you from—"

"I give you my word, I didn't come down here to kill anyone, ok? I'm just here to do a job. So, please, just open the goddamn safe and let me do it."

Despite the pacifist angle to her comment, Denella accompanied her latest request by jabbing the disruptor pistol firmly into the small of the Ktarian's back.

After a final glance around the confines of the basement, looking for some form of salvation to present itself from amongst the scattered crates, Palmor finally crouched down and tapped a sequence of commands into the touchscreen panel. Feeling the pistol muzzle at his back, he held his breath as he completed the process, and the door to the safe opened with a telltale hiss.

Behind him, Denella looked over the Ktarian's shoulder expectantly. And gasped in shock.

Palmor's shoulders sagged in resignation.

"I did say there was nothing down here."

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

“Empty?!”

Mizar’s frustrated voice filled the confines of the Bounty’s cargo bay as he hissed into the communicator in his hand. Next to him, Devan instinctively flinched at the harshness of his tone, and began to wring his hands in front of him to try to sooth his rising worries.

“Ha!” Jirel called out with gusto from the other side of the bay, “Not such a great plan now, is it?”

“We’re still tied to a bomb, Jirel,” Natasha calmly reminded him, accompanying her comment with a sharp tug on her end of the cuffs.

“You might want to listen to her,” Mizar grunted, “And we can still beam out of here and detonate that thing whether I get my latinum or not.”

Jirel struggled for any sort of retort to that, eventually opting for a weak shrug of his shoulders. “Still not entirely convinced it’s a bomb,” he managed, in a substantially less confident tone of voice.

Mizar returned his attention to the communicator in his hand, barking out further instructions to try and smooth out this unexpected wrinkle in his plan. “He must be hiding it,” he grunted, “He has to be.”

To his side, Devan stepped forwards, still rubbing his hands together with worry. “Mizar. I—If they’ve got Fot, then we sh-should beam them up. It’s not about the latinum—”

“It is to me,” Mizar snapped back instantly, “Why else do you think I’ve been helping you? Out of the goodness of my heart?”

The shorter Ktarian shrank back, his brief attempt at an assertive action abandoned. Jirel watched on with intrigue from across the bay, trying to pick up on any clues as to what had led his former crewmate from the scrapyards down this unhinged path.

“I want you to find that latinum, ok?” Mizar continued into the communicator, trying to keep a lid on his rising sense of frustration, “Search that place from floor to ceiling. And if it’s not there, I want you to get Mr Fot to tell you where it is, and for you to go get it. Understood?”

There was a short pause over the static-filled comms link before Denella’s equally frustrated voice returned.

“And how exactly do you expect us to ‘go get it’, hmm? You told us to come down here and take hostages. We’re not exactly a mobile operation any more!”

As Mizar searched for a solution to that obvious issue, Devan’s rudimentary assertive streak found a minor second wind. “If we b—beam them up now, we could get Fot to—”

“Shut up!” Mizar snapped as his frustration boiled over, causing Devan to jump in shock, “You know as well as I do that if we keep using that transporter, we’re gonna get the security forces on our backs for sure!”

That barrage was enough for Devan’s assertive side to flee the scene completely, as he meekly returned to his role as the literal silent partner in their criminal enterprise.

Across the bay, Jirel slowly shook his own head, struggling to fully marry up his memory of working with Devan Gol at the Tyran Scrapyards with the Ktarian he saw now. He had always been a quiet individual, content to stay out of trouble. Jirel had always been the more outgoing and talkative one. Usually overconfidently talking them both into trouble before Devan’s more reserved and diplomatic side talked them back out of it.

But now, something had clearly changed. The Ktarian’s quiet side was no longer a result of him simply being calm and reserved. Now he was more fearful and timid.

On their journey to Varris IV, Jirel had expected to spend most of the trip catching up with him over as many of the random bottles of alcohol lying around the Bounty as they could get through. After all, it had been the best part of a decade since their time together at the scrapyards. But instead, Devan had been withdrawn as soon as he had beamed aboard, and had spent most of the trip holed up in the spare cabin, or otherwise in furtive conversation with Mizar.

It hadn’t exactly been the reunion that Jirel had been expecting.

And the more that this unfortunate situation continued to unfold, the more Jirel wondered exactly what had happened to his old acquaintance.

While the Trill was worrying, Mizar had been pacing, and he now began to reiterate the bones of his revised plan to the rest of the Bounty’s crew over the comms link.

“Ok, listen to me,” he sighed, dialling back his frustrations and allowing his old charming tone to return to the surface, “I really don’t want to be that guy, but you’re not getting back onboard this ship without that latinum. Alright? So I don’t care what you have to do, where you have to go, or who you have to kill down there, you need to find it. Got it?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the comms link. Long enough for him to opt to continue when no immediate response was forthcoming.

“Or do you want me and my colleague to transport over to our shuttle, and then set off the little present we’ve given you in your cargo bay—?”

“No,” Denella’s curt response came quickly, “You don’t need to do that. We’ll find the latinum.”

Mizar’s face creased into a self-satisfied smile at this, his broad shoulders fully relaxing. “Thank you for your cooperation,” he offered, with just about the least amount of warmth it was possible to bestow on those words.

Without waiting for any further response from the other end, he clicked off the comms link and shot a look at the still-cowering Devan.

“I swear, if those idiots down there mess this up—”

“Hey!” Jirel called out, “Don’t call my crew idiots! That’s my job!”

The Trill felt the need to call out for a few reasons. Partly in honest defence of his absent shipmates, partly out of his continued jealous thoughts towards the handsome Ktarian, partly out of the intense feeling of shame that accompanied those thoughts, and also partly to take the heat off Devan.

Let’s give him someone else to get angry with, he thought to himself.

Mizar glanced over at Jirel, who did his best to look as imposing as he possibly could while still sitting chained up in his underwear. It wasn’t a look that threatened to come close to troubling Mizar from his position of superiority, but the mild farce of the sight at least seemed to cause him to call off his latest rant in Devan’s direction. Which Jirel silently decided to take as a win.

Instead, Mizar merely glanced back at the other Ktarian and jerked his head to the exit. “Come on then,” he offered, “We might be stuck onboard here for a bit longer. But we can still get ready.”

The two of them walked off, leaving Jirel and Natasha to continue their futile efforts to free themselves from their cuffs.

Neither of them tried to spend too much time thinking about what exactly they were getting ready for.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella heard the comms link go dead and let out a deep, tired sigh over the ever-present sound of the patter of rainfall against the windows of the Ktarian Moonrise. She turned back to survey the situation inside the bar and tried to figure out what the hell they were going to do next.

To one side of the room, eleven hostages remained gathered together. Sunek and Klath had joined her in the middle of the bar while she had checked in with Mizar.

Next to them, Palmor was slumped in a chair, having gathered from the conversation he had just overheard that his predicament was far from over. Even if it wasn’t quite clear exactly which way it was now going to go.

“Well,” Sunek tutted eventually, idly spinning his disruptor around in his hand, “This trip has turned into a hell of a pile of suck. What now?”

“We should return to my original plan,” Klath boomed out, “Make our way to a transporter pad, return to the ship ourselves, and take it back by force.”

“You’re forgetting the part about the bomb in the cargo bay again,” Denella countered.

The Klingon defiantly shrugged his burly shoulders.

“I am still not entirely convinced it is a bomb.”

“Besides,” Sunek pointed out, “Surely those two geniuses up there won’t go and blow up our ship while they’re still onboard?”

Denella considered this for a moment, but shook her head. “I’m not sure what they’re capable of doing. But I know that’s too much of a risk. Besides, as soon as we leave this place, we’ve now got a dozen witnesses who’ll raise the alarm before we even get to a transporter.”

Sunek and Klath looked over at the hostages. The Vulcan shrugged. “We could always—”

“We’re not gonna hurt them,” Denella countered quickly.

“I wasn’t gonna say that, obviously!”

Before the Vulcan could offer a full explanation of exactly what he had been proposing, Denella turned back to Palmor. “Ok, Mr Fot,” she sighed, “Let’s try this the easy way. Where’s the latinum?”

“I already offered you my winnings!” the Ktarian whined, gesturing over at the abandoned Tongo game on the other side of the bar.

“We need a hell of a lot more than that, I’m afraid. Where’s the latinum from your safe?”

Palmor wrung his hands together nervously. But despite the weapons all around him, he elected to remain mute in response to this question. Because, while he wasn’t exactly a brave man, preferring to stay a suitably safe distance from all of his more nefarious business dealings on Varris IV and allow his subordinates to accept the risks instead, he was also a gambling man.

And right now, he was gambling that he could keep hold of his latinum after all.

Like all committed gamblers, he had weighed up the odds of success before deciding to embark on such a high risk strategy. And he had decided that those odds were in his favour.

Based on what he had seen and heard of their captors so far, he didn't get a sense that they were the type to shoot him any time soon. In fact, none of the strangers had so much as fired a warning shot from their disruptors since they had arrived.

Then there was the way the Orion had conducted herself while they had been in the basement. She had been determined and forceful, and hadn't bought any of his efforts to talk his way out of it. But there had still been an undertone of kindness to her tone. A hint of compassion in her eyes.

And then there was the ongoing discussions over the comms link, which suggested to Palmor that their captors were not the ones that were set to profit from this particular operation. They were just here to do the legwork. And from his own dubious experiences on Varris IV, he knew that people were always less willing to be ruthless if it was all for someone else's benefit.

So he decided to roll the dice. To twist. To hold onto his Evade card for a later turn. And not to tell them anything.

It was a strategy that might have worked, but for one thing. He hadn't factored in the other players at the table. Not the captors themselves, but the other hostages. The ones with no qualms about selling the least popular man on Varris IV down the river.

"He'll have moved it somewhere," Tegras piped up, standing up from his position amongst the gaggle of hostages.

Palmor jerked his head around to where Tegras stood, shooting daggers at him from across the room. For his part, Tegras stared back at his old enemy with a satisfied smile. Buoyed by her colleague's showing, Evina stood up next to Tegras and nodded her head.

"He's right," she nodded, "He must have another secure location."

To Palmor's side, the three hostage takers glanced at each other. None of them looked overly delighted with this somewhat scant offering of information.

"Well," Sunek offered eventually with a healthy portion of sarcasm, "Duh-doy."

The two Ktarians suddenly looked a little less satisfied with their actions, and glanced at each other with considerably more concern. Then, just as they began to regret making themselves stand out in the crowd quite so much, the bartender chimed in.

"Whenever the safe gets full, he arranges a transfer. Atmospheric shuttle comes and takes the latinum away. If it's empty, that's where it's gone—"

"Stop that!" Palmor snapped impotently as he was slowly and methodically sold out, "If you try to take me down, I'll take every single one of you down with me—!"

"Quiet," Klath grunted with fresh annoyance, silencing the fearful Palmor once again.

"Last shuttle pick-up was two days ago," the bartender added, more concerned by the disruptors than by Palmor's threats, "But I'm afraid I can't tell you where they take it."

Denella nodded, then turned back to Palmor, determined to tug on this particular thread some more. "So, Mr Fot. Where do they take it?"

In his mind, Palmor began to run the odds again. It didn't take him long to decide on a new course of action. Double or nothing.

"It goes off-world," he muttered, "By secure transport."

His answer was enough to elicit a loud growl of frustration from Klath, with enough intensity to cause Palmor, and most of the other hostages, to flinch.

"This is insufferable!" the Klingon spat, "We have been sent on a fool's errand!"

"Habit of a lifetime," Sunek chipped in, as Klath kicked a bar stool clean across the room to punctuate his frustrations.

Denella allowed the Klingon's outburst to subside naturally, and got her own mind into gear. She paced over to the bar area and tapped a series of commands into the computer console located behind it.

"Hey," Sunek called over, gesturing at the bottles of alcohol behind her, "While you're there, Trelok would love a—"

"Shut up, Trelok."

As Denella continued to work, Sunek glanced over at the hostages and managed an awkward smile. "That's just, y'know, a bit of banter. Actually, technically, I'm her boss as well—"

"He's lying," the Orion engineer called out.

"Well, don't tell them that!"

"No, not—Him!" she sighed, pointing an accusing finger at the squirming Palmor, "He's lying. He's got to be."

"How can you be so sure?" Klath asked.

“Because,” Denella said, gesturing down at the screen, “The barman said the last pick-up from the safe was two days ago. The only ships that have left orbit since then have been two ore freighters and a prison transport. None of which, I’m assuming, do much in the way of latinum transportation.”

“Meaning?” Sunek offered.

“Meaning that wherever the latinum was transported to, it’s still on the planet somewhere,” she continued, gesturing over to Evina, “So she was right. He must have a lockup or a holding area somewhere. That right, Mr Fot?”

She glared at Palmor, who appeared to be suddenly finding his shoes endlessly fascinating. Seeing a chance to work off some of his mounting frustrations, Klath stepped back over to where the Ktarian sat and lifted him out of his chair by his collar.

“My colleague asked you a question.”

“Ok, ok!” he babbled, as Klath dropped him back down into the chair, “I have a secure facility, over on the other side of the settlement! The next orbital pick-up isn’t until tomorrow!”

Denella smiled in satisfaction. Sunek grinned broadly. Klath nodded, but couldn’t help but look a little disappointed that he hadn’t had to use any more force to get the information.

“There,” Denella said, “Was that so hard?”

Palmor folded his arms in angry defeat, as the Orion considered their next step.

“Ok, I guess we’ll have to restrain the rest of our friends over there somehow. Then we should have enough time before the alarm gets raised to get to—”

She stopped herself as she spotted something unsettling on the computer interface she had been working on. Something that suggested that the alarm had already been raised. Away from the main part of the screen where she had called up the public transport logs, she saw a small flashing light. She tapped the screen for more information, and didn’t like what she found.

“Um, guys...we might have a problem.”

Sunek walked over and peered over the rim of the bar at the screen itself. Even though it was upside down, he could see the tell-tale signs that an alert of some description had been activated.

It wasn’t clear how it had been activated. Presumably during the initial melee after they had made their entrance, one of the Ktarians had reached out and triggered it.

But however it had happened, it was clearly a problem.

A sound from outside, louder than the permanent rainfall, seemed to add further confirmation to the existence of a problem. It was a sound that distinctly sounded like several small vessels landing on the hard ground outside.

Klath sidled over to a window and carefully peered out.

He saw several small vessels landing on the hard ground outside. Each one clearly belonged to the local security force on Varris IV. The doors of the shuttles opened, and several figures clad in dark brown uniforms scurried out and took up strategic positions behind nearby cover. All of them carried phaser-type weapons.

Within moments, they had surrounded the entire front of the Ktarian Moonrise. And while he had no way of knowing for sure, Klath was certain that a similar scene was taking place at the rear of the building.

They were surrounded.

“Yes,” he nodded, turning back to Denella and Sunek, “I believe we have a problem.”

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

“It’s gonna be 1-2-3-4. I’m telling you.”

Natasha sighed and shook her head.

The two figures that were so uncomfortably positioned on the floor of the Bounty’s cargo bay had made a modicum of progress in their efforts to free themselves.

From blindly feeling around, Jirel had managed to locate a small set of controls on one set of cuffs, designed to input a code to release the lock, and he had managed to contort his right hand in such a way that he could just about tap at the controls with his index finger.

But, as Natasha had repeatedly tried to tell the excited Trill, this wasn’t quite the significant step forward that he seemed to be treating it as. The telltale buzz of the latest incorrect guess rang out into the cargo bay, and the cuffs remained resolutely in place around their wrists. Much as they had with every other blind guess Jirel had made so far, from 0-0-0-0 to 9-9-9-9.

“My hero,” Natasha couldn’t help but fire out, with levels of sarcasm that Sunek would have been proud of.

“Whatever. I’ve got plenty more plans, ok?”

“Like what?”

There was a telling pause before the Trill’s weak response came back.

“4-3-2-1...?”

Natasha groaned gently in frustration, shivering from the cold deck below her exposed legs as Jirel’s master plan continued to resolutely get them precisely nowhere. Aside from the bomb behind her going off, she absently noted that there was only one way the situation could get any worse.

And Jirel managed to guess that one right away.

“So,” he offered into the silence that had descended, “You know—I mean, earlier, when Mizar was talking about you. And him. Him and you.”

Natasha groaned again. She really didn’t have the patience to be reminded about her latest terrible choice of sexual partner. Especially by one of her previous terrible choices. Not for the first time, she cursed her flawed thought process on her first night onboard the Bounty, after she had been rescued from her unplanned exile on a barren planet in the Kesmet sector following the destruction of the USS Navajo.

When, after six months without any form of company or companionship, she had dispassionately used a process of elimination to decide what she was going to do to avoid spending another night alone with her thoughts, which had been dominated by memories of the Navajo’s final moments, and the face of a dying ensign she had left behind. And for one night, she ended up in Jirel’s cabin.

Had she known at the time that she would end up joining the Bounty’s crew, that Jirel would read significantly more into what happened than a simple one night stand, and that the Trill, for all of his outward bravado, possessed a somewhat pathetic jealous streak the length of the Alpha Quadrant, she would definitely have opted to spend another night elsewhere. Thoughts or no thoughts.

But she hadn’t been privy to that information at the time, so here she was.

She had already suffered through Jirel’s jealous streak on one occasion, just before she had resigned her commission on Starbase 216, when they had run into her ex-husband, Cameron Kinsen. And she hadn’t had much time for it then. And now, given that she was already feeling bad enough to have allowed herself to be taken in by Mizar Bal’s physical charms, coupled with the fact that she was still shackled to an explosive device, she definitely didn’t have time for it.

Not that Jirel seemed to have picked up on any of that.

“I mean,” he continued from the other side of the metal cylinder between them, “It’s cool. Y’know, it’s not that it’s not cool—”

“Good. Glad we could settle that. Because it’s really, truly none of your business, Jirel. And I thought you said you weren’t going to make a thing out of it.”

“Yep, right, I know. I’m not.”

A pause. For a blessed moment, Natasha wondered if it was all over.

“But...I mean, when he said ‘after a night like we had’, does that really mean you two really—?”

“7-1-3-9!”

Of all the responses Jirel had been expecting, and if he was being honest with himself, he wasn’t sure which response he wanted to hear, that had definitely not been one of them.



“Excuse me?”

“On the cuffs,” she sighed, “If you really want to keep trying to guess the code, try 7-1-3-9.”

Another pause. Natasha breathed a silent sigh of relief that this appeared to have been enough of a non sequitur to throw Jirel several light years away from his previous topic of conversation.

“... Why?”

“Because I once read about a mathematical study which found that, across all known species that use a structured numbering system, if you ask a large enough sample size to name a random four-digit number, a statistically significant percentage always choose 7-1-3-9. It’s the most random number in the galaxy.”

Jirel considered this response for a moment, before shrugging his bare shoulders as best he could while still being tied up. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. That’s exactly what the people running the study said. But given that nothing you’re trying to do right now makes any sense, I thought I’d at least suggest it.”

“You...want me to try 7-1-3-9?”

“Might work?” she offered, allowing herself to actually believe what she was saying for the briefest of moments.

“It won’t work,” Jirel retorted, as he diligently tapped the interface.

A familiar buzz rang out through the bay.

“It didn’t work,” the Trill added, unnecessarily.

“Great. What now?” Natasha signed again, “And before you answer that, bear in mind that if the next words out of your mouth are concerning me, Mizar Bal, or what may or may not have happened in my cabin last night, know that once we’re out of these cuffs, I will use my encyclopaedic knowledge of Trill anatomy and my favourite laser scalpel to make sure you will never need to worry about sharing your cabin with anyone else ever again.”

Jirel instinctively crossed his legs on the cold floor of the bay and focused on the bigger picture. “We could try toppling it over?”

“Toppling it over,” Natasha scoffed, “Toppling over the big bomb?”

“Still not entirely convinced it’s a bomb.”

“Ok, well, we’ll file that one under Plan B, ok? Anything else?”

Jirel chewed his lip thoughtfully, doing his best to make sure his thoughts didn’t drift back to questions about Mizar Bal. “If I can get Devan by himself, I still feel like I can get through to him,” he said eventually, “Get him to stop all this.”

“What makes you think that?” Natasha asked, genuinely curious to hear his answer, given how little she still knew about a lot of her new crew’s old lives.

“Well, y’know, that time together hanging out back at the scrapyards had to count for something, right?”

“Depends if he was a friend or an acquaintance,” she replied knowingly.

Jirel’s shoulders slumped slightly, the Trill a little reluctant to divulge too much about his past, even to the only person onboard who knew most of it already. All the way down to his illustrious Starfleet admiral father.

“Ok, so,” he began to explain eventually, “Back at the Tyran Scrapyards...not a lot of people liked me.”

“Is this the part where I act surprised?”

Jirel stifled a wry smile, reassured that there was still room in their conversation for the usual level of barbs, despite their situation. “Yeah, and I totally deserved it. Rolled up there cocky as all hell just cos I’d spent a few years wandering around the quadrant and hadn’t gotten myself killed yet, crossed all the wrong people on my first day on the job, and thought all the work sent my way was beneath me.”

“I know you can’t see, but I’m really trying hard to act surprised.”

“Yeah, well, by the time I’d started to grow up, it was too late. I was a social pariah. And the Tyran Scrapyards weren’t the sort of place where you wanted to be that. I was bullied, beaten up, given the worst jobs, whatever indignity the other workers could send my way, they did. Where else do you think I learned how to fight so well?”

“Huh,” Natasha offered, a little more understandingly, “I had no idea.”

“Yep. Pretty much everyone there had it in for me. Except for Devan Gol. He was always happy to hang out with Spotty—”

He stopped himself as soon as he said the word, but it was too late. He winced, having not intended to share quite that much with his current company.

“...Spotty?”

Jirel sighed and nodded his head, even though the woman on the other side of the bomb couldn't see him. "Yeah. That, um, that was one of the nicknames the other workers had for me."

He paused, wondering what else he could add. Eventually, he settled on something.

"Y'know. Cos of the spots."

He wasn't particularly happy with what he had settled on.

"Huh," Natasha muttered thoughtfully, "Spotty."

She didn't know exactly why it happened. Whether it was a burst of mild delirium brought on by spending this long lying half-naked on the cold deck of the ship. Whether it was her mind's way of working off some of her excess frustrations about the situation she was in. Or even whether it was a genuine subconscious desire to take out those frustrations on the Trill as punishment for his earlier round of profoundly irritating jealousy.

Regardless of why it happened, she couldn't help but let out an amused snort. One that was more than loud enough to be picked up on by her colleague.

"Are you laughing?"

"No!" she replied, a little too quickly, "No. That was just—I'm not—"

Another snort escaped her mouth before she could stop it. Followed by a stifled chuckle.

"You are laughing!" Jirel persisted, with a hint of indignation, "Stop that! This is serious!"

"I know! I'm sorry! I—!"

Another uncontrollable chuckle burst forth. The more she tried to stop herself from laughing, the greater the urge swelled inside of her. The effort of holding in the belly laugh that was growing inside of her became so great that tears began to roll down her cheeks.

On the other side of the metal cylinder, Jirel listened to the stifled snorts, and despite still feeling a little hurt at her reaction, something about the sound of her choking back laughter caused a similar wave to rise up inside him.

"I mean," he snorted, "I guess—it is pretty funny—"

Natasha couldn't hold it in any longer. She burst out laughing. Jirel followed suit.

The two figures sat, still chained up to a cabrodine bomb, and the cargo bay filled with helpless laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the other end of the Bounty, in the Ju'Day-type raider's cockpit, the two Ktarians looked up from their work and tilted their heads in curiosity at the distant sound echoing down the length of the ship's corridor.

"What the hell's so funny?" Mizar grunted at Devan, not expecting an answer.

The smaller Ktarian didn't offer one, aside from an anxious shrug.

Unlike their prisoners, they had little to laugh about themselves. They had just been informed of the latest unhappy developments down in the Ktarian Moonrise on the planet below, as their seemingly straightforward plan hit another hitch. It had done little to improve Mizar's already darkening mood.

"I thought you said this guy's crew would do the job?" he grouched, "Two hours they've been down there, and now Ktarian security are all over the place!"

Devan flinched slightly under the latest barrage directed at him, and resumed wringing his hands together with renewed vigour. "W—We should beam them up now," he managed in an altogether quieter voice than Mizar's own rich baritone, "While we still can."

Mizar leaned back in the seat of the Bounty's tactical console and looked over at the mild-mannered Ktarian standing next to the centre seat. "We can't do that now, can we?" he replied with irritation, "As soon as they turn off the transport inhibitor, the security teams will get to them!"

Devan shrank back behind the centre seat in the face of this latest verbal assault, and increased the intensity of his hand-wringing.

He knew it had been a stupid suggestion. The inhibitor not only prevented transporters from beaming through it, but it also prevented any attempt to establish any sort of transporter lock on anyone inside it to prevent a swift beam out.

"S—So," he managed to mutter, "What now?"

Mizar Bal sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, mulling over the situation in front of them in silence. Eventually, he opened his eyes again and leaned forwards in his seat. "We'll stick to the plan," he replied with a nod, "Get our stuff, get the hell off this ship and get over to the

shuttle.”

Devan’s eyes widened slightly at this, as he grew slightly more concerned by the dark look on his colleague’s face.

“B—But, shouldn’t we—?”

“We should keep ourselves as far away from this as possible right now. If it all goes to crap down there and the security forces trace those idiots back to this ship, I don’t want to be anywhere near it.”

“W—What about Fot?”

“We’ll still have the comms link. If they get away with Fot - and, more importantly, if they get my latinum - then we’ll know about it.”

Before Devan was able to counter any further, Mizar stood up from the tactical console and pointed back out in the direction of the Bounty’s cargo bay. “Now,” he added, “How about you go make sure our cargo is primed for long-range, remote detonation, ok?”

Devan’s eyes widened even further, as he felt the sensation of his carefully planned idea spiralling further out of control.

“B—But, we’re not actually going to—?”

“What’s the point of bringing a threat if you’re not willing to use it?” Mizar interjected, “Besides, nothing like a bomb threat to keep those fools down on the planet in line, just in case they decide to hand themselves in...”

Devan Gol couldn’t muster a counterpoint to this. So he absently started to bite his nails, even though most of them were already eroded down to the quick.

It wasn’t supposed to have been like this, he told himself. And once again, he found himself cursing ever recruiting the help of Mizar Bal. Even though he knew that he wouldn’t have been able to get this far without his help.

Devan had been planning how he was going to find Palmor Fot for months. But it had quickly become apparent to him that, while he could figure out the theory, he was never going to be able to carry the whole thing out by himself in practice. So he had started to sniff around in the Ktarian underworld as best he could, throughout several other old colonies in a similar state to Varris IV, and he had eventually struck up an uncomfortable working relationship with Mizar.

The plan had initially seemed simple. Devan had the plan, and Mizar was there to provide the leadership that was needed. He would help Devan succeed in his aims, and in return, he would get the latinum that Palmor Fot had to his name.

Except, Devan had already succeeded in his aims, in as much as the Bounty’s crew down on the colony had found Palmor. Now it was Mizar’s stake in the game that had proved to be the issue, and now meant that his carefully laid plans were unravelling.

Devan took a second to compose himself, resting his hand on the arm of the centre chair in the cockpit and trying not to focus too much on the guilt he felt upon touching the seat where Jirel usually found himself. He tried to summon up memories of happier times, before Palmor Fot, to get him focused back on the task at hand. But those memories seemed further away than ever.

“Is there a problem?”

Devan took a deep breath and looked over at Mizar, who seemed as entirely unconcerned by the meeker Ktarian’s moment of crisis as he always was. “N—No,” he managed to stammer, “I’ll go and deal with the detonator.”

Mizar’s eyes narrowed slightly, displaying more than a modicum of distrust. Then he nodded. Devan took that chance to walk back down the rear steps of the Bounty’s cockpit as quickly as his shaking legs could carry him.

He walked on down the ship’s main corridor. All the while wondering how everything could have gone so wrong.

## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

Security Chief Tylor Ral surveyed the scene in front of him, gritting his teeth with a mixture of annoyance and regret.

He was getting too old for this kind of crap.

The rain continued to lash down from above, the peaked rim of the cap on his head and the thick waterproof jacket over his shoulders doing little to protect him from getting thoroughly soaked. In front of him, the gaudy blinking neon sign of the Ktarian Moonrise continued to flash on and off, illuminating the puddles around his feet and serving to contribute to an ever-developing stress headache that was building in his weathered temples.

Tylor had worked in the Ktarian security force since he was old enough to get a job, back before his people had even heard of the Federation, or the Alpha Quadrant.

He had developed a reputation as a solid, no-nonsense investigator back on the homeworld, and was once talked about as a future Head of Ktarian Security. After Ktaris had officially joined the Federation, he had even been offered a chance to lead a delegation of officers to liaise with Federation Security and help draft a new planetary defence program.

But instead, much to the surprise of most, he had turned down those sorts of opportunities. And as he had neared retirement, he had instead volunteered for the post of security chief on the Varris IV colony.

It was by no means a plum assignment for a man of his pedigree. In fact, given the state of the colony these days, it was pretty much as grim and thankless as they came.

But Tylor was an old school operator. Too much so for Ktaris's forthcoming enlightened future inside the cosy ranks of the Federation. He knew he would operate on a need to accumulate wealth until his dying day, and with his retirement on the horizon, and the overly generous salary available for as uninspiring a post as this, the decision to come here had been an easy one.

Varris IV had been, in a strange way, the perfect way to wind down his career and make sure that he and his wife had a big enough nest egg to spend their golden years in comfort somewhere in the cosmos. Plus, with the central Ktarian government having all but given up on the place, there was no real pressure for him to deal with the crime levels to any serious extent.

Or at least, there had been no pressure. Before his new second in command had arrived.

"All strike teams are in position, Chief. All units report ready. Comms are clear."

The soaked security chief turned to regard the younger uniformed Ktarian woman standing next to him behind the cover of one of the atmospheric shuttles they had arrived in.

Deputy Jalon Sep had, like Tylor himself, volunteered for assignment on Varris IV. But she hadn't come here to escape responsibility and secure a final payday before retirement. She had come here to make a name for herself.

Determined to work her way up the long ladder of the Ktarian Security Force, she had found her career losing momentum once she had risen as high as regional section head. And so she had jumped at the chance to take up the deputy role on Varris IV. Where else could she truly prove herself to her superiors on Ktaris than by taking on and beating the runaway criminal elements across their least impressive colony.

And ever since she had arrived, she had done her best to get her new boss back up to scratch as well, much to Tylor's continued frustration.

"We're waiting on your orders," she added to the grizzled chief, as the rain hammered down on the hull of the shuttle.

"Good work, Deputy," Tylor replied with a grim nod, before turning his attention back to the Ktarian Moonrise itself.

For a moment, only the sound of the relentless downpour filled the air. But Tylor could sense his deputy still standing rigidly next to him, wanting more from her superior.

"What...are your orders, Chief?" she persisted eventually, "For the record, I would recommend a frontal assault, keeping the guards at the rear in position to cover those exits."

Tylor took a moment to wonder whether the neon sign or his own deputy was now contributing more to the growing stress headache, then shook his head. "No assaults. Not until we know what we're assaulting."

The level one alert back at the Varris IV Security Headquarters had come as a shock. While many businesses across the main settlement still had their emergency alert systems up and running, most were barely used these days. Bar brawls and robberies were so common, and the usual security response so slow and ineffective, that there was usually very little point in raising any sort of alarm.

Indeed, when the alert first showed up, Tylor's first instinct had been to ignore it. After all, the bartender could have just leaned on it by mistake. That had happened before.

But his new deputy had insisted that they follow official procedure when a level one alert was reported by a business on a Ktarian colony. As she insisted that they follow official procedure for everything.

And so, strike teams had been assembled, shuttles had been prepped, and here they were. Standing in the rain, in front of an apparent hostage crisis. And now Tylor was supposed to do something about it.

“With all due respect, Chief,” Jalon continued, “We know enough. The intelligence drone has already conducted a primary scan of the building.”

She handed him a small padd. And although the results were on screen for him to browse, she also felt the need to vocalise the report, much to the dissatisfaction of Tylor’s aching head.

“Eleven Ktarian hostages confirmed, located near the front of the premises. Three, possibly four hostiles located away from the main group. And we have confirmed energy signatures for three disruptor weapons. One Type-J Klingon design, one Ferengi D’Tak pistol—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tylor replied, only half-listening and gesturing to the padd, “What the hell are these life form readings all about?”

Jalon looked confused by this, having deemed such information to be irrelevant to procedure during a hostage incident. “All lifesigns are stable. No casualties have been detected—”

“No, not lifesigns, Deputy. Life forms. Who the hell are these people? A Vulcan? An Orion? A...Klingon? On Varris IV?”

Jalon paused for a moment, contemplating this as the rain dripped off the peak of her own cap.

“I didn’t consider that information relevant, Chief,” she admitted eventually, “When dealing with a level one emergency alert, and a potential hostage situation, regulations are to secure the perimeter of the building and isolate hostile targets. Regardless of the shape of their ears.”

In an almost Vulcan-like manner, she raised an eyebrow to emphasise her final point. Despite her continued regurgitation of regulations, Tylor couldn’t help but stifle an amused grunt at that.

“You know, Deputy,” he replied, waving the padd at her, “Regulations are all well and good, but they’ll only get you so far. You’re missing something.”

Jalon’s second eyebrow joined her first as she reacted to this comment. Tylor didn’t wait for her next query before he continued. “You need instincts in this job, as well. And right now, my instincts are telling me something’s up with this whole situation. This isn’t just a bunch of junkies looking to lift some latinum for their next score. This is...something else.”

“Then what do you advise, Chief?”

Tylor stared back over at the bar, migraine-inducing neon sign and all, and grimaced.

In truth, part of him just wanted to go with her plan. To allow procedure to be followed and to send the strike teams in, phasers loaded. Whatever happened after that, at least it’d all be over quickly, and his deputy could handle the paperwork.

But somewhere in the back of his tired mind, his old detective brain was kicking into gear. The one that had made him such a renowned security officer back in the day. And there was more than enough of a mystery in front of him for that part of his brain to take over.

“Get me a comms unit,” he said eventually, gesturing to the bar, “And patch me in there. Let’s see who we’re actually dealing with.”

Deputy Jalon Sep nodded and hurried away to carry out his request. He managed a slight smile that her diligent belief in rules and chains of command meant that she was always willing to follow his orders. Regardless of whether she agreed with them.

After a moment of contemplation, he returned his full attention to the bar, squinting slightly against the fresh thud of pain in his head from the blinking sign.

He could tell it was going to be a long night.

## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

“What the hell do we do now?”

It wasn't the first time that Denella had asked that particular question since the three Bounty crew members inside the Ktarian Moonrise had realised they were surrounded.

But it was the first time she had asked it since the gruff voice had come out of the comms unit built into the console behind the bar. Which was an unsettling new development in their escalating predicament.

“I say again,” the voice cracked over the comms link, “This is Security Chief Tylor Ral of the Varris IV Security Division. We have you surrounded. But nobody out here wants to get hurt tonight, and I'll bet nobody in there does either. So I'd really appreciate it if we could talk this through.”

The Orion engineer glanced across the burnished metal bar area to where Klath and Sunek had joined her. For the time being, they had returned Palmor to the rest of the hostages on the other side of the room, and while they had left them alone to join Denella, both the Klingon and the Vulcan kept their disruptors raised and the majority of their focus on the Ktarians.

“Based on what I could see,” the Klingon reported, “There are approximately twenty guards setting up in front of our location. I would presume there to be a similar number at the rear of the building as well.”

“Great,” Sunek tutted with predictable fatalism, “So we're screwed.”

“Perhaps not. With the right tactics, I believe we will be able to attempt a glorious—”

“Ok,” Denella sighed, stopping the Klingon with a raised hand, “We're not attempting a glorious anything. I'm not gonna start shooting innocent security guards down here.”

“They will likely shoot us if we do not act first,” Klath countered with all seriousness, gesturing to the gaggle of fearful Ktarians on the other side of the bar, “We have taken several hostages.”

Denella fixed him with a withering look and shook her head. “I'd also very much like to get out of this without being shot, killed or arrested. If that's not too much to ask.”

Klath considered these additional restrictions to his battle plan with a thoughtful expression, as the comms unit flared into life again.

“Come on now, folks. I'm sure we can work this all out, ok?”

“In which case,” Klath said, having completed his fresh considerations, “I believe that one of us should talk to him.”

Sunek's face brightened up immediately as he reached out for the controls, preparing his most authentic Trelok voice to date. Before he could actually say anything, however, Klath shot out a burly hand and grabbed Sunek's wiry arm, keeping his eyes on Denella.

“And I do not believe it should be the Vulcan.”

“Naw,” Sunek griped.

Denella sighed deeply as she saw the implication in the rarely-talkative Klingon's expression. He had also clearly excluded himself from an active role in this particular plan as well. “Fine,” she grumbled.

She reluctantly tapped the controls in front of her and cleared her throat, mentally trying to work out the best way of approaching a hostage situation that she didn't want to be involved in.

“Um, hi, Chief,” she began, “We're, um, we can talk this out. I guess.”

There was a pause. She idly wondered whether or not she should have gone for a more assertive tone of voice.

“Well, I'm glad to hear it,” the voice of Chief Ral came back eventually, a trace of relief evident in the tone of the Ktarian, “Now, I've told you who I am, and you can call me Tylor. So, who exactly am I speaking with?”

“This is Denella,” said Denella.

On the other side of the bar, Sunek threw his hands up into the air and paced back over towards the hostages, waving his disruptor around in frustration. “Ugh! Come on, people! Cover names!”

Denella ignored the amateur dramatics of her colleague in favour of focusing on Chief Ral. She licked her lips and continued. “And I'm with you, Tylor. I don't think anyone wants to get hurt today.”

“Glad to hear it,” the Ktarian replied, “So, now we're on first name terms, how about we go one step further, hmm? How about you lower that transporter inhibitor and then I'll beam myself in. Unarmed. We can talk face to face.”

Denella met Klath's stern look and nodded grimly. They weren't falling for that one.

"Sorry, can't do that."

A pause. Even if Tylor had been expecting that response to his somewhat transparent opening gambit, his next step wasn't immediate.

"Fair enough," he conceded eventually, "How about we try something different then. It's pretty clear what I want out of this. I want those people in there with you to come out, safe and sound. So, how about you explain to me what you want out of all this."

Now it was Denella's turn to pause. Like it or not, she was definitely in the middle of a hostage negotiation.

The question was, how far could she push it.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the other side of the room, nestled amongst the fearful hostages, Tegras shook his head.

"I don't get it," he muttered quietly to Evina where she sat to his right, "They don't act like criminals at all..."

On his other side, Palmor mustered an audible tut, his self-confidence making a fleeting return now he had been thrown back in with the rest of them. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"No, he's right," Evina nodded, "There's something strange about all this. And they haven't been violent at all."

"Pah!" Palmor hissed angrily, "Since they showed up, I've been threatened, manhandled, marched down to that basement on the end of a disruptor—"

"They haven't been violent to anyone who hasn't deserved it," Tegras chipped in with a grin, earning a further annoyed tut from Palmor.

The older Ktarian kept his focus on their captors. The Orion and the Klingon remained next to the comms unit, engaged in barely audible negotiations, while the scruffy Vulcan was now pacing around the room, whistling to himself.

He couldn't help but remain intrigued.

While Tegras kept his attention on the newcomers, Palmor's focus had drifted over to the exit, having now seen that two of their captors were engaged with the comms unit, and the third appeared to be entirely distracted, having paused his whistling to investigate some dirt under one of his fingernails.

He didn't waste time trying to coordinate any sort of escape plan with his fellow Ktarians. He was entirely operating in self-preservation mode, as was his way. Slowly, but surely, before any of the others could ask what he was doing, he silently stood up and took a tentative step towards safety.

"Oi."

Palmor's head jerked up in fright, as he saw that the previously distracted Vulcan now had his weapon trained squarely at him.

"Come on," Sunek continued with a raised eyebrow, "How dumb do you think I am?"

He immediately held his free hand up to silence any response from his two colleagues, who had now looked up from the comms unit to see what the fuss was about.

"Don't answer that for him."

Palmor stared at the disruptor pointing at him, then gulped and sat back down, earning a satisfied nod from the tousle-haired Vulcan.

"There. That's a good hostage."

His rudimentary escape plan now thwarted, Palmor glanced back over at Tegras and Evina with a dark grimace. "Huh," he muttered, "They seem to act like criminals to me. Believe me, I know enough of them."

But Tegras ignored him, and kept his focus on their captors and their increasingly hard to read actions.

Still no nearer understanding them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over at the bar, negotiations had reached something of an impasse.

In truth, Denella knew it had been a bit of a long shot before she had even suggested it. Still, as a novice in the enterprise of hostage

negotiations, she hadn't seen much point in being anything other than completely open about what they were after.

"Well, I'm sorry, Denella," Tylor's voice came back, "I'm afraid the Varris IV Security Division doesn't have quite that much latinum available to us."

The Orion looked over at Klath, and Sunek behind him, and shrugged. "Worth a try. Anyone else got any bright ideas?"

Klath remained silent. Sunek, inevitably, didn't.

"Hold up," the Vulcan pointed out, "We don't need latinum from them. We've already got the latinum from matey boy over there."

He gestured over at the unhappy Palmor with a dismissive wave of his disruptor. Denella remained visibly unconvinced.

"Well, we don't actually have that latinum, do we? That's really the fundamental problem we're dealing with right now."

"Ok, whatever, but we know where it is. Or he knows where it is, at least. So that part's all fine, right?"

"So, what?" Denella pressed, "You're saying I should ask those nice people outside for a lift?"

"Sort of," Sunek replied with an enigmatic grin.

This time, before Klath could stop him, the Vulcan stepped over and quickly jabbed his finger down on the comms unit.

"Attention, Varris IV security guy. You still there?"

"Still here," Tylor's response came, "And who might you be?"

"Trelok's the name," Sunek said with a beaming smile, even as Denella, Klath and several of the hostages themselves rolled their eyes, "I'm a gritty, hard-nosed vigilante from the—"

He paused under the weight of the scowls of his colleagues, and sighed.

"Ugh, fine. We can skip that. But just know that I have an awesome backstory. With fighting, and explosions, and girls, and everything. Ok?"

A long pause.

"...Ok."

"You wanna get to your point?" Denella muttered at the Vulcan without a trace of humour.

"Yeah," Sunek nodded, "So, listen, we're willing to do a deal here."

"I'm listening," Tylor's reply came.

"We're willing to give up...almost all the hostages. Right here, right now."

"Well," the security chief said with palpable relief, "I'm glad to hear that, Trelok."

The Vulcan winked at the confused Denella as he jabbed his finger down on the comms panel again to complete his attempt at negotiation.

"In exchange for a shuttle."



## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

“...So, that one ended fairly acrimoniously, as you’d expect. Then there was Lieutenant Paul Guthrie, an engineer from the USS Heracles who came onboard the Tripoli as part of a big crew exchange program...”

“Natasha,” Jirel sighed, for what felt like the thirtieth time since she had started talking.

For the thirtieth time, she ignored him.

“...I mean, he was...cute? Yeah, really cute. Had one of those bodies that was right in that sweet spot, y’know? Nicely toned, but not so big and muscly that you’re worried he’s gonna spend more time in the gym than he is with you...”

Jirel sighed again and leaned back, gently banging his head on the metal cylinder behind him, part of him not caring if he accidentally set the detonator off.

“Natasha?”

“...Oh, and then, I mean, this barely counts. But I had a bit of a fling with an Orvadian ambassador during a two-week layover at Starbase 312. Took me most of the time just to work out how to say its name. What was it again...?”

“Natasha, could you just—?”

“...Ah, yep, Cr’xx-ala’rhyrrpo’o’jahn. That was it. Emphasise the second ‘x’ and roll the ‘r’s. Otherwise you’re saying the Orvadian word for a sort of ceremonial belt. Honestly, I just ended up calling it Crxy for short. Didn’t seem to mind...”

Jirel closed his eyes and sighed even more deeply.

“...Ah, and how could I forget S’stalath? Now he was the sexiest Gorn commander I ever met—”

“What the—?” Jirel called out, having located his final straw, “You slept with a Gorn?!”

On the other side of the cylinder, Natasha’s mouth curled into a satisfied smile, enjoying the ease with which she was able to wind up the Trill, despite the peril of their wider situation. “You do realise I’ve made most of this list up, right? I’ve been naming names for ten minutes now. What sort of girl do you think I am?”

A rush of emotions hit Jirel all at once, all competing for his attention. After a hard-fought scuffle, shame defeated the combined strength of relief and annoyance by TKO. “Oh, yeah,” he managed, “I got that.”

“Serves you right, anyway,” she scoffed, “I felt sorry for you, after you’d just coughed up that embarrassing nickname story. So I give you a free hit in return, ask me about anything from my past and I’ll tell you the truth. And you pick my sex life?”

“Hey, I just wanted to know—”

“Something that was none of your business. As usual. Just as me and Mizar Bal are none of your business.”

“Hey, it was a perfectly valid question. And it deserved a bit more than some dumb made-up story about jumping into bed with a Gorn.”

“Who said I made that bit up?” she replied, a fresh smile dancing across her face as she prepared the Trill for some more well deserved torment, “You know, I think it was the eyes that first drew me to Commander S’stalath...”

Just as Jirel’s own eyes began to boggle, they were interrupted by the sight of Devan entering the cargo bay and shuffling over to a tool cupboard recessed into the wall.

“Hey! Devan’s here!” Jirel called out with exaggerated gusto, eager for any sort of conversation other than the one he had trapped himself in.

But there was no answer as the nervous Ktarian rummaged inside the cupboard, searching through the various tools and equipment inside.

“You know,” Jirel persisted, “Denella really doesn’t like people going through her stuff.”

Still no response, aside from Devan muttering a barely-audible string of words under his breath as he finally selected a specific tool and walked over to where Jirel and Natasha were still shackled, before he began to tinker with the metal cylinder itself.

“Listen,” Jirel continued, now with a more serious tone, “I meant what I said before. We can help you. Whatever the hell is going on here, we can help. Whatever you’re doing. Um, what exactly are you doing?”

The top of the cylinder opened with a gentle hiss, as Devan kept his focus on his work. “I’m recalibrating the bomb,” he replied as calmly as he could manage, “For long-distance remote detonation.”

Jirel considered this for a moment, then shrugged. “I mean, I’d rather help you do something else—”

“Jirel, please,” Devan managed, blinking fiercely from the stress, “D—Don’t try all that. The jokes, and the small talk. I—I can’t do all that. I’m sorry.”

“Ok, fine. No jokes. But please, Devan, just talk to me? You’ve barely said anything since you came onboard, and now all this? Help me understand what’s going on here.”

“There’s no point,” the Ktarian replied in a quiet voice, “No point in any more talking. T—That’s all I’ve been doing. With counsellors, or friends, or whoever, and it never—Believe me, Jirel. If there was any other way, I’d have done it.”

As Devan talked, he deliberately avoided making eye contact with his former colleague. Instead, he kept his focus on running the small ODN recoupler in his hand over the internals of the device in front of him. After a few seconds, he stopped working entirely and took several deep breaths, staving off the encroaching sense of dread as best he could.

“I have some anti-anxiety shots in the medical bay,” Natasha chimed in with her best kindly doctor tone, “They might help.”

“I’m fine,” Devan gasped, as he forced himself to stand back up straight, “I don’t need another medical opinion.”

“I’m sure you don’t. But I’m more speaking as someone who’s currently tied up to the explosive device you’re working on. A shot might calm your shaking.”

No response. Devan shook his head to clear his thoughts and focus on the task at hand, knowing it was likely that Mizar was growing ever more impatient.

“Hey, I get it,” Jirel said, refusing to give up in his efforts to reconnect with his acquaintance, “You need latinum. Hell, we all do, right? And you thought this sort of crazy scheme wasn’t gonna fly with me, so you thought you had to go to this kind of extreme—”

“I already told you,” Devan interjected, “I—It’s not about the latinum.”

“Then what?”

Jirel refused to ease up on his pressing, now that he had Devan on his own, away from the more overbearing presence of Mizar. For her part, Natasha was on exactly the same wavelength, as she joined in the questioning again.

“You mentioned someone called Palmor Fot,” she offered, “Who is that?”

Devan felt another rush of anguish rush through him. He steadied himself on the side of the cylinder, then gripped the recoupler a little more tightly and finished his work on the final relay. With that, everything was ready.

“I—I can’t say,” he replied eventually, as he stepped back and started over to return the coupler to the cupboard, “It’s between me and him.”

“Huh,” Jirel nodded, “Revenge, then. For what?”

Devan didn’t turn around. He kept his focus on returning the tool to the cupboard. But Jirel had found a thread, and he gave it a few gentle tugs.

“For what, Devan? If not latinum? A business deal? A woman?”

There was a sudden clattering sound as Devan’s legs buckled for a moment, forcing him to grab onto the shelves of the cupboard for support. It was the first time he’d thought about her for a while, and he hadn’t expected the rush of emotion to hit him quite so strongly. Back on the other side of the bay, Jirel craned his neck around to see the sight of his old friend struggling to keep a lid on his emotions.

It seemed like he had his answer.

“A woman,” he nodded quietly.

Devan turned back to him, his face racked with emotion. Jirel saw the same face he’d known back on the Tyran Scrapyards. But also different somehow. Darker. “I’m sorry,” he managed to get out, “I—I don’t want to—”

“Hey,” Jirel offered with a half-smile, persisting with his gentle charm offensive on his estranged friend, “Remember back at the yards? What was that big Nausicaan’s name?”

Devan looked confused by this sudden change in the Trill’s line of questioning. On the other side of the bomb, Natasha listened on, silently. Though while she was glued to the conversation, she also saw something out of the corner of her eye which caused her some amount of interest.

“I don’t think I remember him having a name,” Devan admitted eventually.

“Me neither,” Jirel chuckled, “What is it with Nausicaans? Either way, I remember when we crossed him.”

“You crossed him, Jirel.”

“Sounds familiar,” Natasha muttered from behind the Trill.

“Ok, semantics,” he shrugged, “Point is, someone - possibly me - stole a big scrap project from his docking bay. And when he found out who it was, he swore he was gonna have his revenge. So we spent weeks hiding out in other sections of the yards, avoiding him, ducking the fight.”

Devan nodded unhappily at the memory as Jirel continued with a knowing smile.

“Until you convinced me that we couldn’t keep running forever. We had to look after ourselves. You told me that together, we could stand up to that Nausicaan.”

“I did,” Devan nodded, “And then—”

“Yeah, and then he beat us so badly we ended up spending two weeks in the medical bay,” Jirel acknowledged, imagining Natasha’s eye-roll in his mind even if he couldn’t see it, “But the point is that we got through it, together. And I promise you we can do the same with whatever’s going on here. Just tell me why you’re doing this.”

Devan stared back at the ungainly sight of the underwear-clad Jirel strapped to the bomb, and found himself replying. For a second, Jirel saw a flicker of something play across his friend’s face. “My wife,” he said quietly, “Palmor Fot stole my wife from me.”

“Ok,” Jirel nodded back in understanding, “I get it. So if you untie us, I promise you that me and my crew will help you get her back without the need for hostages, or bombs, or—”

“No!” Devan snapped suddenly, turning back for the exit of the cargo bay, “I’m sorry, Jirel. But I can’t make you any more of a part of this.”

Jirel grimaced in exasperation as Devan disappeared back into the main corridor of the Bounty. He called out in frustration.

“I’m already part of this! A very big, strapped-to-a-bomb part of—Ow!”

He yelped in pain at the sudden, unexpected sensation of Natasha yanking on the cuffs to get his attention.

“What the hell was that for—?”

“Ssh,” she muttered, “Look over there.”

Given their relative positions on either side of the bomb, it took Jirel a few moments to figure out exactly where ‘over there’ was. But as soon as he saw it, he knew that was what she was talking about. Next to the supply cupboard Devan had been working in, just within reach of one of their outstretched legs, lay a small engineering tool.

One that must have fallen out of the cupboard when Devan had staggered into it.

A small engineering tool with a number of uses. Including cutting through metal.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rear doors of the Ktarian Moonrise opened with a telltale hiss.

For a moment, all that was revealed through the opened doors was a patch of darkness, leading to the bar’s rear storeroom. Then, there was a brief hint of movement, as Klath peered around the corner of the door with his disruptor poised.

Rain thudded down onto the ground of the alleyway behind the bar, but the Klingon peered through the continued downpour, all the way down to where the alley opened up onto a wider square of ground that the row of buildings the bar was a part of backed onto.

And in the middle of that square sat the stocky form of an atmospheric shuttle from the Varris IV Security Division, side door opened ready for boarding.

Having tactically assessed the situation as swiftly as his old training from the Klingon Defence Force allowed, Klath ducked back inside the dark storeroom. He had a tight grip of his weapon in one hand, and a tighter grip of the miserable Palmor in the other, the wily Ktarian still very much in the middle of a hostage situation.

To their side, Denella kept a similarly tight grip on Evina, while Sunek had Tegras in his own grasp. All kept their disruptors visible enough to keep their unwilling Ktarian companions keenly aware of the gravity of their situation.

“It looks clear,” the Klingon reported, “Though I am certain there will be guards positioned on the roof, and possibly more nearer the shuttle.”

“Hey,” Sunek chimed in, “Trelak has firm assurances from Chief Whats-his-name that we’re clear to get to the shuttle. That right?”

The Vulcan held up the small comms unit that they had located to continue their ongoing dialogue with the security team now that they were mobile.

“That’s right, Trelak,” Security Chief Tylor Ral affirmed, electing not to correct the Vulcan’s take on his name for the time being, “You have my word. We’re just glad that you’re giving us the other hostages for the time being. Safe and sound.”

“See?” Sunek grinned at his colleagues, “I’m a genius.”

“If you’re that confident,” Tegras grunted from Sunek’s side, “Perhaps you should leave a few more hostages behind.”

“I’m a genius, but I still need insurance.”

Denella suppressed a shudder at that off-hand comment. The logic of their plan made sense, and it was clear that whatever security teams were positioned around the shuttle would be significantly less keen to start shooting with civilians in the mix.

Still, the fact that she was on a Ktarian colony, having already committed a fair few felonies and on her way to committing half a dozen more, and was now using an innocent woman as a shield, for the benefit of two people who had installed a bomb on her ship, wasn’t exactly filling

her with comfort.

"I'm sorry about this," she offered to Evina.

The dirt-streaked miner studied the Orion's expression for a moment, and then nodded. "Yes. You are, aren't you. I've seen a lot of thugs down on this colony before, but there's something different here. You're—"

"Green. I know. You'll get used to it," Denella offered quickly, before looking back at Klath, "We need to get going."

"The transport inhibitor?"

Denella fumbled around in her pocket and then held up the small disc device she had carried with her from the bar. "It's not exactly designed to be used like this, but it should be enough to disrupt anything if they try to get clever."

"Won't stop a phaser though," Palmor muttered from Klath's side.

Denella kept her focus on the Klingon, who shrugged his burly shoulders in tacit acknowledgement of that point. Though there wasn't much they could do about that. "We go," Klath concluded, "But stay alert."

The six figures, led by Klath and the ever-reluctant Palmor, stepped out into the downpour.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Huh. Well I'll be damned."

Behind the cover offered by a large air filter stack on the roof of the bar, Tylor peered down through the rain at the motley gaggle of individuals as they emerged. True to the data that had been provided by the drone scans, there was indeed a Klingon, a Vulcan and an Orion on Varris IV. Armed, and leading their remaining trio of Ktarian hostages towards the empty atmospheric shuttle at the end of the narrow alley.

To his side, Deputy Jalon Sep moved over to him in a low crouch, keeping her voice low, but her tone still effortlessly formal. "Strike team inside reports that all other hostages are accounted for. And unharmed."

"Just like they promised," Tylor mused to himself.

Jalon didn't look entirely satisfied with that response from her superior, but she was careful not to let it show in her demeanour. She knew how important it was to maintain trust in the chain of command during a crisis situation.

"Chief," she offered instead, in as even a tone as was appropriate, "They still have three hostages. And they appear to be taking them onboard the shuttle."

"Let them go," Tylor muttered back as he watched the group slowly advancing towards the shuttle, "And make sure everyone understands that order, ok?"

Despite her level of training, his deputy paused for a moment.

She knew that wasn't the appropriate response to an order. The appropriate response was to affirm acknowledgement of said order and set about relaying it to the rest of the team. But she was sufficiently taken aback by the content of the order that she remained where she was for the moment, long enough for Tylor to notice.

"Relax, Deputy," he offered with a wry smile, "We've got most of the hostages out. But my instincts are still telling me we need to see the play out a little more."

He paused for a second, feeling stronger for the rekindling sense of excitement he was feeling to investigate such a mystery that was in front of him.

Retirement or no retirement, he suddenly felt like a detective again.

"Besides," he added, "They're getting into one of our shuttles, aren't they?"

She nodded in sudden understanding at the full extent of his plan.

"We'll activate the transponder remotely as soon as they're underway, and track them at a safe distance. See where it leads us. Like I said, there's more to this than some junkie holdup."

"Yes, Chief," she replied, "Understood."

Now satisfied with the plan, she grabbed her comms unit, ready to issue the order to the rest of the units. But, thanks to her momentary diversion from established procedure, she was delivering the order some twenty seven seconds later than Tylor had issued it.

Which turned out to be a problem. Because right then, the shooting started.

**End of Part Two**



## Part 3A

### Part Three

Two buildings down from the Ktarian Moonrise was an unassuming establishment that was currently being run as a kitsch laser nail salon, which itself was a front for an elaborate latinum laundering scheme, which itself was connected to a small-scale drug dealing network that spanned the entire colony.

But none of the four members of the Varris IV Security Division's 7-A Heavy Armed Unit, in place on the rooftop of the building, had any idea of the complex, multi-faceted scheme underneath them. Instead, they simply crouched behind their phaser rifles, focused on the rain-soaked alleyway.

On the end of the line of four, Deputy Constable Regor Lok was also focused on controlling the shivering that was threatening to consume his body.

The cause of the shivers were a combination of several things.

He was currently lying in a cold puddle of accumulated rainwater, which had soaked right into the thick layers of his uniform. That was certainly a contributing factor.

He had also been working since sunrise, on a prolonged double shift that was clearly not ending anytime soon, and as such had lost count of the number of double raktajinos with foam and sugar he had replicated for himself since he had woken up. That definitely wasn't helping.

But also, this was the first serious situation that Deputy Constable Regor Lok had found himself in since he had passed his advanced marksmanship course and joined the 7-A Heavy Armed Unit. And the pressure was starting to get to him.

Making sure not to shake his phaser rifle enough for his colleagues to notice, he took one hand off his weapon and wiped the rain from his eyes, blinking a few times to re-focus on their target.

The most recent orders they had received were to take up position and hold. Which was exactly what they had done.

Since then, there had only been radio silence over their intercoms.

Part of him wanted to call in, to request confirmation on their next move. But he had been told that wasn't the way to do things when you were part of a Heavy Armed Unit. You didn't query orders, or ask questions. You kept your finger on the trigger, and kept your focus on your target.

Then, he saw the figures. Six of them, furtively creeping down the alleyway towards the waiting shuttle. He kept them in his sights, just as he had been ordered to do.

During a later debriefing back at headquarters, Deputy Constable Regor Lok would be asked several times why he fired the first shot.

He wouldn't really have a straight answer.

It may have been the stress of the situation. It may have been that his view through the rain and the poor ambient lighting caused him to mistake a movement by one of the figures as an aggressive motion. It may have been the dozen or so double raktajinos with foam and sugar.

But whatever the specific cause was, what happened next was not up for any debate.

He felt his breathing become faster. He felt another shiver down his spine. He felt his shooting arm tense up on his rifle.

And he fired.

\* \* \* \* \*

None of the six figures had time to figure out where the first shot had come from.

All they knew was that one second they were edging towards the waiting shuttle, the side door yawning open to receive them. And the next, they were in the middle of a battlefield.

All three Bounty crew members reacted according to their own instincts, with each hostage at the mercy of whomever had a grip on them.

"Crap!"

Sunek opted for self-preservation and immediately made a break for the shuttle itself, dragging Tegras along with him. He made it inside just as a trio of phaser blasts scorched into the thick hull of the craft.

"No!"

Denella's own instincts resulted in an intricate piece of multi-tasking. She virtually threw Evina through the side door of the shuttle, to get her

to safety, while at the same time spinning around with her disruptor raised, looking for Klath.

“Ragh!”

Because she knew that Klath’s own instincts would be to immediately turn and fight. Even though the odds were clearly hopelessly against him.

Which was very bad news for Palmor Fot.

The growling Klingon fired off a few disruptor blasts as he swung around, intuitively aiming in the rough direction of where the initial shots had come from, on top of one of the nearby rooftops. All the while, he kept a firm grip on Palmor’s arm with his other hand.

“Let go of me!” the Ktarian screamed over the melee, “You’re going to get us both killed!”

Klath ignored him, and continued to fire back. Which may have been what his instincts told him to do, but in the context of the current situation, it merely served to exacerbate the issue.

Because while the initial flurry of phaser fire had been precipitated by Deputy Constable Regor Lok’s moment of weakness, the fact that they were now under fire themselves caused the rest of the guards in position to return fire.

Fortunately for the prone Klath and Palmor, none of the guards had a particularly clear shot right now through the rain and the mass of rooftops and buildings. But still the phaser blasts continued.

“Klath!” Denella called out from behind, as she fired off a couple of covering blasts of her own, “Get back here!”

The Klingon took a step backwards, keeping his back to the shuttle and his eyes on the danger even as more shots peppered the alleyway.

“Hey, Denella!” Sunek called back from inside the shuttle, “Get in already!”

Denella gritted her teeth. She ignored the Vulcan’s call to get herself to safety, and prepared to dash the short distance over to where Klath was still fighting. She saw one phaser blast arc down and catch Palmor on the leg, causing the Ktarian to cry out in agony and collapse to the ground.

And then she heard a deeper, pained growl from Klath.

And she saw him fall.

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

“Hold your fire! I repeat: All teams, hold your fire!”

Jalon bellowed the order into her comms unit, over the sound of the firefight all around them. She and Tylor were ducked down behind their cover, as further disruptor blasts whistled past their position from the strangers down in the alley.

After a few more shots, the Ktarian side of the impromptu battle fell silent, the night air now merely filled with the patter of rainfall and the odd covering disruptor shot from below. A few seconds later, with no further attacks coming their way, even the disruptor fire ceased.

Tylor grimaced in frustration at how quickly the situation had spiralled out of control. The thumping in his temples returned with a vengeance.

Ever since he had arrived on Varris IV, he had found that most of the personnel under his command were not exactly the best and the brightest that Ktarian Security had available. Most of them were either wet behind the ears trainees who had been unfortunate enough to be assigned to Varris IV fresh out of their training programmes. Or long-serving veterans too slow-witted or ineffective to have been seriously considered for a transfer elsewhere.

Ordinarily, that hadn't especially bothered him. After all, he had only come to Varris IV for a final payday before retirement, and the less overly capable subordinates making his life difficult with their initiative and enthusiasm, the better.

But now Varris IV was facing an actual crisis, he was starting to have some doubts about the rank and file available to him. He just prayed that their aim with a phaser was as haphazard as their permanent records.

Alongside him, Jalon breathed a shallow sigh of relief as the shooting ceased. But she also felt a pang of guilt that her momentary inaction, and her unforgivable deviation from established protocol, could have had a potentially fatal result.

Tylor cautiously peered over the top of their cover as he grabbed the comms unit still patched through to the group at the shuttle. “Trelok?” he grunted with urgency, “You still with me, Trelok?”

There was a burst of static.

Through the rain, he could just about make out the shuttle, and he saw two figures being dragged limply across the wet ground into the side door.

“Goddammit,” he muttered, to himself as much as to his deputy, “Two down. Can't tell how bad.”

Jalon swallowed a gasp as she saw the activity down by the shuttle for herself. “Chief,” she replied, managing to keep most of the emotion out of her voice, “I didn't mean to—”

“Trelok! Talk to me!”

Tylor cut her off mid-apology as he barked back down the comms unit, and Jalon got the implied message. Now wasn't the time for apologies or recriminations, and all of Tylor's old instincts from back on Ktaris were now kicking in.

There was another burst of static from the comms link. Then, a familiar voice.

“Hey!” Sunek yelled over the link, agitation clear in his tone, “What the hell was that? You promised we'd be clear all the way to the shuttle!”

“I'm sorry about that, Trelok. You have my word, that wasn't supposed to happen.”

“Starting to think your word isn't worth much!”

“What's the situation down there?” Tylor continued, making the concern in his voice as clear as he could in an effort to underline his sincerity.

Down in the square, he could just about make out the final figure disappearing inside the shuttle.

“Ugh,” the Vulcan griped, “Looks like we've got two injured. One badly. So, yeah, thanks for all of that, guys!”

“The hostages—?”

“Ok, screw this,” Sunek fired off as the shuttle door closed, “We're getting the hell out of here. Just like you promised we could!”

“Trelok,” Tylor urged, “You need to keep this channel open, and we need to—”

The comms link definitively clicked closed. Tylor let out a tired sigh and checked his chronometer, seeing that they had officially passed into the early hours of a new day on Varris IV. He rubbed the rainwater out of his eyes, even as the anti-grav units on the underside of the shuttle down in the square began to glow a familiar deep yellow, and the small craft began to ascend into the heavens.

Through the downpour, Tylor and Jalon watched as the shuttle uncertainly gained cruising height, and the rear thrusters fired up and propelled it away from the scene.

Mercifully, as far as Tylor was concerned, this time none of the more trigger-happy members of the Heavy Armed Units dotted around decided



to take matters into their own hands. As per Tylor's slightly tardily-delivered orders, they let them go.

Tylor sighed again and stood up straight from behind the cover, stretching his aching body that was crying out after so long crouched down.

He was definitely getting too old for this sort of thing.

The shuttle skimmed along just underneath the heavy layer of rain clouds, and then banked up and disappeared from view. As soon as it did so, Tylor turned to Jalon and nodded, before leading her off the roof.

It was time to give pursuit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the shuttle, the ride was proving to be a bumpy one.

The interior of the craft was fairly generic, with two pilot seats at the front, semi-partitioned from the main body, which was a wide, open-plan design. There was a bench of seats down the opposite wall to the side door, where Denella and Sunek had managed to lie the injured Klath and Palmor before they had departed, and a couple of raised storage crates further back, where Evina and Tegras sat, clinging on for dear life.

A fenced off area at the very rear housed a transporter. It was clear that the shuttle was designed to ferry security teams where they needed to go as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

But there was very little in the way of smooth efficiency in their current trip. The small vessel bucked and weaved around uncertainly as it flew onwards, tossing the six occupants around from side to side with varying degrees of violence.

"Keep us steady!" Denella called out, as she did her best to tend to the wounded on the bench.

"Good call, genius! Hadn't thought of that!"

In the pilot's seat up front, Sunek fired off the comeback even as he focused on desperately trying to figure out the controls in front of him.

The Vulcan had, on plenty of occasions, referred to himself as the greatest pilot in the galaxy. And while that statement was usually presented humorously, as so many of Sunek's statements were, there was still a kernel of truth to it as far as he was concerned. His distinctly un-Vulcan ego really was of the considered opinion that he was a master at the controls of any craft.

He had learned his piloting skills pretty much on the fly, after he had left his life on Vulcan with the V'tosh ka'tur behind. And after leaving his home, he had found himself behind the controls of a variety of ships as he had drifted through the galaxy.

To his surprise, he had found that, in the pilot's seat at least, he was a natural daredevil. His swirling emotions gave him the confidence and the desire to always push the envelope, and his intrinsic Vulcan mind gave him the ability to calculate precisely what he needed to do in order to pull it off.

Onboard the Bounty, he had navigated his way through endless firefights and squabbles with a myriad number of enemies. He had steered them through or around all manner of interstellar hazards, from gravity wells, to quantum singularities, to tachyon eddies. And over the years, his skills had improved and his ego had swelled to the point that he genuinely started to believe that he was the greatest pilot in the galaxy.

Until he had gotten behind the controls of a Ktarian atmospheric shuttle, that was.

The shuttle was an older design than he was used to. The controls consisted of a bank of mechanical switches and dials as opposed to the sleeker LCARS panels of the Bounty. He wasn't entirely sure what half of the dials were measuring. There were too many of them to even begin to try to decipher. And the switches themselves were labelled with a confusing sequence of proprietary acronyms, which didn't help matters.

There was a central control column, which he was more familiar with. But for reasons he couldn't begin to fathom the logic of, moving it left and right actually moved the shuttle up and down, and up and down were used to steer from side to side.

If all of that wasn't bad enough, there was the matter of traffic.

Although the skies of Varris IV were relatively empty this early in the morning, there were still a few other shuttles and drone vehicles flying merrily through the night above the main settlement and in between some of the taller buildings. And if the controls were baffling enough, Sunek had absolutely no idea what the rules of the skies were on a Ktarian mining colony.

As a result, not only was it taking all of his piloting skill to figure out how to fly the shuttle, it was taking all of his spatial awareness to avoid being involved in an almighty mid-air collision.

"This is the single dumbest thing we've ever done!" he called out in frustration as he desperately flicked the control column down to move the shuttle to the right in order to avoid a substantially larger delivery shuttle meandering across their path.

"It was your idea!" Denella called back.

As the shuttle continued to buck and weave, the Orion kept her own focus on the improvised triage area she had established on the main compartment's bench.

Klath grimaced as he gripped his left leg, blood already seeping through the fabric of his trousers where the phaser blast had caught him just above the knee. "I am fine," he predictably grunted, as Denella tore at the fabric to get a better look at the wound.

"Liar," she fired back, as she saw the extent of the injury.

To her rudimentary medical eye, it looked like the blast had only caught him with a glancing blow. But even a glancing blow from a Ktarian phaser rifle had been enough to do substantial damage.

"What about me?" the shrill voice of Palmor reverberated around the confines of the shuttle from the other end of the bench, "I'm injured too!"

Denella glanced over at the Ktarian, who was holding his substantially less badly injured arm, and waved her disruptor at him dismissively. "You'll live."

The Ktarian didn't seem too pleased with that response, and fired back by gesturing down at Klath's leg with a dark sneer. "Perhaps. But your friend might not."

Denella clenched her jaw and tightened her grip on her weapon. Not for the first time, she wished they could have left this particular hostage behind at the bar.

But they still needed him.

They were disturbed by the shuttle making another violent change of direction, causing Klath to growl slightly as his wounded leg jarred awkwardly against the bench.

"Sorry! Another truck!" Sunek called out from the cockpit, "Also, does anyone wanna tell me where we're going?"

Denella looked up at Klath, then across at Palmor, who seemed determined to remain mute on that particular subject all over again.

"Go," Klath grunted at her through gritted teeth, "We must get to the latinum."

"But you're—"

"I am fine," he lied again.

She gave her friend a particularly withering glare, which he countered with his best insistent nod.

"Um," Tegras awkwardly piped up from the rear of the shuttle, "If I may?"

Everyone on the bench turned to the older Ktarian, as the vessel swayed in the air again. He pointed at a storage locker embedded in the wall of the shuttle's interior.

"There should be a medical kit in there," he explained, "Standard requirement for all atmospheric shuttles on the colony."

"And I'm a registered field medic back at the mine," Evina added from his side, "I can take a look at your leg for you."

Denella smiled at the source of the unlikely assistance. Klath merely grimaced further, continuing his occasional role as the worst patient in the history of the universe. "Thank you," the Orion engineer nodded at the two Ktarians, "And again, I'm sorry that you had to be a part of this."

Evina smiled back, then gingerly made her way across the unstable deck of the shuttle and retrieved a small medical kit from the storage locker.

"Pah," Palmor mocked, "Tending to our captors' wounds. Perhaps while she does that, you might like to fetch him some Liset root tea and a pillow, Tegras?"

"They may have taken us hostage," Evina calmly replied, "But they protected us back there when the shooting started. They didn't need to do that."

"They didn't protect me very well," Palmor grouched, looking down at his arm.

Evina ignored him and approached Klath, who kept his disruptor raised in his hand despite the growing pain in his leg.

"I will be watching you closely," he grunted at her.

"Good to know," she replied with a sliver of sarcasm.

Denella mustered a smile, then stepped over and grabbed Palmor's good arm. "Come on, you. Time to tell our chauffeur where we're going."

Before the Ktarian had the chance to begin a fresh round of protestations, he was hauled up into the cramped cockpit, where Sunek was still wrestling with the controls.

"Ok, buddy boy," the Vulcan called out over his shoulder, gesturing to a particular set of dials on the panel in front of him, "Coordinates go in there. I think."

As Denella had expected, Palmor didn't immediately try to do anything. She sighed and prodded her disruptor into the small of his back again. "Seriously, we don't have a lot of time."

With extreme reluctance, the Ktarian leaned over and tapped in the requisite coordinates.

“There,” Sunek nodded, “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Next stop...um, wherever we’re going.”

He tapped a few more controls in front of him, briefly activating the shuttle’s turning indicators before stopping them again with a slightly embarrassed glance, and then gripped the control column with determination as the shuttle sped on to its destination.

With Sunek focused forwards and Denella relaxing slightly now that they were on their way, neither of them noticed Palmor gently reaching into his pocket with the hand of his injured arm. He felt a familiar small disc-shaped object inside, and tapped the button on top.

Then he allowed himself the slightest of smiles, having played his final roll of the dice.

## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

Some distance behind, a similar Ktarian shuttle was cutting a considerably more dignified pattern through the early morning traffic.

The vessel was working nowhere near its top speed. Instead, it was hanging back and keeping a watching brief. Metaphorically, at least.

Neither occupant could actually see their target. The other shuttle was lost somewhere in the gloom and the rain and the traffic. But that didn't matter. So long as they kept within range of the tracking transponder of the other shuttle, they were on the right track.

Tylor peered through the forward window of the shuttle, ignoring the gentle throbbing in his temples, as they gently picked their way through the few other vehicles out and about at this time. Alongside him, Jalon expertly worked the controls, keeping her focus on following the trace from the transponder. Which was proving trickier than she'd have liked.

"They're all over the place," she grunted as she completed another turn to fall in line behind a bulky cargo transporter, "Altitude, direction, they're going to cause an accident if they're not careful."

"Just keep us in range," he replied, "Let's not spook them."

Jalon nodded and kept her eyes on the instruments.

Tylor could have taken the controls himself. He knew that he was more experienced at pursuit and interception than his deputy from his time further down the ranks back on Ktaris, and especially in atmospheric shuttles as old as the ones still used on Varris IV.

But he'd seen the impact that her momentary lapse in protocol on the comms link back at the Ktarian Moonrise, and the resulting firefight, had caused. And the last thing the grizzled old chief needed now was his most valuable officer having a full-blown crisis of confidence. So he had decided to make sure she had something to keep her focused on the immediate task at hand, without second guessing herself for failing to follow procedure.

"They're changing heading," she reported quickly, "Looks like they're taking a direct route through to the old financial district."

"Huh," Tylor mused with intrigue, "Not a lot there these days, is there?"

"I believe that depends on what you're looking for, Chief," Jalon replied mirthlessly.

Tylor mustered a nod at this knowing comment.

As Varris IV had faded into insignificance in the eyes of the central Ktarian government, the main financial hubs of the settlements across the planet's surface, once thriving hubs of commerce filled with mining enterprises, retail spaces and recreational districts for the workers, had all slowly dwindled away.

After the business and the commerce had departed, the deserted streets that had been left behind were filled by financial schemes of a different variety. Nowadays, the financial districts were where you went if you wanted to score some narcotics, some illicit materials, some company for the evening, or any combination of the three.

Still, it now seemed the most likely destination for their quarry, and that was good enough for Tylor to reach for the comms unit on the shuttle's bank of controls.

"Teams three, four and seven, divert to the south side of the financial district," he grunted, "All other teams maintain the outer perimeter. Keep your data receivers pointing at that transponder, but do not engage until I confirm. Out."

He set the comms unit back down and braced as Jalon made another sharp turn to keep them on the right track.

"Chief," she piped up as she worked, "I need to formally acknowledge my failure earlier."

Tylor sighed and shook his head. Putting her in the pilot's seat hadn't distracted her for long.

"It was an inexcusable breach of protocol to question your order," she continued, "And it could have resulted in more casualties. Rest assured that when this is over, I will submit a full report to the Head of Ktarian Security and recommend myself for a transfer—"

"Hey," Tylor grunted, causing her to pause as she flicked the shuttle to the left, "You made a mistake, Deputy. Now, I don't like it when that happens. But we all make them from time to time. And over the years, I've found that what's really important is what you do after the mistake."

She went to reply, but immediately had to execute another turn, which allowed him to continue.

"Now, we've still got a lot of work ahead of us tonight before we get back to our families. And I need my deputy to stick with me through it all, ok?"

Although her focus was still on the transponder reading and the traffic around them, Jalon mustered a whisper of a smile.

"Ok, Chief."

“And listen,” he added, “Never feel like you shouldn’t question my orders, ok? Like I said, we all make mistakes.”

She considered this for a thoughtful moment, before an alert from the shuttle’s computer called her attention to another navigational change.

Tylor let her complete the latest sharp turn.

And contemplated whether he was making a mistake right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ow!”

Jirel couldn’t help but yelp as the tiny laser cutter nicked his skin for what felt like the millionth time.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m really starting to doubt that.”

Natasha couldn’t help but suppress a smile as she redoubled her efforts to complete the task at hand. A task which was proving somewhat difficult.

With some small amount of effort, some coordinated shuffling around the circumference of the bomb, and what she was pretty sure was a strained hamstring, she had managed to hook the small engineering tool with her foot, close enough for the pair to secure it in their hands.

Then, after an awful lot of false starts, Jirel had finally been able to position the tool in her left hand in the right direction for her to activate it and laser through the metal. Or roughly the right direction, at least. It seemed to be pointing at Jirel’s wrist as much as it was pointing at the cuffs themselves.

In fact, so far, she hadn’t made contact with the metal at all.

“I’m doing my best,” she insisted to the slightly singed Trill, “You try doing this when you can’t see what you’re doing.”

“Gladly. Hand it over, and let’s see how your wrist likes it.”

“We don’t have time for that,” she countered, not entirely accurately, “Plus I don’t wanna risk dropping it again.”

“Fine,” he pouted, “Just be a bit more careful? I’d hate to be one of your patients in surgery.”

She elected not to go for another jibe in response, and instead refocused on her task, feeling for the cuffs and doing her best to align the end of the laser tool with the edge of the metal, before carefully depressing the button for a test shot.

“Ow!”

“Sorry!”

While still apologetic, part of her did start to wonder if she was subconsciously doing it on purpose.

There was a moment of silence, as she tried to prepare for another attempt. A silence that Jirel decided it would be a good idea to fill.

“Hey, listen, I guess...I’m sorry too.”

She suppressed a frustrated sigh. There was definitely something to the subconscious theory. “Ugh. If this is about—”

“Mizar!” he hissed back quickly.

“Yep, that’s what I thought. And as I am getting so very bored of telling you, it’s none of your business—”

“No,” Jirel hissed again, more urgently, “He’s coming down the corridor!”

With realisation now dawning, Natasha jerked her hand up so quickly that she nearly dropped the cutting tool completely. But she was just about able to gather it up and hide the small device inside her palm as best she could, pressing her hand into Jirel’s own hand in an action that she hoped would simply come across as a strategic attempt to hide their means of escape, and nothing else.

“What the hell are you smiling about?” Mizar grunted at the dorky grin on Jirel’s face as he and Devan entered the bay.

Before Jirel could muster a response, Mizar’s attention was drawn to the mess around the supply cupboard that Devan had been using earlier.

“And what the hell’s all that?”

“Um,” Devan muttered nervously, chewing his nails, “That—Um, I slipped.”

Natasha felt herself tense up involuntarily as she saw Mizar studying the bits of engineering equipment on the ground. She couldn’t help but push her hand further into Jirel’s, who squeezed back tightly.

“And what if one of these tools had fallen close enough for them to get it, hmm?” the taller Ktarian continued to berate Devan, “What then?”

As the other Ktarian stammered and squirmed, Jirel felt the need to act. Both from the desire to somehow protect his old friend from further verbal abuse, and also from how emboldened he felt from the hand squeezing that was going on. “Come on, Mizar,” he scoffed, “You really think if we had a cutting tool, we’d still be tied up here like a pair of idiots?”

Mizar whirled around to the Trill, as Natasha felt herself tense up even more. Why the hell was Jirel lampshading their actual plan like this? She did her best to communicate her displeasure with a slightly irritated squeeze of her clenched fist, causing Jirel’s grin to widen slightly.

The Trill remained confident in his approach, as he kept his attention on the handsome Ktarian. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was beginning to see that he might have more than a little in common with Mizar. Specifically when it came to his ego.

And that meant that, if Jirel was correct, he could be easily distracted. After all, as far as Mizar’s ego was concerned, he was a genius, and they were a pair of idiots. So how could they have the means to escape?

Mizar’s eyes narrowed with disdain, as Jirel kept his focus on him, hoping that he was a good enough judge of bad characters. “You know,” the Ktarian replied eventually with a slightly superior grin, “I’m almost going to miss these little chats of ours.”

His grin stretched to a sneer as he stepped over to the other side of the bomb, where Natasha was putting on her best impression of someone who didn’t have a small cutting tool nestled inside her palm.

“And as for you,” Mizar’s ego continued, all concerns about the engineering equipment now forgotten, “I guess I’m going to miss just about everything about you.”

“Gross,” Jirel chimed in.

For once, Natasha was in complete agreement with him. And she mentally added yet another session that she’d need with the quadrant’s best counsellor to try and get to the deeper reasons for her consistently terrible taste in men.

“P—Please,” Devan quietly offered, “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Jirel said, more seriously, “Your shuttle?”

Mizar allowed himself a lingering look at Natasha before walking back over to his partner in crime with a casual swagger. “Yes, I’m afraid this is farewell. Your friends down there definitely need a hurry-up. So we’re going to try and save a bit of time and make sure we’re at a suitably safe distance to bring our little present into play.”

He gestured idly to the bomb in between the two of them. Jirel grimaced and forced his focus back for one last effort to appeal to his old friend. “Devan, come on. I’m telling you, if this guy stole your wife, I can help with that.”

“N—No, you can’t,” Devan replied, “Only Mizar can.”

“Why?” the Trill asked, with genuine confusion.

Devan paused for a moment, and looked over at the confident Mizar, and then back at his old friend from the Tyran Scrapyards.

“B—Because I need someone who can help me kill.”

Jirel felt a chill pass down his spine.

As soon as Devan said the words, he looked away, unable to face his friend’s glare any longer.

Before Jirel could formulate an appropriate response, Mizar patted Devan forcefully on the shoulder, and the two of them made for the exit of the cargo bay, heading for the Bounty’s transporter. He stared into space for a few moments, still processing his friend’s words. Until he heard a cough from behind him.

“You can let go of my hand now,” Natasha urged with a waggle of her clenched fist, “Kinda feels like we need to get out here as soon as possible.”

“Oh,” Jirel nodded quickly, “Yep.”

He unclasped her hand, and Natasha quickly started to reposition the cutting tool for another attempt to breach the cuffs. As she continued to work in silence, Jirel’s attention switched to something else that he’d just realised.

“I, um, we were just holding hands that tight to hide the cutter, right?”

There was no immediate response forthcoming from the other side of the bomb. At least, not a verbal one.

“Ow!”

## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

“How’re you feeling?”

Denella looked down at Klath, whose leg wound was now looking substantially improved thanks to Evina’s triage work.

“Better,” he admitted, before looking over at the Ktarian woman and adding with a little reluctance, “Thank you.”

“It’s not fixed,” Evina admitted, “You’ll need a proper medical facility for that. But I’ve cleaned it up and stopped the bleeding for now.”

The hulking Klingon started to stand up, showing further reluctance in accepting help from Evina and Denella to get back onto his feet. As soon as he put his weight on his injured limb, he immediately stifled a grimace.

“Like I said,” Evina added sympathetically, “Not fixed.”

Denella watched on with concern as Klath tested his weight again. He eventually looked up at the Orion’s dubious expression and nodded. “I can still fight,” he affirmed.

“Sure,” she sighed, “If any guards storm the shuttle when we land, I’ll just ask them to play fair, line up in an orderly fashion and let the guy with one leg shoot at them.”

Klath responded with a withering glare, but before he could offer anything more as a counterpoint, Sunek called out from the cockpit.

“Hey, we might have a problem here.”

Klath’s glare switched to one of concern in an instant, as Denella’s own expression hardened. “Feels like that’s the theme of today, doesn’t it?” she offered as she stepped and Klath hobbled over to the Vulcan’s position.

Sunek was still wrestling with the controls to the shuttle, but had enough of a handle on them by this point to be able to glance over at them and gesture out of the cockpit window. “We’re almost at these coordinates, and something doesn’t feel right. I’m not seeing anything on the scans that looks like a secure facility. Most of these buildings look totally abandoned. It’s like Friday night at a Promellian discotheque down there.”

Denella peered out of the cockpit window. Sunek had successfully located the controls for the wipers, and they were now manfully fighting a losing battle against the lashing downpour hitting the transparent surface. Through the dark skies, the driving rain and the shining beacons and lights of the scant passing traffic, she made out rows and rows of tall skyscrapers below them, packed close like a small forest of trees straining up towards the top of the canopy layer.

But while this vista looked like it might have been an impressive sight at some point in Varris IV’s past, the sense of decay all around was palpable, even through the pitch black downpour.

The buildings looked run down. Windows smashed, metal supports rusting and stone edifices crumbling. Around the tops of some of them, local plant life seemed to be flourishing, sprouting out from the mighty skyscrapers in haphazard tufts.

As Denella chewed her lip and Sunek flicked the shuttle around to complete another loop, Tegras called out from the rear, having seen the view himself.

“No, no,” the grey-haired Ktarian said, shaking his head, “This is the financial district. There’s no latinum here.”

Sunek and Denella both mustered a double take at this.

But Klath’s attention was diverted by something else. And the Klingon’s leg may not have been at one hundred percent, but there was nothing wrong with his arms.

“Argh!”

The squeal of pain from Palmor caused everyone else in the shuttle to turn around and look at where Klath had shot out a burly limb and grabbed the Ktarian’s own arm.

“You,” Klath grunted, wrenching Palmor’s hand out of his pocket, as Denella spied the tiny disc-shaped object in his grasp.

She reached over and grabbed the disc from the struggling and horrified Ktarian. It didn’t take long for her engineering brain to figure out what it was. “Some sort of tracker. Or a homing device.”

“A trap,” Klath grunted unhappily, squeezing extra hard on Palmor’s arm and eliciting a further squeal of pain.

“He’s been trying to scam you again,” Tegras nodded, “And he’s got plenty of contacts around the colony to call on for a rescue.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Sunek tutted sarcastically from the pilot’s seat.

“I don’t know what this fool is talking about—!”

That was as far as Palmor got with his latest protestation. The rest of the sentence was lost in an even louder scream of pain, as Klath grabbed the Ktarian's other injured arm and squeezed down on the phaser burn.

"The truth," he grunted, as Palmor's scream reached a crescendo, "Where is your latinum?"

"I—I swear," he stammered, "It's here—!"

Another squeeze. Another scream.

Denella winced at the sound, and part of her wanted to tell Klath to stop. But a greater part of her was tired of being screwed around, and was focused on the Bounty in orbit, and the possible bomb in its cargo bay. So she allowed the heavy-handed treatment to continue.

"My penthouse!" Palmor screamed eventually, "T—The latinum is in my penthouse! I haven't used a holding facility since one of my shipments got stolen last year!"

Klath kept up the pressure on Palmor's wound as he stared into the eyes of his adversary, tears beginning to form from the pain. Eventually, he released his grip and turned to Denella with a look of satisfaction.

"The truth."

"I know where his penthouse is," Tegras offered.

The defeated Palmor didn't even bother to call out this latest piece of treachery from one of his fellow Ktarians. Released from Klath's grip, he slumped back onto the bench down the side of the shuttle's rear section, holding his injured arm.

Denella saw the look of pain, and reluctantly gestured to Evina. "Now you've helped my friend's leg, might be an idea to fix his arm."

Evina gave the Orion a dubious look, one that suggested that she didn't entirely agree that Palmor deserved that sort of treatment. But the look of compassion from Denella eventually caused her to nod and step back over to the medical kit.

"Um, guys," Sunek chimed in again, "I realise I'm becoming a serious buzzkill here, but we've got another problem."

"What?" Klath grunted, as he, Denella and Tegras turned their attention back to the driving rain in front of the shuttle.

"I've got something closing fast on our position," the Vulcan offered as he gestured to the controls in front of him, "And I'm still figuring out how to read a lot of this, but I think it's either another shuttle, or a cataclysmic rift in spacetime."

Denella compartmentalised the slight feeling of shame that registered when she instinctively glanced through the cockpit window for signs of a cataclysmic rift in spacetime, and slid into the co-pilot's seat next to the Vulcan.

"Get us the hell out of here."

"Already on it."

Sunek didn't need telling twice. He pirouetted the shuttle around and took off in a flash through the downpour.

Palmor Fot's contacts had arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I repeat, all units move in. Intercept and escort!"

Security Chief Tylor Ral fired the order out over the comms link as Deputy Jalon Sep kicked their security shuttle's systems up to full power. Their watching brief was over.

Moments ago, the readouts of their shuttle had begun to flare up with alerts, as they had detected a suspicious craft that was breaking several Varris IV traffic laws, and appeared to be intercepting the shuttle they were tailing. That had been enough to make the two most senior members of the colony's slapdash security forces into action.

Tylor gripped onto the shuttle console, his headache forgotten, as Jalon gunned the thrusters and moved in on the location of the transponder trace.

Elsewhere, on the perimeter that had been established in the skies above the financial district of the main settlement, several identical shuttles began their own manoeuvres towards the targets.

"Is this what your instincts were expecting, Chief?" Jalon couldn't help but ask as she flicked on the security shuttles alert sirens to clear a path through the traffic.

"I'm not entirely sure what I was expecting, Deputy. That's kinda the trouble with instincts."

Jalon suppressed a stifled smile at this, as she swung the shuttle into a sharp climb to avoid a small civilian craft.

"But," Tylor continued, "Something's definitely going down. And I can't risk leaving those remaining hostages with them any longer. So I'd



say it's time to round 'em up."

"With pleasure, Chief," she nodded, before she acknowledged a chance on her instruments, "But they're moving!"

"I see 'em," Tylor nodded, grabbing the comms unit again, "Teams four, five and seven, intercept the new target. All other teams, form up with the lead shuttle for the primary target. Stay with them, keep them out of civilian lanes, use grapplers if you have to, but get 'em stopped. Out."

As he clicked off the comms link, he turned back to Jalon, whose focus was entirely on the task at hand, all of her previous doubts having been forgotten now they had a job to do. "Right then, Deputy," the grizzled chief nodded, "Let's go get these sons of bitches."

The shuttle burst forwards, sirens blaring, and closed in on their target.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh, good, more shuttles."

Sunek managed to fire off his latest volley of sarcasm even as he wrenched the control stick in front of him upwards and to the right, to throw the Ktarian shuttle to the left and downwards.

Denella gripped on to the console and the other passengers did their best to brace as Sunek managed to just thread the shuttle past the edge of the wall of a rusted skyscraper.

The Orion checked the console in front of her and grimaced as she saw the fresh traces that Sunek had been referring to. "These ones look like they're from Ktarian Security," she reported, "There must be a transponder in here somewhere."

"Probably too late to find it now," Sunek called back, as he flicked the control stick to the right again to send the shuttle into a sharper descent.

Denella ignored his comment and began to do her best to check through the ship's systems for some sign of tracking software.

The tiny craft plunged deeper into the maze of crumbling skyscrapers, dropping away from the civilian traffic in the higher altitudes, pursued by four identical security shuttles, all of them with sirens blaring.

Whoever Palmor Fot had called in as backup had temporarily broken off their own pursuit, disappearing into the night to try and lose their own tail. Which now left Sunek free to swing his controls one way, then the other, between the fading metal and glass constructs.

In the rear, Klath gritted his teeth as his weight was forced onto his injured leg, as Tegras, Evina and Palmor all gripped onto the padded bench.

"Slow down, you maniac!" Palmor managed to spit out, "You're going to get us all killed!"

"Relax," Sunek fired back, "I'm a professional."

The shuttle swung to the right, skimming around the corner of a building and getting almost close enough to scrape the paintwork as it did so.

"See? Loads of room!"

Sunek had initially assumed it would be an easy enough job to lose their pursuers amongst the buildings themselves. All he needed to do was get two or three turns ahead of them and make a swift break for the cloud cover well above their heads. But he was finding that, no matter how many turns he made, he couldn't get any sort of clear moment to make that break. Which backed up Denella's assumption.

"Yep," the Vulcan grimaced, "They're definitely tracking us."

"Damn it!" the Orion snapped, as the shuttle banked again and Klath growled in pain from behind, "I can't find anything here to disable! Whatever they're tracking us with must be some sort of built-in failsafe hardwired into the shuttle's systems somehow!"

"Makes sense. In case three complete idiots ever decided to take one out for an early morning joyride."

Sunek glanced over at his colleague and grinned, even as he pitched the shuttle around another turn. He was met by an unamused glare from Denella.

"Fine," he shrugged, "Two complete idiots and a hot chick."

He ignored the way the unamused glare increased in intensity, and skimmed the shuttle between two more skyscrapers before he continued.

"Either way, if we can't disable that transponder, then we're never gonna shake them."

At this, Denella was forced to concede the point with a nod of her head, even as she heard one of the Ktarians slide off the bench behind them onto the deck with a thump. "Any bright ideas, flyboy?" she replied.

Sunek considered the situation for a moment. Engaging both his methodical Vulcan mind, and his very un-Vulcan ego's confidence in his own abilities, to figure out how they were supposed to escape from a security detail who would literally always know where they were.

Then, he made out something down below them, on the ground. And suddenly, his eyes lit up. “Hey, did I see a transporter back there?”

“Um, yes,” she replied, a little confused, “Short-range only, though. Not enough to get us where we need to go, or—”

“Nah,” Sunek shot back, “That sounds perfect.”

“For what?”

The Vulcan glanced over at her and grinned, before calling back to the rest of the passengers.

“Everyone get ready. We’re going on a little trip...”

\* \* \* \* \*

The modest two-person Ktarian craft hung in the cloud layer that currently covered the entirety of Varris IV’s single vast continent.

It was a standard warp shuttle design, with small nacelles hanging down underneath a squat main body. But this one had been modified and stretched to include a more substantial rear section for habitation purposes, making this a long-range ship. Not an especially comfortable one, but one that could ferry Mizar and Devan to a distant spaceport once all this was over.

The tiny vessel bucked and rolled inside the swirling clouds, like a sailing boat on the ocean.

In one of the forward seats, Devan wished that the rising sickness in his stomach could be blamed on the uncertain motion of the craft. But he knew that wasn’t true. It was being caused entirely by the tension that was bubbling inside him. The feeling that he was finally closing in on his target. And that was fraying what remained of his nerves to breaking point and beyond.

He was this close to Palmor Fot.

Even picturing the name sent a fresh stab of pain through him, and he forced himself to try to focus on something else. Other than Palmor Fot. And the sickness in his stomach.

The waiting wasn’t helping.

They still hadn’t heard from the team down on the planet, and whether or not they had managed to find the latinum that his entire plan now apparently hinged on. But he couldn’t do anything about that. So he tried to ignore the memories swirling around inside his mind, and focused on quelling his nausea.

Alongside him, Mizar looked up from the padd he was idly reading, the screen displaying a list of current rentals available on Risa. Just one of the things he was considering spending his ill-gotten loot on, once they had recovered it.

The larger Ktarian gestured over at the object Devan was holding with a slight trace of amusement.

“You really sure you’ll be able to use that when the time comes?”

Devan didn’t look up at Mizar, but he did look down at the ugly disruptor pistol in his hands. The one he had purchased before he came to Varris IV.

Part of him still wanted to run away from all of this, to give up and not finish what he had started. But then the memories came swirling back through his mind, and he found himself overwhelmed by a new feeling. One of determination.

And he nodded.

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

“Damn, this guy’s good.”

The atmospheric shuttle banked sharply again, even as Tylor quietly offered his opinion regarding the skills of the pilot they were chasing.

Fortunately, he was sat next to the only pilot on all of Varris IV who was a match for whoever was behind the controls of their target. And Jalon was matching the precise skills of the guy in front, turn for turn.

She did have the advantage of the transponder, meaning that even if she missed a turn or two, she would be able to relocate their quarry with ease. But it hadn’t escaped Tylor’s attention that she hadn’t needed to utilise that particular cheat code even once so far.

He gripped his armrest tightly as she expertly dipped the shuttle around the corner of the next skyscraper, before making a sharp downward plunge to continue their pursuit.

“They’ve descended to 100 feet,” she reported calmly as they levelled off, “We’re getting a little too low for my liking, Chief.”

“He’s just trying to spook us,” he replied as calmly as he could, even as the shuttles blasted down the former main street of the district close enough to the ground for them to kick up plumes of dirt and detritus in their wake.

In truth, it was starting to work.

He had already ordered the additional teams that had joined them for the chase to back off and remain tracking them above the roofline of the district, not wanting to endanger too many of his personnel now the chase was getting so dicey. And he was also increasingly worried about the hostages onboard the other shuttle, not to mention any pedestrians out this late, as their target got more and more daring.

He might be good, but Tylor knew that every pilot had their limits.

Even though he knew it was probably futile, he grabbed the comms unit and switched the transmission to the shuttle ahead of them. “Trelor, if you can hear me, what do you say we both find somewhere to park up and talk this over, hmm? Before someone gets hurt?”

Silence. Just as he had expected.

“They’re dropping again,” Jalon reported urgently, matching their target’s moves, “Descending another twenty feet.”

Tylor grimaced, as both shuttles shimmied left and right at this new, even lower altitude. The sense of adventure inside him that had been rekindled by this sudden burst of seat-of-the-pants detective work was starting to be replaced by his more mature, restrictive side.

“I assume my deputy thinks that this is all going too far?” he offered to Jalon, casually trying to give himself an excuse to call it off.

The response that he got surprised him.

“Actually, I’m quite enjoying myself.”

She made her comment even as the two shuttles swept around another tight corner and dropped even closer to the ground below.

“And,” she continued, “Our target has slowed slightly. I believe I can get close enough for us to use the grapppler. If I...use my instincts.”

Tylor suppressed a smile and nodded back at his usually reserved deputy instead. “Ok then, let’s do it.”

Jalon kept her focus forward and leaned on the thrusters a little more as the gap between the two shuttles further decreased. Alongside her, Tylor tapped at a bank of controls and brought the shuttle’s grapppler arm online.

The grapppler was a magnetised arm more often used to tow stricken vessels. But it could also be used to electronically assume control of a craft, which was of more use to them in this pursuit. A grapppler manoeuvre at this sort of speed was a last resort. But it would be achievable.

“They are descending further,” Jalon reported as they coasted over a large landing pad filled with rows and rows of parked-up civilian shuttles lying dormant beneath them, “Now at 65 feet!”

“Grapppler online,” Tylor reported back, “Preparing a shot.”

“Wait! Now ascending!”

Jalon jerked the controls to the left to follow the sudden pitch up from their target, and the two craft ascended again, now less than three shuttle lengths apart. Tylor licked his lips and gripped the grapppler controls, preparing for his shot.

As they reached a safer altitude, their target levelled off, and for a moment appeared to have lost interest in shaking them off, flying along in a straight line instead.

“This is our chance, Chief,” Jalon affirmed.

Tylor saw the same thing. He fired.

The small flexible arm shot out from the nose section of their shuttle, and magnetically locked onto the target's rear hull at the first attempt.

"Got him!" Jalon called out, the emotion in her voice even surprising herself.

"That we have," Tylor nodded, more calmly, "I'm remotely powering down their systems."

In an instant, the glow from the other shuttle's thrusters decreased as the grapppler connection brought the vessel to station-keeping. At the same time, Jalon slowed their own vessel to bring the pursuit to a halt.

As soon as the drama was over, Tylor's jaw tightened. His instincts kicked in again. "That was too damn easy," he muttered.

"Chief?"

"Scan for lifesigns, Deputy."

Jalon jumped to action immediately, then gasped at what she saw. "There's nobody onboard," she reported, "The shuttle's empty. Must've been...on autopilot. Chief, where the hell are they?"

Tylor didn't reply immediately, as he ran over the last few minutes in his head. They'd missed something. Specifically, he'd missed something. That didn't used to happen. But what? What had he missed?

Then, it hit him.

"Son of a gun..."

He tapped his controls quickly and barked out commands at the same time.

"I'm releasing the grapppler. Get unit four to tow that shuttle back in. And then get us back to that landing pad we just passed."

Jalon nodded and relayed the orders. Not questioning anything this time.

Moments later, they hovered in place just above the landing pad. Below them, through the driving rain, they saw the rows of tired, battered private shuttles, just as they had flown over before.

Except now, there was an empty spot. One of the shuttles was missing.

"My god," Jalon whispered as she shook her head in realisation, "They...?"

Despite the situation, Tylor allowed himself a wry smile.

"Damn, this guy's good..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn, I'm good."

It hadn't taken long to get to Palmor's penthouse from the financial district. Which was a small mercy for five of the occupants of the dirty grey shuttle as it quietly sped above the main settlement of Varris IV. Because it limited the amount of time Sunek had to brag.

"Seriously," he called back from the tattered pilot's seat of their new ship, "I deserve, like, a medal or something for that one."

Denella finished helping Evina as she bound up Klath's leg as best she could in preparation for them to move out, and shared a tired look with the Klingon.

"Or some kind of award, maybe?" the Vulcan continued, "I mean, setting up the autopilot that quickly, short-range transporting all six of us into this thing, all without them noticing? We are talking 'idea of the century'-level crap here..."

As Sunek's vainglorious ramble continued, Evina looked over at the Klingon and the Orion.

"Does he ever stop talking?"

Denella stifled a grin. Klath grunted.

"Unfortunately not," he offered back with genuine unhappiness.

"Like I said," Denella called out, "It was a pretty good plan."

If she hoped that would satisfy him, it didn't even come close.

"A 'pretty good plan'? That's really all you're gonna give me? This was an incredible plan! I mean, when some stuffy guy with a haircut and a Starfleet uniform pulls off something like that, they get seven years of holosuite programs made about them. And what do I get? 'You know what, Trelok? That was a pretty good plan'..."

As Klath got back to his feet slightly uncertainly, Denella sighed and paced over to their pilot and his rapidly inflating ego. "Fine," she offered,

putting on her best impression of someone in genuine awe, “Oh exalted saviour, great masterful one, king of the Alpha Quadrant, could you help out us mere mortals and use that incredible genius of yours to...park us up?”

She gestured out of the cockpit window through the rain. Sunek shrugged. “No need to overdo it, you know.”

Palmor Fot’s penthouse had turned out to be hard to miss. It was located atop one of the tallest buildings in the downtown residential hub of the main settlement, in a grey metal building that towered over everything in the local vicinity. The penthouse itself seemed to take up the entire top two floors of the building, and also featured a flat rectangular landing pad which took up most of the top of the roof.

Even on somewhere as downtrodden and forgotten as Varris IV, it was still a residence that hinted at a level of luxury that could only be attained by a very rich individual. Which was a good sign as far as their efforts to finally locate some latinum for Mizar was concerned.

Sunek tapped the controls in front of him and gently guided them downwards. The dented shuttle landed on the rooftop pad with a slight thump.

Seconds later, the side door opened. Denella led Palmor down the steps and out into the persistent rain, keeping her disruptor pointed squarely at his back. “Come on,” she barked at him, “Time to show me the money.”

With an exaggerated sigh, the defeated Palmor led her across to the small building at the edge of the landing pad, which contained steps down to the penthouse itself. He walked with clear reluctance, but also with the slumped shoulders of a man with no more cards to play.

The rest of the shuttle’s occupants followed. Sunek kept his own weapon raised at Tegras. “Everyone remember where we parked!” he quipped as they descended the steps.

Finally, Klath emerged, guarding Evina and casting an unhappy look at the sky as he hobbled down the steps. “Does the rain ever stop?” he grumbled.

“Unfortunately not,” Evina replied with a smile.

The Klingon looked back at her, and his grimace subsided imperceptibly. Then, he gestured for her to proceed with a wave of his disruptor.

“Even after everything I just did for you,” the Ktarian woman sighed as they walked, “There’s still no chance of you putting that away?”

Klath considered the question as he hobbled across the slick landing pad surface.

It was true that Evina and Tegras were now entirely cooperating with them. Hostages or no hostages. Still, he also wasn’t about to let his guard down. Especially given his compromised physical condition. So he simply offered her a slow shrug of his shoulders.

“Unfortunately not.”

## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The Bounty's cargo bay was quickly filling with the scent of burning metal.

"You know, it's actually a good thing this took me so long to get right," Natasha idly opined, "We'd have been found out in minutes."

Jirel could see what she meant. It would have been impossible to have hidden the smell from their captors. But fortunately, they had left them to it. And Natasha was finally making progress.

"Just hurry up," he urged her, unnecessarily.

He couldn't tell exactly how long ago Devan and Mizar had left them, but he knew it was long enough for his old friend to have already done something stupid. And that was worrying him. Not to mention the fact that Mizar still had the ability to detonate the cabrodine bomb that remained between them.

Even if Jirel still wasn't entirely convinced that it was a bomb.

"You think they'll still be on their shuttle?" Natasha asked from the other side of the metal cylinder, as she inched the cutting tool further along the cuffs.

"I hope so," he replied, "They'll just be waiting for a call from the others before..."

He paused and considered the last thing that Devan had said to him.

How he needed someone to help him kill.

It didn't please him to admit it, even to himself, but Jirel was no stranger to death. With the amount of misfortune that the Bounty and her crew tended to run into, it was almost written into whatever passed for his job description. But he still preferred to think that they were the exceptions in the grand scheme of things. That people like Devan Gol, occasional run-in with a Nausicaan aside, didn't need to get involved in that side of galactic life.

And yet, it seemed as though that was exactly what was happening.

"You really think he's gonna go and kill someone?" he asked out loud.

"He's your acquaintance," Natasha pointed out knowingly, "But...in my experience over the last few years, I'd say that anyone has the power to kill someone. If they really want to."

"I guess," he admitted with a sigh, "But there's got to be more to it than—"

In an instant, and for the first time in hours, he felt the sensation of his hand being freed from the constraints of the cuffs.

"Got it!" Natasha squealed triumphantly.

Still shackled together by their other arms, they managed to get to their feet and extricate themselves from around the bomb, Natasha then making short work of the other set of cuffs, as they dropped to the deck with a satisfying clang.

"Ok," Jirel urged, as he rubbed his slightly singed wrist, "Let's get down there, and find Devan before he does something stupid."

She nodded back urgently, before the two of them paused and awkwardly took each other's underwear-clad forms in. The Trill held up a finger to make a slight, but important correction to his plan.

"...Let's get dressed, then get down there and find Devan before he does something stupid."

Natasha nodded twice as urgently, as the two reddening figures raced for their respective cabins.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's beautiful..."

Sunek stood and gawped at the pile of latinum on the table in front of him. All fifty bricks of it. Across all of his travels, even before he had joined the Bounty's crew, he had never seen so much wealth in one place.

The fifty shiny bricks sat on top of an anti-grav unit and glistened in the artificial light of the penthouse's main living area, which was an appropriately decadent setting for such a sight.

Palmor's residence was filled with fine furnishings and lavish decorations, finished with the most indulgent of fabrics and precious metals. It was a venue entirely out of place with the rest of the Varris IV colony. And it was also a venue that contained a secure storeroom, which

Denella had frogmarched Palmor to in order to retrieve the treasure that now sat before them.

“You reckon he’d really notice if we just kept one for ourselves?” Sunek added as he continued to stare at the latinum in awe.

“I believe it likely that he will be able to count to fifty,” Klath replied, with a surprising amount of sarcasm.

“Spoilsport.”

“Heh,” Tegras couldn’t help but grunt, “I wonder how much of that came from legitimate business transactions, hmm?”

“All of it,” Palmor muttered back as he stared impotently at the riches in front of him.

“A likely story.”

As the two Ktarians bickered, Denella pulled the communicator from her belt and glanced at Klath. “Guess we’d better call this in. Before…”

“Kaboom,” Sunek offered, almost mirthlessly.

The Orion engineer stifled a grimace, and tapped the communicator. “Mizar. You there?”

Silence. For a horrible moment, she wondered if things had escalated a little too far in orbit above their heads. Then, eventually, Mizar’s voice came through.

“You found my latinum? Or is this just another social call?”

Denella suppressed the urge she felt to punch something whenever she heard the smug Ktarian’s voice, and worked hard to maintain a level of calm. “The latinum’s here,” she reported, “We’ve done everything you asked us to do down here. So, how about you give us our ship back —?”

Before she could get any further, Mizar cut in, his voice still supremely confident.

“Palmor Fot?”

The Ktarian man’s yellow eyes widened upon hearing his name directly again.

“He’s here as well,” Denella said simply.

There was no further comment from the other end of the comms link. It simply clicked off.

“Wh—What more do these people want from me?” Palmor stammered, “I’ve done all you asked, given you my latinum, now what?”

“Now,” Tegras offered, his old gloating tone having returned as he watched his old foe squirming once again, “I suspect that life has finally caught up with you, Palmor.”

“Happens to all of us,” Sunek chimed in, “Except for old Trelok here. He’s gonna live forever.”

“B—But,” Palmor stammered, “You have to let me go! You can’t—!”

He was silenced by a familiar noise. All six individuals in the room turned towards the whining sound of the incoming transport.

Klath immediately tensed up. With their transporter inhibitor having been left behind during their shuttle-switching manoeuvre, there was now nothing stopping Ktarian Security from getting to them.

But this wasn’t Ktarian Security.

They watched as Mizar Bal and Devan Gol coalesced on the other side of the living area, as the transporter process completed. Both of them held disruptors of their own.

“Thank you for all your help,” Mizar smiled, stepping forwards with his weapon raised, “But we’ll take it from here…”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Damn it!”

Tylor punctuated his frustrated growl by slamming his hand down on top of the shuttle’s control panel. His headache was back with a vengeance. Alongside him, Jalon kept her own emotions more in check. Though she could definitely appreciate the sentiment.

They had completed several circuitous searches around the skies of the financial district, but had turned up no trace of the missing shuttle, or scanned any lifesign matching their known targets in any passing vehicle.

They had somehow managed to escape from under their noses.

The shuttle gently banked through a final loop of the southern end of the district, returning to its starting point once again.

“Should I prepare for another pass, Chief?” Jalon asked.

Tylor shook his head as he rubbed the hand that had impacted the top of the console a few moments ago. “No point,” he replied, “We’re looking for a goddamn needle in a haystack, and we don’t even know we’re in the right haystack.”

Jalon nodded. She had come to the same conclusion three loops ago. But she hadn’t wanted to say anything directly to her superior out of respect.

“Nothing from the other teams either,” he grimaced, “I guess we call this off. Get back to HQ and see if we can get anything out of those goons in the other shuttle for our reports.”

They had at least received word that the second target had been successfully rounded up, but that had done little to ease Tylor’s grim mood. He looked out of the cockpit window with a hint of sadness, as the rain thumped down on the hull of the ship.

“Guess that’s just one more bunch of criminals that got away down here—”

He was interrupted by a chirp from the console in front of Jalon. She quickly checked over the incoming message and dismissed it, returning her attention to their issues.

“What was that?” he asked off-handedly, not entirely interested in the answer.

“Oh, nothing, Chief,” she reluctantly replied, “It’s just...I asked the units back at the bar to compile a full list of the hostages that were released, and profiles on the ones still being held.”

She offered him a slightly guilty shrug at the inevitability of her reasoning.

“It’s...standard procedure.”

Tylor stifled a smile and nodded, before returning his attention to the rainfall outside. Then his face lit up, and he spun back around to her. “Let’s see that report.”

“Chief, it’s just—”

“I know, standard procedure. Let me see.”

She called up the report for him on the central screen of the control panel. It didn’t take long for him to break out into a satisfied smile.

“Well, well, well. Would you look at that?”

“Chief?”

“In your list of profiles of those hostages still on the shuttle. Palmor Fot.”

She recognised the name, but still looked a little confused. “Local businessman,” she nodded, “One of the richest men left on Varris IV.”

“And also someone who’s caught up in every criminal enterprise across this whole goddamn colony.”

“Allegedly,” she reminded him, “Ktarian Security has never been able to pin anything on him, since well before I got here.”

“Right,” Tylor tutted, “Guy’s an expert in the art of plausible deniability. At least enough of one to stay ahead of the sort of resources we’ve got. But I’m willing to bet that it’s a bit too much of a coincidence for him to be one of the hostages still on that shuttle.”

“You think he’s part of this?” Jalon asked.

Tylor looked over at her with a satisfied smile, then gestured to the report on the screen that her adherence to standard protocol had handed them.

“I think,” he replied, “You just found us our haystack...”



## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The three Bounty crew members kept their focus on the weapons being pointed at them by the two familiar newcomers to the penthouse, and kept their own disruptors raised.

Not that this seemed to faze Mizar at all, who merely waved dismissively at the trio of weapons pointed at him as he stepped over to the pile of latinum. "You can put those away," he motioned, "Don't forget that we're one little button click away from wiping out that little ship of yours..."

Denella stole a glance at Sunek and Klath, and nodded a silent acknowledgement. They all, especially reluctantly in Klath's case, lowered their weapons.

Mizar acknowledged their concession with a smug nod of his head, and then took in the pile of latinum with a greedy smile. "Now, this is what I was waiting for," he grinned.

"Who the hell are you?" Palmor barked out at the tall Ktarian, "I don't recognise you."

"I'm just a man who happens to know how much of a crook you are, Palmor," Mizar drawled, still with one glinting eye focused squarely on the latinum, "And one who knew how much of a payday robbing you would be. If you want to know why we chose you specifically, you'd need to talk to my colleague."

Devan felt the urge to shrink back as the attention of everyone in the room suddenly swung over to him. But he forced himself to stand as tall as he could, and kept one thing in his mind to ensure that his often fleeting resolve didn't waver this time.

One single image. An image of her face.

Of those looking at him, Klath, Sunek and Denella waited patiently for an explanation, while Tegras and Evina looked a little confused, having never seen him before.

And Palmor suddenly looked significantly paler.

"You..." he whispered, "You're behind all this—?"

"Please, d—don't talk," Devan managed to snap out, keeping his disruptor pointed squarely at Palmor and his finger on the trigger, "You know why I'm here."

Palmor swung back around to the others, his eyes widening with fear. "You can't trust this man, ok? What has he told you?"

"Actually, very little," Denella said truthfully, "We were kinda hoping to get some answers at the end of all of this."

"Just what have you done this time, Palmor?" Tegras added with a shake of his head.

"You don't understand," Palmor continued, "This is all a big misunderstanding—"

"He knows what he did," Devan replied, his hand with the disruptor starting to shake slightly as he prepared for what he had to do, "A—And now, I'm going to—"

He was interrupted by the sound of another incoming transporter beam.

Two more forms coalesced inside the increasingly crowded penthouse. Two that were again familiar to most of those present in the room, and significantly more appropriately dressed than the last time anyone had seen them.

It hadn't taken Jirel and Natasha long to figure out where they needed to beam in. Even the Bounty's often temperamental sensors could pick up the lifesigns of a Klingon, a Vulcan and an Orion from orbit of an otherwise almost entirely homogenised colony such as Varris IV.

But any relief they felt as they saw the familiar faces of their crewmates again was short-lived. Jirel immediately turned around to the shocked Devan. "Hey, Devan, stop," he called out, "Please!"

Devan was momentarily stunned at the sight of the Trill and the human, and struggled to find anything to say to his former colleague. But Mizar had no such issues.

"I thought I said goodbye to you two," the Ktarian grouched, seemingly not overly concerned that his own hostages had escaped.

"You did," Natasha replied, "It was gross."

"Huh, but you broke out and beamed down here. Tut, tut, that wasn't part of the deal. I've got a mind to detonate that little bomb anyway—"

That was enough for Denella to whirl around to the Ktarian and raise her disruptor once again. He'd threatened the life of the Bounty, after all.

"You do that, you're not getting out of here alive!"

The determination in her face as she growled those words at him were enough to make Mizar pause and second guess his position for the first

time since he had arrived.

“Hey, hey,” Jirel managed to his engineer, “Let’s - all of us, ok? - put the disruptors down for a bit, ok? And just calm down.”

Denella ground her teeth, but reluctantly lowered her own weapon. Mizar followed suit with a shrug of his shoulders, then tapped a command into a device in his other hand.

For a sickening moment, Jirel wondered if that had been the command for the bomb. Even if he still wasn’t entirely certain it was a bomb. Instead, a split second later, the pile of latinum shimmered and disappeared, as Mizar’s shuttle’s transporter whisked it away. Fifty bricks of latinum literally disappeared before everyone’s eyes.

“Well,” Mizar purred, “I’ve got everything I need.”

Jirel sighed and turned his focus back to Devan, who had been looking at the Trill ever since he had beamed in. “Ok, so, Devan, you’ve got the latinum, so there’s no need to do anything else, ok?”

“I—I’ve told you, Jirel. You can’t stop me from—”

“He’s gone!”

Evina’s cry was enough to cause everyone in the room to look around in shock. It quickly became apparent that, as everyone else had been arguing with each other, Palmor Fot had taken the opportunity to disappear as completely as his latinum had.

“No!” Devan screamed.

Without waiting, without even thinking, he took off with his weapon raised. Heading for the exit of the living area next to where Palmor had been standing, and the steps that led up to the landing pad.

Jirel jumped into action, following his friend. Equally close to the door through which Devan had bolted, Natasha instinctively tagged along as well.

“Ok, that’s enough of that,” Mizar called out, just as the other Bounty crew members were about to follow in their wake.

Denella, Sunek and the limping Klath turned to see that Mizar’s disruptor was raised again, the Ktarian still looking entirely in control of the situation despite the sudden flurry of activity.

“Let’s leave them to it, hmm? Devan just needs to do what he needs to do.”

Klath grumbled slightly, causing Evina to look over at him. “Feel like a hostage yet?” she offered with a friendly smile.

The Klingon didn’t match her smile, and simply grumbled again, even as Mizar stifled a slight yawn.

“Shame though,” he offered idly, “I had been hoping to see someone die today...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Palmor Fot had run. Because that was exactly the sort of thing that Palmor Fot was best at.

Whenever he found himself in a sticky situation, he had an instinctive ability to get out of it. Usually exactly like he just had, by waiting for an appropriate distraction and then making a sharp exit, either literally or metaphorically, leaving everyone else to clean everything up.

It was exactly how he had been able to get involved in just about every dodgy deal on Varris IV without ever leaving enough of a trace to get caught. And here, in his own penthouse, he had spotted a window of opportunity to sneak away and make for the landing pad.

Now outside, he swiftly dashed across the pad, stumbling slightly in a deep puddle that was left behind by the still-driving rain as he made for the freshly liberated personal shuttle that was still parked there.

He may have lost a hell of a lot of latinum, but he knew he had more where that came from. And if he could escape in the shuttle, he could shop the others to the authorities and be home free.

As the rain soaked him to the skin, he reached the steps of the shuttle and tapped at the external controls to open the door. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had made it.

And then he heard the voice.

“Stop!”

Palmor’s stomach sank. Even as the door began to open, he turned around and squinted back through the rain, to where Devan stood on the far side of the pad, his disruptor raised.

“N—No further, Palmor,” he added for emphasis, stepping towards him.

Palmor licked his lips. This was undoubtedly a setback, but he was still sure he could talk his way out of this one. He’d talked his way out of

worse situations before. And behind him, he heard the shuttle door fully opening with a dull thud. He was just a few steps from his escape.

“Listen, Devan,” he replied with an amenable tone, “I know you’re upset, but this isn’t the way to—”

“D—Don’t talk!” the other Ktarian snapped back, “Nothing you say can change what has to happen here!”

He took another step forwards, edging closer to his target.

Behind him, the door to the stairway opened again and Jirel and Natasha raced into the driving rain themselves, stopping when they saw the standoff in front of them.

“Devan!” Jirel called out.

The Ktarian didn’t turn back. He didn’t even flinch. He kept his weapon raised. “This is the man, Jirel,” he called back, “The one that took her from me!”

“I get it,” Jirel replied, “But this is way too crazy a reaction to—”

“Oh no,” Natasha gasped, grabbing Jirel’s arm in shock, “He took her from him, Jirel. He didn’t steal her. He killed her.”

Jirel’s jaw dropped as he processed that comment, silently cursing himself for not having seen the full truth of Devan’s words earlier.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Palmor insisted, taking half a step backwards, “You can’t blame me for—”

“Her name was Etara,” Ryan bellowed out into the sodden night’s sky, “S—She was Ktarian. And she was the most perfect woman I’d ever met.”

He took another step forwards, rage now entirely overriding his earlier timidity.

“A—And then she came to Varris IV to work on a new mining deal for her company. And she met Palmor Fot. And his drug empire.”

Jirel stepped towards his friend, with Natasha following suit. But the Trill struggled to find the words to respond to his friend’s raw angst.

“Devan, I had no idea—”

“Felicium!” Devan spat out.

Next to Jirel, Natasha’s mouth gaped in horror. “Oh my god,” she whispered.

“What’s felicism?” Jirel asked.

“Heavy narcotic,” she explained, “Originally developed on a planet called Brekka as a cure for the Ornarán plague, but so addictive that they turned it into a dependency. Starfleet intervened and broke the cycle, but without any other industry to speak of, the Brekkans turned to selling the drug on to the rest of the galaxy.”

“I—It’s everywhere on Varris IV,” Devan added miserably, “Thanks to this man.”

Palmor kept his hands raised up in front of him, an appeasing look on his face. “You have to understand, I’m just a businessman providing a service—”

“It consumed her,” Devan continued, cutting the other Ktarian off with a furious glare, “Took away everything that was perfect about her. A—At first, I tried to keep her supplied with enough of it. But with felicism, you can never have enough. You can never be satisfied. And eventually we ran out of latinum, and Palmor Fot cut us off...and then the withdrawal started.”

Natasha flinched in sympathy. Jirel grimaced. Palmor tensed up further. Devan stifled a sob.

“It sent her insane. S—Screaming in agony. Begging me for help. And then, one day, when my back was turned, she g—got away, and s—she \_\_\_”

His body convulsed in a sob. The disruptor in his hand wobbled slightly. Jirel had heard enough, he stepped through a puddle towards his old colleague to comfort him.

“No closer, Jirel,” Devan managed as he heard the splash of water behind him, “I can’t let you stop me. Not now.”

Jirel obediently stopped, having only reduced the distance between himself and Devan by a few feet. There was still half the length of the landing pad between them.

“Devan,” Jirel urged, raindrops dripping off his forehead, “I know you don’t want to do this. It might seem like the right answer, given everything that’s happened, but I promise you that you will regret this the moment you press that trigger.”

Devan shook his head and stared down at the disruptor for a moment, as Palmor took another fearful half-step back towards the safety of the side door of the shuttle.

“There’s no other way,” Devan replied eventually, “A—And this is why I had to find someone like Mizar Bal to help me with all this. Because you might have given me passage here, but you wouldn’t have helped me to do something like this.”

“Well,” Jirel managed with a sad smile, “I guess you got that part right.”

Devan still didn't take his eyes off Palmor, but he nodded in acknowledgement of Jirel's comment, even as his wife's face flashed through his memory once again. He stifled the fresh wave of emotion and stared back at where Palmor still stood, frozen in terror, gripping his disruptor a little more tightly.

And then they heard the sound of the transporter.

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“Ugh.”

Mizar tutted audibly as he checked his chronometer again.

Ten minutes. It had been ten minutes since Devan had disappeared on the trail of the fleeing Palmor. And Mizar's feet were getting itchier by the second. He pictured the fifty bricks of latinum, sitting safely onboard his tiny shuttle in orbit, and tried to focus on that positive.

“You got somewhere to be?” Sunek piped up, filling the silence that had descended in the same way that he always seemed to, regardless of the situation.

Mizar glanced over at the perma-grinning Vulcan with a mildly irritated glare. “I've still got a bomb on your ship, don't forget.”

“Oh yeah,” the Vulcan fired back, “Real big talk for a—”

“Hey!” Denella snapped, with palpable concern, “Let's not play chicken with my ship, ok?”

Sunek adopted a slightly more grumpy expression, like he'd just been told off by his mother, and shrugged his lanky shoulders.

Behind the bickering duo, Tegras and Evina stood with Klath, who was now propping himself up on the back of one of Palmor's lavish sofas to keep the weight off his injured leg.

“Do you think he's really going to shoot Palmor?” Tegras asked the Klingon in a low mutter.

Klath suppressed a wince, both from a sudden surge of pain from his leg, and from the unmistakable sign that he was getting dragged into another conversation he wasn't especially keen on having. “I do not know,” he admitted eventually, “I have not known that individual for very long.”

He paused and considered the events that had just unfolded, then continued.

“But...I saw a familiar look in his eyes when he saw Palmor Fot. A look that a warrior recognises. The look of striving for vengeance. And being at peace with the consequences of doing so.”

It was a look that Klath knew all too well throughout his life, and had last seen some months ago when he had fought a vengeful Klingon named Kolar to the death. But he decided not to explain that particular story to his current company.

Even so, the two Ktarians shuddered slightly at the implication of Klath's words.

“So, it was all true,” Evina mused after a pause, “The hostage-taking, the weapons, everything that you did down here. You and your friends weren't doing it out of choice.”

“No,” Klath acknowledged, “We were not. But I...apologise.”

The Ktarian woman offered a thin smile, and then looked over at Tegras for a moment. But before she could offer anything further, Mizar loudly tutted again.

“Right,” he sighed, “That's just about enough waiting. If that idiot up there wants to spend the rest of his life on this fleapit of a colony, so be it.”

“Charming,” Denella replied acerbically, without a trace of amusement.

“I've done what he asked me to do,” Mizar shrugged back, “And I've got my latinum. So that's good enough for me.”

“You're a special kind of idiot, you know that?” Sunek griped.

If Mizar was further irritated by the Vulcan's quips, he didn't let it show. Instead, he allowed a victorious smile to crease across his face. “On the contrary,” he replied, “Unlike you hapless morons, who've been running around down here without a clue, I'm the one who actually had the plan from the start. One that seems to have reaped me plenty of rewards. And now everything else will be blamed on you idiots. So, farewell.”

Before Sunek could get in another retort, Mizar tapped a command into his communicator and patiently waited for the computer to beam him back to his shuttle.

And nothing happened.

The victorious smile faltered slightly as he quickly tapped the device again. And still nothing happened.

As Mizar's smile vanished entirely, a dawning grin of realisation appeared on Denella's face. “Problem?” she couldn't help but ask.

“The transporter,” he grunted, “What the hell's going on—?”

The main door of the living area hissed open behind Mizar, causing him to spin around on his heels in shock. Framed in the doorway stood a young woman in a Ktarian security uniform, pointing her phaser straight at him.

“Regulations governing the infiltration of a hostile’s location require that active units beam in a safe distance away, and activate transporter inhibitors before proceeding. To prevent escape.”

The woman stepped fully through the doorway, keeping her weapon raised.

“My name is Deputy Jalon Sep. And you are all under arrest.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hold it right there, son.”

Tylor pointed his phaser across at Devan, as he took another step towards Palmor.

“Great,” Jirel couldn’t help but sigh sarcastically at the sight of the security officer, “Just what the situation needed. More people with guns.”

The grizzled Ktarian ignored the Trill entirely, keeping his focus on the active target. Just as his decades in security had taught him. “My name is Security Chief Tylor Ral, Varris IV Security Division,” he continued, “And I’m gonna need you to drop that weapon.”

Devan paused mid-step, but his own focus was still on Palmor at the doorway to the shuttle.

“You heard him!” Palmor screamed through the rain, “Stop this, now!”

“You took her from me,” Devan hissed at his fearful quarry, “You destroyed everything!”

Jirel turned to the grizzled Ktarian security chief and gestured to his raised phaser with concern for his old colleague. “Please, don’t shoot. We can explain.”

“I’m all ears, friend,” Tylor replied, not bothering to question the apparent presence of a Trill and a human on Varris IV for the time being and keeping his focus on the armed Ktarian halfway across the landing pad, “But first, how about your buddy over there drops his disruptor.”

It wasn’t a suggestion. It was very much a demand.

“Devan,” Jirel called out, “Listen to him, please. Let’s just talk!”

“I—I’ve told you, Jirel. Talking didn’t work. N—Not with counsellors, or doctors, or anyone.”

“Yeah, but it might now,” the Trill persisted grimly, “With a friend.”

Devan didn’t turn around. He didn’t lower his weapon an inch. He just pictured her face. She was smiling.

“You should listen to them,” Palmor offered with a nervy edge, “No point getting shot by Ktarian Security over this, is there?”

As he spoke, he licked his lips and tried to calculate how quickly he could realistically propel himself inside the shuttle and power the thing up, assuming there was an appropriate distraction. He concluded that it was worth a try. Especially as he didn’t want to get involved with Ktarian Security either.

“He’s not backing down,” Natasha muttered urgently at Jirel.

Not that he needed that pointing out. Devan remained focused squarely on Palmor.

“Hey,” Jirel tried again, “If you want justice, we got it right here. Ktarian Security just beamed in, Devan. So let them handle this, ok?”

“He’s right, son,” Tylor chimed in, “You’re pointing that weapon of yours at Palmor Fot. I know all about him. And if you talk to me, I can deal with him the proper way, ok?”

Palmor didn’t like the sound of this at all, and returned to bargaining for his escape. “I have more latinum,” he babbled to Devan, “I could give you—”

“All the latinum in the quadrant won’t make up for what you did.”

“I—I really didn’t mean to—”

“I know you didn’t,” Devan interrupted, “You just didn’t care.”

He inched another step forwards. Tylor’s finger tensed on his own weapon’s trigger. Jirel licked his lips and tried one final time.

“Ok, Devan, ask yourself, is this really what Etara would have wanted?”

Devan’s face flinched for the first time since he had arrived on the landing pad. He stared down at the weapon in his hands as the rain thundered down on the collection of bedraggled figures on the pad.

He considered the disruptor. The one he had bought just for this. The one he still hadn't actually fired in anger.

He thought about Etara. He pictured her face, and her smile. He thought about their first date. Their first trip together. The first time he had met her parents. Their wedding day. Their honeymoon. Their life together. Or what life together they had managed to have. He pictured the woman she was, before the feliciium. And he considered Jirel's question.

And as his mind flooded with memories on the soaked landing pad of a criminal's penthouse, he slowly lowered his disruptor.

Jirel felt his stomach untighten. Natasha breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"Alright, son," Tylor nodded, "That's a really positive step. Now just walk back over here, ok?"

Devan acquiesced. He kept facing Palmor, but he took a slow step backwards, as Tylor, slowly but surely, started to pace over to him. Ready to take the mysterious disruptor-wielding man into custody for the time being.

In front of him, at the foot of the shuttle's steps, Palmor's nervousness evaporated, giving way to a look of undeserved relief, with a tinge of self-satisfaction.

"Well," Palmor offered, "I'm glad you've seen sense."

Devan stared at the Ktarian. His mind was flooded with a fresh assault of memories.

He thought about the latinum he'd spent to satisfy her unsatisfiable cravings. He thought about the sound of her screams, as Palmor Fot's feliciium had agonisingly left her system. He thought about the sinking feeling of dread he felt when he returned to their apartment and found her missing.

And he thought about her funeral.

And then he didn't think about anything. He allowed his instincts to take over. He raised the disruptor and fired.

It caught Palmor square in the chest, with enough force to send him flying back into the hull of the shuttle, before he slumped down onto the wet surface of the landing pad.

Devan heard Jirel cry out from behind him, as he stared at Palmor's lifeless form. A split second later, he felt himself falling, toppled by the force of Tylor Ral slamming into him and forcing him to the ground.

Not that such a dramatic action really mattered. He released his grip on the disruptor immediately. It clattered to the floor as he fell, having served its singular purpose.

Jirel stared in shock, feeling Natasha grab his arm instinctively as they watched the scene unfold. Whatever he had been hoping to prevent by escaping from the Bounty's cargo bay and coming down here, he had failed.

With Devan offering no resistance, Tylor quickly cuffed him and forced him back to his feet, before he glanced over at the unmoving form of Palmor, a neat disruptor blast in the centre of his chest.

He looked back at Devan and shook his head.

"Shouldn't have done that, son," he grunted with a shake of his head, as he led him away.

Devan didn't reply to the older Ktarian man. But he did look over to Jirel as he was dragged past where the Trill was standing, with an empty look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he offered simply, "For all of this."

Jirel grimaced and nodded back at his old friend.

"Yeah. So am I."

**End of Part Four**

## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Part Five

The reunited crew of the Bounty found themselves in familiar surroundings. Not for the first time, and almost certainly not for the last time, they were corralled together, inside a secure detention cell.

They had been brought back to the headquarters of the Varris IV Security Division by the backup teams that had arrived to assist Tylor and Jalon, and had little choice but to surrender to their inevitable arrest. Especially when Jalon had followed procedure and read out the full list of charges against them.

Kidnapping, extortion, violence, conspiracy to commit grand larceny, theft of a civilian shuttle, not to mention a multitude of minor traffic offences that Sunek had managed to rack up during their early morning high speed chase through the skies.

And so, a detention cell it had been.

“All things considered,” Sunek offered from where he sat on the floor, slumped against the rear wall of the cell, “We’re kinda boned.”

“We’ve got some pretty big mitigating circumstances,” Denella offered as she perched on the end of a hard metal bed in the corner of the cell, “I mean, they had two of us strapped to a bomb.”

“Yeah, right, we were only following orders,” the Vulcan quipped, “That one always goes down well.”

Natasha ignored the usual bickering amongst the Bounty’s crew and walked over to the shimmering forcefield at the front of the cell, where Jirel stood and stared out into the rest of the holding area, silently musing on what had just transpired. “How’re you holding up, Spotty?” she offered.

Despite his inner worries, he glanced over and gave her a knowing look. “Seriously, if that catches on again, I’m dumping you out an airlock.”

She smiled, managing to coax half a smile back. Jirel silently cursed how helpless he was to do anything else when he saw her face light up.

Then, he turned back to stare out of the cell. He had no idea where Devan had been taken. Nobody had even seen him since Tylor had marched him back off the rooftop. Presumably he was elsewhere in the headquarters, being interrogated along with Mizar.

“I just wonder,” he muttered eventually, “If I could’ve talked him round. If I’d have said the right thing, or tried a bit harder...”

“You did all you could,” she affirmed, “He was just dealing with way too much. I can’t imagine going through something like that.”

She suppressed a slight shudder as she remembered Devan’s full story.

“And,” she continued, “If it makes you feel any better, Varris IV is a Ktarian colony, which means they’re covered by Federation law. Which means a Federation penal colony. Not a stint on Rura Penthe.”

Jirel considered this and then nodded. “I guess,” he replied mirthlessly, “Maybe we’ll wind up being cellmates. At least then we’d be able to catch up properly.”

She grimaced slightly at the reminder of their own potential fate.

“Wanna know the worst thing?” he continued.

“Always.”

“Devan kept saying that the reason he got involved with Mizar, rather than coming straight to me, was because he needed someone who’d help him kill.”

He paused again, wondering quite how open he should be from inside a detention cell.

“Truth is,” he concluded eventually with a sigh, “Having heard his story...I’m pretty sure I would’ve helped him.”

Natasha paused for a moment, and Jirel turned back to her.

“I mean, maybe,” he corrected himself, “I dunno. Sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“No,” she replied, “I get it.”

Before their discussion could go any further, they were interrupted by the sound of the door to the holding area opening, and three familiar Ktarians entering.

Deputy Jalon Sep walked in the middle with a slightly unhappy look on her face. On either side, she was flanked by Tegras Pel and Evina Jix. As they reached the forcefield of the cell, the Bounty’s crew all stood to meet them. With some effort, in the still-injured Klath’s case.

“Well,” Jalon managed after a moment of reluctance, “I suppose you’re all free to go.”

She followed up her comment by deactivating the forcefield with a quick tap of a button, as the residents of the cell stared back in shock.



“Is this a bit you’re doing?” Jirel managed, “Cos it’s really good.”

“No,” Jalon replied, gesturing to Tegras and Evina, “These two have given us the full details of what transpired here. And after a discussion with the other hostages from the Ktarian Moonrise, nobody is willing to press any charges.”

Tegras and Evina smiled in satisfaction, looking over at the confused figures of Denella, Klath and Sunek inside the cell.

“We explained everything to the security teams,” Tegras explained, “How it was all down to those other two, pulling the strings. So to speak.”

“And how you’d actually tried to save our lives,” Evina added, gesturing to Klath’s injury, “Despite the cost.”

Klath gave a respectful nod back at the two Ktarians, as Denella smiled widely.

“Thank you,” the Orion replied.

Next to the two civilians, Jalon wasn’t quite done. “Still, that only deals with some of the items on the charge sheet. But, with the statements you’ve already given, and with the two ringleaders in custody, not to mention the...unique circumstances of this particular case, my Chief has decided to waive the other charges. Except one.”

She handed a small padd to a still-confused Sunek.

“Trellok, you are hereby banned from piloting any form of atmospheric vehicle on any Ktarian colony for life. Commencing immediately.”

Sunek glanced over the padd and grinned, mostly in relief. “Suits me,” he shrugged, “Those things suck.”

Jalon hadn’t been expecting that reaction, but she disguised it well, and merely turned on her heels and started for the door.

“Wait,” Jirel called out, “What about Devan? Devan Gol?”

Jalon paused and looked back at the Trill. “The Chief is talking to him now, and he is fully cooperating. But he will be charged with murder.”

Jirel wasn’t entirely sure what else he had been expecting to hear, but he couldn’t help but feel a tinge of sadness. He nodded back glumly.

Once again, it was down to Sunek to break the uncomfortable silence that descended.

“So, how about we get the hell out of here. Before someone changes their mind?”

\* \* \* \* \*

After some relieved farewells to their erstwhile hostages, the Bounty’s crew returned to some even more familiar surroundings. And there was one more major issue to deal with.

The five of them stood around the metal cylinder in the Bounty’s cargo bay, as Denella carefully worked on opening the top of the device.

“There’s still one thing that’s confusing me,” Natasha offered as the Orion engineer worked, “Who the hell is Trellok?”

“Oh,” Denella replied, “He’s a gritty, hard-nosed vigilante from the Cerris Nebula. Men fear him, women love him—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sunek griped with a modicum of irritation, “Of course it’s gonna sound stupid out of context.”

Klath, his injured leg now more permanently repaired after a short trip to the Bounty’s medical bay, looked over at the still-confused human woman. “We are yet to locate the appropriate context.”

Sunek griped some more as Denella’s work continued, carefully undoing the series of screws that kept the lid on the cylinder.

“You know, we could just beam it into space,” Jirel offered.

“Yeah,” Natasha added, “Definitely a good idea to add an act of terrorism to our charge sheet just before we leave orbit.”

“Still not entirely convinced it’s a bomb,” he fired back with a slight grin.

He could already feel his old self starting to return. He still felt some residual regrets about what had transpired. But one thing he had learned during his time on the Bounty was that it was rarely healthy to dwell too much on things they had no power to influence.

So he just compartmentalised it up inside. Which he appreciated was probably equally unhealthy for plenty of reasons. But it was how he and his crew seemed to operate.

“Well, I’d feel better knowing it wasn’t a bomb,” Natasha admitted, “Given how long I spent tied up to it.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Sunek piped up again with a cheeky grin, “Top marks on your choice of underwear, doc.”

Natasha shot an unimpressed look at the Vulcan who, one way or another, had gotten to know an awful lot about her just recently. At least her darker secrets, that he had mistakenly found out during a desperate mind meld when she had been rendered comatose by a plant toxin, were still secret for the time being.

“Heh,” Jirel added with a grin of his own, “I guess if nothing else, I got some pretty good blackmail material out of all of this.”

Denella looked up from her work to give the Trill a knowing smile. “Didn’t yours have little spaceships on them, Jirel—?”

“Ok, so we’re all agreed to never mention the ‘tied to a bomb in our underwear’ incident ever again,” he interjected quickly, looking at each member of the group with genuine sincerity.

Denella stifled a chuckle as she finally lifted the lid off the cylinder. “Well, either way—Oh, wow.”

“What?” Klath asked.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need some proper tools over here. This thing’s a bomb.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After Denella had deactivated what had turned out to be an entirely functional cabrodine bomb, they had set course away from Varris IV. And then the entire crew of the Bounty had decided it was finally time for some rest.

Sunek had headed straight for his cabin as soon as he had set the autopilot, while Denella and Klath hadn’t been far behind. Meanwhile, the other two crew members had headed for the dining area, having realised that they hadn’t eaten for some time.

As Natasha toyed with the remains of her double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings), her go-to meal after all manner of crises, she looked up at a still-preoccupied Jirel.

“You could always talk to him about it, you know.”

The Trill smiled wryly, knowing exactly who she was referring to. The one person he knew who might be able to do something for Devan, now he was set to be prosecuted under the auspices of Federation law. His father. Admiral Jenner.

“I mean,” he offered back as he pushed his own unfinished meal away, “You’re the one still on speaking terms with him.”

“Touche,” she nodded.

She reminded herself that she still wasn’t entirely sure why she was on speaking terms with the admiral. Why exactly he had asked her to effectively keep tabs on Jirel and the Bounty’s movements as they went about their business. But that was an issue for another day, she surmised.

“Anyway,” Jirel added, “Even if my relationship with him wasn’t a therapist’s wet dream, I’m pretty sure that getting someone off a murder charge would be a step too far. I guess Devan’s at the mercy of the system now.”

Natasha nodded in understanding, even as Jirel stood up and took his leftovers back to be processed back into the replicator.

“You sure you’re ok?” she called out as he walked.

“Sure,” he shrugged, “Like I said, he was an acquaintance.”

Natasha had seen enough by now to see through the lie. But she didn’t want to push it any further, so she let it slide, even as Jirel made for the exit.

“Any other acquaintances from your old scrapyards we need to look out for?” she asked.

This time, it was Jirel’s turn to have a memory of a woman’s face flicker to the front of his mind, but he quickly dismissed it.

That was an issue for another day as well.

“Nope,” he lied, before turning back to her, “Um, but, also, I am sorry, you know? About being an idiot earlier. With you. And Mizar—”

“Apology accepted,” she replied quickly, not wanting the Trill to make things any more awkward on that front.

“Right,” he nodded back with a smile, “It’s just...I guess I feel like I know you pretty well now. And you can definitely do better than Mizar Bal.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at this, slightly amused by Jirel’s attempt at a pep talk. “Yep,” she replied, “I can.”

The Trill paused at the doorway for a moment, considering whether he should follow up with what he had been intending to follow up with.

It was enough of a pause for Natasha to jump in on his behalf. “I can do better than that, as well,” she added knowingly.

Jirel floundered for a moment, before mustering a grudging smile. “Yep,” he nodded back, “You can.”

He walked out of the doors and Natasha watched him leave, before she turned back and idly took a bite out of the remains of her double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings), as she got lost in thought herself, contemplating the Trill that had just walked out of the room.

And not for the first time in the last 24 hours, she cursed her terrible taste in men.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early the following morning when Deputy Jalon Sep returned to her desk at the Varris IV Security Division's Headquarters. Despite the very late shift she had endured the night before, she was in earlier than anyone else who had been on duty during the crisis.

She had barely slept in the meantime as well, her mind racing with thoughts about her greatest piece of crime fighting on the colony to date.

This hadn't been just another meaningless patrol, or a false alarm, or a minor drug bust or scuffle between street gangs. This was a major event. Hijackings, murder, the lot.

She was still slightly perturbed by the willingness that the Chief had shown in letting the five strangers go, given that they clearly appeared to at least be accomplices. Regardless of how unwilling they might have been. Still, she hadn't questioned his orders.

Although, as she sat and worked on the paperwork from last night's arrests, she decided that she might bring it up with him during a quieter moment today.

As she worked, she was approached by Section Constable Rogan Kel, a slightly scatterbrained man on the next rung of the latter below her. And one that she had eased past during her initial rise through the ranks before she had arrived on Varris IV. Not that it seemed to bother Rogan Kel that a woman many years his junior outranked him. He was one of the security personnel who had been here for so long because he had no real plans for career progression.

As he arrived at her desk, he handed her a small padd with a friendly smile, and took a sip from a mug of steaming coffee.

"Section Constable," she nodded formally, "What do you have for me?"

"Release papers from this morning," he explained jovially, "All processed now. But we need you to countersign for the records."

She suppressed a sigh. Once again, the Varris IV Security Division was playing fast and loose with procedures. Procedures meant that she should have countersigned the release papers before the subjects had been processed, not after.

Still, all of her minor concerns about a lack of due process vanished into irrelevance when she saw the actual name on the top of the papers.

"Devan Gol?" she gasped, "That's the guy we picked up for murder! What the hell does the Chief think about this?"

Rogan looked a little confused, as though the cogs of his brain were still being lubricated back into life for the day by the coffee in his hand. "Chief was the one who signed them off in the first place," he shrugged.

Jalon looked at the padd again. He was right.

"What the hell?" she snapped, all of her usual calm decorum forgotten, "I need to talk to him about this. Right now!"

"He's not in yet," Rogan replied, taking another lazy sip from his mug, "Must be running late, I guess. Could wait in his office, if you wanted?"

She stood from her desk, nostrils flaring in indignation. "I'm going to do just that, Section Constable. Thank you."

She stormed across the bustling office, leaving Rogan and his coffee behind, and straight into the Chief's private sanctum. She didn't even bother to stand on ceremony and wait outside, instead sitting herself down in front of his vacant desk. She wanted answers. Answers as to exactly why Security Chief Tylor Ral had just let a murderer walk free.

And so she waited in his office.

For a very long time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ex-Security Chief Tylor Ral leaned back in his chair and smiled.

He was reclining in his study back at his private residence on the outskirts of the main settlement on Varris IV. And he couldn't remember the last time one of his headaches had flared up.

This wasn't where he was supposed to be. Technically, he was supposed to have started his next duty shift an hour ago. But instead of being there, he was at home. With who he wanted to be with.

"Tell me," his wife, Ilena, smiled as she walked into the room to join him, "If you really have retired early, how come your office keeps trying to call?"

She dropped his comms unit onto the desk in front of him, just as it chirped out another alert.

Tylor shrugged and spun around in his chair, beckoning her to sit on his lap. “Well, the thing is,” he replied, “I sent my official statement of retirement to Central Security back on Ktaris this morning. It’ll take a bit of time for the old wheels of bureaucracy to turn enough to get the message out to the office here.”

“You could always tell them,” she pointed out as she gently sat down.

“Eh, they’ll figure it out.”

She smiled and hugged him, wrapping her arms tightly around him, barely able to believe that she’d finally got him all to herself.

As they broke the hug, he reached up and stroked her aged face with his hand, eliciting a slightly coy reaction from the love of his life. He knew that she no longer felt as though she could quicken a man’s pulse. But as far as he was concerned, she was still as beautiful as the day they’d met. And on that matter, his was the only opinion that counted.

He couldn’t help but smile back at her, leaning in and kissing her on the cheek.

“So,” she said as she playfully batted away his affection, “I guess I’m going to have to get used to you being around the house all the time now, am I?”

“Not necessarily. Actually, I thought we might go travelling.”

At this, she looked a little confused. “Travelling? Where?”

“Wherever you’d like, my darling,” he smiled, “Thought maybe we’d start with a month on Risa, and work our way out from there.”

“A month?” she chuckled incredulously, “Someone’s feeling flush.”

“Hey, I’m retired. On a very generous pension.”

She studied his face. Something didn’t quite add up to her. But she couldn’t quite place what it was, and eventually, a feeling of joy overwhelmed her other concerns. “I’ll think about it,” she affirmed, as she stood back up, “And in the meantime, I’ll fix us some tea.”

She walked off, leaving Tylor to recline one again, as he planned everything out in his head.

He could explain to her that the new executive shuttle he was planning to buy was a gift from the Ktarian government for his forty years of service to the force. He could explain that their luxury suites on Risa were part of a package deal that he’d managed to wrangle.

He was pretty sure he could explain everything away.

As his attention drifted to the relentless rain outside, he thought about his final act as Security Chief for Varris IV.

Devan Gol had told him everything. About his wife, the drugs, his misery and his need for revenge. And in that moment, he had decided to take pity on him. And organised his release papers before his officious deputy had the chance to intervene.

Maybe it had been the story itself that had convinced him, the sense of trauma he felt to hear of Devan’s loss, and all the times he’d worried about losing Ilena. Maybe it was the fact that, in a strange way, Devan had done him a favour by killing Palmor Fot. The master criminal of Varris IV was no more. Maybe it was because he was feeling demob happy that close to retirement. After all, they still had Mizar Bal bang to rights for the little crime spree that had just taken place.

Or maybe it was the offer that Devan had made him. The offer that, in the heat of the moment, he had trusted his instincts over.

Tylor smiled in satisfaction as he watched the rain fall outside. It was probably that last one, truth be told.

After all, fifty bricks of gold-pressed latinum was a hell of a retirement package.

**The End**

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