

## Star Trek: Bounty - 109 - "But One Man of Her Crew Alive"

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## Star Trek: Bounty - 109 - "But One Man of Her Crew Alive"

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

After the Bounty is impounded, Jirel, Klath and Sunek are tasked with helping to salvage a derelict ship, which turns deadly when they find that something killed the last crew of the derelict, and they might be next.

# Prologue

## Prologue

She ran.

She ran for her life.

On and on, past the endless gunmetal grey walls of the corridors deep in the bowels of the ship, she sprinted as fast as her legs could propel her.

The corridors themselves were eerily dark and cloaked in shadow. Stark evidence of the ship's power issues, and enough of a change to the usual brightly lit interior of the vessel to cause the familiar surroundings to now feel alien and unsettling.

That feeling spurred her to run even faster. She skidded around a corner, almost colliding with the wall on the far side of the intersection as she did so. And still, she didn't slow down.

Because she needed to escape.

To escape from what was behind her. Or possibly what was in front of her. Or, in fact, anywhere all around her. Even inside the walls of the bulkhead for all she knew.

She forced that especially unnerving thought out of her mind and gritted her teeth as she raced onwards, her feet thudding down onto the floor of the deck and her arms pumping back and forth to help propel her forwards.

Her lungs began to ache from the exertion and the muscles in her legs started to cry out for an end to the torturous workout. But she kept on running. The stakes were too high for her to consider doing anything else. The fear that she felt provided the extra fuel that her aching body needed.

And she knew her destination was getting nearer. The shuttlebay was now just a few more intersections away. There, she could make good her escape in one of the science vessel's support craft.

We can make our escape, she silently corrected herself.

Assuming he was still alive, of course. She knew for a fact that nobody else was.

It had all been going so well. Their mission had been a complete success. They had made it to the rendezvous point well ahead of time, the package had been swiftly secured, and they were on their way home.

And then the package had escaped. And all hell had broken loose.

She fought off the wave of emotion that threatened to engulf her as she pictured the faces of some of the others. So many had died, so needlessly and so quickly. Picked off, one by one.

The package had learned fast. A lot faster than any of them had anticipated. Perhaps that had been their mistake, she thought bitterly as she sprinted past another darkened intersection. They hadn't appreciated just how fast it could learn.

Or perhaps their mistake had been in simply taking the package in the first place. That was definitely another way of looking at it.

She rounded a final corner and felt the persistent thumping terror inside her chest subside just a fraction as she saw the huge grey doors of the shuttlebay looming large at the end of the latest stretch of dank corridor.

But it was only a fleeting relief. Because then the scant flickering emergency lighting still illuminating the corridor disappeared. The entire vista in front of her was plunged into total darkness. The last vestiges of emergency power were finally being depleted.

The sinking feeling in her stomach began to grow all over again as she realised what this would mean for her escape attempt. She skidded to a halt in front of the shuttlebay doors and desperately tapped at the controls. But they were completely dead. Out of power. And the doors themselves remained defiantly closed.

"No, no, no!" she whimpered to herself with a stifled sob, as she clawed helplessly at the tiny sliver of a panel gap in the middle of the unyielding metal doors.

On the other side was her salvation. Half a dozen shuttles and service vehicles, with enough capacity to evacuate the entire ship's modestly sized crew in lieu of escape pods. Any one of which could be her own route away from this place.

But first she had to get to them.

She desperately looked around in a growing panic, looking for some sort of service hatch or access point, but there was no sign of anything. Stifling another sob, she quickly tapped the communicator badge attached to her dirt-streaked tunic top.

"Regaza!" she hissed into the ether, "I'm at the shuttlebay! Where the hell are you?!"

She waited for the only other surviving member of the crew to reply. Once they had realised that they were the only ones left, they had agreed

over the crackling comms link to meet up right here, making their way over from opposite ends of the ship.

In truth, she hadn't necessarily been intending to wait for him. Her all-consuming fear of what was chasing her was more than enough to override any sense of camaraderie. Her intention hadn't been born out of callousness, but hysterical self-preservation. But now, she called out for him, hoping that the extra help might get them through the sealed doors and to the precious shuttles within.

Except, as she waited in the eerie darkness of the corridor, there was no response.

"Regaza! Come in, please!"

She whispered the call with a note of dread, and received only static back over the comms link. A tear of despair ran down her cheek.

And then she remembered. The shuttlebay doors were a priority system, especially in an emergency situation. Which meant that they would be fitted with a secondary mechanical release in the event of a complete power failure across the ship.

It was a logical design, to prioritise crew safety above all else, especially during a catastrophe. And it was a design feature that was about to save her life, just as intended.

She could picture the process in her mind right now. Remove the control panel, activate the mechanical door release, open the doors, get to a shuttle, and get the hell out of here. The whole process would take less than two minutes if she worked fast.

Easy.

She returned to the door controls and roughly prised the entire panel up and away, revealing the isolar circuitry underneath. She wasn't an engineer, but she spied the manual release immediately. Reaching out with a tendriled hand, she grabbed the bulky lever and pulled with all her might.

And nothing happened.

Her relief immediately gave way to a fresh chasm of terror that opened up inside her as she wrenched at the lever again and again. And still nothing happened. The doors in front of her remained shut. Someone must have tampered with the override.

The package really had learned fast.

She felt a fresh wave of despair rising up as she considered her dwindling options. Perhaps she could get back to engineering and find a laser cutter, or a tool to get through the door itself. Perhaps there was a chance that Regaza was still on his way here, and that the silence over the comms link was just a result of the power failure.

Perhaps there was still hope.

And then all hope was extinguished. Because she realised that she was no longer alone.

Something was behind her.

"You ran away."

Quivering with fear, she slowly turned around in the direction of the voice. Even though she already knew what would be waiting there for her.

Behind her, a short distance back down the darkened corridor, stood a young girl.

"But I found you," the girl added in a childish sing-song voice.

She looked barely eight years old, a picture of childhood innocence. She had smooth, light brown skin and wore a simple green dress. Even through the darkness that was all around them, her vibrant, piercing yellow eyes were clearly visible. And the sight of the cherub-like child made the sole remaining crew member of the otherwise lifeless ship weep with terror.

"Please," the older woman cried out through tears as she sank to her knees, "Let me go! I beg you, let me live!"

The girl cocked her head to one side with a trace of curiosity, but the dark glare on her face didn't soften one iota.

"You're not very nice," she said, scrunching up her nose with palpable disgust, "And you weren't very nice to me."

"I—I swear, I didn't mean to—"

"I don't like people who aren't nice."

The girl took a step forward. The woman's eyes widened in horror.

"And I don't like you..."

As the girl continued her advance, her face suddenly started to contort and fold in on itself. The innocent dusky face began to disappear, to be replaced by something else.

The woman stared at the unholy sight as it formed in front of her.

And she screamed.



## Part 1A

### Part One

Even by his own admission, Jirel Vincent was lacking in many of the basic requirements that people tended to look for in a top of the line 24th century space captain.

He wasn't especially gifted academically. He struggled to project any sense of gravitas. He let his crew ride roughshod over the very concept of a chain of command whenever they pleased. And he didn't own anything that came even close to the definition of a uniform. He also really needed a haircut.

But none of that necessarily mattered when you took into account the fact that the Ju'Day-type raider he nominally commanded, the Bounty, was lacking in many of the basic requirements that people tended to look for in a top of the line 24th century spaceship.

The Bounty was an ancient, weathered, battered vessel which had been through more repair cycles than a Klingon battle wing, more warp cores than an experimental starship, and had covered more sectors than an overworked Ferengi mining freighter.

Still, in their own special way, captain and ship both possessed a shared quality of resilience. Which explained why both had somehow made it this far in life, despite their obvious limitations.

For the Bounty, this resilient quality was built into the rugged design of the Ju'Day-type craft, and the durability and repairability of the ship's components. And for Jirel himself, the quality was reflected in his unerring confidence in his own ability to talk his way out of anything. No matter how dire a situation he found himself in, the Trill trusted his powers of negotiation and his winning charm to get him through. That was just what he did. That was what he always had to do.

Which was why, even though he and the Bounty were five days late in arriving at the Flaxian science station Reja Gar, and even as he stood in front of the station commander's desk, he was absolutely certain that he was successfully talking his way out of his latest problem.

After all, he had some really solid excuses.

"The Children of Tama?"

Commander Turanya, the Flaxian whose office Jirel stood in, steepled his tendriled fingers on the other side of the desk and stared back at Jirel in bemusement.

Jirel, for his part, offered his best disarming shrug and a sideways grin straight out of the top drawer of the available smiles in his armoury.

It didn't matter to him how unbelievable the truth might have sounded. Because a lot of days onboard the Bounty tended to be fairly unbelievable. So, while a lesser captain might have been concerned that his excuses weren't washing, he just casually pointed down at a bowl of Flaxian pine nuts sitting on his side of the desk.

"These complimentary, or...?"

Turanya gestured dismissively at the bowl and Jirel grabbed a handful of the nuts, popping a couple in his mouth and crunching them noisily.

"You're telling me," Turanya continued, the oily commander's nostrils flaring slightly with incredulity as he spoke, "That you're five days late with the consignment of spore samples our biological science team were waiting on because of...the Children of Tama?"

"Well, not entirely," Jirel conceded truthfully, his confidence levels still high, "But one of their ships did intercept us as we were taking the most direct route out here, and they said we couldn't cut through the Montur system because it belonged to them."

"Did they?"

Commander Turanya's tone was bereft of any sense of genuine belief, and he had in fact had to work hard to extract most of the sarcasm from his words.

Not that Jirel was worried about that. He was talking his way out of the problem, after all.

"I mean," he continued with another winning grin, "I think that's what they were claiming? They just kept saying 'The city of Julod, its walls high, its moat wide'. And then they locked weapons on us. So we, y'know, decided we'd go the long way around."

Turanya shook his head and picked up a small padd from the desk in front of him, raising a single eyebrow in confusion. "But your engineer told my repair teams that the damage to your vessel was caused by a Breen scout ship?"

Jirel crewed on another pine nut and nodded, confidence levels still operating within normal parameters. "Ah, yep, well, our new route had us skirting pretty close to the new border of Breen space. And, apparently, also a tiny bit over the border. Which was an honest mistake, but they didn't give us a chance to explain that."

Turanya's second eyebrow joined his first.

"And then," the Trill continued, "After we got through all that, we picked up the distress call."

"...Distress call?"

“Yeah. From a transport ship ferrying a Kriosian princess to the Sentaxian system.”

“You...rescued a princess?”

Commander Turanya’s eyebrows were now threatening to flee his face entirely.

“I know what it sounds like,” Jirel smiled back, “But the transport just had a warp core imbalance, so we didn’t ‘rescue’ her so much as we just gave her a lift. We were passing that system on our way here anyway.”

“I see.”

“But, I mean, you know Kriosians, right? And it turned out this princess hadn’t imprinted yet. Said she’d been saving herself for her wedding day. Until she accidentally bumped into my weapons chief at the wrong moment. So then that became a whole thing—”

“Jirel, I’m going to stop you there,” Turanya said with a deep sigh.

Jirel obediently paused, happy that another sticky situation had been successfully avoided thanks to his ever-resilient powers of negotiation.

In front of him, the Flaxian leaned forward in his chair, affecting a slightly deeper glower than Jirel would normally have expected from a man who was fully satisfied with the completely truthful explanation that he had been offered for their entirely understandable delays.

“Frankly, I don’t believe a word of what you’re saying.”

Jirel’s latest grin disappeared for a fleeting moment, as his confidence levels suffered a hit. But he quickly rotated his shield harmonics and recovered. “That’s genuinely what happened,” he persisted, “Ask my crew. Klath had to undergo an ancient Kriosian memory wipe to get out of that whole imprint thing—”

“Stop it.”

Jirel stopped it. His confidence levels now fluctuating under pressure from the Flaxian’s reaction.

“So,” Turanya continued, “They’re fun, the stories. Very entertaining, I’m sure. But here’s the facts of the situation: In return for a very generous quantity of latinum, I entrusted you and your crew with the simple task of transporting two hundred spore samples from Flaxia Prime to my station, so that our researchers could conduct groundbreaking research into fungal lifespans in microgravity.”

“I know,” Jirel nodded, “Sounded super important.”

“Instead, you’ve shown up here five days late. All of the samples are damaged, destroyed or otherwise unusable. And on top of that, you’ve had the front to ask my engineering department to take time out of their refit of the habitation levels to help repair your ship!”

Jirel calmly reached down and grabbed another handful of pine nuts. “Look, Commander,” he offered, keeping his tone understanding as his confidence returned to peak levels, “I’m as upset as you are. All we wanted was a nice quiet delivery for once—”

“For once?!”

“My point is that we honestly tried our best. But sometimes these things happen out here. And I totally understand if you want to renegotiate payment given what’s happened.”

The Flaxian leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers again. “Oh, you have no idea how much we need to renegotiate. Because of your delays, the spores are ruined, the research will have to be delayed, which means the funding for the whole project will now need to be returned. And we were supposed to use part of that to get our new onboard animal habitat up and running!”

“Huh,” Jirel managed, his confidence levels shielding him from fully acknowledging how far south this negotiation was heading, “So, what, we’ll keep the upfront payment, you keep the rest of the balance, and we’ll call it even?”

The Trill tried a hopeful smile. And for the first time since their conversation had started, there was a trace of a smile on Turanya’s own face. Though not one that settled the nerves that were starting to impact on his resilience. As Turanya idly tapped on the padd in his hand and then handed it over, Jirel felt his spots starting to itch.

“Here’s my counter-proposal,” the Flaxian said, calmly but firmly, “You, and your crew, are going to repay that amount of latinum. In full.”

Jirel stared at the figure on the padd. His confidence shattered in an instant. “Um, I think there’s a typo here. This says you want us to pay—”

“No typo. That’s what you’ve just cost the Flaxian Science Agency.”

Jirel looked back up at the Flaxian commander. Who was still smiling, but definitely didn’t seem to be joking. “Ok, let’s be real here, Turanya,” the Trill managed, “We both know that there’s no way we can give you that sort of money.”

“Well, I’d suggest you find a way, Jirel. Because until you do, I’m afraid that I have no choice but to keep hold of the collateral.”

“What collateral?”

“Your ship,” Turanya replied with a wider leer, “Which is hereby impounded.”

Jirel’s face dropped. His confidence had fully evaporated. For the first time, he was forced to fully acknowledge that he wasn’t going to talk his way out of this one.

“Y—You can’t do that!”

“I assure you I can,” Turanya replied, his own confidence growing as Jirel’s dwindled, as if he was absorbing it from the Trill’s body, “As per the rules of Flaxian interstellar law. If you need to double check, I think it’s section 17, paragraph 3.”

He gestured back to the padd in Jirel’s hand as he continued.

“You bring me what you owe me, and you can have your ship back. Otherwise, I guess you’re hiking to your next delivery.”

Jirel went to retort again, to try and argue his case further, and talk his way out of what was happening to him and his ship. But something entirely unexpected happened.

He found that he had nothing else to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Moments later, Jirel quietly stepped out of the station commander’s office and into the small reception area.

Over on the benches across the side of the room, the rest of the Bounty’s crew stood up expectantly, and he looked back at them. Klath, his Klingon weapons chief, Denella, his Orion engineer, Natasha Kinsen, his human ex-Starfleet doctor, and Sunek, his emotional Vulcan pilot.

Four people that had entrusted their immediate future in Jirel’s ability to talk his way out of any situation. Four people that were completely exhausted from their eventful trip to the Flaxian science station Reja Gar.

And four people that Jirel now had to tell that they were homeless.

“Well?” Denella asked expectantly, “How did it go?”

The unjoined Trill took a moment to decide on the best way to break the news. Eventually, he settled on his approach.

“So, there’s good news and bad news.”

A long pause. The four people stared back at their de facto leader, as he held his hand out with a hopeful, confident smile.

“The good news is: I got us some pine nuts...”

## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

“This is all your fault.”

Sunek grumpily gestured at Klath with a wiry accusing finger. The Klingon looked suitably unimpressed at his action.

“How?” he grunted back.

The five Bounty crew members sat around a small table situated in the recreation area of the Reja Gar station, which was positioned down the length of one edge of the station’s main rectangular habitation section. They had retreated here after leaving the commander’s office, ostensibly to figure out what they were going to do next. But it had quickly and predictably turned into the setting for an argument.

“Because,” Sunek griped, “We could still have been here almost on time if you hadn’t hooked up with that stupid princess!”

Klath growled unhappily back across the table. “We did not ‘hook up’,” he retorted, “She accidentally allowed herself to imprint on me during a brief moment of weakness, that was all. As I explained to her betrothed’s family before respectfully submitting to the...eighteen stages of the memory wipe ceremony.”

“Besides,” Natasha added with a wisp of a smile, “It’s really not Klath’s fault that he’s so irresistibly attractive.”

Sunek scoffed loudly at this, even as Klath nodded back at the doctor, in complete agreement with her that such a thing was not something that was under his control.

“Psh,” the Vulcan retorted, “Looks have got nothing to—She was a Kriosian metamorph! She’d have imprinted on a hasperat soufflé if it had looked at her the right way!”

“Funny,” Denella mused, “Cos she met you in the transporter room and didn’t seem to—”

“I’d just woken up! I hadn’t fixed my hair! Besides, you know I’ve got more of a cute, understated, boyish thing going on. Some women are so shallow...”

Jirel was loath to break up his crew’s bickering. It was one of their favourite pursuits, after all. But after remaining silent for most of the debate so far, he reluctantly leaned forwards. “Ok, come on. What the hell are we gonna do here?”

The question brought the argument shuddering straight into a miserable silence.

The Bounty, and all of their belongings, had been well and truly seized before they had even had a chance to get back. Commander Turanya had sent out instructions to seal off the docking bay they had landed in as soon as Jirel had left his office.

“There’s not a chance in hell we can pay what they’re asking,” Denella admitted with a sigh, doing her best to keep her full feelings under the surface.

Though, in truth, she didn’t really need to make the effort. Everyone else knew just how badly the Orion was taking their current plight. After all, as an engineer, she had imprinted on the Bounty with the same level of commitment that the Kriosian princess had with Klath.

And now it was lost.

As another unhappy silence descended, Sunek’s face lit up with a flash of inspiration. “Steal the ship back!” he eagerly exclaimed, before pointing around the table at the others in turn, hunting for some affirmation, “Steal the ship back? Steal the ship back? Steal the—?”

“Ok, sensible ideas only,” Jirel cut in, “This might only be a science station, but Turanya’s got half a dozen Flaxian cruisers out there at his disposal, don’t forget.”

They had seen the extent of the fleet protecting the station as they had arrived. Whatever research was being conducted on Reja Gar, it was being well protected. And while a Flaxian cruiser wasn’t an especially terrifying prospect in and of itself, it was still a match for the Bounty. And half a dozen of them would finish off any escape attempt before it had started.

“In which case,” Natasha shrugged, “We’ve got to reason with him. I dunno, work out a repayment plan, or something.”

“Sure,” Sunek snorted, gesturing at the padd in the middle of the table that still displayed the extent of their debt, “At the rate we rake in the latinum, that should all be squared up just in time for the heat death of the universe.”

“Besides,” Jirel added, “Turanya’s not exactly in a negotiating mood.”

Undeterred, Natasha stood up from the table and grabbed the padd, firing a knowing glance in the Trill’s direction. “He wasn’t in a negotiating mood with you. That’s not the same thing.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a terrible negotiator, Jirel.”



This comment hit him hard for a couple of reasons. One, because of who it was that said it, which he decided to file away in the recesses of his mind along with the rest of his ever-conflicted feelings for the human doctor. And two, because of what she said. After all, he was a brilliant negotiator.

“Um, I’m a brilliant negotiator,” he shot back to emphasise that particular point.

“Not really,” Natasha replied with a patient smile, which Jirel also swiftly filed away in the recesses of his mind, “I’m sure you think you are, but you definitely have your limits. It’s one of your many, many weaknesses.”

“Yeah,” Denella chimed in, “Like when you tried to talk things out with those Nausicaan pirates last month?”

Jirel snapped a defensive look at his engineer and wagged a finger at her. “Ok, granted, not my finest hour. But, after that little incident, who successfully talked us into a discount on a replacement shield grid from that Ferengi outpost on Darvan IV?”

“Kinda feels like you’re missing the larger point.”

“So,” Natasha said, waving the padd at the group as Jirel gently simmered in his chair, “Seeing as I’m guessing the rest of you are all just planning to sit around in this bar, drinking and feeling sorry for yourselves all night...?”

She paused to allow any of the other four to offer a counterpoint. But all she got back was four slightly guilty looks.

“I guess I’ll go...negotiate our ship back,” she concluded with a roll of her eyes.

With that, she turned and walked off out of the recreation area. For a moment, Jirel considered following her, but then he turned back to the others with a defiant look.

“I am a good negotiator, you know.”

“Cool,” Sunek yawned, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the bar, “So how about you go negotiate us a round of shots, hmm?”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What the hell do you mean ‘no contact’?”

Commander Turanya snapped the question at the face displayed on the small screen on the desk in front of him.

The female Flaxian on the screen, Captain Sonaya of the cruiser Sud Yot, stared impassively back at her superior. Not entirely sure how she could make her report any clearer. “I mean we’ve heard nothing from the crew since the last scheduled check-in, fourteen hours ago. All we have is a sensor trace. Three sectors away.”

Turanya grimaced and nodded, before smacking a balled fist onto the polished top of the desk. After leaving a short gap for any further reaction from her commander, Sonaya diligently continued with her report.

“From this distance, long-range scans aren’t going to tell us a lot, but we’re not even getting signs of an impulse pattern. Looks like they’re drifting. I would suspect that they’ve suffered a serious power failure of some kind.”

“Power failure? You really think so?”

At this question, Sonaya raised a curious eyebrow. “What else could it be?” she asked back, entirely reasonably, “It is an older ship, after all. It was due for a refit of its warp core next month.”

“Right,” Turanya nodded, “Lifesigns?”

“Indeterminate. At this range.”

Turanya’s fist made a second impact with the desk as he began to grind his teeth. He could definitely have done without this today. First the collapse of the spore sample research, and now this. “Ok,” he sighed, quickly composing himself and switching back to business mode, “I guess we’ll have to assume the worst for the time being. I’ll put together a recovery operation and get them ready to ship out asap.”

“Commander,” Sonaya replied, “The Sud Yot is ready for immediate departure—”

Turanya stopped her in the middle of her volunteering with a sharply dismissive wave of his hand. “No. I’m not risking the Sud Yot. That’s the newest cruiser we’ve got out there.”

Sonaya’s eyebrow raised once again. “What exactly would we be risking on a simple recovery mission?”

In his rise up the ranks of the Flaxian Science Agency, Turanya had become so used to covering his lies that he barely skipped a beat before he replied. “I mean that I’d rather have the Sud Yot on patrol back here,” he explained with an entirely believable expression, “We had another report of Kressari raiding parties in the sector last week, so I don’t want to take any chances.”

Sonaya hadn’t seen any such report, but she knew that her superior would be privy to more detailed security briefings than she was. So she merely nodded in understanding.

"I'll have a word with Captain Grinya on the Ret Kol," Turanya continued, "I know he's short a few crew members right now, but he's a salvage expert."

Sonaya nodded again, then cocked her head slightly, mulling over whether she should be forward enough to ask her next question. In the end, she decided to proceed. "Commander, if I may. There have been some rumours around here about the cargo that—"

"I'm aware of the rumours," he fired back tersely to shut her down, "And I'll deal with them. You just tell Captain Grinya I want to talk to him."

A short pause. As if she wanted to push the matter further.

"Understood," she said eventually, "Sud Yot out."

The screen went blank, leaving behind a reflection of Turanya's scowling face in the reflection. As he mulled over the fresh complications in his head, he noted a message pop up from his secretary, indicating that someone was waiting for him in reception.

"Send them in," he sighed as he tapped the intercom controls.

The door opened and a human woman walked in, dressed in a simple dark tunic top and holding a familiar padd. It didn't take all of Turanya's powers of deduction to figure out where she had come from.

"Hi, Commander Turanya," Natasha began with a friendly smile, "Sorry to bother you, but I—"

"Yes, yes, you're one of Jirel's lot, aren't you. Here to pay what you owe me?"

Natasha was a little thrown by his directness, but she didn't let it show. Keeping her Academy lessons on diplomacy and mediation at the forefront of her mind, and treating this particular exchange with the delicate touch of a first contact. "I am here to discuss our...financial situation, yes. So, if I may—"

"There really is nothing to discuss," Turanya cut in again, "You either have the latinum, or you don't. And unless you and your colleagues won the Lissepian lottery in the last couple of hours, I'm going to assume that you don't."

Natasha wasn't sure precisely what it was about this particular Flaxian's demeanour. Whether it was his superior, dismissive attitude. Or the way he kept cutting her off and talking over her. Or simply the fact that he had impounded all of her worldly possessions.

But whatever it was about Commander Turanya, she suddenly found herself dropping her carefully honed Starfleet diplomacy and striding across to the commander's desk, before slamming the padd down onto the surface with a surprising amount of force.

"Ok, let's cut the crap," she fired off, "You know as well as I do that there's no chance we're gonna be able to pay this off. Especially when you've made so completely sure that we've lost the use of our ship."

Turanya went to retort, but she persisted, not giving him a chance to interrupt her this time.

"And, on top of that, I'm sure you're also aware of the state of our ship. Collateral or not, you know that's not even gonna cover the down payment on the amount that you're asking for. Way I see it, neither of us are getting anything out of the current situation. So...this is where we negotiate."

She folded her arms in satisfaction and nodded down at the Flaxian. It was his move.

For his part, Turanya looked more than a little irritated at the impudence of her entrance. But he also had to admit that she had a point. His repair crews had delivered an initial report on the state of the collateral down in the landing bays. And to put it mildly, it was no Lissepian lottery prize.

And then, he had a sudden brainwave. A way to combine the twin headaches that he was dealing with right now. His irritation gave way to a more typically insincere leer.

"Perhaps you're right. And you know what? There might be a solution to all of this, staring us right in the face."

Natasha's face betrayed a modicum of uncertainty. Regardless of how she had planned to approach this particular negotiation, she definitely hadn't expected it to be quite that easy to win the Flaxian over. "Oh," she managed, "Well, that's good to hear."

Turanya's smile widened further, as he realised that Captain Grinya and the Ret Kol wouldn't be short of crew members for much longer.

The universe worked in mysterious ways sometimes. And Commander Turanya had just been delivered a consignment of useful idiots. Right to his doorstep.

"Yes," he nodded, "I think I've got the perfect way for you to work off your debt..."

## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

“Salvage?”

Sunek punctuated his question with a scoff that was loud enough to echo around the now mostly empty rec area. And his comment was backed up by a trio of less than enthusiastic looks from the rest of the Bounty’s crew, as Natasha revealed the results of her negotiation.

“Nope, nuh huh,” the Vulcan continued, “Salvage work is the worst. Creeping around some musty old shipwreck, probably in some stupid stinky spacesuit, just to steal stuff from a bunch of dead people? No thanks.”

“It’s not like that,” Natasha retorted, “This is more of a recovery mission. The ship’s out of power, the crew should still be alive. And it’s one job. We help out with this, and Commander Turanya says he’ll square off our debts. And we get the Bounty back.”

She paused and shrugged a concession.

“I mean, after we’re done with the salvage work, obviously. It’ll be a Flaxian-led operation using one of their cruisers.”

Sunek tutted and shook his head again. Further around the table, Jirel’s eyes narrowed slightly. “One salvage job? Really? And just like that, he’s gonna write off all that latinum?”

“You’re welcome,” Natasha replied with a smile, “And, guys, a little more positivity, maybe? I just saved the day here!”

The previously silent Klath grunted unhappily and folded his burly arms. “I am...forced to agree with the Vulcan,” he grimaced with extreme reluctance, “There is no honour in salvage work.”

“But there was honour in ferrying a bunch of fungus across the cosmos?” Natasha shot back with a knowing look.

Klath went to fire back an equally sharp response, but found that he didn’t really have one. In truth, he just didn’t like salvage work either.

“That is...not the point.”

Denella shrugged from her side of the table. “Well, I can’t say it’s what I’d choose to do, but I’d be up for some salvaging. Besides, it’s not like we have much of a choice, right?”

“Ah,” Natasha managed awkwardly, “Actually, you do have a choice. Because there’s something else Turanya wants from us.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yeah. It’s some big engineering project down in the science labs. It’s fallen behind schedule and they need some extra hands. So I...offered our services with that as well. And in return, we’ll be allowed to complete repairs to the Bounty before we leave.”

That seemed to appease the engineer, leaving Natasha free to turn her attention back to the other three at the table, who all remained substantially less appeased.

“Ok, I get it, salvage work sucks. But I’m not hearing any better ideas.”

“Well, here’s one,” Sunek offered, “We had a good run on the Bounty and all, it was fun while it lasted, but I guess now we go our separate ways. Keep in touch. Maybe catch up in a few years, see how we’re all getting on—?”

“Shut up, Sunek,” Denella griped, “I’m getting my ship back.”

“Your ship?” Jirel asked with amusement.

“Whatever. I say we do this.”

Jirel looked back at Denella for a moment, then conceded the point with a nod. “In the absence of a plan that doesn’t involve salvage work, I guess I’m forced to agree.”

The three of them turned to Klath and Sunek. The Klingon grumbled slightly again, but offered a curt nod of his own. He was in.

“Ugh,” the remaining dissenting voice griped, “I’m still not going salvaging, you know.”

“Perfect,” Denella replied, “You can help me with the building work. Lots of heavy lifting, running around fetching me tools all day, long hours—”

Sunek jumped up from the table in an instant and turned to Jirel, snapping him the sharpest salute that anyone else at the table had ever seen.

“Reporting for salvage duty, sir!”

Jirel stifled a smile as he and the others stood up as well, preparing to depart.

“And you never know, Sunek,” he offered with an optimistic shrug, “Might end up being fun?”

As soon as he materialised on the transporter pad, Jirel immediately questioned how fun this particular mission was going to be.

He, Klath and Sunek stood on the raised pad and looked around the confines of the room. And at the trio of distinctly unimpressed Flaxians standing by the transporter controls.

Each of them possessed the usual facial ridges of their species, with a central silvery line of nodules running down their noses and wispy sensory tendrils hanging from their chins. But even by Flaxian standards, these three appeared especially tough and grizzled. They were dressed in sturdy black uniforms with silver communicator pins attached to their chests, and looked entirely ready and prepared for their recovery mission.

In comparison, the three newcomers couldn't have looked less prepared for a recovery mission if they tried. They wore a variety of creased and mismatched tunics and trousers, and their dishevelled look was topped off by Sunek's ever-chaotic hairstyle, and Klath's unfriendly scowl.

It wasn't all that hard to understand why the Flaxians looked so unimpressed with them.

Jirel suppressed the urge to flinch as he stepped down from the transporter pad and held out a friendly hand to the Flaxians, turning on his winning space adventurer charm once again. "Hey there," he grinned, "I'm Jirel. Someone ordered some salvage experts?"

The tallest of the Flaxians slowly looked down at Jirel's outstretched hand, then back up at the hopeful smile on his face, without his expression softening one iota.

Behind Jirel, Klath stepped down from the pad as well, glaring darkly at the three distrusting figures that faced him. Sunek took another moment to compose himself before reluctantly stepping down. Someone who talked as much as he did knew it was best not to stand on active transporter pads for too long when someone was at the controls.

Eventually, just as Jirel's jaw was starting to ache from the effort involved in maintaining the charming grin, and as he was starting to wonder if he needed to lean harder on the universal translator, the lead Flaxian tapped the combadge on his chest.

"Bridge," he barked out in a deep voice, "The newbies are aboard. Set a direct course for the target. Maximum warp."

"Confirmed," the response came through the ether.

Satisfied that his order was being followed, the lead Flaxian clocked the comms link closed, then jerked his head in the direction of the door of the transporter room and began to walk. The three Bounty crew members followed, with the two other still-silent Flaxians bringing up the rear.

Mercifully, given the decidedly awkward atmosphere that was developing, their tour guide did at least start to talk to them once they were moving.

"I'm Captain Grinya," he explained as they paced down a corridor outside the transporter room, "And this is my ship, the Ret Kol. Fifteen years service for the Flaxian Science Agency."

"The ship or the captain?" Jirel offered good-naturedly.

He received a sharp glare from Grinya for his efforts, who then turned and led them down an identical second corridor.

"Firstly, understand that I am the leader of this entire operation. And that whatever I tell you to do is what you do. It may sound trivial, or easy, or even beneath you. But salvage work can be dangerous, believe me. Especially when people don't do what they're told to do."

"Don't worry, I always do as I'm told," Sunek inevitably piped up, "Just not always exactly when I'm told to do it."

The Vulcan's weak attempt at breaking the ice fell on deaf ears, as Grinya continued.

"The three of you will be part of the initial boarding team, along with myself and Lieutenants Deroya and Kataya back there."

Klath glanced back at the two Flaxians, one male and one female, that followed them. There was still no trace of warmth on their features.

"Is there a problem, Klingon?" the male Flaxian virtually spat at him.

Klath felt an innate urge to fight rising up inside of him at this immediate sign of confrontation, but in a break from tradition, he opted to suppress it. "No," he replied in his most measured tone, "No problem."

Jirel felt the atmosphere around the group drop another few degrees, as he gamely tried to find some sort of rapport with Captain Grinya. "So, what's the mission? What are we...salvaging?"

Grinya's jaw tightened slightly, but he didn't delay his reply. "Our target is a Flaxian transport, located three sectors away. Based on our sensor data, they've lost main power. Indeterminate lifesigns. No other ships detected in the area. Our mission is to recover and retrieve. Logs, survivors and...cargo."

"What sort of cargo?"

Jirel wasn't really all that interested in the answer, and was merely still trying to gamely make some sort of conversation. Still, Grinya's jaw

tightened another notch.

“Cargo that belongs to the Flaxian Science Agency,” he replied curtly.

Before the distinctly awkward conversation had a chance to progress any further, they arrived at a simple plain grey door, seemingly identical to all the other simple plain grey doors they had passed on their walk down the corridors of the Ret Kol so far.

Grinya pointed at the door with a slight sneer. “These will be your barracks for the trip. I thought it best to keep you separated from the rest of my crew as much as possible. For your own safety.”

He glanced over at Deroya and Kataya, and for the first time since the Bounty’s trio had arrived on board, the Flaxians all shared a sudden burst of laughter.

Mocking laughter, but laughter all the same.

Without needing to glance over to check, Jirel could already tell which of his colleagues was going to rise to that piece of obvious provocation.

“I do not need protection!”

Captain Grinya looked back at the snarling form of Klath and shrugged. “Maybe not,” he conceded, still smiling, “But plenty of my crew love a fight, Klingon. And I don’t want them having too much fun before we’ve finished our mission.”

Klath growled again as the three Flaxians allowed themselves another short burst of mocking laughter, before they walked back the way they had come, leaving the three newcomers alone.

Jirel realised that he’d been holding his breath for some time, and suddenly became very keenly aware that they were onboard an unfamiliar ship, surrounded by unfriendly people, warping away into space. He felt a long way from home all of a sudden.

“Is it just me?” Sunek asked from over the Trill’s shoulder with more than a trace of sarcasm, “Or are we nailing this so far?”

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

Natasha had been feeling pretty good about her negotiating skills after her initial meeting with Commander Turanya. To the point that she hadn't thought twice about offering to help Denella with the engineering side of things back onboard the Reja Gar station.

Unfortunately for her, she hadn't been the only one impressed with her skills. It turned out that she'd also made quite an impression on Turanya himself.

"You know, I had no idea that you were ex-Starfleet when we met earlier. We're always on the lookout for extra researchers at the Flaxian Science Agency."

The oily Flaxian walked alongside her as she carried the crate of engineering parts along one of the labyrinth of corridors inside the station, contributing the bulk of the work to a conversation that Natasha had no interest in having. He had offered to carry the crate for her, and she had been hoping that her polite but firm rejection of that offer would have been enough of a hint that she would rather have been left alone. But apparently Jirel wasn't the only one whose negotiating skills had their limits.

She walked through the door to the science lab where Denella was working, followed by her unshakable Flaxian shadow.

The Orion engineer glanced up from where she was working at a bank of computer consoles on the far side of the room, and caught the meaning behind Natasha's knowing glare as soon as she saw it.

"Seriously," Turanya continued, having caught none of the meaning, "With your qualifications and experience, you'd have the pick of the projects out here."

Natasha placed the crate down with a thud and turned back to the Flaxian, trying to maintain a significantly more polite tone than the situation merited. "Again, that's a very kind offer, Commander Turanya. But as I've already told you, I'm a doctor, not a scientist."

"Psh," Turanya replied, his powers of awkward flirtation apparently unaffected by her comment, "Mere technicalities. As a medic, you have to know so much about so many different species out here in this galaxy of ours, you're basically a biologist."

"Hmm. Never had to treat a Flaxian before, actually," she mused, maintaining her polite tone, before pointedly adding, "Yet."

If Turanya was taken aback by that comment, he didn't let it show. Instead, he broke into a cheery smile and wagged a tendriled finger at her. "You're spunky. I like that."

Natasha fought off the urge to roll her eyes, and settled on sending a second knowing glare in Denella's direction, who offered an apologetic shrug back.

"Tell you what," the Flaxian commander continued unabashed, "How about we discuss all of this further. Over dinner? You know, the station commander's dining area on Reja Gar gives an incredible view of the Plavian nebula..."

Natasha let out a tired sigh. Inside, she considered the sad fact that there was definitely a part of her that had fallen for this sort of boastful behaviour in the past. Not just her ex-husband Cameron, but more recently with Mizar Bal, a Ktarian who had turned out to be a criminal mastermind. Or even Jirel himself, when she had first arrived on the Bounty.

Still, she also noted that all of those men in her past had at least a modicum of charm to back up their more boastful side. Which was a department in which Turanya was entirely lacking.

"Honestly," she said eventually, with a firmer tone, "Thanks for the kind offer, but I really think I'm better off where I am."

"You're homeless," the Flaxian pointed out.

She offered him a smile and a gentle pat on his shoulder. "Yep. I am. So, you let that sink in as you're watching that nebula of yours over dinner, ok?"

Turanya looked a little offended for a moment, before his scaly face creased into another wide grin and he wagged another finger at her. "You're spunky," he repeated, as he shook his head and made for the exit to the lab, "I...really like that..."

As the door closed, Natasha let out another sigh, this time of relief. Then she walked over to where Denella was still working.

"Hear that? I'm spunky."

The Orion engineer offered a sympathetic smile, but had no interest in poking fun at the unwanted attention that the other woman was receiving. After all, she had plenty of experience of having to deal with that sort of thing. So, instead, she turned her attention back to their work. Because she had some more pressing issues on her mind.

"I wanted to talk to you about all this," she said, gesturing around the lab.

The room they were in was distinctly more modern than the rest of the interior of Reja Gar that they had seen so far, indicating that this was part of some new flagship scientific endeavour that had been designed from the ground up.

It was divided into two distinct areas. The main part, where they were standing, was clearly the main laboratory. It was filled with banks of computers, testing equipment and the like, all of which Denella was currently setting up.

And then there was the other, smaller section of the room. It was partitioned off by a stout metal frame that was evidently designed to house a forcefield of some kind. And it was this part that Denella had some issues about.

“What exactly are we building here again?”

“A research facility,” Natasha shrugged as she glanced around and gestured to the partitioned area, “Commander Turanya said they’re going to build an arboretum in there and complete a long-term study of plant growth patterns in artificial gravity.”

Denella didn’t seem at all convinced by this, even as Natasha continued.

“Actually, it sounds really fascinating. They’re going to test out a range of atmospheric conditions, and there’s a real potential for the results to apply to long-range terraforming projects. If you can adapt the required plant life to the planetary conditions en route, that would shave decades off the time it usually takes to—”

“Are you sure you’re not a scientist?” Denella asked with a wryly amused look, “Because you can definitely talk like one.”

Natasha looked a little sheepish, as the Orion turned back to the fenced-off area.

“Anyway, my point is: Why does an arboretum need a type-45 forcefield to be installed?”

“Like I said,” Natasha replied, “They’re going to test out—”

“Different atmospheric conditions, I know. But you can achieve atmospheric containment with just about any old forcefield. Why specify one so powerful?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I dunno,” Denella admitted with a shrug, “But it kinda feels like Commander Turanya has asked me to build a cage.”

Natasha looked back at the fenced-off section of the lab, and suddenly felt unnerved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel felt like he was flying.

In fact, he was flying. For a brief moment. He sailed across the mess hall of the Flaxian cruiser Ret Kol in a graceful arc, momentarily freed from the confines of the ship’s artificial gravity. Until his impromptu flight was brought to a significantly less graceful end by the form of one of the stout metal tables inside the mess hall, which the Trill landed on in a pained heap.

Today’s lunch was proving to be a very eventful meal on the Ret Kol.

Breathing heavily, and wincing from the pain of the impact, he managed to roll away across several unfinished meals, before dropping back to his feet and refocusing on the fight. He barely had time to note Klath on the other side of the room, growling in exertion as he lifted a burly Flaxian over his shoulders and threw him to the ground. Or Sunek, who was in the middle of sprinting down the length of one of the other tables, pursued by three other Flaxians.

Because as soon as Jirel got back to his feet, he found himself having to evade a punch being thrown at his face, and failing to evade a second one thrown at his stomach.

He wheezed in pain as the shot connected, but managed to connect with a punch of his own to momentarily daze his own opponent.

The fight had been on the cards ever since they had arrived onboard the Ret Kol.

While the trio of Bounty crew members had mostly kept themselves to themselves onboard, as per Captain Grinya’s suggestion, they had occasionally mingled with the rest of the crew, at mealtimes and during mission briefings. And there had always been plenty of needle between the grizzled salvage veterans and the strangers in their midst. It was fair to say that the Ret Kol’s crew didn’t have much respect for them, and Jirel had to admit that they hadn’t done a great job in earning any.

And with each passing mealtime over the two day voyage, the tension in the air had ratcheted up a notch and the glares they got had become more adversarial.

Until lunchtime today, when an especially large member of the Ret Kol’s engineering team had casually walked up to where Klath was sitting and deposited a large helping of spit directly into the Klingon’s ration of Flaxian stew.

That action had proved to be more than enough to get things going.

As he evaded another punch, Jirel heard Klath roar in satisfaction again, accompanied by the sound of another Flaxian body being slammed into something substantial. At least someone was enjoying themselves.

Klath spun around from the latest enemy he had dispatched and grappled with another Flaxian who charged at him. He recognised him as

Lieutenant Kataya, from when they had beamed aboard. The Flaxian seemed to revel in their scuffle.

The Klingon gritted his teeth as he was slammed back against the wall of the mess hall, still relishing the fight despite the surge of pain that lanced through him.

Further across the room, Sunek found himself cornered by Lieutenant Deroya, the female Flaxian they had met when they had beamed aboard. He whipped his head one way and then the other to avoid a couple of swings of her fists as he panted in exertion.

“Um, guys,” he shouted out, “Can we all just clarify what the rules are here? Are we in a ‘it’s ok to hit a woman’ kinda scenario, or—?”

Before Sunek got any further, Deroya threw a punch that connected with the Vulcan’s side, and followed it up with a kick to what was almost universally established across humanoid species as being the part of their body they least appreciated being kicked in.

“Ok,” Sunek managed to cough, as his eyes widened in pain, “That...is definitely against the rules.”

Jirel himself was busily embarking on his second flight of the afternoon, having been launched back across the room by his new fighting partner onto another of the mess hall’s tables. This time, he couldn’t stop himself from sliding clean off the sturdy piece of furniture in a clattering pile of arms, legs, metal canteen plates and leftovers. He wearily groaned where he landed, as a sizeable portion of Flaxian stew landed in his hair.

The fight had finally been knocked out of him. But before his adversary could take advantage, and before the fight could escalate even further, the door to the mess hall opened.

The dozen brawling individuals stopped in the middle of whatever they were doing, and a collection of dazed Flaxians, a snarling Klingon, a wheezing Vulcan and a Trill covered in leftover stew all watched as Captain Grinya strode in, flanked by his second in command, Lieutenant Rondya.

For a moment, there was silence, as the grizzled captain surveyed the scene of carnage in front of him with a look that suggested this wasn’t the first time he’d walked in on this sort of thing.

That suggestion was confirmed moments later, when the Flaxian captain’s face creased into an amused smile. “I told you my crew loved a fight, didn’t I, Klingon?” he offered in Klath’s direction.

Still panting from the exertion of the battle, and working on controlling the blood lust that still boiled away inside, Klath mustered a curt nod back and nothing more.

He was surprised to feel a supportive pat on his shoulder at the same time, and was more surprised to turn and find Lieutenant Kataya respectfully smiling back at him.

“I’d heard Klingons fight well,” he grunted, “But I’d never gotten the chance to see it until now. You didn’t disappoint.”

Klath wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he fired off another of his curt nods. A motion that he hoped conveyed succinctly enough that he’d enjoyed himself as well.

“Still,” Captain Grinya barked out, getting everyone’s attention back to him, “There’s no more time for fun and games. We’re closing on our target. Lifesign readings are still indeterminate, so we’re now treating this as a priority alpha situation. Beam-in team, be ready in the transporter room in precisely fifteen minutes. Full spacesuits.”

He glanced at Jirel, just as a particularly large dollop of Flaxian stew dropped from his hair onto the deck below.

“In the meantime, get yourselves cleaned up. Newbie.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fifteen and a half minutes later, a completely stew-free Jirel led Klath and Sunek into the Ret Kol’s transporter room. And Sunek was still complaining.

“All I’m saying is below the belt is...below the belt! They literally named the thing after the thing!”

“Shut up, Sunek,” Jirel sighed.

All three of them were now clad in form-fitting Flaxian-spec spacesuits, replicated by their hosts to their exact dimensions to allow for full mobility. Each carried their bulky transparent helmets in their hands for the time being.

The three Flaxian members of the beam-in team were already in position on the transporter pad, clad in their own grey spacesuits with helmets locked in position. The faces of Captain Grinya and Lieutenants Deroya and Kataya were visible through their visors. And none of them looked happy to have been kept waiting, nor to be getting treated to another rant from Sunek.

“And another thing,” the Vulcan continued, gesturing to his helmet, “How come we need all this? They can’t scan that crate to check for an air supply over there? What kind of useless operation—”

“I said,” Jirel sighed, feeling a trio of glares burning into him from on the pad, “Shut up, Sunek.”



“What? It’d take five seconds for them to—”

“Our scans indicate an atmosphere,” Captain Grinya interjected, his voice oddly distorted as it came through a speaker on the outside of his sealed helmet, “The suits are a precaution. Until we ascertain exactly what has happened over there. And, just in case this wasn’t clear, they are a requisite precaution.”

The tall Flaxian stepped off the pad with a heavy footstep and stood towering over the wiry form of the Vulcan.

“Now, put your damn helmet on and get onto the damn transporter pad. Now.”

For a brief moment, Sunek considered firing off the comeback that was forming in the back of his mind. But eventually decided better of it. Instead, he reluctantly fixed his helmet into position, as Jirel and Klath did the same. As the three of them stepped onto the pad and turned back, the Flaxian transporter operator walked over to them and wordlessly offered out three bulky phaser rifles.

“Better take one of those each,” Grinya continued, his voice now oddly echoing around their individual helmets over the inter-suit comms link, “Again, precautionary.”

Each of the Bounty crew members took one of the heavy rifles. A modular and industrial design that none of them were entirely familiar with. Jirel noted now that the three Flaxian members of the beam-in team already carried their own versions of the weapon.

As Klath quickly familiarised himself with the controls, Jirel once again heard Sunek’s voice drifting over the comms link.

“Lotta phasers for a simple salvage mission, aren't there?”

Jirel declined to tell the Vulcan to shut up again.

Instead, and not for the first time since he had arrived onboard the Rel Kol, he suppressed a gulp.

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

The six figures materialised inside a darkened corridor onboard the derelict vessel.

As soon as their patterns had finished reforming on the deck plates, Captain Grinya and his Flaxian lieutenants tapped the sides of their helmets to flick on the torchlights on top of the headgear and swung around to sweep down each direction of the corridor. At the same time, Grinya flicked on the comms link back to the Ret Kol with a tap of his suit's wrist controls, while Deroya and Kataya tapped their own wrist controls to perform initial scans with the built-in tricorder.

All of their actions were performed with the practised speed of a group of people who had done this sort of thing dozens of times before.

"Grinya to Ret Kol."

"Rondya here," the gruff voice of his second in command came back.

"We've completed beam-in. Main power is definitely offline, no sign of any crew. Or any bodies. For now. Keep the channel clear for updates. Grinya out."

While the Flaxians were following their usual procedures, the three Bounty crew members were working on keeping up, switching on their own helmet torchlights.

Jirel found himself suppressing a shiver that ran down his spine as he peered down the shadowy and uninviting corridor ahead of him, bathed only in thin torch beams.

"Lifesign readings are still unclear. But no contaminants detected," Deroya reported over the separate suit-to-suit comms channel as she tapped her wrist controls.

"Well, that's something at least," Sunek grunted, reaching to undo his helmet.

"No!" Grinya snapped at the Vulcan.

"Wh—? What the hell were you transporting in this thing? The Tarellian plague?"

Grinya ignored the latest round of sarcasm from Sunek and checked his own readouts, explaining his reasoning as he did so. "As the lieutenant said, scans are still muddled. It's possible they're missing something. Until we find the crew, or until we get main power back online and run a full internal sensor sweep, helmets stay on and suits stay sealed. This is not a debate."

With that matter settled, the lead Flaxian turned to the rest of the group and began to bark out orders.

"Ok, people, this is the part where I tell you what you're gonna do, and then you all go and do it, without screwing anything up. Everyone clear?"

Jirel braced himself for Sunek's inevitable contribution to that question, but to his surprise, the Vulcan remained silent. He couldn't help but absently wonder whether there was a fault with his comms unit.

"Myself and Lieutenant Deroya will head to main engineering, get main power back up," Grinya continued, "The Klingon and the Vulcan will head up to the bridge and set up the data link back to the Ret Kol, so they can start downloading data recorders and mission logs. And Lieutenant Kataya, you take newbie here and begin a deck by deck sweep for crew and cargo. Tag everything of value for us to retrieve with the Ret Kol's transporter, and get any survivors back to sickbay, stat."

"Great," Jirel muttered to himself, forgetting his own comms link for a second, "Splitting up. That always works."

Grinya took a slow and deliberate step towards him and fixed the Trill with a glare. "You got a problem with my orders, feel free to sign up for the Flaxian Science Agency, work your way up the chain of command until you outrank me, and then tell me what to do. In the meantime, remember: I'm the leader of this operation. And you will do whatever the hell I tell you to do. I've not lost a member of a salvage team in fifteen years, and I'm not gonna start today."

His eyes narrowed slightly as he stared down at Jirel.

"Besides, you'd better do a good job, or that debt of yours with Commander Turanya'll grow a little bigger."

He didn't bother to wait for a response, and instead turned on his heels and led Deroya away down the corridor. Once he was a safe distance away, Sunek took a moment to snap a very sharp, and very sarcastic salute in his direction. Despite their situation, Jirel failed to hide the smirk.

Lieutenant Kataya, meanwhile, didn't seem to be in a smirking mood. "Ok, you all heard the Captain," he barked over the short-range comms link in their helmets, jabbing a gloved finger in Jirel's direction, "You're with me. The two of you, get to the bridge and set up that transfer. And everyone keep an eye out for lifesigns."

Like Grinya, he didn't wait for any sort of affirmation either. He was used to people doing as they were told. Instead, he hoisted his phaser rifle, tapped a couple of commands into his wrist-mounted controls, and set off.

Jirel offered the scowling Klath and the distinctly nervous Sunek a shrug, then took off after the Flaxian before he disappeared from sight.

With only Klath left for company, Sunek made for a set of turbolift doors that were recessed in a nearby alcove. He paused in momentary confusion when they failed to open.

“What the hell?”

“Perhaps you missed the fact that main power was offline,” Klath grunted from behind him.

“Yeah, but then how are we supposed to—?”

Sunek paused mid-question as he turned to see Klath disappearing into an access conduit a little further down the corridor, to begin their slow and laborious journey up to the bridge.

The Vulcan sighed inside his helmet with enough intensity to temporarily fog the visor.

“I really hate salvage work...”

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched them from a safe distance, keeping herself well concealed.

As soon as she had heard them arrive, she instinctively reacted and hid herself away. Just as she had learned to with the others.

She knew now that it was important to remain out of sight. Until the time was right.

Fortunately, it was easy enough for her to remain concealed, especially when she was so small. So she had calmly watched on as they had debated and gesticulated at each other before they eventually split up.

She hadn't been able to hear what they were talking about, and struggled to discern much about the newcomers at all given how they were dressed in identical suits. She certainly couldn't make out any details of their features through their helmets.

She had also never seen a Flaxian phaser rifle before, but a distant memory somewhere inside her instinctively made her feel wary about them. Especially when she saw the way they were being held by the newcomers.

And although she had remained concealed and undetected, their presence worried her. She hadn't expected any more to show up.

She thought that she had done everything that she needed to do. But it appeared that her task was still not at an end.

Once again, she found herself wishing that she could just go home. She ached to be back where she had been before all this had started. Before she had started to kill. But all of that seemed so far away, like a distant and faded memory. And besides, she had no idea how she would even get there any more. Whatever she used to do, or used to be, this was what she was now.

So, instead of going home, she crept onwards after two of the newcomers. Keeping herself carefully hidden from view for the time being, and using her skills to ensure that they had no possible idea of what was silently stalking them.

She continued to observe them for now, but she knew that soon she would have to act.

Because she didn't think she was going to like these people either.

## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

The bridge of the derelict had been peaceful and silent for some time. Then, in an instant, the silence was shattered by the sound of an access hatch clattering to the ground, and two ungainly figures in spacesuits awkwardly clambering out onto the deck.

All the while, Klath's own peaceful silence was being shattered by the sound of Sunek's long list of complaints over their short-range comms link.

"Five decks! Five decks, crawling on our hands and knees inside a bunch of musty old conduits, in a stupid heavy spacesuit which, frankly, I'm starting to think wasn't even freshly replicated! Does yours smell weird?"

Klath got back to his feet and retrieved the phaser rifle from where it was slung on his back, swinging the weapon around the darkened bridge and using the torch sight along with his own helmet lights to scan for any threats.

"No," he replied to the Vulcan as he did so, "My suit is fine."

Sunek clambered back up onto his own two feet, and caught the clear message in the Klingon's grunted comment. "Yeah, ok, I know what you're implying, smart guy. But it's not me. Vulcans don't sweat. And besides, I have a very pleasant natural odour. Every single one of my exes have said that I'm—"

"Completely empty," Klath muttered.

It took Sunek's indignation a moment to realise that Klath's attention was still on the bridge of the derelict itself. The Vulcan swept his own spotlights around the room to confirm the Klingon's initial analysis of the situation.

The bridge was a fairly typical design for most species throughout the quadrant, with a forward helm position, a central command chair and several other consoles and interfaces dotted around the perimeter of the room. Sunek noted that, aside from the command chair, every other station was a standing position. On Flaxian ships, it seemed that only the captain got the comfortable option.

At the front of the room stood a small but functional viewscreen. Albeit one that was currently offline, along with just about every other screen or readout on the bridge.

And, as Klath had correctly pointed out, the entire room was completely empty. Not that Sunek seemed overly worried by that at first.

"So?" he shrugged, "What were you expecting? A surprise party?"

Klath stepped cautiously and quietly around the expanse of the room, making sure to scan into every dark corner with his lights. "No," he replied tersely, "I was expecting dead bodies."

"So, like, a Klingon surprise party?"

Klath suppressed a sigh, the tension inside him continuing to rise as he completed his sweep of the seemingly empty room. "We have still detected no lifesigns, but this vessel apparently only suffered a power failure," he patiently explained to his companion, "Which means that some of the crew would have remained on the bridge while repairs were attempted."

Sunek considered this statement for a moment, cocking an eyebrow as he thought through the likeliest answer to Klath's concerns.

"Maybe they abandoned ship?"

"Perhaps they did," Klath replied, "Or at least attempted to. Which is a very...illogical response to a simple power failure, would you not agree?"

At this leading comment, Sunek suppressed a shudder that suddenly passed down the length of his spine. Without being entirely sure why he was doing it, he found himself unslinging his own rifle from his back and idly thumbing the power setting onto a medium stun.

"Alright, come on, stop messing around, buddy," he managed to stammer out, "What the hell are you getting at?"

The Klingon walked back over to the Vulcan, still darting glances around the dark recesses of the bridge as he did so. His battle senses were definitely hardening. "Something I sensed as soon as we arrived here. Something is very wrong here."

"I—In what way?"

"It is as if everyone on this vessel decided to...run."

A second shudder followed the first down Sunek's spine. He quickly thumbed his rifle onto the heaviest stun setting available.

"Ok, look," he added, gesturing to the consoles, "Let's get this stupid data link sorted. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can get the hell off this crate and you can tell me your ghost stories somewhere a lot less creepy. Deal?"

Klath's senses still alerted him to the danger of their situation, and he felt his blood lust rising once again. But he controlled that for the time being, and nodded back at the Vulcan. The pair of them moved over to one of the side consoles of the bridge, and before Klath could start to

work, Sunek took over the entire task.

“Right,” he said as his gloved fingers danced across the dimmed controls, “There’s enough juice in the reserve batteries to get this done without main power. I’m gonna patch out a link to the other ship, then they can take over and pull whatever they need from the database.”

Despite the darker feelings inside him right now, Klath couldn’t help but watch on in quiet satisfaction as the Vulcan actually put some effort in for once. Not only was it a rare enough event to be celebrated in its own right, but he had also stopped complaining.

The Klingon was almost allowing himself to relax a tad when the main comms units inside their helmets suddenly flared into life.

“Search team checking in,” they heard Jirel’s familiar voice say with a clear modicum of worry, “We’ve…found a body.”

Klath tensed up all over again, even as Sunek patted him on his arm.

“See, buddy?” the Vulcan said over their shorter suit-to-suit link, “There’s your bodies.”

Klath ignored his comment, listening in to the main link as Captain Grinya’s gruff voice responded to Jirel with clear irritation.

“It’s a salvage mission, newbie. Should expect to find some bodies.”

“Yeah,” Jirel replied, “But not in the state this one’s in.”

The third shudder that jolted down his spine was sharp enough to cause Sunek’s fingers to jump across the controls with even more haste. To his side, Klath gripped his phaser rifle even more tightly. Whatever Jirel’s comment meant, he was now certain that the crew had been running.

The next question was: From what?

\* \* \* \* \*

Like most 24th century spacefarers, Jirel tended to intensely dislike wearing spacesuits of any description.

Centuries ago, such heavy outfits had been a basic requirement of space travel, in order to keep their occupant alive and well in whatever harsh environment they found themselves in. But since the advent of reliable artificial atmospheres and gravity, together with precise sensor readings and transporter biofilters to protect against most threats, they had been phased out for just about anything other than external spacewalks.

All of which meant that it was now possible to spend your entire life travelling in space without ever having to wear a spacesuit, being able to walk around or beam in and out of any environment as you pleased, unencumbered by anything other than the clothes you had on at the time. And the rare occasion when you actually had to pull on a spacesuit tended to be seen as a universal chore.

Still, right now, Jirel was glad to be inside the bulky confines of his Flaxian spacesuit. Because at least the suit and his helmet were helping to block out a couple of his senses.

He stood alongside Kataya and surveyed the grisly scene they had stumbled into, and took a moment to control a fresh feeling of nausea.

There was very little left of whoever it had been. Little more than a ragged, shredded torso lying in a dried-up pool of crimson blood. After a brief supplementary search, Kataya had found a couple of limbs a short distance away.

They still hadn’t found the head.

Jirel glanced over at his impassive Flaxian search partner, even as Captain Grinya’s voice filled his helmet over the still-open comms link.

“Tag the remains and move on. We’ll beam them to the Ret Kol when we’re finished up over here. Meantime, there’s a lot more searching to be done.”

The Trill stifled a scoff at the dispassionate nature of his response. He was pretty sure he’d been detailed enough in his description of what they’d found. “You heard what I said, right?” he replied with more than a trace of anger audible in his words, “This guy’s been—”

“Understood, Captain,” Kataya butted in over the open link, “Tagging and moving on. Search team out.”

Before Jirel could act, Kataya had closed the link for him. The Flaxian then dutifully thumbed the controls of his rifle into tagging mode and shot a small isolar tag into the bloodied torso. All the easier for the Ret Kol to identify it and beam it back. With that done, he stood back up straight, kept his weapon raised, and continued down the corridor in the direction they had been heading.

A shocked Jirel took one last look at the remains, suppressed another wave of nausea, and then took off after the slowly marching Flaxian.

“That’s it?” he called out over their suit-to-suit link.

Kataya didn’t look over at him, continuing to sweep his spotlights across the deck in front of them instead. “That’s it,” he grunted in response.

“But,” Jirel persisted, “Wh—I mean, what the hell did that? What the hell were they transporting on this ship, anyway? Whoever that poor guy was, it looked like he’d been…I dunno, mauled by something!”

Kataya’s focus remained on the path ahead, but inside his helmet, his jaw clenched a fraction tighter before he responded.

“Unclear. Explosive decompression, engineering malfunction, some kind of previously undiscovered interstellar phenomenon—”

“Interstellar phenomenon?” Jirel scoffed, “Yeah, sure, maybe a type-4 meteor just swung by and ate the guy!”

Kataya stopped suddenly and swung back around to Jirel, fixing him with a stern glare. “And what exactly is your theory? Hmm? Some big old space monster on a ship where we’re still detecting no lifesigns? That seems more likely to you?”

Jirel felt the intensity of Kataya’s glare even through the visor of his helmet, but he maintained his own stance without shrinking back.

“I thought those readings weren’t reliable?” he offered back, “Otherwise, what exactly is Captain Grinya having us search for?”

Kataya went to retort, then paused. Clearly the Trill had caused him to run into a momentary logical dichotomy. But it didn’t take long for his expression to harden again, back into work mode.

“Listen, newbie,” he grunted, “I don’t know how you normally do things wherever the hell you’re from, but we’ve been given an order by Captain Grinya. And when he does that, we don’t ask questions, we don’t start playing make-believe, we follow his orders. Because when we stop doing that, that’s when things go wrong.”

Jirel couldn’t help but fire off the response that jumped onto the tip of his tongue.

“That guy back there,” he gestured back to the remains, “Think he followed orders?”

He regretted saying it as soon as it was done, even though he stood by it as a question, seeing Kataya’s expression contort into an even deeper scowl. For a moment, he even wondered if Kataya was about to settle things as he and his crewmates had tried to settle things in the mess hall earlier.

But instead, the Flaxian merely jabbed a gloved finger back down the corridor as he spat out his response. “I have no idea what the hell happened back there, ok? But I do know that the best way to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to us is if we make sure not to jeopardise the entire salvage operation. Now, we’ve tagged it, and we’re moving on. Clear?”

Jirel stared back at the Flaxian. Almost every fibre of his being was telling him to continue to argue his point further with the order-following lieutenant. Or even to entirely go rogue and signal back to the Ret Kol to beam them back.

But once again, he was also keenly aware of just how far away from home he was. He had lost the Bounty, he had left Natasha and Denella many light years away. And now he was even separated from Klath and Sunek. Every one of his friends and his comforts had been stripped away.

And he felt very alone indeed.

So, instead of arguing, he quickly walked off after Lieutenant Kataya, as he strode on deeper and deeper into the maze of corridors inside the derelict ship. Getting even further away from home with every footstep.

And as he walked down the darkened corridors, he couldn’t shake a feeling that had been cultivating in the back of his mind since they had beamed in. A feeling that was unsettling enough to make his spots itch.

He felt like they were being watched.

\* \* \* \* \*

Captain Grinya growled in renewed frustration as the console in front of him remained resolutely dark and powered down.

He had finished the laborious process of rewiring the main power grid of the derelict moments earlier, which should have been enough to get everything back up and running. But the ship was still refusing to cooperate with him.

His mood wasn’t being helped by the message from Jirel. Not just the unhappy content, but the deeply unprofessional way it had been communicated. Not for the first time since he had accepted this salvage job, he was beginning to sense that Commander Turanya had cheated out on him once again.

The slimy commander of the Reja Gar station had promised to make sure that the Ret Kol was back up to a full crew complement for their recovery mission. But he hadn’t told Grinya that he’d be sending him a trio of untried and entirely untested newbies instead of genuine like-for-like replacements for the reassigned members of his team.

And ever since the three newcomers had arrived onboard the Ret Kol, Grinya had been feeling more and more irritations over what was supposed to be a simple salvage mission. Irritations that were now being added to by the entirely non-functional power grid.

“What the hell is wrong with this thing?” he muttered to himself after muting his suit-to-suit comms link with Lieutenant Deroya, leaving the angry words of frustration to echo empty around inside his helmet.

He began to check over the connections with his wrist-mounted scanner once again, searching for a broken connection, or any sign of a fault he had missed.

Then, in the corner of his eye, he saw something move. A shadow flickered across the wall somewhere to his right. He instinctively spun

around and grabbed his phaser rifle where he had placed it next to the bulky console, bringing it to bear in the direction he had seen the shadow.

But there was nothing there.

Still, he was sure he had seen something moving.

“Lieutenant Deroya?” he called out.

No answer.

He scanned around the dark recesses of the section of the engineering deck he was working in with furtive darting looks, feeling his breathing grow sharper and more tense as his torchlight illuminated jagged metal edges in amongst the shadows. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, even inside the carefully temperature controlled confines of his spacesuit.

Then, as he swung around, he saw another movement. His instincts told him that this one was much closer.

Already fearing it was too late, the gruff Flaxian whirled around, bringing his phaser rifle to bear on whatever was approaching at the same time.

The torch beam of his weapon illuminated the face of Lieutenant Deroya.

She stared at him in shock. Through the visor of her helmet, he could see her mouth moving, but he couldn't hear her.

His suit-to-suit comms link was still off.

He silently cursed himself for missing such a basic issue. He'd temporarily switched it off in order to be able to grumble to himself in private, but hadn't switched it back on after being distracted by chasing shadows. With a tap of his wrist controls, he reactivated the link in time to catch the end of Deroya's monologue.

“...checking the secondary systems. Are...you ok, sir?”

She maintained her formal tone as she delivered her report, while still warily eyeing up the rifle, which Grinya now lowered, slightly sheepishly. “I'm fine, Lieutenant,” he replied, a little more sharply than he'd intended, “Just losing my patience with this goddamn power supply, that's all.”

He gestured back to the console he'd been working on, as Deroya considered the issue. “There could be a fault in the plasma grid matrix?”

“Yeah,” Grinya muttered back with a scoff, “Could be about two dozen other things as well. Bad enough that worm Turanya sent me those three newbies to do this with, now he's sent me to a derelict that doesn't want to cooperate either.”

He forced himself to pause and stop chewing his loyal lieutenant's ear off, reminding himself that he needed to make sure he was following his own orders as much as his own team should be. He needed to make sure that he wasn't allowing his own frustrations to affect their work. The only way that he had been pulling off these sorts of salvage missions without a serious hitch for the last fifteen years was by ensuring that everyone kept focus.

So he reined in his growing list of irritations for the time being, and nodded at Deroya through his helmet.

“You're right,” he grunted, “Could be the plasma grid matrix. Let's check it out.”

She nodded back, betraying no sense that she had been thrown off by his sharp tone or his raised weapon.

The two Flaxians stepped away from the console and moved across the expanse of the engineering deck of the derelict. Both of them kept their rifles drawn, but kept them down at their sides for now, using the flashlights on their helmets to illuminate their path.

The engineering deck itself was a vast expanse of a room, dominated by the warp core arrangement on the far side. A vertical tube-like structure surrounded by scaffolding and platforms to allow for maintenance access.

Only the very top part of the core was visible at the level of the engineering deck itself. The rest of the huge cylinder disappeared down into the very lowest decks of the ship, into a cavernous hole that was only accessible via those same scaffold platforms, all the way down to the bottom of the vessel.

It was a somewhat antiquated design, even compared to older Flaxian cruisers like the Ret Kol. And Captain Grinya remembered stories he was told by his former chief engineer about the dangers of maintaining such an exposed core. But the design had persisted amongst some older Flaxian transports like this due to their cheapness and their reliability.

Although this particular example seemed somewhat lacking in the latter department.

As they passed by the core, heading for a specific access point on the far wall, the two long-serving salvage experts walked in lock step.

“Plasma controls are over here,” Deroya noted with a nod.

She hadn't needed to say it out loud. Both she and Grinya knew enough about the layout of this ship to know that. But she had also wanted to break the tension in the air. And distract herself from the unsettling fact that, regardless of what her wrist-mounted scanner was telling her about the lack of local lifesigns, she was sure she kept seeing something moving in the shadows.

They got to the requisite panel, and Grinya crouched down to remove the dirty metal plate in order to get to the plasma controls.

He paused.

“Look,” he grunted, gesturing at the panel.

Deroya crouched down next to him. For the time being, both of them hunched over the panel, their backs to the rest of the engineering deck.

She saw what he was pointing to immediately. Several of the clips that held the panel in place had been snapped clean off, and the few that remained were only holding the panel flush to the wall very loosely indeed.

Lieutenant Deroxa couldn't help but feel a chill pass down her spine.

“What are you thinking?” she muttered over the suit-to-suit line.

“I think,” Grinya replied with a dark grimace, “That we're not the first people to have worked on the plasma grid just recently.”

Deroya allowed the words to drift around in her helmet as she took in what he meant by that. In truth, he could only have meant one of two things. Either the crew of the derelict had been working behind this panel recently, and done a very clumsy job of it.

Or something very strong had wrenched the panel off. To tamper with the ship's power supply.



## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

“Jirel.”

There was no response from the Flaxian next to him as they walked away from the latest pile of body parts that they had tagged.

So far, the search team had tagged around half a dozen sets of remains, roughly a quarter of the derelict's crew. Though with some of them having been discovered close together, it was sometimes hard to see when one Flaxian ended and another one started.

Each time they happened upon a set of remains, Jirel's stomach tightened a little more, and his grip on his phaser rifle got a little more strong. Whatever had happened, the increasingly pointless search for survivors was becoming as grim a job as he had ever been involved in out in space. The unsettling nature of their work was beginning to take its toll.

And things weren't being helped by the ongoing silent treatment he was getting from his entirely formal and focused search partner. So he tried again to break that particular strand of tension.

“My name's Jirel,” he continued, “Just so you don't need to keep calling me ‘newbie’.”

Alongside him, Kataya didn't offer him as much as a glance, keeping his focus dead ahead as they paced on down the latest corridor. But he did eventually reply.

“I know what your name is. Newbie.”

Jirel strained to detect a sliver of good humour in the Flaxian's voice when he delivered that comment over the suit-to-suit link. But he heard nothing.

“Right,” Jirel sighed, “I get it, you're doing a thing. It's just...I'd kinda like to think we're at a stage where we can drop all that now?”

No response. They turned another corner to find a mercifully empty corridor greeting them.

“I mean,” Jirel continued as winningly as he could manage under the circumstances, “I thought we'd got past this back in the mess hall...”

Kataya grunted with a trace of amusement at this, but any hopes Jirel had of making a breakthrough in his relationship with his search partner were dashed when the Flaxian looked over at him with a dismissive glare. “That fight gave me respect for your Klingon friend. But not for the rest of you. And around here, on this crew, respect has to be earned.”

Before Jirel could muster any sort of response to that, Kataya swiftly walked on and rounded another corner. Then, as the Trill followed him and looked down the next corridor, a response suddenly came to him.

“Holy crap.”

There was no response from Kataya. But, truth be told, his thoughts were similar. They both stopped dead in their tracks and stared at the sight that their torches were illuminating ahead of them.

On the right side of the corridor, about halfway towards the next intersection, the lines of the dark and weathered walls were interrupted by a huge misshapen hole, torn through the metal itself as if a photon torpedo had slammed through it. Great ugly shards of grey metal stuck out from the rupture, glinting in their torchlight, unsettlingly twisted outwards into the corridor itself.

Kataya raised his phaser rifle without a sound, and slowly stepped towards the carnage. Bereft of an alternative plan, Jirel brought his own weapon to bear and cautiously followed.

As they approached the tear in the wall, his eyes widened at the evident ferocity of whatever had so completely wrenched a direct path through the solid wall.

“Holy crap,” Jirel repeated in a whisper, struggling to think of anything else to say.

As he got to the twisted metal, Kataya was already tapping his wrist-mounted controls, scanning the area to try and ascertain their surroundings. “These are the main laboratories,” he muttered over the suit-to-suit link, gesturing with his other hand to the scene of carnage on the other side of the hole.

“So,” Jirel offered in return, “You gonna tell me this was a meteor as well?”

The Flaxian didn't respond immediately, keeping his focus on his scans for some sort of clue as to what had happened here. But Jirel persisted.

“I'm serious. What the hell have we beamed into over here? What were they transporting on this crate, Kataya?”

Inside his helmet, the Flaxian shook his head. The words of his response rang hollow when they finally came. His previous assertiveness eroded slightly. “I...have no idea,” he admitted, “Captain Grinya might have seen a full manifest, but he didn't flag any issues to us. We were just ordered to salvage the ship. Tag and retrieve.”

“Yeah, well, looks like you're gonna need some bigger tags.”

Kataya ignored him, continuing to scan the remains of the wall. Jirel turned the torch beam on his rifle onto the widest available setting and cautiously peered into the room on the other side of the wall, trying to make out details in the darkness.

The light illuminated the eerie scene of a trashed laboratory, bouncing off wrecked consoles and overturned tables and casting foreboding shadows onto the walls.

Just as he plucked up the courage to take a step through the gap and into the room, being careful not to nick the fabric of his suit on the jagged edge of the hole, a sudden noise caused him to literally jump back in fright.

It took him a moment to calm his heart rate as his helmet filled with a familiar gruff voice.

“Klath to Jirel, come in.”

The unauthorised communication not only caused Jirel to jump, but caused him to follow up with a slight flinch. He felt Kataya’s glare on his back without turning around, as his colleagues once again went against clearly established protocol during Flaxian salvage operations. Still, given the circumstances, he elected to answer the call.

“Hey, Klath,” he managed to get out as he felt his spots start to itch all over again, “Remember those long, super interesting briefings back on the Ret Kol, right? All salvage team comms are addressed to the team leader?”

“Yes,” Klath grunted back, “But that is proving difficult. I am unable to raise Captain Grinya.”

Jirel stepped back out of the ruined laboratory and looked over at Lieutenant Kataya, whose gaze became slightly more steely as he opened a second channel.

“Search team to Captain Grinya. Please respond.”

Jirel watched on as the Flaxian waited for a response, then shook his head and talked back to Klath via his own link. “Nothing here either. Could be interference if they’re still down in engineering?”

“Perhaps,” the Klingon replied, in a tone of voice that suggested he didn’t believe that particular explanation for a second.

Kataya cut into the main comms line and barked out a response before Jirel could muster anything further to his friend.

“We’re closer to the engineering section. We’ll go down and check it out.”

“Oh,” Jirel couldn’t help but reply, “We will, will we?”

Kataya fixed him with a freshly determined glare. “Until we’ve re-established contact with Captain Grinya, I’m in effective command of this operation. So yes, we will. Newbie.”

Before the Trill could retort any further, the Flaxian turned and walked off. Jirel sighed inside his helmet and began to follow, keeping his eyes on the scene of destruction that still dominated this stretch of corridor.

“Hey, Klath, you still there?” he called out over the comms link, not caring what Kataya thought about another breach of procedure.

“Yes,” the Klingon replied.

“Listen, buddy, you two keep an eye out up there, ok?”

“For what?”

“I...don’t really know,” Jirel admitted with a sigh, “But based on what we’ve seen down here, I’m pretty sure there’s something else onboard this thing with us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Looks like...something got out of the labs down here. You should see the damage. Whatever it was made mincemeat out of the place.”

“I see,” Klath’s response came, “Something...big?”

Jirel cast a final look at the twisted wreckage that had once been a solid tritanium bulkhead and suppressed a fresh grimace.

“Yep,” he replied, “Something big.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lieutenant Rondya sat in the command chair on the Ret Kol’s bridge and sighed.

As second in command of a Flaxian cruiser primarily tasked with salvage missions, he found that there was a lot of sitting and waiting involved.

Perhaps if his commanding officer was more of a delegator, he might have had the opportunity to actually lead more of the salvage teams, and

get in on some of the action.

But Captain Grinya had never been a delegator. He was a leader. And so his second in command was usually left with little more to do than keep the centre chair on the bridge warm for hours on end, while the real work happened elsewhere under the eagle eye of Grinya himself.

On the main viewscreen, the derelict hung at a slightly awkward angle compared to the Ret Kol itself, a testament to the ship's lack of power.

It was a substantially larger vessel than the cruiser, featuring a large rectangular secondary hull which housed the sensor banks, storage areas and laboratories alongside the main engineering areas, and a smaller semi-circular forward hull housing the bridge and crew accommodation, connected to the larger section with a short neck. Two stubby nacelles branched out from either side.

It wasn't an ugly design by any means. But given that Rondya had been staring at it for the best part of four hours by now, he was definitely starting to dislike it.

The bridge was largely understaffed, as it often was during the meat of a salvage operation. Aside from Rondya himself, there was a junior officer keeping an eye on the helm and matching their course with their target, and a relief officer at the rear comms and engineering panel to keep an eye on the derelict itself.

There was some concern among the bridge crew at some of the reports from over on the derelict, not least the complete lack of survivors found so far. But equally, it wasn't the first time they had dealt with such an unhappy situation. It was part of the salvaging process, after all.

As time ticked on, Rondya found himself absently drumming his fingers on the armrest of the command chair, apparently to the irritation of the helmsman, whose shoulders flinched slightly as the noise persisted.

Then, out of nowhere, the comms panel behind him chirped, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Captain Grinya and the team were ready to return. Like clockwork.

Except, this time, that wasn't what the comms traffic was.

"Lieutenant," the comms officer reported, "You're being contacted. From below decks."

"What?" Rondya scoffed, as he swung around in his chair.

"It's Crewman Jadaya. From the port engineering section."

The Ret Kol's executive officer couldn't help but raise a curious eyebrow. Jadaya was one of the newest members of the crew, and pretty much the lowest-ranking. He was very much the subordinate's subordinate. Having actually met the sickly young crewman when he first came aboard, Rondya had considered it very lucky of him to be joining the Ret Kol at the same time as the three newbies had joined up for salvage duty.

If it hadn't been for the Trill, the Vulcan and the Klingon distracting the more rowdy members of the crew, he was pretty sure they'd have eaten Jadaya alive.

Still, contacting the bridge from his lowly position, especially in the middle of a salvage operation, suggested that someone had gotten to the crewman for a spot of old-fashioned hazing anyway.

"Crewman," Rondya responded, keeping his tone formal despite the amusement he was feeling inside, "How can we help you down there?"

"Um," the weak voice of Jadaya stammered, "I—I just thought I should report it in, sir."

Rondya couldn't help but shake his head as he heard the helmsman snort behind him. Everyone on the bridge was wondering exactly what fanciful message the bullied crewman was being asked to deliver to his senior officers. "Report...what, Crewman? Out with it."

"R—Right, um, y—yes. It's just...Captain Grinya said I didn't need to report it, but I r—really thought I should—"

The amusement vanished from Rondya's face in an instant.

"What the hell are you talking about, Crewman? Captain Grinya is aboard the derelict."

"Yes, sir. B—But he beamed back. Just now."

Rondya rolled his eyes. Maybe the Ret Kol's crew were losing their touch if this was the best they could come up with as a plan to haze their newest arrival.

"Ok, Crewman, I don't care who put you up to this, but you need to clear the line. We're in the middle of—"

"Sir," Jadaya's voice came back, a little more certain, "I'm telling the truth."

Rondya glanced at the officer at the comms station, who seemed equally perplexed by the effort that the junior crewman's persistence. Still not entirely sure he wasn't being hazed as much as Jadaya was, he reluctantly stood up from the command chair and left it spinning behind him.

"I'm on my way."

The Ret Kol's exec strode off the bridge in a foul mood. He was already cooking up a suitable punishment for the young crewman for all of this. A couple of weeks spent cleaning the waste reclamation unit was the first thing that sprung to mind.

A few moments later, when he arrived in the Ret Kol's engineering section, he was as shocked as anyone to discover that Crewman Jadaya had

been telling the truth.

## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

“Something big?”

Klath ignored the question and busied himself with re-checking the power settings on his phaser rifle, even as Sunek nervously rambled on.

“That’s what he said? Something big?”

Their work on the bridge was now complete. The data transfer back to the Ret Kol was underway, and controllable from their end. Sunek had even found time to use some of the remaining battery power in the data systems to get another few bits up and running. The main viewscreen was now active, bathing the still-darkened bridge with a static-covered view of the Ret Kol where it hung off the port bow of the derelict.

But with only battery power to work with, there had been no real chance to get anything more significant up and running. Certainly not anything as powerful as internal sensors. Which meant that they only had Jirel’s unsettling and vague description to work with.

“I mean,” Sunek continued as he paced nervously around the bridge, swinging his phaser rifle around as he went, “What does that even mean? Something big? Like, how big? Your shoes are big.”

He gestured down dismissively at Klath’s significantly outsized spacesuit boots, even as the Klingon grunted back his straightforward response. “It means that we must be prepared to fight.”

“Oh no,” Sunek scoffed, wagging a gloved finger at the battle-ready Klingon, “Nuh-huh. It means that we need to entirely and immediately leave this stupid ship.”

He pointed at the benign image of the Ret Kol where it hung on the viewscreen as their sanctuary, to further underline his point.

“We need to get them to beam us back, and then we need to get the hell out of here. That’s what we need to do. So you can take that look off your face right now.”

Klath stared back at the fretting Vulcan through the visor of his helmet, doing his best to feign a look of ignorance. “What look?”

“You know exactly what look. The look you always get when crap like this happens. The one that says ‘I’m a big dumb Klingon warrior, so even though the only sensible thing to do is run away, I’m gonna go charging right towards all the scary things’. Honestly, it’s a miracle your people made it this far in life, it really is.”

“My people,” Klath retorted, a tad offended, “Have learned that there is little to be gained from running away from one’s problems.”

“Yeah, right. It’s just like that old joke, isn’t it? You hear the one about the Andorian diplomat who slayed an entire Klingon army? He advised them to make a tactical withdrawal.”

Klath grunted without a trace of amusement. He didn’t get it.

“And that’s exactly the sort of dumb thing you’re doing right now,” the Vulcan concluded with a final accusatory jab of his finger, “And don’t even think about pretending it isn’t, cos I’ve seen it all before. Remember Starbase 216?”

Klath looked up from his weapons check at this unhappy reminder. Some months ago, Sunek had been an unwilling witness to another of his more foolhardy moments, when Klath had been hunted by a vengeful Klingon called Kolar on a planetary Federation starbase that the Bounty had visited for repairs.

After Sunek had been kidnapped by his enemy, instead of seeking help, Klath had taken off into the wilderness by himself to challenge his rival. And he had not only ended up having to reveal the details of his discommendation to the talkative Vulcan, but had nearly ended up being killed.

Still, whatever regrets those memories dredged up inside of him, Klath remained a Klingon warrior at heart. And Klingons didn’t run.

So, instead of wasting time responding to Sunek’s comments, he merely shouldered his rifle and made for the access hatch that led back into the conduits of the derelict, his mind focused on the battle that was to come. A battle with something big.

“Ugh!” Sunek whined, “You’re really gonna do it, aren’t you. Well, that’s great. Just great. Cos that means that I’m gonna have to come and do the really stupid thing with you, doesn’t it?”

“I am more than happy to go alone.”

Sunek watched the Klingon stooping down towards the hatch and suppressed a sigh. It was true that he could call the Ret Kol and try to ask to be beamed out. That was definitely still an option that was available to him. But he also knew that he couldn’t let his friend face danger alone. No matter how much a significant part of his less brave side wanted to.

“Yeah, well,” he sighed again as he set off towards the hatch, “Tough.”

Just as Klath’s head entered the conduit, though, Sunek’s more cowardly side was granted a last second reprieve. Because suddenly their helmets were filled with an incoming transmission.

“Guys,” Jirel said, sounding more serious than either of his colleagues had ever heard him, “We’re leaving. Now.”

“Thank Surak for that!” Sunek sighed, throwing his hands up in satisfaction.

Klath, for his part, couldn’t help but look a little upset that he wasn’t going to get his fight. But he managed to keep that from his voice as he crawled back out of the conduit and responded. “Why?”

“I’ll tell you when we get back,” the Trill simply responded, “Prepare for beam-out.”

Sunek stood and waited for the transporter effect, and looked over at the Klingon.

“Look on the bright side,” he offered with a shrug, “Maybe they’ll let you keep the gun?”

\* \* \* \* \*

She made her way through the ship, still keeping herself hidden.

In truth, she didn’t need to be quite so cautious right now. She was all alone for the time being. Still, her instincts told her to remain secluded. She didn’t think to question those instincts. Most of the time, that was how she operated. Her body and her subconscious reacting in ways that her conscious mind didn’t understand.

She had never been told about the concept of a survival instinct. But regardless of that, it was a potent force inside her.

As she silently moved, she allowed herself a moment of satisfaction, even of pride, in what she had been able to do. She wondered if her parents would be as proud to see what she had become, how much she had learned to do.

She liked to think that they would be. Wherever they were.

But part of her was also filled with self-doubt. Over whether she was really doing the right thing, and whether all of this was necessary.

And then she remembered the pain, and the torment that she had been put through. She recalled the way that she had been snatched away from her home. How scared she had been, and how disorientating it had all felt.

She thought about the tests they had run on her, the challenges they had forced her to complete, and the punishments that were handed out when she didn’t do as she was told.

And that was more than enough to convince her that what she was doing was necessary.

So she stealthily walked on in the shadows, and waited for the next part of the plan she only tangentially understood to be completed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Down in the engineering deck, Lieutenant Kataya stood back up and tapped the comms unit on his wrist controls to signal their ship.

As he did that, Jirel kept his phaser rifle raised, scanning the expanse of the darkened engineering deck with his wide-beam torch. Looking for something big.

“Kataya to Ret Kol, requesting emergency beam-out.”

For a moment, there was no answer. Only an eerie silence. When the comms link did splutter into life, it did so with a burst of static which did little to ease either man’s concerns.

“Rondya here. Say again, salvage team?”

Kataya displayed no outward sign of concern or irritation at this response, but raised his own weapon defensively as he repeated himself. “I say again: This is Lieutenant Kataya, requesting emergency beam-out now.”

Another burst of static. Jirel felt the knot in his stomach tighten further.

“Message received,” Rondya eventually replied, “That won’t be possible at the moment. We’re having some power supply issues over here. Transporters are temporarily offline.”

Jirel instinctively turned back to Kataya, forgetting about the need to scan the room for the moment, though the Flaxian remained calm.

“What sort of power supply issues?”

“Our engineers are still trying to figure that out. There’s some sort of power drain affecting almost every system. Happened as soon as we beamed Captain Grinya back over to you.”

Now it was Kataya's turn to offer a moment of silence as a response. The Flaxian's mouth gaped open, but he struggled to find any words.

"Sorry," Jirel offered instead, jumping in to fill the silence, "When you beamed who back over?"

"Captain Grinya. He beamed over here to check the data link, then returned to the derelict."

Jirel licked his lips, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down his neck. His spots itched like crazy. "Wh—When was this?"

"A few minutes ago. Why?"

Jirel glanced at the gobsmacked Kataya, then looked down at the two mutilated corpses they had discovered as soon as they had got to the engineering deck. The reason they had called for the beam-out in the first place. The two victims were more readily identifiable than the other victims they had found, despite the severity of their injuries. One was Lieutenant Deroya.

And the other was Captain Grinya.

"That's...not possible," Jirel managed eventually.

On the other end of the comms link, he was hit by a fresh burst of static.

"Ret Kol?" he urged, "Come in, Ret Kol?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Up on the bridge, Sunek and Klath had been following the back-and-forth over the comms link with growing concern.

"What the hell's going on down there?" Sunek snapped, as he paced the room impatiently.

"I do not know," Klath admitted, "But—"

He was silenced as the entire bridge was suddenly bathed in a bright light. Both Sunek and Klath followed the source of the light, turning as one back to the viewscreen at the front of the room.

Just in time to see the Flaxian cruiser Ret Kol being devoured by a fiery, all-consuming explosion.

**End of Part Two**

## Part 3A

### Part Three

“What the hell?”

Natasha grunted in frustration as she tapped the console in front of her, being confronted by the same defiant buzz from the system she was trying to access.

On the other side of the lab area on Reja Gar, Denella looked up from her work with a patient smile on her face. “You know, I’ve had better engineering assistants over the years.”

Natasha looked up at the Orion and offered an apologetic smile of her own, as she gestured down at the console. “Sorry. But this is really, really odd.”

Denella reluctantly got up from where she had been connecting up the lighting system for the caged-off section of the lab, dusted herself down, and walked over to where her colleague was still tapping away.

“Trying to order us some lunch?”

“I wish. I’ve been trying to find out...anything, actually. About what they’re doing on this station.”

“Huh,” Denella mused, “So you’re spying?”

Natasha looked up at the green-skinned woman’s amused face and affected a mock-defensive air.

“I’m exercising curiosity.”

Denella accepted that defence with a shrug, as Natasha gestured around the room.

“Besides, it’s your fault. You got me all paranoid talking about those forcefields. I mean, what sort of plants are they putting in this arboretum?”

Denella considered this for a moment as she wiped a smear of dirt across her face and set down the hyperspanner in her hand. “I dunno. Back where I grew up on Orpheus IV, there was a type of vine with four inch spines on it. If you so much as grazed it with your skin, the poison on the spines was strong enough to kill you in about half an hour.”

She offered the other woman a shrug.

“I don’t like forests.”

Natasha nodded in understanding, casting her mind back to her own recent run-in with a toxic plant on a pre-industrial planet that the Bounty’s crew had accidentally found themselves on. One which had nearly ended up killing her. “Fair point,” she conceded eventually, “But that still doesn’t explain all of this.”

She tapped the console again, and another buzz rang out around the room.

“It’s like the entire station database is completely locked down to the public. And I mean everything. I get that they’re not about to let me hack into the weapons controls, but this is a science outpost, and I can’t even call up a manifest of ongoing research projects without hitting half a dozen dead ends. I’ve served on Starfleet ships during wars, and even they had less computer lockouts in place.”

Denella stepped over and looked down at the screen with a thoughtful expression, seeing the error message that she had run into. “Yeah, but in defence of the Flaxians, you guys could really do with investing a bit more in security over there.”

Natasha gave the Orion woman a withering look, as Denella simply offered back a knowing smile and a casual gesture down at the controls.

“I guess I can try and force my way in. Whatever it is they’ve got in place, there’s always a way through somewhere.”

“Didn’t you get arrested the last time you tried to do that?”

Now it was Denella’s turn to look a little unhappy, reminded of her run-in with Starfleet Security on Starbase 216 after she had hacked into their database to try and help Klath track down details about his enemy. “Yeah, well,” she offered back, “If Starfleet put as much effort into their system encryptions as they did into arresting people, they might save themselves a lot of trouble.”

“Still,” Natasha smiled, “I’m not sure we want to risk that sort of thing happening again. We’re already down one ship and three crewmates. I just wish there was some other way...”

Denella nodded thoughtfully, then an idea came to her, even if she was reluctant to suggest it.

“Well...I hate to say it, trust me. But if you really do want to get some more information, you might have another option open to you.”

Natasha realised what she was getting at immediately. And she didn’t like it.

“No,” she said with a defiant shake of her head.



Denella just shrugged again.

“He did say the views were very good...”

Natasha failed to suppress the grimace that raced onto her face at warp speed, and looked back down at the uncooperative screen with a frustrated sigh. She was desperately curious to find out more about what the hell was really going on here on Reja Gar. Her sense of curiosity and intrigue had well and truly been piqued.

The question was whether or not she was curious enough about it to actually go to dinner with the oily Commander Turanya.

And she had a horrible feeling that she was.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We’re boned.”

It wasn’t the first time that Sunek had offered his own personal report on their current survival prospects, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. But while it was getting repetitive, it was also an entirely concise and accurate summary of their situation. As good as anything else that anyone else could offer.

It had taken Jirel and Lieutenant Kataya some time to make their way up to the bridge to meet up with the two other remaining survivors of the late Flaxian cruiser Ret Kol.

By that point, it had already dawned on Klath and Sunek that there were no survivors of the explosion that had so suddenly consumed the other ship. While they still had no power for sensor sweeps, the image on the viewscreen had resolved into little more than a scattered debris field, with no visible signs of shuttles or escape pods.

“So,” Jirel managed eventually, as he stood next to the command chair of the unfamiliar bridge of the derelict and stared at the floating patch of debris on the screen, “We’re on our own.”

“No,” Sunek snapped, as he continued to pace around the rear of the room, “We’re not on our own, are we? That’s kinda the whole problem here, isn’t it? It’s not just us. It’s us, and whatever the hell this great big scary monster is that’s spent the last week gorging on every passing Flaxian in the sector!”

As the Vulcan ranted on, Jirel looked over at Kataya, who was sitting slumped on the deck next to one of the bridge consoles to the left side. He had collapsed there as soon as they had gotten to the bridge and seen first hand the fate of the Ret Kol, and hadn’t even said a word.

But before Jirel could worry any more about that, Klath stepped over to him. The Klingon still carried his phaser rifle in his hands, ready for action inside his bulky spacesuit. “Jirel,” he boomed over the open suit-to-suit comms line, “What exactly are we dealing with?”

Clearly Klath was in no mood to panic, as Sunek was doing. Nor to retreat inside himself, as Kataya had. There was only one thing on his mind, and that was to fight.

The Trill reached for an answer, thinking back to what he had seen down in the belly of the ship.

“We’re dealing with a lot,” he said eventually, “Once, back at the Tyran Scrapyards, I saw a guy lose his footing and fall into a tritanium-crushing machine we used to compact down whatever we scraped off an old ship’s hull to be transported away and sold off. And it ended up being my job to clean up what was left of him...”

He suppressed a shudder at the memory, and then looked back at his friend.

“As of today, that’s officially the second worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

Klath pondered this summary for a moment, then nodded in understanding.

“We’re totally boned,” Sunek offered, having heard the same explanation over the open comms line.

Jirel shot the Vulcan a look, then turned back to the shellshocked Kataya, stepping over to the silent Flaxian and crouching down next to him. “Hey, Lieutenant?” he offered with a calm tone, “We kinda need a plan here. And...I hate to say it, but I guess you’re in charge.”

The Flaxian slowly looked up at the Trill in front of him, a lost expression clearly visible on his face through his helmet. “Fifteen years,” he muttered, “Captain Grinya had been doing this for fifteen years. He’d never lost a team member. Not one. Fifteen years...”

Jirel grimaced as Kataya’s voice trailed off. Without his captain, his crew and his ship, the hardened lieutenant that the Trill had endured an uncomfortable search with had vanished, replaced by an entirely less confident and perplexed individual.

“Right,” he nodded in understanding, patting Kataya’s shoulder with a gloved hand, “But me and my friends have been doing this for fifteen minutes. So we’re gonna need you to help us out here if we’re all gonna get through this, ok?”

Kataya just stared back up at him, the silence over the comms link hanging heavily in the air.

Realising that there were going to be no orders forthcoming from the single remaining member of the Flaxian Science Agency onboard, Jirel

reluctantly stood back up and turned to the others. “Ok,” he sighed, “Let’s figure this out. What have we got up here?”

He gestured around the unpowered and darkened bridge. Klath grunted an unhappy response as Sunek continued to pace around.

“Very little,” the Klingon admitted, “What power remains gives us access to the data banks and computer records. Life support is minimal, internal and external sensors are still offline, and we have no propulsion or navigation beyond limited thruster control.”

“Can we send a distress call?”

“Short-range only. And this is not a populated sector of space.”

Jirel knew it was a stupid question before he’d asked it. But, as he’d already explained to Kataya, he didn’t have a lot of experience with this sort of thing.

“The data banks,” he offered, switching focus as his brain tried to figure out the puzzle that they were all trapped inside, “All that stuff that the Ret Kol was downloading. That should tell us what we’re dealing with, right?”

“You’d think,” Sunek scoffed from behind him.

Before Jirel could lash out at the Vulcan for his latest unhelpful comment, the fretful pilot actually opted to expand on his point.

“I’ve already checked the database out while we were waiting for you to get up here. The whole thing is locked down to anyone without about half a bajillion access codes.”

“Locked down?” Jirel asked.

“Yeah. Like a freaking Romulan prison ship. Everything’s quadruple encoded. The logs, navigational history, ship’s manifest. Can’t even tell you what these guys had for lunch yesterday. We’ve been properly set up here, Jirel.”

Jirel sighed, even as his spots started to itch with a fresh intensity. Given that life support was still just about functioning, he gave serious thought to just ripping off his helmet and scratching them, but for some reason he felt ever so slightly safer with the suit on.

Instead, he turned back to the static Kataya.

“Look, Lieutenant, you need to give us something here. What the hell is on this ship? And why did the Ret Kol think that Captain Grinya had beamed back aboard?”

Kataya looked up at the Trill again, but remained slumped next to the control panel, his phaser rifle lying at his feet. After a moment, he shook his head. “I—I don’t know. We were just told to…secure the cargo.”

That seemed to be all they were going to get out of the formerly gruff salvage expert.

“Secure the cargo,” Klath echoed with an ominous tone.

Jirel thought back to the wreckage of the laboratory and felt himself grimace for what felt like the thousandth time since he had left the Reja Gar station. He still felt a long way from safety. A long way from the Bounty.

He forced himself to shake those thoughts from his mind.

“Ok, so, what now?” he said instead.

“We fight,” Klath inevitably replied, “We turn the hunter into the hunted.”

“Whatever this thing is,” Jirel countered with a stern glance, “It’s picked off two ship’s-worth of Flaxians for fun.”

Klath didn’t miss a beat. He had clearly already considered this. “Still, if we fight, then we die with honour—”

“Ok, gonna stop Rear Admiral Suicide Mission right there,” Sunek cut in, “And, for a less entirely stupid plan, I still say we get the hell out of here.”

“Our lift home just exploded, Sunek.”

“Yeah, but this crate has a shuttlebay, right?”

Klath looked distinctly unimpressed by this suggestion, but Jirel nodded at his pilot inside his helmet. It was pretty clear what their best option was.

“Ok, good plan. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

He gestured in the direction of the access conduit, and watched as Klath and Sunek set off with their weapons raised, before he turned back to Lieutenant Kataya, who remained where he was.

“Hey,” he continued to the Flaxian, stepping over to him and holding out a hand to help him back up to his feet, “You with us, Lieutenant?”

The Flaxian met his gaze again with a set of sunken eyes. For a moment, he didn’t move, to the point that Jirel began to wonder whether they could realistically drag him all the way down to the shuttlebay. Instead, he decided to use his powers of negotiation.

“Look, I’m sorry. For everything that’s happened here. And I don’t know much about Flaxian Science Agency protocol, as I’m pretty sure you’ve noticed. But I’m pretty sure Captain Grinya would have taught you never to give up. And I’m definitely sure the chances of us three idiots getting home alive are gonna be a hell of a lot better with you alongside us.”

There was a slight flicker in Kataya’s eyes, and then he accepted Jirel’s hand. The Trill even did a manful job of disguising the wince of pain that shot up his arm as he fully appreciated the effort required to help lift a burly Flaxian up off the ground.

With Kataya standing back on his own two feet, he hoisted his phaser rifle, locked eyes with Jirel again, and nodded firmly.

“You’re right,” he muttered, “Let’s go.”

With that, they turned towards where Klath and Sunek were impatiently waiting at the entrance to the access conduits.

“Ok, team,” Jirel nodded, “Let’s find ourselves a shuttle.”

One by one, they headed back into the narrow confines of the conduit. As he dropped to his knees and inched himself inside, Jirel tried his best not to think about what might be waiting for them between here and the shuttlebay.

“Just FYI,” Sunek tutted over the comms link, “We’re definitely boned.”

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

The concept of the honeypot was one of the oldest techniques in covert operations across the whole galaxy. One that seemed to be practised in some manner by just about every sentient species in one way or another.

And Natasha Kinsen hated it.

Many years ago, when she was a junior ensign in the medical staff onboard the USS Tripoli, she had been chosen for a special away mission on the planet Bravik VI, where the Tripoli had been dispatched to deal with a severe case of cultural contamination.

A rogue Idanian businessman had found the planet to be rich in latinum deposits, and had infiltrated the pre-warp society on the planet. He had ingratiated himself with a ruthlessly ambitious politician who he had helped rise to become president of the largest continent, in exchange for exclusive mining rights. All before the Idanian had fled with the latinum and left Bravik VI in chaos.

The Tripoli had been tasked with correcting the damage by returning the former president to his rightful place, and she had been delighted to have been personally selected to play a key role in such vital work, especially given her lowly rank onboard at the time.

Until she realised that she hadn't been selected because of her advanced medical training, or her tactical skills, or the extra credits in pre-warp socio-economic theory that she had meticulously collected at the Academy. Instead, she had been selected because the former president's head of security had needed to be distracted, and he apparently had a thing for redheads.

So, while the Tripoli's first officer, security chief and operations officer had tooled up with weapons and infiltrated the former president's summer house to kidnap him, posing as operatives sent by the current president as a ruse designed to turn the population against him, she had been stuck wearing a scandalously low-cut and high-hemmed dress, lying on a picnic blanket and giggling flirtatiously while she shared a bottle of the local wine with an especially unattractive Bravikian a safe distance away from the compound's monitoring station.

It wasn't exactly what she'd dreamed that covert operations would be. She'd rather hoped that her years of training would count for more than her natural hair colour and her ability to squeeze into a mini dress.

And yet, ten years later, here she was again. Playing the honeypot.

At least this time she was dressed with substantially more dignity, having turned up for her dinner date in her everyday tunic and trousers. But regardless, she was still having to use her looks, rather than her actual skills, to make their plan work. And she hated it.

Still, on the plus side, at least Commander Turanya hadn't been lying about the view.

"It's amazing," she cooed in deliberately exaggerated awe.

Turanya's private dining room was located on the top edge of the main rectangular body of the Reja Gar station, a little further around from the recreation area they had been in earlier.

It was a small room, containing little more than a modest table and chairs. Their food was brought to them by a diligent and discreet waitress, who occasionally scurried into the room to present the next course to the pair of diners. But the modest interior didn't really matter when the entire outer wall of the room consisted of a single unbroken piece of transparent aluminium, affording a stunning view of the cosmos. And especially, as Turanya had advertised, of the Plavian nebula.

She stared out at the vivid green and yellow hues of the phenomenon as it temporarily hung in the middle of the starscape as the station slowly rotated. And, for a moment, she forgot all about the less pleasant aspects of her current assignment.

Her dining partner didn't take long to remind her.

"Yep," Commander Turanya replied, having switched into his most libidinous gear, "I'm a big fan of the view myself."

Natasha looked over to see that the Flaxian was staring directly at her as he said that, leaning back in his chair in front of his empty dessert plate with a glass of Flaxian riesling in his hand. She suppressed the sudden urge she had to stand up, walk around to his side of the table, and tip the rest of the bottle of dessert wine over his head, and instead did the exact opposite to what her instincts told her to do.

She smiled coquettishly and tossed her hair back with a flick of her head.

And then she repressed the feeling of self-loathing that immediately washed over her, and stored it away with the other similar feelings she'd been building up since dinner had begun.

Oblivious to all of that, and only seeing her outward demeanour, Turanya leaned forwards and set his glass back down on the table. "You know, I'm very glad you reconsidered my offer. Very, very glad. I'm sure you'll make a fine addition to the Flaxian Science Agency, Natasha."

She added a few more helpings of self-loathing to the pyre inside of her as Turanya paused for a moment to look her up and down.

"A...very fine addition."

In her mind, she switched the bottle of riesling she was pouring over his head for a bottle of some sort of chemical. She hadn't decided which

one. Nothing that would permanently scar him, she wasn't going that far, but definitely something that would sting. For a very long time.

In reality, she widened her smile and gave his hand a playful tap across the table.

"Oh, Commander," she tutted in a display of mock admonishment, "I bet you say that to all the girls you invite up here."

Turanya's grin widened, in a tell-tale manner that suggested he was increasingly of the opinion that he wasn't going to be sleeping alone tonight.

Natasha compartmentalised the latest feelings of revulsion, and gently ran a finger down the back of the Flaxian's hand, delicately curling one of the whisker-like tendrils around her finger in a way that caused Turanya to breathe in sharply. "Actually...I was wondering if you had a list of current projects," she offered casually, "I'd love to see the sort of thing I'd be getting involved with while I'm here."

At this, Turanya's blissful look shifted slightly. He looked a little suspicious for a moment. She momentarily worried that she'd gone too far.

"Ah, well. You know, that sort of thing is for Science Agency eyes only. Being ex-Starfleet, I'm sure you understand that, right?"

She reacted quickly, stroking his tendrils again and focusing on distracting Turanya from thinking straight about precisely what she was asking for. "Aw," she pouted, "But Commander, if I'm joining you, then I'm going to be part of the Science Agency anyway? Surely you can let me get a little...sneak preview?"

Summoning up all her reserves of strength, and discarding her last vestiges of dignity, she punctuated her request by idly running the fingers of her other hand down the v-shaped neck of her top, with enough of a knowing smile to convey the implication that she might be willing to offer something of a sneak preview of her own in return.

The entirely unsubtle action, coupled with another gentle stroke of the tendrils on his hand, were enough to seal the deal with the increasingly blissful Turanya. He reached into his pocket and took out a mini padd device, tapping the screen before passing it to her.

"Ah, fine, you twisted my arm," he grinned, "There's an overview of all current and planned projects aboard Reja Gar. But don't tell anyone I gave you that."

She disguised her relief as she accepted the padd, and celebrated by nailing down the precise chemical that she was pouring over his head to a particular compound of dermatological agent, used by Dopterians to treat all manner of skin conditions, but infamously known to irritate and aggravate the basal skin layer on every other humanoid species in the quadrant to the point of madness.

"Now," Turanya continued, still oblivious to his fate in her mind and clasping her hand for effect, "I've shown you mine, so how about—"

Before he was able to complete the rest of that sentence, and before the corresponding rising sense of nausea in Natasha's stomach overwhelmed her, there was a merciful chime on the door of the dining room. With visible irritation, Turanya withdrew his hand and stood up, walking over to the door. As soon as he left, Natasha slipped the mini padd underneath the table and deftly went to work as fast as she could manage.

She glanced up to check that she wasn't being watched, and was surprised to see that the individual at the door wasn't the waitress from earlier, but a new Flaxian dressed in a far more formal uniform of the Science Agency. And there was a muttered, but clearly serious conversation going on.

After a moment of frustrated gesticulating from Turanya, the uniformed man retreated. Natasha quickly slipped the mini padd back on the table just as the commander turned and walked back to the table.

"Natasha, my dear, I'm terribly sorry," he offered with his usual oily demeanour, "You have...no idea how sorry. But we may have to pick this up another time."

"Oh," she replied, momentarily trapped between her enforced flirting and the overwhelming sense of relief that erupted inside her, "That's, um, such a shame. How come?"

Turanya glanced back at the door and sighed. "There's been an issue," he managed eventually, "We've lost contact with the Ret Kol."

In an instant, all thoughts of her honeypotting vanished entirely. Replaced by a pit of dread that opened up inside of her.

"When?" she demanded.

The Flaxian sighed, a little reluctant to go into too much detail. He was very much back in business mode after his more relaxed patter over dinner. "I'm sure it's nothing," he placated her with a weaselly smile, "It's just...they're supposed to check in on schedule, but we've heard nothing for the last three cycles. They're probably just busy, it's probably just an anomaly, but we're gonna send another ship to take a look \_\_\_"

"I need to be on that ship," she snapped immediately, the pit inside her growing wider all the time, "Me and Denella."

Turanya seemed taken aback at her tone, but she fixed him with a determined enough look to suggest that she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Eventually, he reluctantly nodded. And the two of them turned and strode out of the room, leaving the padd and the view of the Plavian nebula behind.

As they walked through the doors, Natasha clasped the data chip in her pocket tightly in her hand.



## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

“Huh,” Sunek muttered, “You really weren’t kidding about this thing, were you?”

They had found the latest set of remains right next to the shuttlebay doors. What was left wasn’t easily identifiable, but they seemed to be those of a Flaxian female.

Next to the Vulcan, Klath regarded the bloody vista and impassively grunted. “We are dealing with a beast,” he said simply, looking back up as his eyes flitted around their immediate surroundings.

While Sunek and Klath got some first-hand experience of the sort of scene that the others had become grimly used to, Jirel and Kataya were focused on the shuttlebay doors themselves, the corridor illuminated by their twin focused phaser beams as they cut through the metal.

As soon as they had reached the shuttlebay, Kataya had found that the manual release had failed in some way, and so they had instantly resorted to more brute force means to get through.

“How come the crew of this thing didn’t try this?” Jirel asked as he completed the vertical cut on his side and turned the beam to work towards connecting with Kataya’s own path.

“This was a science transport,” Kataya grunted, “No real weapons. Nearest laser cutter would have been back in engineering.”

The Flaxian’s expression slipped slightly as he thought about the helplessness of the situation they would have been in. But before he could dwell on it too much, he brought his beam into contact with Jirel’s and they completed their cutting work. With one deft kick, a section of the metal gave way and allowed them through to the bay itself.

Once inside, the four figures shone their torches around. And Jirel felt a palpable sense of relief when he saw the row of half a dozen stocky shuttles, all waiting patiently to lift off.

“The area seems secure,” Klath noted with a grunt.

“Right,” Kataya added, the Flaxian having recovered a modicum of his earlier confidence as their plan unfolded, “We’ll use the shuttle’s phasers to break through the outer doors, then get free of the derelict and send a rescue signal back to Reja Gar. Let’s get moving.”

“That is something I am totally onboard with,” Sunek replied, as he scampered over to the nearest shuttle as fast as his suit would allow and disappeared inside.

Seconds later, as the others approached, the Vulcan poked his head back out of the doorway of the support craft.

“Um, guys? This one’s dead as a Kaelon old folks’ home.”

“What?” Kataya snapped back.

“Yep. Power cells have been ripped right out.”

The Vulcan exited the shuttle and bounded over to the next one, even as Jirel felt a fresh sinking feeling inside.

It didn’t take long for Sunek to call out again. “Entire console’s fritzed on this one,” he said, “Couldn’t fly it even if we wanted to. Plus, the power cells look like they’re totally drained. Anyone else seeing a pattern here?”

As Klath kept his weapon trained on their improvised entry point to the bay, Jirel and Kataya joined the Vulcan in checking over the remaining shuttlecraft. It didn’t take long for them to find that the pattern extended across the whole fleet.

“Goddamn it!” Jirel exclaimed in frustration, kicking the final shuttle with his heavy boot for good measure.

“Every one of them?” Klath called back, not taking his eyes off the entrance.

“Every one,” the Trill sighed, “Every goddamn shuttle’s been tampered with somehow. None of them are good for flight!”

“Interesting,” the Klingon muttered.

“Oh, right,” Sunek scoffed as his frustrations boiled over, “Hear that, everyone? Professor Klath over here thinks that’s ‘interesting’. Yeah, how interesting it is that our only escape route is completely screwed! And how interesting that we are - and I hate to repeat myself here - entirely boned!”

The Klingon ignored the Vulcan’s latest panicked rant, and glanced over at Jirel, gesturing to the ruined shuttles. “This is not the work of a beast,” he pointed out, “But an intelligence.”

Jirel considered this for a moment. “Not sure that makes the situation any better, to be honest.”

“No,” Klath conceded, “But it does change the rules of combat. This is not a battle of brute strength, but of skill, and tactics.”

“And brute strength?” Jirel offered, gesturing grimly back to the remains out in the corridor.

Klath acknowledged that point with a slight nod, then immediately returned to scouring the entrance to the bay for warning signs. Still ready for the battle.

Feeling distinctly less ready for the battle, Jirel turned back to the others. “Any chance we can fix up one of these things?” he asked, gesturing to the ruined shuttles.

“There may be enough working components here to repair one of them,” Kataya muttered, “But we’d need to fetch some additional parts from the stores. And it’ll take time to recharge the power cells using the ship’s final reserves.”

“Which all sounds like time that we don’t have,” the Trill grimaced.

“Hey,” Sunek chimed in, deepening Jirel’s grimace, “I’ve got an idea—”

“Sunek, I swear if this is anything other than a genuinely constructive plan, I’m gonna test the stun setting of this rifle on the back of your head.”

The Vulcan scrunched up his face inside his helmet, mildly affronted at the suggestion that he would be anything other than helpful and productive given the circumstances.

“Engineering,” he offered in response, “I don’t like to say it, but we’ve gotta head right the way down there.”

“But the shuttles—” Turanya began.

“Are gonna take too long to repair. We can’t escape, so we’re gonna need to get enough power back into this crate to send a long-range distress call. Doesn’t matter who to. Anyone passing by with a transporter can get us out of here.”

Jirel glanced over at Kataya, who offered a reluctant nod.

“Ok,” the Trill affirmed, “I guess that’s our new plan.”

The four figures started back towards the improvised door they had carved out for themselves, Klath leading them with his rifle still raised.

“And do not forget,” the Klingon offered over the comms link, “We are still being hunted.”

Sunek had lost count of the number of shivers that had passed down his spine in the last few hours, but he raised his own weapon even as he muttered back at his colleague.

“You’re a barrel of laughs right now, you know that?”

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched them moving once again, each of them still oblivious to her presence.

There was a fresh sense of pride inside her for the work she had done on the smaller vehicles, the ones that she had discovered shortly after she had dealt with the last of those that had hurt her. Before these new people had arrived.

Once again, she had been operating more on some form of preternatural instinct. Something in her mind telling her exactly what needed to be done, even if she didn’t quite understand why she was doing it. But once again, it worked.

Now, the new people were heading elsewhere. And she was following.

As she had been watching them on their journeys around the ship, she found them more and more curious to observe. She even found herself trying to figure out who they were and where they had come from.

But she didn’t need to figure out what they were here to do.

She knew they were here to hurt her. They were just like the others.

And so, while she found them curious, she also knew that there was only one thing to be done with them. The same as all the others.

She crept onwards. And prepared to strike.



## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

The Flaxian cruiser Sud Yot effortlessly cut through the vacuum of space at high warp.

It wasn't a brand new ship, but it was significantly less weathered than the Ret Kol, with a smoother and more curved raptor-like design. It was also substantially faster, with this particular class of cruiser having been handed a major warp core upgrade over all of their predecessors by the Flaxian Science Agency after having been commissioned.

As a result, it was set to make the long journey out to the derelict in a much faster time than the Ret Kol had managed. Although, as far as anyone onboard was concerned, it still wasn't making it fast enough. Even at their maximum cruising speed, they were still over 30 hours away.

Inside the habitation levels of the ship, Natasha tried to put her worries about the duration of their journey to the back of her mind and instead focus on the task in hand.

Alongside her, Denella was wrestling with similar feelings of concern. The feeling of being separated from so many people that she cared about wasn't new to her. She had experienced that feeling before when she had been taken from her home on Orpheus IV by the Syndicate. And now she was feeling it again, separated from Klath, Jirel and Sunek. Not to mention the Bounty, her home. Her ship.

But, like Natasha, the Orion engineer was similarly trying to keep those feelings submerged for now, and kept equal focus on their task.

In their shared cabin, in the interior of the Sud Yot, Natasha watched on as Denella worked on the small padd device. The one that now contained the set of data she had been able to copy from Commander Turanya's own device. Except, even the copied data was still locked down.

"Got something?" Natasha muttered at her colleague, eliciting a slightly irritated glance in return.

"For the tenth time: No."

Natasha mustered an apologetic smile and stepped away from the single table of the cabin they'd been assigned, where Denella was working. There was little else in the room aside from the uncomfortable bunk beds where they were to sleep, which at least meant that, despite the relatively small size of the cabin, there was plenty of room for a spot of worried pacing.

"I'm sorry," she managed as she walked, "It's just...I sacrificed a lot of dignity for that. And I really want us to get something from it in return."

Denella nodded in understanding and returned to her work. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, all your work made it a lot easier to get past the encryption."

"So you've got something?"

"For the eleventh time: No," she smiled patiently, "But this snapshot of the data is no longer tethered to the live encryption cycle of the main Science Agency network. It's still switching between different encryptions, but only a local repeating sequence, which I can definitely work with."

Natasha nodded in satisfaction.

She had already had a chance to browse through the smattering of unencrypted data that Turanya's padd had contained on it. But that was little more than a dry list of ongoing research that he had been using to impress her over dinner.

And there was nothing in the projects, with titles such as 'An investigation into the efficiency of hypospray delivery systems in zero gravity', or 'Assessing the impact of warp speed deceleration on the gut microbiome of a Horta', or 'Chaotic space: A topological study of trimetric fractures in the eighteenth dimensional gradient', that had really helped shed any light on anything.

But she was sure that there would be more information than was being shown to her, and so Denella was now trying to break through to the full database. To try and give them a better idea of what might be going on as they raced on to find out what had become of their colleagues.

Neither woman was certain that there would be anything helpful on there, but even if there wasn't, it was at least proving to be something of a distraction from their deeper worries on their long journey out to the derelict.

Natasha lost count of how many laps of worried pacing she had completed when Denella finally called out from the table.

"Ah-hah!"

"You did it?" Natasha called out, as she rushed over to the table and accepted the padd back from the satisfied Orion.

"The tougher they make 'em, the easier it is to break 'em."

Natasha tapped away at the device in satisfaction for a moment, but it didn't take long for that expression to turn into a frown.

"What?"

“Nothing,” she sighed, “There’s...nothing here. Just a bunch more lists of research projects, crew rotations, requisition forms, station admin.”

“What were you expecting? A big folder marked ‘secrets’? There’s gotta be something that’ll tell us more about what the hell’s going on here.”

“Like what?”

Denella paused and considered that question for a moment. Then, inspiration hit her. “What about the transit logs for the transport ship the others went off to salvage? Where had it been? What was it carrying?”

Natasha nodded and went to work, quickly tapping away at the device to find the relevant information. “Got it. Seems like it was dispatched to a trading outpost in the Drura sector.”

“Hrm,” Denella mused, recognising the name, “Pretty lawless part of the galaxy for a Flaxian transport to be waltzing by.”

“All the transit log says is that they were sent to pick up a ‘package’ for Commander Turanya and the Reja Gar station. Let me see if there’s anything else here...”

She worked on, checking through the padd’s files for the right information. And then she gasped.

“Oh my god.”

Denella glanced over at the screen, and her eyes widened in shock.

“Well,” she managed eventually, “That’s not something you read every day.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel stared down at the complex of platforms and scaffolding as they stretched out below them, the fragile structure only partially illuminated by his torchlight.

With a grim sense of foreboding, he looked back up at Lieutenant Kataya, who stood next to him overlooking the railings that fenced off the derelict’s warp core, and associated long drop down into the depths of the engine decks.

“And you’re sure this is the only access to the secondary power matrix?”

“Yes,” Kataya nodded inside his helmet, “It’s an old design. Not built for convenience. Usually this sort of repair would be carried out at a maintenance facility. Not in deep space.”

“Yeah, well, packed my spare maintenance facility in my other spacesuit, didn’t I?”

The Trill clocked a flicker of something on Kataya’s face in response to that. A slight softening of the Flaxian lieutenant’s icy complexion which made him wonder whether he was finally making progress on a rudimentary friendship. Although, he quickly conceded to himself that this wasn’t exactly the most pressing issue.

“Klath?” he called out over the comms link, “How are things looking?”

“Still clear,” the Klingon reported back, “For now.”

After they had ascertained that the deck was clear, Lieutenant Kataya had posted Klath and Sunek next to the entrance to the engineering deck to keep watch, as he and Jirel had got on with fixing the power issues.

The repairs had proven to be more complicated than either man had hoped, with the main power relays all out of action. Which is what had ultimately brought them over to the silent warp core, and the very long drop next to them.

“Ok,” Jirel managed, as confidently as he could, “Guess we should get on with this.”

With that, he took a deep breath, and went to clamber over the guardrail around the core, to begin his journey down into the pit. Just as he swung his leg over, his heart skipped a beat in shock as he felt something grab his arm.

He tried to hide his embarrassment as he realised it was Lieutenant Kataya.

“I should be the one to go,” he muttered over their short-range comms link.

Jirel channelled all his own power reserves into maintaining a brave face, and into keeping thoughts of the mauled Flaxians they had passed on the way here from the forefront of his mind. On both aspects, he was only partly successful. “You’re the expert on Flaxian engineering,” he pointed out, gesturing to the array of controls and consoles around them, “I’m the doofus who can just about clamber down there and flick on the secondary connections. Plus, you’re in charge.”

Kataya considered the logic of this statement for a moment, then reluctantly nodded. “Well,” he offered, “Good luck, Jirel.”

“What, no ‘newbie’?”

The Flaxian regarded the Trill and shook his head.

“Not any more.”

Jirel mustered a friendly nod and allowed that breakthrough to feed his wavering sense of confidence in himself. Then, he fully swung himself over the guardrail and set the heavy boots on his feet down on the first level of the elaborate scaffolding platforms that dropped down into the depths of the ship below him.

“Jirel,” he heard Klath grunt over the comms link from the other side of the engineering bay, “Make sure you stay alert.”

It was as close as the Klingon got to a heartfelt expression of concern.

“Yeah,” Sunek chimed in, “If you die, I’m gonna be really annoyed.”

And that was as close as the Vulcan got.

Stifling a smile despite himself, Jirel shone the torch beams from his helmet down below him, keeping a lid on the rush of vertigo he felt from the sight of the drop.

There were several further open mesh platforms to the labyrinth below him, each connected by narrow ladders and secured to the walls of the cylindrical expanse and to each other with stout metal poles. He still couldn’t get an accurate picture on how far down it dropped. But it seemed to be several decks-worth of distance down to the bottom.

He forced himself to look back up and tentatively stepped over to the ladder down to the next platform.

“Secondary connections’ll be two levels down,” Kataya reported as he watched on.

“Got it,” Jirel muttered back, as he began to descend.

There was barely enough room on each rung for one of his bulky boots at a time, forcing him to awkwardly swing each leg past the other with each step down he took. His phaser rifle rocked back and forth where it was slung over his back. After a moment, he breathed a sigh of relief as he touched down on the next platform, and quickly swung his head torches around to check his next move.

And then he saw her.

She was crouched on the opposite side of the platform he had just set down on, staring at him with a curious expression.

She couldn’t have been more than eight years old, and looked for all the world like a human child, with dusky brown skin and piercingly bright yellow eyes. She wore a simple green dress and flat shoes. Given the context of where they were and what was happening, she couldn’t have looked more out of place.

“Hello,” she said.

Jirel just stared back, frozen to the spot in shock. He opened his mouth, but couldn’t find anything to say through the speaker on his suit.

Above him, he heard Kataya call out over the comms link. “What are you doing? You need to go down another level.”

“Um,” Jirel finally managed, keeping his focus on the mysterious girl that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, “I think I’ve...found a survivor.”

“What?” Kataya snapped back in disbelief.

Up above, the Flaxian craned his neck over the guard rail. On the other side of the bay, Klath and Sunek immediately exchanged a look of concern.

Down on the platform, the little girl jerked her head up and spotted Kataya above them, peering down at them. Though he could seem to see her in the gloom. She cocked her head to one side as she studied the Flaxian in the spacesuit, before looking back at Jirel.

Despite the shock of seeing her, something inside Jirel instinctively made him want to help this lost child. Keeping his rifle slung behind him, he took a slow step forwards and crouched down towards her eye line. “Hey,” he managed, hoping his voice sounded as calm as he was intending through the tinny speaker on his helmet, “It’s alright. We’re here to help you. Ok?”

She seemed to consider his words, but was still primarily focused on his face through the helmet visor, peering at the two rows of spots down either side of his head.

“You’re not like the others,” she said eventually.

Jirel wasn’t quite sure what that was supposed to mean. But before he could ask any follow-up questions, the girl took a half-step back and scrunched her nose up.

“But I still don’t like you.”

In an instant, her expression hardened.

The girl’s face began to fold in on itself. Her entire body seemed to contort and deform as she transformed into something else entirely.

And Jirel, helplessly suspended on a platform above a long drop into the depths of the derelict, found himself clinging to one of the scaffolding

poles for dear life, as the whole structure started to vibrate and groan.

And his eyes widened in horror.

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

“A chameloid?”

Natasha’s angry voice filled the small ready room of the Sud Yot, accompanied by a hefty thud as she slammed the small padd in her hands down onto the desk.

Behind the desk, Commander Turanya sat as impassively as ever, his tendriled fingers steepled in front of him. Her outburst did little other than provoke a flicker of annoyance across his features.

Natasha stood alongside Denella, both of them having found out the truth. To the side of the desk, Captain Sonaya of the Sud Yot was just getting up to speed.

“A what?” the younger Flaxian managed eventually.

“A type of shapeshifter,” Natasha explained for her benefit, through gritted teeth, “There’s only ever been contact with a handful down the years. But apparently the Flaxian Science Agency found one.”

“Yeah,” Denella added, “From a trafficker in the Drura sector.”

The Orion felt her fists balling up instinctively. For reasons that she didn’t need to explain to anyone else in the room, she had a particular hatred for anyone engaged in people trafficking.

Despite all of this, Turanya maintained an entirely becalmed exterior behind the desk, not flinching in the face of the accusations being thrown at him. Even as Sonaya turned to her superior officer.

“Is this true, Commander?”

The male Flaxian kept his focus on the human and the Orion, ignoring his colleague’s question. “You know,” he chided with a slight tut, gesturing at the padd, “Hacking into a Flaxian database is a very serious crime—”

He was silenced by the sound of Captain Sonaya’s fist impacting on the desk with almost as much force as the padd had done. His face betrayed a slight flinch for the first time. He hadn’t been expecting that.

“I said,” the other uniformed Flaxian hissed, “Is this true, Commander?”

Turanya glanced back over at his subordinate and fixed her with his most smarmy of expressions. “That was the rumour,” he conceded, “But we wanted to see for ourselves. After all, it’s not every day that you get wind of a chameloid specimen out here in the cosmos.”

Denella couldn’t help herself.

“You son of a—”

“But,” Turanya patiently interjected with a placating tone, “You understand that this was a rescue mission, first and foremost. As you pointed out, the Drura sector is a hive of trafficking. We heard the reports of a juvenile chameloid being traded, and we...intervened.”

“Right,” Natasha snorted, “One big altruistic gesture.”

“We’re a science agency, Doctor,” Turanya calmly replied, “I’d rather hoped I’d made that clear with your job offer. Which is rescinded at this point, you should probably know.”

Natasha felt her hackles rise all over again at the superior smile that accompanied Turanya’s latest comment, but she forced herself to keep a lid on her emotions. “There’s a hell of a lot more to this than just a rescue, isn’t there?” she persisted, “Otherwise, why all the secrecy? Why don’t your own captains know what you’re doing?”

She gestured to Sonaya, whose eyes widened a little more as she took in the back and forth of the discussion in front of her.

“And,” Denella added with a pointed glare, “Why the hell are you building that...cage back on your station?”

“That’s just a—” Turanya began.

“You weren’t rescuing it,” Natasha jumped in with venom in her tone, “You’d bought it from the traffickers. You were experimenting on it, weren’t you? Even as that transport was heading back to the station.”

“Doctor, you don’t know what you’re—”

“Except,” Denella continued, “By the sounds of it, this poor thing didn’t much like being caged up and experimented on, did it? Looks like it used its powers to break out, disable the transport, and now it might have destroyed one of your cruisers. And...maybe our friends along with it.”

Natasha maintained her poker face despite the rush of emotion she felt as Denella laid out their own personal stakes in all of this, even as

Turanya's expression failed to shift an inch.

"Really," he sighed, "This is all speculation. And I'm not going to—"

"Answer them!"

The trio of arguing figures turned to see Sonaya brandishing a small phaser she had produced from the belt of her uniform. She pointed it straight at her superior officer, who reacted in shock.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting you to answer them," Sonaya replied with a firm glare.

"You've just made a huge mistake," Turanya scoffed back at her, "Pulling a phaser on a commanding officer? You'll never see a captain's chair again."

Sonaya knew that this was a gamble. She might be in command of the Sud Yot itself, but in the pecking order of the Science Agency, Turanya was her superior. Nevertheless, she kept her weapon poised and licked her lips.

"That is possible," she conceded with a thin smile, "But if my career really is over, at least I'll have heard the truth."

Turanya looked down at the weapon, and then up at the determination in her eyes.

"Ok, fine," he sighed eventually, "The truth? The truth is that...thing is the most incredible scientific marvel in the galaxy. Chameloids are shapeshifting creatures with humanoid DNA! If we understand the processes involved in that, if we can crack the biological code and harness the potential—"

"It's a living thing," Denella hissed through gritted teeth.

Turanya paused, a little thrown off by that statement of fact. But he'd justified this all to himself so often that it didn't take him long to recover.

"We weren't going to kill it. Just study it. And you have to see what it might allow us to do? We could allow any individual to manipulate their own cellular structure! We could eradicate any number of ailments! We could wish away disease! You see that, Doctor Kinsen?"

Natasha shook her head coldly. "Even if that was true, that doesn't justify any of this. Any of the trafficking, or the experiments, or the deaths..."

She let that word hang in the air, seeing the glare on Captain Sonaya's face darken further.

"Captain Grinya," she growled, "You sent him and the Ret Kol out here. How much did he know about what he was getting into?"

Turanya glanced at the phaser being pointed at him again, and licked his lips slightly, realising that the situation in the ready room was threatening to get away from him. "I thought he knew enough," he replied in his most measured tone, "I swear, I didn't know this would be so dangerous. All I knew was that the transport had suffered a power failure."

"No," Sonaya said, shaking her head, "When I first told you about the loss of contact with the transport and volunteered to head out there, you said you 'didn't want to risk the Sud Yot'. You knew there was a risk."

"I didn't think the package would be this—"

"Enough!" Sonaya called out, punctuating her comment with another thump of the desk, silencing the oily commander at last. Then, she looked over at the other two women.

"You have to believe me, I had no idea that—"

"We believe you," Natasha nodded with a trace of a mirthless smile, "Question is, what the hell do we do now?"

A silence descended. Everyone in the ready room knew they were still more than a day's flight from reaching the derelict, even with the Sud Yot's newer engines.

"We need to tell them," Denella said eventually, "If there's anyone left alive out there, on the derelict, or the Ret Kol, they need to know what they're dealing with."

"We're still trying to raise the other cruiser," Sonaya replied, "No reply. And long-range sensors still can't locate it."

"The derelict?" Natasha pressed.

"Still drifting, from what we can tell. No power, no communications. Besides, if Captain Grinya is following procedure, the boarding party on the derelict will be suited up."

At that comment, Denella's face suddenly lit up. "Spacesuits? With internal comms links?"

"Yes. But they're only short-range—"

"Got it," the Orion nodded, "And I think I've got an idea."

Natasha saw the look of satisfaction on the face of the Bounty's engineer, and felt the knot in her stomach untangle slightly. If Denella had a plan, she felt a little more hopeful.

"Ok," Sonaya nodded, "You can tell me all about your plan. After I've escorted Commander Turanya here to the ship's brig."

The commander snapped a look at his still-armed subordinate. "You can't do that—!"

"After what you've just told me, I can, and I will. We'll let a Science Agency tribunal decide if I'm doing the right thing."

With that, she waved his phaser at him. He reluctantly stood, still protesting under his breath, and the two Flaxians walked off. Left alone, Denella looked over at Natasha.

"Don't worry," she smiled, "Jirel, Klath and Sunek, they're survivors."

Natasha nodded back, and tried to force her concerns to the back of her mind, focusing instead on the plan to let the others know what they were dealing with.

But she couldn't shake the horrible feeling that they were already fully aware of that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel had never seen a mugato in real life before.

He had seen plenty of pictures of them. He had encountered them in holosuite programs before. He even used to have a stuffed mugato when he was a young adoptee back on Earth, which as far as he was aware was still in a storage crate somewhere in his family's Colorado home. But he had never seen one in the flesh. Until now.

The figure in front of him on the platform, which had previously been an innocent small girl who had inexplicably appeared in front of him on the derelict, had fully transformed.

Now, a two metre tall monster, covered in white fur and complete with a vicious horn on top of its head, stood in front of him.

He didn't have time to fully comprehend what had just happened. Whether he was facing a little girl, or a giant mugato, or something else entirely. Because, whatever it was, it immediately began to rush towards him, causing the thin metal platform under their feet to shake and shudder.

Without any other escape option available to him, Jirel acted on instinct. He kept a tight grip on the metal pole in his gloved hands and swiftly spun his body right around it, to dodge the attack.

It was only partly successful. As the mugato reached him, it flailed out with the claws of its left paw, and caught him on the left side of his torso. His ears registered a tell-tale hiss as his suit was compromised, and his brain registered the intense flaring pain as the claws tore into his flesh.

He thought he heard Kataya say something over the suit-to-suit comms link, but his senses were too overwhelmed for the words to register. He considered trying to grab his rifle from behind his back, but the pain was too disorienting.

The mugato lumbered past him to the edge of the platform, then spun around for another inevitable attack. He had seconds to act.

As the beast charged again, Jirel gritted his teeth and jumped off the platform entirely, sliding down the scaffold pole in his gloved hands the fifteen feet or so to the next platform below.

His feet made contact and he managed a ragged breath. He heard a roar above his head.

Forcing himself to keep moving, he staggered over to the ladder to the next platform, and swung his leg out. After a vertigo-inducing glance downward with his helmet spotlights, he scuttled down the rungs as fast as his injured form could move.

At the last second, he lost his footing, and for a dizzying moment he felt his left foot dangle out into the murky drop below him. His injured side caused his left arm to spasm, and with a rush of nausea, he found himself hanging on by just one arm and one foot.

Another roar came from above.

He thought he heard Klath's voice over the comms link.

Everything was becoming a blur.

With one desperate swing, he flung his entire body off the ladder, landing in a crumpled heap on the platform with enough force to cause a fresh flare of pain to stab through his entire body. He forced himself to roll onto his back, even as the unstable metal grid shuddered from his landing, as he looked back up at the towering warp core, and the platforms above him. He tried to say something, but he could only manage a pained grunt.

And then he saw a huge shock of white fur. Descending towards him.

The mugato had jumped off the first platform.

He tried to cry out as he realised the likely impact the extra weight was going to have on the platform under him. But there was no time. He tried to roll away, but it was useless. He heard the mugato land on the platform with a thud, and the telltale snapping sound of the supports holding it in place in the scaffold.

He felt something claw at his back, to the side of the rifle. He felt a fresh sensation of warm blood soaking into his clothing.

And then he felt the platform give way entirely.

He felt himself falling. He saw a shock of white fur folding in on itself as they fell.

He saw the deck at the very bottom of the warp core's cylindrical housing approaching with speed.

And then he saw nothing.



## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

“Jirel!”

Klath’s latest bellowed call over the comms link garnered no response.

The Klingon stood alongside Sunek and Lieutenant Kataya, the three men leaning over the guardrail at the top of the warp core’s cavernous pit. They scanned the darkened depths below with their rifle torch lights, keeping the weapons raised as a result. But all they saw was darkness. And all they heard was silence.

The Klingon swiftly turned his attention back to Kataya, who had barely said a word since he and Sunek had raced over to him to find out what was happening. “What was it?” he grunted.

The Flaxian struggled to bring himself to respond, scarcely believing the answer himself.

“It was a...mugato.”

Klath’s glower deepened. Sunek just smirked. “Really? A mugato? Great big hairy thing? Seven feet tall? Big old poison-tipped horn on its head? Don’t tell me, it was riding an armoured le-matya and juggling the Stone of Gol.”

“I’m telling you, that’s what I saw,” Kataya growled back.

“And I’m telling you that no matter how unreliable the lifesign readings are, I’m pretty sure we’d have picked up a giant ape monster by now.”

Klath remained silent, looking down again into the darkness. Kataya, still some way off the confident and antagonistic young Flaxian they had first encountered thanks to the tumultuous shocks he had endured on this salvage mission so far, persisted in his defence.

“I know what I saw,” he muttered, “Except...”

“Except what?” Klath pressed.

Another slight pause. This part of his report seemed fantastical, even to Kataya himself.

“Except...he was talking to it. Before I saw the mugato, I heard him talk to it.”

Klath kept his opinions as private as ever, but Sunek snorted again. “Ok, so, sit-rep: You’ve gone totally insane.”

“I heard it!”

“Yeah, right. My great uncle Tovak heard plenty as well. Just before the Bendii Syndrome got the best of him.”

Klath turned back to them, his torch beams illuminating their reflective visors. “We do not have time for this,” he pointed out, “We must try to save Jirel.”

“From the mugato?” Sunek replied sarcastically, eliciting a further angry glare from the Flaxian.

“From the fall,” the Klingon pointed out, finding himself in the unusual position of playing the role of peacemaker.

He gestured back to the yawning chasm next to the core where Jirel had fallen.

“We cannot descend down there. Too many of the platforms have been damaged. But we can use the access conduits to descend to the bottom of the ship.”

For a moment, it looked as though Sunek was about to continue to argue, but he ultimately nodded, having mainly been using his sarcastic responses to cover for his own worries about Jirel’s fate. “Gets my vote,” he said, grasping his rifle a little tighter.

The two of them turned to Kataya, who reluctantly nodded as well. “If we can’t get down via the maintenance platforms, we’ll need to try and get to the secondary power grid controls through the access conduits anyway. We can look for your friend at the same time.”

With a tentative agreement having been struck, Klath led the trio over to the nearest access hatch in the wall of the darkened engineering bay. With some help from Kataya, he quickly removed the hatch cover. Then, the pair of them reluctantly stowed their rifles behind their backs for the journey, before Kataya led them into the narrow, dark confines of the conduit.

“And remember,” the Flaxian offered, “Be on the lookout for a—”

“Mugato,” Sunek sighed with a roll of his eyes, “Got it.”

As Klath followed Kataya into the conduit, Sunek couldn’t help but circle a gloved finger around his ear in a cuckoo gesture. The lieutenant had clearly lost it.

But, just before he slung his own rifle behind his back and prepared to crawl after them, he double checked that it was set on the heaviest stun setting available.

There might be a mugato down there, after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nothing.

There was nothing here at all. Just a perpetual, inky blackness.

Then, slowly, he began to resolve shapes in the darkness. Confusing, shadowy forms slowly began to coalesce. As he slowly blinked and tried to get a grip on where he was, he knew one thing for certain. He was still alive.

Though he wasn't sure how long that would be the case.

He tried to lift himself up, knowing that the last thing he had been doing before the fall was fighting a murderous mugato. But he struggled to find the strength.

Slowly, his surroundings resolved themselves. He was lying on his back in an awkwardly contorted position, at what appeared to be the very bottom of the warp core's shaft.

He could barely see where he had fallen from. The vertical expanse of the core itself stretched up into an expanse of grim darkness above his head. The ship's continued lack of power meant that there was no lighting to help him out. All around him were twisted pieces of metal from the collapsed platform and scaffolding that had come down with them.

There was no sign of the mugato anywhere. He couldn't decide if that fact was either a source of comfort, or an incredibly unsettling development.

His view was now partially obscured by a sizeable crack in the visor of his suit's helmet. Not that his suit's integrity seemed to matter much any more. It was entirely compromised thanks to the mugato's claws, and he was at the mercy of the derelict's own emergency air supply.

He still felt a burning pain across his back and side where he had been mauled. As he shifted his weight, he was sure he felt a squelch from his blood-soaked clothing.

But somehow, thanks to the robustness of the suit he was wearing, he was alive. For now.

With a pained grimace, he tried again to force himself up off the deck, gritting his teeth against the agony that emanated from his wounded body as he did so. The pain was enough to cause him to stop again. Instead, he checked that the comms link on his suit was still open, and forced out a whisper.

"Hey, Klath? Sunek? Kataya? Anyone?"

A shrill burst of static filled his damaged helmet. For a horrible moment, he feared that it may have been irrevocably damaged in the fall. Or worse, he feared that the mugato had somehow got to the others.

"Jirel," Klath's voice came back eventually through the choppy link, relief clear in his voice, "You are alive."

"Jury's still out on that one. Where are you?"

"We are on our way to your location now."

"Klath," he coughed, "Be careful, ok? I don't know where it is now, but there was a...mugato."

There was a pause and another crackle of static. Jirel could just about make out Sunek's voice for a moment, but he couldn't tell what he was saying. Eventually, Klath's booming voice returned.

"How badly are you injured? Can you move?"

The Trill braced himself against the pain and tried again to lift his weight, getting as far as mustering himself into a vaguely seated position. "Just about," he reported, "Remind me to thank Natasha for finding such an easy way to make our money back."

The voice of Lieutenant Turanya replaced that of Klath. "If you can move, aim for the bow of the ship. We'll meet you there."

"Got it," Jirel managed in response, "I'll see what I can do."

The comms link clicked off in another shower of static. Jirel gritted his teeth again, before grunting and straining in renewed determination to get to his feet. Eventually, using some of the scaffolding around him as leverage, he was able to clamber his way out, all the while doing his best to ignore the waves of pain from his injuries.

With some additional effort, he reached back and retrieved his phaser rifle from his back. It was badly scuffed and dented from the fall, but it still seemed to be operational. He knew he couldn't risk drawing attention to himself by testing the firing mechanism, so for all he knew the weapon was useless. But he felt at least a tad more safe to have it in his hands.

Still, it wasn't all good news. The torch attachment was shattered, along with those on his helmet, which meant that he had nothing but the scant amount of ambient light to illuminate his path. He peered through the twisted metal all around him, but saw no signs of movement.

Absently, he wondered if the fall might have been enough to kill his adversary. But he noted that if it hadn't been enough to finish off an unjoined Trill, it probably wouldn't have been enough to kill a fully-grown mugato.

Or possibly a small child. He still wasn't entirely sure what it was that he had been fighting.

He checked his wrist-mounted tricorder to get an idea of where he should be heading, but the screen was smashed, the device inoperative. With a sigh, and after another scan of the room, he picked a direction to head in. And with a wince, he began to limp across the room.

Only a few steps into his journey, he was sure he heard a noise.

He whirled around as quickly as his aching body could manage and kept his rifle level and true. But he couldn't see anything.

Licking his lips and feeling the sweat beading on his brow, he squinted through the darkness in vain, then reluctantly turned back and staggered on, mentally preparing himself at any point for the sensation of the mugato pouncing on his prone form and finishing the job.

Just as it must have done with all of the poor souls he'd seen throughout the upper decks. And just how it somehow must have done with the crew of the Ret Kol.

He suppressed a fresh shudder and picked up his pace as best he could, spying a doorway ahead of him in the gloom. It wasn't entirely clear where it would take him, but anywhere was better than here.

And then he heard another noise.

Except this one wasn't unsettling. It was comforting. And very familiar. And it came through loud and clear over the comms system.

"Jirel?"

## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The Sud Yot hung gently in space, having temporarily paused in its desperate journey towards the stricken derelict.

It was positioned next to a large rectangular metal object, dominated at one end by a vast array of subspace transmitters. One of several such arrays dotted around the surrounding space, and one of the most extensive projects undertaken by the Flaxian Science Agency.

The network of deep space transmitters allowed a steady flow of subspace comms traffic throughout Flaxian space, with messages flitting between ships, stations, shuttles and planets. And right now, the Sud Yot was using it to amplify and focus their own comms signal.

On the bridge of the cruiser, Captain Sonaya watched on from her command chair as Natasha stood over the expansive port-side communications console, with Denella frantically tapping at the controls alongside her.

Sonaya knew that a few of her officers were put out by their passengers appearing on the bridge like this. Her crew weren't quite as grizzled as Captain Grinya's, but they were still a proud and often prickly group. Still, given what she had heard from Commander Turanya, and given the speed with which the Orion had come up with her plan, she was happy to give them the space to work.

Denella finished her frantic work and looked over at the human woman next to her. "Ok, I've got us tied into the array's main booster. You're patched in and targeted to any open comms line in or around our target point. Even in a spacesuit."

"If there's anyone there to hear me," Natasha replied quietly.

"They'll be there. They're survivors, remember?"

Natasha accepted the supportive words with a slight nod, still feeling a sense of dread as she looked down at the controls in front of her.

Ever since things had started to go wrong, a nagging voice at the back of her head had been persistently reminding her that this had all been her idea. She'd been the one who had negotiated their participation in the salvage work in return for their debts to Turanya. And she would be responsible if anything had happened to the others.

With some sense of trepidation, she licked her lips, reached out and slowly pressed her finger down on the panel to open the comms link.

"Jirel?"

Nothing. Her sense of guilt rose further as she feared the worst.

"Klath? Sunek? If you can hear me—"

"I can hear you, Nat."

The sound of the familiar voice of the Trill coming back over the link caused her to instinctively break out in a look of relief. A look that was noted by Denella with a trace of knowing amusement before she could return her features back to business mode.

"I'm still here," Jirel continued after a burst of static, "So are Klath, Sunek and Lieutenant Kataya. But, everyone else..."

Behind Natasha and Denella, Captain Sonaya dug her fingernails into the arms of her command chair. Jirel, his voice sounding weak and pained, continued.

"How are you even talking to me right now—?"

"Long story," Natasha replied quickly, forcing herself to stay in business mode, "But you need to know, on the derelict, there's a—"

"Mugato. I know. We've met."

Natasha and Denella exchanged a slightly confused look, before the doctor continued. "No, Jirel, listen: It's a chameloid."

A long pause. Long enough for Denella to furtively double check that they hadn't dropped their connection with the array. "A what?" Jirel replied eventually.

"A chameloid. A shapeshifter."

"Huh. Like one of those Dominion fellas?"

"No, not exactly," Natasha explained, "The Founders are a semi-collective species, non-humanoid in their natural state. Chameloids are individual humanoids, with shapeshifting abilities."

Another pause. Denella was sure she could hear the sound of the cogs in Jirel's brain turning over.

"So," he offered, "This thing could be a little girl one minute, and a mugato the next? It could even...turn into Captain Grinya and fool the crew of the Ret Kol?"

"It could."

“And it could even disguise itself from tricorder readings somehow? Cos we’ve been walking round this crate for hours, and we’ve definitely not detected any chameloids. Whatever one of those is.”

“Possibly,” Natasha replied, “We still know so little about them. Frankly, until about eighty years ago, they were still assumed to be mythical.”

“Fascinating,” he grunted back, through pain and heavy sarcasm, “Important thing is: A phaser can still take it down, regardless of what it’s dressed up as, right?”

Natasha glanced over at Denella with concern. She sighed. “Jirel, listen, whatever it’s done, it’s just a child. It’s scared.”

“Makes two of us.”

“The Flaxians were...experimenting on it. I don’t know how badly, but...you need to understand that it’s just frightened, and probably confused. And—”

There was a sudden burst of static over the link. Denella tapped at the controls and shook her head in frustration. “We’re losing the link,” she reported, “Comms lines are shorting out all over the ship. Was only ever going to be a short-term thing.”

Natasha nodded, then found that she couldn’t help but call out one final message to the Trill across the ether.

“And Jirel, stay safe. We’re on our way.”

Her words were met with silence, as the link finally died.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Natasha?”

There was no answer.

Jirel had passed through the door and into a corridor beyond, with still only the vaguest sense that he was heading in the right direction. As he listened to the silence that followed his question, he stifled a fresh feeling of pain, not just from the wounds on his back and his side, but from the sensation of being alone again.

He tried not to dwell on that feeling, nor on wondering how much it had been triggered by hearing Natasha’s voice specifically, and kept limping on with his rifle raised.

Instead, he started to think about what she had just told him. About how this thing that seemed to be hunting them wasn’t a murderer or a psychopath. Or even a monstrous fur-covered mugato. But a terrified child.

He thought back to the damage he and Kataya had seen in the science labs earlier. The way it felt as though something had burst out of there, splitting the bulkhead asunder. It had seemed like the actions of a violent monster. Something gruesome that had wrenched its way out of containment to slaughter the Flaxians onboard. And something that had just nearly killed him, and could be stalking him right now.

But after hearing Natasha’s explanation, he pieced together a different view.

They could have been the actions of a frightened child, reacting on instinct. Trying to escape, to get away from the people that were hurting it.

He remembered the child-like way the girl had spoken to him. And he couldn’t help but feel like things weren’t quite as they appeared.

He checked his comms link was still active as he limped down the dark corridor towards the next intersection.

“Guys, you hear all that?”

Static. Then a response.

“Yep,” Sunek piped up, “And I told you, it wasn’t a mugato. So once again, I’m right, and everyone else is—”

Another burst of static. Eventually, a more measured response came back.

“We heard,” Klath confirmed, “We are nearly at the lower level.”

“Ok, but, that all made sense, right? What Natasha was saying about this...chameloid?”

“Jirel,” Klath grunted, clearly in no mood for having this debate, “I suggest we concentrate on getting to the bow. Then we can devise a strategy to defeat our enemy.”

“But it sounds like you were right,” Jirel replied, grimacing as he took another painful step forward.

This seemed to give the Klingon reason to pause for a moment. “I do not understand,” the reply came eventually.

“You said we were up against an intelligence, not a beast,” he reminded him, “And if that’s what this intelligence is, some scared child a million miles from home, then maybe we’ve got a chance to...reason with it?”

“Before or after it chews your face off?” Sunek glibly cut in.

As Jirel struggled for a response to that remark, he heard Lieutenant Turanya jumping in as well, his tone back to something approaching his old grizzled roughness. “We can’t reason with it, Jirel. You’ve seen what it can do. What’s it’s already done. So we regroup, and then we kill it.”

“Except,” Jirel persisted, “It’s wiped out two crews at this point, and we’ve barely got a shot off. Maybe we need a different plan—”

“No!” Kataya cut in again, “We’re not reasoning with it. Especially not after what it did to the Ret Kol. And to Captain Grinya.”

Jirel stopped himself from firing off a quick retort, taking a moment to grimly appreciate the losses that Kataya had suffered at the hands of the chameleon. For a moment, static-flecked silence descended over their link.

“Jirel,” Klath’s measured voice returned eventually, “You are injured. Focus on getting to us.”

“Right,” he sighed, “That’s what I’m doing.”

“Good.”

With that, the comms link went quiet, as each side of the conversation returned to their more pressing tasks.

Jirel approached another intersection. His head was still filled with thoughts of what they were dealing with. Of what Natasha had told them. He wondered if there really was some way to reason with the chameleon.

He certainly hoped there was. Because as he turned the corner, he saw her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

She hadn’t expected to fall.

In all of her work so far since she had made her escape, she hadn’t really hurt herself. At least, not beyond a few scratches. But the fall had definitely hurt her. The pain had shocked her.

It was true that she healed quickly. Any injuries she had sustained were now gone, absorbed back into her body. But still, the experience had thrown her off. It had made her want to run away, and it had made her cry. It had made her yearn to be comforted by her mother. And that feeling of loneliness had made her even more upset.

So she had retreated to the shadows once again, as she decided on a new plan. She knew that she needed to be more rational in her actions, she needed to think things through more. Not act quite so instinctively as she had before the fall.

She opted to lie in wait.

And it didn’t take long before he reached her. And they saw each other.

And she started to transform.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel raised his rifle as soon as he saw her. He felt disconcerted to be pointing the weapon at a small, dusky-skinned child. But he wasn’t doing that for very long.

Almost as soon as he rounded the corner, she began to change. Her face began to fold in on itself again as her body grew and contorted.

He watched on through the smashed visor of his helmet. His finger tensed on the trigger. Time seemed to be slowing down.

It’s just a child.

The chameleon’s form grew further as its new form fully resolved in front of the Trill.

It’s a terrifying mugato.

The monster in front of him prepared to charge, claws raised and horn lowered. At the same time, he prepared to fire.

It had already wiped out the crew of the derelict. Used its shape-shifting powers to trick the Ret Kol’s crew and destroy the cruiser. It had slaughtered Captain Grinya and Lieutenant Deroya. It had nearly killed him, and was now ready to finish the job.

But it was just a child. That was what Natasha had told him.

Jirel’s brow was thick with sweat. The wounds on his back and side ached. His spots itched like never before. His finger wavered on the

trigger.

The mugato roared. And it charged.

He had no idea what to do. And so, he took a deep breath, and placed his trust in two things he had developed an unshakable trust in.

Natasha's conscience. And his powers of negotiation.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was used to the reactions by now.

She remembered how scared she had been when she had first broken out. When she had seen the look on the face of the first one she had killed. It had been awful enough that she had wanted to stop there. But they had kept on coming for her, trying to find her, wherever she had hidden away.

And before that, they had hurt her. They had hurt her so much that she found she had the urge and the strength to keep going. To punish them. Every single one of them.

Some she had taken by surprise. Some had tried to fight back. Some had begged for their lives. But each reaction had one thing in common. A look of horror. And none of the reactions had ever caused her to stop doing what she had to do.

Until now.

She charged at the man in front of her. And he reacted by throwing the bulky rifle in his hands to one side, and lifting his hands above his head.

She stopped her charge on the spot, and cocked her head, fur and horn and all, in curiosity.

The man kept his eyes focused on her, as he placed his hands either side of the strange adornment he wore over his head and lifted it clean off with a slight hissing sound. She saw his face more clearly now, and noted the two lines of spots running down the side of his face that she had seen earlier.

And then she saw him open his mouth, and speak.

"I'm not like the others!"

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

Jirel stared back at the mugato, which was oddly frozen in place.

He held his broken helmet above his head, after he had removed it. And he stared back at the giant ape-like creature that stood barely five feet away from him.

He wasn't sure how he was coming across to the mugato/chameloid, but he hoped that he was approximating enough of a look of trust, and of appeasement. He also hoped that he didn't need to keep his hands raised for too long. His back was already aching from his injuries. And this fresh exertion wasn't helping.

As the huge creature stared back at him, he also started to worry that he'd made entirely the wrong call. That he should have just pulled the trigger there and then, rather than tossing his only defence to one side.

Then, just as the pain became unbearable, the mugato folded in on itself. It began to shrink. And before he knew it, he was staring back at the altogether less immediately threatening form of the little girl in the dark green dress.

He couldn't remember how long he had been holding his breath for, but he took a grateful deep lungful of air.

"No," the girl said simply, "You're not like the others."

As she gazed curiously at his spots, Jirel gently lowered his helmet down to his side, glad of the respite, but careful not to make any sudden movements. "Glad you agree," he offered back, "Cos those Flaxians aren't exactly lookers, you know?"

He tried a friendly smile, but she just stared back at him in confusion. He elected to change to a different approach.

"Jirel. My name's Jirel. What's yours?"

The girl scrunched up her face, like she was trying to remember some sort of half-forgotten fact she'd once learned at school.

"Mireia," she said eventually, with a nod of certainty.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Mireia."

He suppressed another pained flinch from his wounds, a timely reminder that this wasn't technically the first time they'd met.

For her part, Mireia stared at him with a child-like inquisitiveness. "The others never asked what my name was," she said quietly, "The others were mean to me. Are you going to be mean?"

"No. I'm not going to be mean."

Her eyes drifted over to the bulky phaser rifle that lay discarded on the ground. She still wasn't entirely sure what it was, but her instincts told her not to trust it.

"Then why do you have that?" she asked.

Jirel considered the somewhat glib and unerring child-like directness of the question, trying to keep his answer as honest, but as non-confrontational as possible. "For...protection. But I promise I'm not gonna hurt you. Nor are my friends."

Mireia pondered this for a moment, then saw the Trill's latest pained grimace. "I hurt you," she pointed out.

Further weakened, Jirel gently lowered himself into a crouch to try and deal with the pain. He noted Mireia copying his movement, sitting down across from him and crossing her legs.

"I know," he sighed eventually, "But I guess you were scared, weren't you."

She nodded.

"Well," he continued, "People can do things like that when they're scared."

This provoked another thoughtful look on the child's dusky face, as she mulled his comment over. "The others," she asked, "The ones who hurt me. Tested me. Studied me. Punished me if I did the wrong thing. Were they scared?"

"Maybe," Jirel nodded, "Maybe they were scared because you're not like them. You're different. Something they hadn't seen before."

"And that's why they hurt me?"

"That's why a hell of a lot of people hurt a hell of a lot of other people, Mireia."

She took in the enormity of this statement as best she could. She felt a sudden pang of sadness for everything that had happened. And she felt alone.



“Some people took me,” she whispered eventually, “A long time ago. From my parents. I don’t know where they are now.”

“I guess we’ve got that in common,” the orphan Trill offered, “I don’t know where my parents are either.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Can’t even remember them. I mean, I did end up getting some new parents, which…”

He paused, as he thought about his adoptive parents back on Earth. His late mother, and his mostly estranged father, Admiral Bryce Jenner of Starfleet.

“…Which is a whole other thing we don’t have time for right now. But I can help you, ok? Maybe we can find you some new parents as well?”

“I don’t want new parents,” she countered, “I want my parents.”

Jirel nodded back in understanding. “I get it. Well, I’m sure I can help you with that as well. Just as long as you help me and my friends out, and you don’t hurt us. Ok?”

Mireia stared back at him with her vibrant yellow eyes. Jirel offered a friendly smile through the pain, glad to be making some progress and suddenly feeling as safe as he’d felt since they had first beamed onboard the derelict.

And then, out of nowhere, the others rounded the corner.

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn’t know exactly why, but she felt as though she could trust this man.

His words were calming and comforting. And ever since he had thrown away his curious weapon, he had made no attempt to retrieve it.

She had been tricked before in similar ways. But this time, it didn’t feel like a trick. This time, it felt genuine. And for the first time in as long as she could remember, she allowed herself to feel safe.

Then, she heard a noise behind her. She turned, to see three figures turning the corner, their own weapons raised.

And she realised that she’d been mistaken. It had been a trap.

And she prepared to attack.

\* \* \* \* \*

“No!”

Jirel cried out as soon as he saw Klath, Sunek and Lieutenant Kataya round the corner.

With reserves of strength he hadn’t even been aware he had, the Trill forced himself back onto his feet and surged forwards across the darkened corridor.

“Don’t shoot!” he added despairingly.

Mireia was already mid-transformation. The small child growing back into the white-furred monster from before. The rifles remained raised. The mugato solidified.

And Jirel dragged himself in between the two sides of the fight with a final burst of exertion, the wounds on his body crying out at the latest sudden movement they had been subjected to.

“No!” he said again, staring back at the mugato’s oddly yellow eyes, “Mireia, please. No.”

There was no obvious response, but the mugato remained where it was, breathing softly and not attacking for now. Jirel whirled back to the others, still sealed inside their suits, and called out again.

“Guys, please, weapons down, helmets off, ok?”

The three figures kept their weapons raised. Jirel heard Kataya over his suit’s external speaker. “Out of the way, Jirel,” he grunted, “What the hell are you doing?”

Jirel stood his ground and ignored him, focusing on Klath in the middle of the trio. “Klath, come on. She’s scared. She needs to trust us. So let’s show some trust ourselves, hmm? And besides, she’s just a child. Where’s the honour in shooting a child?”

He saw something flicker in the Klingon's face. In his head, Klath wrestled with the blood lust he felt when confronted by their quarry, and his faith in his long-time friend and colleague.

Eventually, and reluctantly, he lowered his weapon. It dropped to the floor with a clatter. Slowly, the hulking Klingon reached to unlatch his helmet with a telltale hiss of air. The mugato watched on silently as he removed it and revealed his scowling features beneath.

Jirel mustered a thankful smile, then glanced at Sunek. The Vulcan didn't look entirely convinced, but his rifle joined Klath's on the ground, and his helmet came off as well.

"Just FYI," he offered to Jirel, "If this little plan gets us all murdered, I'll kill you."

Jirel smiled wider, then looked at Kataya. The Flaxian's weapon was still raised. A look of fierce determination was still there in his eyes.

"Hey," the Trill said calmly, "Lieutenant, please just—"

"This thing killed Captain Grinya!" Kataya's voice sounded out from the tinny speaker, "And Deroya, and Rondya, and everyone else! Dozens and dozens of Flaxians!"

Behind him, Jirel heard the mugato softly growl. He took another step through the tense atmosphere towards the angry lieutenant, keeping himself between the rifle and Mireia.

"Step aside, for god's sake!" the Flaxian spat.

"Can't do that," Jirel replied, "I'm sorry. And she's sorry. For everything that's happened here. And for everything you've lost. But what Commander Turanya was having your people do to this little girl was wrong as well. And she was just defending herself."

The Flaxian's weapon shook slightly. Jirel took another half step forwards with his weakened body.

"Plus, I think I'm pretty much done with dealing with dead bodies today, Lieutenant. So, I guess, if you really want revenge, you're gonna have to shoot me as well."

To his side, Klath tensed up. Even Sunek couldn't bring himself to fire off a quip. Kataya stared at Jirel, and Jirel stared back. Even the Trill was a little taken aback at where this latest negotiation had taken him.

A wave of emotion passed over the Flaxian's features, and he faltered. The rifle slowly lowered, and then clattered to the ground with a sense of finality. He reached up and removed his helmet. Jirel gave him a thankful nod, then turned back to Mireia, who had turned back from her mugato form to that of the little girl in the green dress. She pointed at Kataya as his face was revealed.

"He is like the others," she muttered, with a hint of fear in her voice.

"No," Jirel smiled softly, "He's not. Are you, Kataya?"

Behind him, the Flaxian stared down at the girl, and shook his head. The fear in her yellow eyes eased off ever so slightly at this gesture.

Jirel breathed a sigh of relief. Negotiation complete.

As the tension eased, Sunek stepped over to the weary Trill and patted him on the shoulder. "Gotta hand it to ya, Jirel. That was pretty badass."

"Good," he managed with an awkward nod, "Cos this is gonna be a hell of a lot less badass."

With no more strength left to give, the wounded Trill stumbled and slumped into the surprised Vulcan's arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I had no idea."

Kataya shook his head in disbelief at what he was hearing, as Mireia told her story to the group as best she could.

They had returned to the bridge of the derelict to wait for the rescue party on the Sud Yot to arrive, with Klath carrying the exhausted and bloodied Jirel most of the way. The Trill was now slumped in the single central chair on the bridge, after Sunek had mustered some rudimentary triage to his wounds with an emergency medkit.

Klath rigidly stood to his side, while Sunek leaned on the forward helm console and Kataya slowly paced around the perimeter of the room. Mireia herself sat cross-legged on the deck, having finished her tale of how she had been taken by the Flaxian Science Agency.

"There was nothing honourable here," Klath muttered, "Only savagery."

"Yeah, well," Sunek added with a shrug, "Wouldn't be the first time someone had crossed a whole buttload of lines in the name of science."

He didn't expand further on his comment, but he couldn't help but think of Doctor Sevik.

Several months ago, when he had fallen under the mind meld-induced influence of Sokar, a former colleague from the V'tosh ka'tur, he had been shown images and memories of the treatments that Sokar had endured as a youth at the hands of an old Vulcan doctor.

To this day, he still wasn't entirely sure how factual the images had been, and how much they had been embellished by the mildly deranged Sokar. But embellished or not, the memory of the agonising emotional purges had left a lasting impact on him. One that he was still dealing with, in private, and in his ongoing meditation sessions with Denella back on the Bounty.

As Sunek suppressed a shudder at those half-memories, Kataya continued to pace around the bridge, shaking his head as he walked.

"And all of this was authorised by Commander Turanya?"

"Apparently," Jirel replied weakly, "Came right from the top."

"I can't believe it," the Flaxian muttered with another shake of his head, "That the Flaxian Science Agency would resort to trafficking and this sort of experimentation..."

Mireia stayed silent. She didn't know who Commander Turanya was, nor what the Flaxian Science Agency was. So she left Kataya to his moralistic quandary.

The uncomfortable silence that followed was broken, as so many uncomfortable silences were, by Sunek. "Hey," he said to Mireia with a grin, "You know that trick you do?"

The chameloid looked a little confused, but the Vulcan persisted.

"Well, can you, y'know, be me?"

She looked over at the shabby, tousle-haired Vulcan. And Sunek's grin widened, as moments later, he was staring back across at himself, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Yes," Mireia/Sunek nodded in her usual child's voice.

"Awesome," Sunek/Sunek replied.

"Hey, Mireia," Jirel coughed weakly, "Please don't do that. The galaxy really, really doesn't need two Suneks."

"Agreed," Klath growled.

Mireia obediently turned back into her usual form, just in time to see the original Sunek stick his tongue out at the Klingon. She giggled. It was the first time she had made that sound in a long time. And it surprised even her to hear it.

"I do have a question," Jirel said to her, "Why a mugato?"

She pondered that for a second, then shrugged her tiny shoulders. "My parents taught me how to do that," she explained, "When I was very young. They told me to use it if I ever got scared. Or threatened."

Jirel noted the pang of anguish on the still-pacing Kataya's face as he heard her response.

"My parents," Mireia continued, in a smaller voice, "Can I go back to my parents now? Can I go home?"

The pointed question hung in the air with enough gravity to cause Kataya to stop pacing. The chameloid looked around at the grim expressions on the faces of the others.

"I...don't know," Kataya replied eventually.

The Flaxian had no good answer to this. He knew that the Agency would want answers to what had happened here. Too many people had died for this to just be ignored by them.

"Where is home?" Jirel asked, filling the silence.

Now it was Mireia's turn to struggle to find an answer. Inside, her instincts came back to her, the same ones that had allowed her to survive for so long, and do so much. "I'm not sure," she admitted, "But...I think I know the way."

She looked back around. The expressions hadn't changed. Her words became a plea.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm really sorry. I was scared! I didn't mean to do any of it!"

On the other side of the room, Kataya looked back at the frightened child. The one that had killed so many of his colleagues.

"No," he replied sadly, "You didn't, did you?"

She looked down at the deck in front of her and her lip quivered slightly. "I...just want to go home."

The four grownups in the room shifted uncomfortably. None of them were quite sure how to break the news that there might be plenty more questions to be asked yet.

"We'll, um, see what we can do," Jirel managed eventually.

At this, Mireia's eyes widened a little. Her body seemed to tense up. "What does that mean?"

Jirel searched for the right answer. How to explain to the young child that whatever had just happened was probably going to take a while to

fully resolve, even after they had been rescued by the others. And how to do it without frightening her further.

But before he could say anything, Lieutenant Kataya stepped forwards. He'd been thinking for some time. About everything that he had seen here, and everything that Commander Turanya and the Flaxian Science Agency had apparently been doing. And he knew that, regardless of the extenuating circumstances, there was going to be some serious investigating done after this. After all, the chameloid was now responsible for the deaths of dozens of Flaxians, and the loss of two vessels.

The little girl in front of him would likely have to answer for that, at least to some extent.

And that was when he'd had his idea.

"Actually," he replied with a slightly grim look, "We might be able to do quite a lot."

Jirel, Sunek and Klath looked back at him with confusion. Mireia gazed up at him where she sat cross-legged on the floor.

He met her look with a slight smile. And then he started to explain his plan.

**End of Part Four**

## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Part Five

The Sud Yot drifted next to the derelict, which remained a picture of serenity that belied the frenzy of activity going on all around it.

As soon as the cruiser had arrived, two operations had begun, both pre-prepared and coordinated by Captain Sonaya.

One oversaw the remaining work that still had to be done on the derelict, rescuing the survivors and finishing off the salvage work that had begun two days ago. The other worked from onboard the Sud Yot to recover whatever debris was left of the Ret Kol, the few recoverable pieces still drifting in the surrounding space.

Sonaya sat behind her desk in her ready room, now entirely in charge of operations. Commander Turanya remained under lock and key in the brig, continuing to argue his innocence and threaten career-ending consequences to anyone who passed by.

In front of her stood the reunited crew of the Bounty, the altogether relieved Natasha and Denella alongside Jirel, Sunek and Klath, who had changed back into their usual civilian garb. Jirel's injuries were now on the mend, thanks to the efforts of Natasha and the medical team on the Sud Yot.

But Captain Sonaya didn't seem especially interested in that. Instead, she looked more perturbed as they finished their report. "I see," she nodded with a note of sadness, "And Lieutenant Kataya volunteered to carry out that plan?"

"That's right," Jirel nodded gingerly, still feeling the effects of the Flaxian dermal regenerator on his back, "He lured the chameloid into the aft airlock. After which, he was able to blow the outer hatch. Both of them were sucked out—"

"Blown out."

"Shut up, Sunek. Both of them were killed, Captain. I'm sorry."

Sonaya sighed deeply and leaned back in her chair, studying the faces of the Trill, the Klingon and the Vulcan in turn. The only survivors of one of the worst disasters in the history of the Flaxian Science Agency. And three people that her instincts told her were not giving her the full story.

But unfortunately for her, and for her official report into what happened on the derelict, they were also her only three reliable witnesses.

"I see," she nodded simply.

She picked up a padd from the desk, which contained the initial report from her own salvage team. The derelict's aft airlock was indeed open, and the controls seemed to have been activated from the inside. And while the search team had located plenty of grisly remains, there had been no sign of Kataya, nor of the chameloid.

Still, as Sonaya looked back up at the Trill's entirely believable face, she still felt as though she wasn't being told everything.

"Well," she continued eventually, with a curt nod, "Thank you for your candour in this matter. And on behalf of the Flaxian Science Agency, I offer my sincere apologies for what you've been through. Trust me when I say this isn't how we usually conduct ourselves."

"I'm sure it isn't," Sunek grunted with his usual sarcasm.

"Our work here will continue for another 24 hours, after which we'll return to Reja Gar. I hope you'll use this time to rest and recuperate in the cabin we've provided."

"You can count on that," Jirel nodded with a wince.

Sonaya scanned their faces again, but they still betrayed nothing. The Trill took the opportunity to continue.

"Um, there was one other thing. Could we...get our ship back?"

"Ah, yes," Sonaya replied, "Well, given what has happened with Commander Turanya, I believe it would be fair for me to release your vessel back to you once we return to the station."

She paused, and her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Although, I really wouldn't count on any more delivery jobs from the Flaxian Science Agency any time soon."

"We get that a lot," Sunek quipped from next to Jirel.

Sonaya raised a curious eyebrow, then dismissed them and watched the motley group walk out of her ready room.

After a moment of contemplation, she tapped the console terminal in front of her. "Computer," she intoned, "Make a correction to the official list of casualties."

"Please state the required correction," the calm and dulcet male voice of the Sud Yot's computer came back.

"Correction is as follows: List both Lieutenant Kataya and the package as 'missing';"

The computer politely chirped back an affirmation.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ok, gotta ask: Is anyone a snorer?”

Sunek looked accusingly at the others from the top bunk of one of the beds in the barracks that the Bounty’s crew had been assigned on the Sud Yot.

“Cos,” he continued, “I’m a light sleeper, and if I don’t get my eight hours, I’ll be crabby all day tomorrow. And it’ll be someone here’s fault. I’m looking at you, big guy.”

Klath rolled his eyes and dutifully continued to strip his own chosen bunk of any manner of comfort, right down to the hard metal frame.

“I’m gonna be glad to be back in my own cabin,” Jirel winced as he lay propped up on a lower bunk as Natasha checked over his back, “Also, to be on a ship with less mugatos on it.”

“Wasn’t a mugato,” Sunek called out, “No matter how many times you say it.”

“So,” Denella chimed in from where she sat on one of the other beds, “Now we’re all alone, are we gonna get the whole story?”

“What do you mean?” Klath asked, as he settled down on the bare frame of his bunk.

“About the chameloid,” the Orion continued, “What really happened. Cos there’s no way that airlock story is true.”

“That’s what happened,” Jirel insisted, “I swear, that was—Ow!”

“Sorry,” Natasha sighed as she worked, “And...I’m sorry for getting you involved in all of this in the first place. If I’d have known—”

“But you didn’t,” Jirel cut in gently, his feelings for her taking the decision not to allow himself to twist the knife into the doctor’s guilt, “Besides, I might keep those scars. Girls dig scars, right? And once I say I got them fighting a mugato—”

“Wasn’t a mugato!”

“I’m serious,” Denella persisted through the bickering, “What happened?”

Jirel craned his aching neck to glance at the other survivors from the salvage team. Sunek yawned, while Klath shrugged.

“We’ll tell you later,” the Trill replied eventually, “When we’ve gotten the hell out of Flaxian space.”

In truth, there wasn’t a great deal to tell. Turanya’s plan had been fairly straightforward.

With time on their side before the Sud Yot had arrived, they had been able to work together to recharge a set of power cells for one of the shuttles, and cannibalise enough spare parts from the other wrecked support vessels to get one working.

Then, using his spacesuit for protection, Kataya had gone through the process of manually activating the aft airlock, just as their story to Sonaya had claimed.

With that completed, all that was left to do was for Mireia to start her journey home. With her guardian at her side.

Kataya had come to the conclusion that, given what he had seen of how the Agency had treated the chameloid, the least he could do was help her get home. And so he had piloted the repaired shuttle himself.

It was likely that Sonaya and her team would eventually piece together what had happened. They simply hadn’t had the resources or the expertise to cover all of their tracks. But by then, the shuttle would be long gone. And hopefully, Kataya’s passenger would get home.

As Natasha continued to check over his injuries, Jirel couldn’t help but allow himself a satisfied smile.

Even as Sunek started to gently snore on the top bunk.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Two weeks later...*

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

Turanya grimaced in annoyance as the air circulator on the ceiling continued to rattle. Just as it had done all night long. He had complained about it repeatedly, but so far nobody had been sent along to repair it.

The former commander's fall from grace was such that he couldn't pull rank on anyone right now either. He was at the mercy of the maintenance team at the holding facility where he was currently being kept, awaiting trial.

He lay on the small bed in the mostly bare cell that he had been assigned, and closed his eyes, trying to block out the noise and get some sleep. But it was impossible.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

He opened his eyes and glared up at the offending unit, before getting up and stalking back over to the door of the cell.

"Hey!" he called out through the door, "Is anyone coming to repair this thing? Even prisoners have rights, you know!"

There was no immediate response from the guards outside, and as he walked back to the bed he began to wonder whether this was all part of his punishment.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

Not that he was overly concerned by any real punishment coming his way. He was confident that the higher-ups at the Agency would be lenient with him. After all, everything he had done had been in the pursuit of scientific advancement. They would understand that.

And if they didn't, then they would definitely understand the generous donations he had already arranged to be made to each of the members of the hearing in turn. Turanya knew how to grease the right wheels when necessary.

So, despite his current incarceration, he was confident that this would all be smoothed over. And once his rank had been reinstated, he'd get back to Reja Gar, and he'd do his damndest to pick up where he left off.

While he'd been detained, he had even started to consider the retribution that he'd hand out to Captain Sonaya for her decision to have him placed under arrest.

At the very least, he'd see that she lost her command. He just wasn't sure if he'd rather have her turfed out of the Agency altogether, or whether he'd rather see her demoted back down to junior lieutenant, forced to endure the endless humiliation of serving out the rest of her career in the lower ranks.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

He grimaced again, just as he heard the cell door opening. He sat up in bed expectantly, to see a burly Flaxian in a detention centre uniform walk in.

"Ah," Turanya sighed, "About time. You from maintenance?"

The other Flaxian stared at him for a few seconds, before he nodded back.

"Well," Turanya continued, gesturing at the circulator, "That thing's been driving me mad all night, so get it fixed!"

The other Flaxian looked up at the circulator, then back down at Turanya. He tapped the door controls and closed the cell once again.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

Turanya felt a little unnerved all of a sudden, feeling a stray trickle of sweat start to make its way down the back of his neck. "Hey, where are your tools?" he asked, "Aren't you going to need them to do the job?"

His new cellmate still didn't speak. He slowly began to walk over to where Turanya sat. He stood up and took a nervous step back.

"Wh—What are you doing? Listen, whatever the problem is, I'm sure we can—"

It was then that he saw the other Flaxian's brilliant, piercing yellow eyes.

"No..."

The other man continued to advance.

"Guards!" Turanya called out, "You need to get in here! Get in here, right now!"

His eyes opened wide in horror as he saw the other Flaxian's face start to fold in on itself.

His screams were drowned out by the noise from the air circulator.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The shuttle lifted off from the surface of the Petrik IX detention facility and ascended back into the heavens.

From the pilot's seat, Kataya glanced at the little girl alongside him. She hadn't said anything since she had returned, but she looked satisfied and happier with herself than she had been before, as she swung her legs off the side of the co-pilot's chair.

And while this hadn't been part of his original plan, Kataya couldn't help but feel some satisfaction as well. After all, whatever had happened to his friends and his colleagues, and whatever had become of the morals of the Flaxian Science Agency that he had left behind, the ultimate blame for everything he had lost lay with Commander Turanya.

So he had used his security clearance to get them to the facility. Clearances that were still working thanks to the slow-moving bureaucracy of the Agency. After all, there was no hurry to delete the clearance codes of a dead man.

"All done?" he eventually asked as the shuttle reached orbit.

Mireia turned to him and nodded happily. Just as a child might if asked whether they had finished all of their homework.

Kataya nodded back, then turned his attention to the starscape in front of them. He still wasn't entirely sure where they were heading, but he had left their journey at the mercy of the little girl's instincts. She seemed to know where her home was.

She wasn't sure how far away it was, or how long it would take. But then Kataya didn't mind that too much. There was nothing left for him in his old life now. He had plenty of time to figure out what was next.

So, he tapped the controls to resume their journey.

The tiny shuttle stretched forwards for a split second, then vanished in a blaze of light.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were going the right way. She was sure of it.

She couldn't articulate how she knew to her companion. But just like before, there was something instinctive inside her that was driving her in the right direction. And that was making her feel happy. For the first time in a long time.

She was also happy about her actions back at the detention centre. After all, that man had definitely not been very nice.

So, she settled back in her seat and watched the stars flash by. She thought about her parents, and how happy she would be to be back with them.

And she made a solemn promise to herself.

No more killing.

Starting from now.

**The End**

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