

Star Trek: Bounty - 110 - "Take Arms Against a Sea of Tribbles"

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Star Trek: Bounty - 110 - "Take Arms Against a Sea of Tribbles"

by [BountyTrek](#)

Summary

Klath sees a chance of redemption when the Bounty is invited to deliver a peace offering to a member of the high council. But his plans are threatened when the crew accidentally brings along some uninvited guests.

Prologue

Prologue

*Iota Geminorum System, Beta Quadrant
Earth Year 2296*

High above Iota Geminorum IV, a vast stretch of the placid and unchanging starscape suddenly began to shimmer and distort without warning.

Within seconds, the tranquillity of the scene was replaced by something entirely different, as the third battle squadron of the Klingon Imperial Fleet decloaked in all of its glory.

The imposing centrepiece of the squadron were two dozen K't'inga-class battlecruisers, which hung over the planet in tight formation. They were supported on all sides by several wings of smaller and more manoeuvrable Birds of Prey, the light cruisers tasked with flanking and protecting the core of larger vessels from incoming sorties from enemy fighters.

Towards the rear, flanked by yet more Birds of Prey, came the heavier troop transports. Huge bulky rectangular vessels with recessed nacelles running the length of their dull green hulls, filled with thousands of battle-hardened and bloodthirsty warriors ready to be deployed across a planet's surface in an instant.

And at the head of the entire collective might of the third battle squadron was the incongruous form of the IKS Qam-Chee. An older D7-class battleship, and the flagship of General K'Vusk.

K'Vusk had served aboard the Qam-Chee for many years as a loyal captain of the Imperial Fleet. It was the only vessel he had ever commanded. And while the entirety of the D7 fleet had been earmarked to be scrapped as soon as the more potent K't'inga-class ships had started to roll out of the Empire's shipyards, he had made a personal request upon his promotion to General that the Qam-Chee be retained, to serve as his flagship.

It was a request that had raised a few eyebrows throughout the upper echelons of command. After all, Klingon generals were not exactly renowned for their sentimentality. But when a warrior as noble and decorated as K'Vusk made a personal request, it tended to be carried out. So, in a thoroughly un-Klingon display of mercy, the Qam-Chee had been spared the fate of her sister ships, and was instead thoroughly modernised, refitted and put back into service.

And as K'Vusk sat in his raised command chair in the centre of the Qam-Chee's ever-familiar bridge, he felt a comforting sense of pride in the vessel around him. Warrior and steed were once again thundering into glorious battle together.

Despite his advancing years, he was still as fearsome a figure as any in the fleet. He stood tall and lean, and while his flowing hair was now a patchwork of grey, it was as thick and lustrous as ever. K'Vusk was respected throughout the galaxy as a master tactician, and had been hand-picked by the Head of the Imperial Fleet for this particular mission. The culmination of a long, brutal struggle that the Empire had been waging for decades.

And today, here in the Iota Geminorum system, the struggle would finally be over.

He leaned forward in his chair, staring intensely at the planet in front of them. They had finally found it. The homeworld of their enemy was theirs to be conquered at long last.

"Sogh!" he called out to the junior lieutenant standing at the tactical station, "Wly cha'!"

"HISlaH, K'Vusk Sa'," the snapped response came.

The image on the viewscreen shifted from that of the lush surface of the planet itself to a tactical overlay. The planet's surface was now painted in a range of colours of varying intensity, indicating the population distribution of their enemies courtesy of the Qam-Chee's sensors.

General K'Vusk took this new information in, as he stroked his grey beard thoughtfully.

Tactically, the most effective battle plan was clear to anyone. The planet was entirely defenceless from their current position, and an orbital bombing campaign was clearly called for. K'Vusk knew that there was more than enough firepower at his disposal to lay waste to the entire surface of Iota Geminorum IV in no time at all.

But he also knew that would not be an entirely appropriate tactic. After such a bloody campaign, and knowing that this would be the final stand for their enemy, he could see that a more honourable approach was required. Besides, he knew that it had been far too long since he and his men had tasted the blood lust of a true battlefield. They deserved more than a simple bombing raid.

And so, just as K'Vusk's sentimentality had once saved the Qam-Chee, so it also shaped his battle plan for the Empire's upcoming victory.

He swivelled around in his chair and barked another order at his tactical officer.

"Yay chol, Sogh. TIG-mang-RUP. DaH!"

"Chah-Veh."

General K'Vusk smiled in satisfaction and stood from his throne-like seat, preparing to join the first of the landing parties on the planet below.

The massed ranks of a full-scale armed Klingon landing party was a fearsome sight. One to rival just about any in the galaxy.

Thousands of armoured warriors stepped in well-drilled formation across the wide open stretch of the grasslands of Iota Geminorum IV's northern continent where the orbiting transports had beamed them down moments ago.

And this was just the first party. Back in orbit, tens of thousands more warriors were waiting patiently in line to be carefully and systematically deployed across the surface of the planet, exactly in line with the general's plan.

None of the Klingons striding through the grass carried a disruptor. Instead, they carried more traditional arms. Swords, daggers, blades of all shapes and sizes, each one freshly polished and sharpened, and primed for action.

The third battle squadron had been waiting for this day for a long time. Each of them knew that this was their enemy's last stronghold. That after today, victory would finally be theirs, and so this was a battle to be savoured. But for the time being, each of the hungry warriors kept their weapons at their side, as they patiently marched across the temperate surface of the planet. Nobody raised a blade.

Because, at the head of the line, General K'Vusk strode proudly in front of them. And each of the men that followed in his wake knew that it was a general's right to make the ceremonial first kill, as it always had been throughout this long, bitter conflict.

Suddenly, without warning, K'Vusk stopped rigidly on the spot and held up a hand with a sharp halting motion.

The wind had changed direction. He could sense something.

As one, every one of the thousands of Klingons marching behind him halted immediately. In silence, they waited for the general's next signal.

The tactical officer from the Qam-Chee, who K'Vusk had selected to personally carry his vintage bat'leth, was the only one that moved, pacing over to the general with the weapon clasped tightly in his hands. "NuqDaq, Sa'?" he asked expectantly.

K'Vusk silenced him with a wave of his hand. The grizzled general closed his eyes and gently sniffed the air searching around him for the telltale scent of their enemy.

It didn't take long for him to locate it. With a satisfied nod, he pointed over towards a deep green patch of bushy plant life in the near distance. "PoS, khi-GOSH," he hissed at the lieutenant.

Slowly but surely, the two Klingons crept silently over to the thicker undergrowth, watched on expectantly by the orderly crowd of men behind them in the clearing. As they reached the target, K'Vusk gestured for his weapon. The obedient lieutenant bowed his head with deference and held up the venerable bat'leth.

K'Vusk grasped the familiar weapon tightly in both hands, as the ambient light glinted off the sharpened edge of the curved blade. He stalked over to the thicket as his audience continued to watch on in bloodthirsty rapture.

The ageing Klingon felt a familiar sensation in his body as the blood lust rose up in his veins. As he got nearer and nearer to his quarry, he parted his lips and bared his teeth, emitting a slight snarl of anticipation.

And then he charged forwards with the speed of a warrior half his age, weapon raised, emitting a guttural roar that seemed to emerge from the very depths of his soul.

The faithful lieutenant and the orderly crowd of warriors watched in rapt attention as K'Vusk reached the thicket and disappeared behind the tall bristles of the plant. They heard the weapon swing down with decisive power as it plunged to the ground, and they heard the tell-tale squeal of anguish from the general's quarry.

And then there was silence.

After a moment, K'Vusk calmly emerged into the open again, his breathing slowly steadying and his blood lust quelled for the time being. He looked out at the expectant faces of his men, and thrust his bat'leth high into the air.

"Qapla'!"

As one, the massed ranks of the first expeditionary force from the third battle squadron raised their own weapons in a victorious cheer that echoed out across the landscape.

His trusted tactical officer stepped up to him and bowed his head again.

"Po'tajg, K'Vusk Sa'."

General K'Vusk felt satisfied. His fleet had arrived. He had made the first kill. His men were here to answer the call of the Empire, and to fight for the future of their people right here on the enemy's homeworld. The final battle had begun.

Impaled on the end of his lofted bat'leth, haloed by the Iota Geminorum system's deep yellow star where it hung benignly in the sky, was a single dead tribble.

Part 1A

Part One

“Eighty years ago, the great General K’Vusk led his men into a glorious battle. Today, we honour each of them as we do the same.”

Klath, the imposing Klingon weapons chief of the merchant ship *Bounty*, stood in the ship’s rear cargo bay, in the middle of delivering the speech of his life.

Anyone who knew him also knew that he wasn’t much of a talker. Still, he felt that an occasion such as this deserved some sort of ceremony. And he had been up most of the previous night on their journey here to memorise his lines.

“You all know why we are here,” he continued, his booming voice echoing out through the bay, “We have been given a call to arms, and we have answered that call. Together, we will not rest, we will not weaken, and we will not falter until the ground is covered with the blood of our enemies.”

He was particularly proud of that part of his speech, even if he had loosely based it on the words purportedly uttered by Kahless himself before a memorable victory over one of Molor’s armies in the Hamar mountains on Qo’noS many centuries ago.

Light plagiarism issues aside, he felt as though they were some pretty inspiring words. Even if he did say so himself. Though he was somewhat disappointed to see that they hadn’t seemed to garner much of a reaction from any of his troops in the same way that Kahless had certainly managed to do with his words all those years ago.

Across the expanse of the *Bounty*’s mostly empty cargo area, the rest of the ship’s motley crew had diligently lined up for inspection.

In the long and almost entirely fractious history of the Klingon people, plenty of brave leaders had gazed upon the men under their command before a battle with pride. General K’Vusk had surely been no exception, eighty years ago, when he had looked out at those thousands of armour-clad warriors on the surface of Iota Geminorum IV.

But as Klath surveyed the collection of individuals in front of him, he couldn’t bring himself to share that sort of feeling.

Firstly, there was the *Bounty*’s de facto captain, Jirel. The rangy unjoined Trill slouched slightly, rather than standing to attention, and was patiently listening to the Klingon’s words with a trace of a smile that suggested he wasn’t quite taking their upcoming battle entirely seriously.

Then came Denella, the *Bounty*’s Orion engineer. Of all the figures in line, she was the only one that was at least doing her best to stand to attention, giving the situation the gravity that she felt it merited. Klath respected this, and was glad that at least someone was taking things seriously, even if he noted that her back was a little too arched in her at-attention stance.

Next came Natasha Kinsen, the ex-Starfleet human doctor of the ship. She was staring straight at him as he spoke, but with a deep scowl on her face, making her feelings on the situation known without having to utter a single word. Klath refused to acknowledge the scowl.

And finally there was Sunek, the *Bounty*’s curiously emotional Vulcan pilot. He had his usual grin plastered on his face underneath his unkempt shock of hair. And for reasons Klath was certain were merely part of his innate desire to wind the Klingon up, he had turned up for inspection with his face smeared with freshly replicated camouflage paint, like an old school commando. The overall effectiveness of that paint was somewhat offset by the especially garish Hawaiian shirt he had opted for this evening.

All things considered, he couldn’t have been taking their battle less seriously if he had tried.

Klath sighed inwardly and did his best to ignore the Vulcan’s grinning painted features as much as he was ignoring the human’s dark scowl, as he neared the end of his brief, impassioned speech.

“The fight will not be an easy one. Our enemies are vast in number and quickly replenish our resources. What they lack in power and size, they make up for in persistence and cunning. But we must bring them to their knees. And we will!”

He paused for applause. The cargo bay remained silent, save for a slight grimace from Denella, whose back was starting to spasm from all the standing to attention she was doing.

But Klath didn’t let the lack of reaction outwardly affect him, even if inside he felt it had at least deserved some sort of acknowledgement. Instead, he stepped towards his troops and gestured to the items that were laid out in front of them. “I ask you all now to pick up your weapons.”

Each of them reached down to retrieve a different type of bladed implement. Klath had been extra careful to tailor the weapon to the individual that would wield it, as all good generals should.

Jirel held up a small serrated kut’luch dagger. Klath was sure that the smaller weapon would suit the sort of close combat that the Trill usually preferred.

Jirel himself looked a tad unhappy at the size of the weapon in his hand, especially compared to some of the others on display. But he decided to keep the dozens of quips that jumped to mind to himself, trying his best to respect the serious way his friend was treating their situation. Even if he couldn’t quite bring himself to understand it.

Denella picked up her trusty Orion dagger, an identical copy of the one she had been given by her mother as a youngster, and one that she’d

had plenty of reason to use since she had joined up with the Bounty's crew.

She hefted the weapon with practised ease, and while Klath could have assigned her a dagger from his own personal collection, he knew that her familiarity with her own blade would be crucial in the coming assault. And he knew how adept she was at using it.

Natasha reluctantly picked up the mek'leth that lay in front of her. She looked at it like it was an affront to everything she believed in.

Klath had thought long and hard about which weapon to assign to her, before opting for the larger blade. He saw that as offering her the greatest chance to cause damage despite her relative lack of experience with bladed combat. Still, as he looked at the way she was unhappily regarding the blade, and her persistent scowl, he feared that even those carefully laid plans may not be enough. He expected to lose her early once the battle began in earnest.

Finally, Sunek grabbed the d'k tahg knife that had been placed in front of him and quickly threw out a few sloppy practice thrusts and parries into the thin air in front of him.

Klath had opted for an all-rounder of a weapon for the Vulcan for simplicity's sake. But watching the painted-up man playfight with it in the cargo bay, he realised that even given that, he was going to have to set his targets particularly low for Sunek not to disappoint him.

Still, with everyone now dutifully armed and ready for action, Klath joined them by grabbing his trusty bat'leth from the sheath behind his back and gracefully wielding it in a flowing series of smooth, well-practised motions using the skills he had honed in the Klingon Defence Force.

Proud of his speech, and his impromptu bat'leth demonstration, he turned back to the disorganised line of soldiers in front of him. Sunek had idly started picking his nose.

Seeing Klath's annoyed look, and wanting to do what she could to rescue the situation, Denella quickly stepped forwards, holding up her dagger, puffing her chest out and filling her mouth with as much phlegm as physically possible.

"Heghlu'meH QaQ jajvam!" she barked out in her best approximation of the Klingon language.

She remained proudly at exaggerated attention as she looked over at Klath, suppressing the wince from another twinge in her back. The Klingon's mouth curved into a slight smile as he nodded back at her, respecting her words and her effort, if not her pronunciation.

Alongside the Orion engineer, Jirel leaned across and muttered at her with some amusement. "Way to suck up, Lieutenant Suck-Up."

Denella made a face back at the Trill, as Klath turned around and led his troops towards the rear ramp of the Bounty. There wasn't a moment to lose.

After all, their shift was about to start.

* * * * *

The Bounty was parked on the third moon of Mentok colony.

The colony itself was a loose agglomeration of settlements and outposts spread out across the habitable planets and moons of the Mentok system, some distance outside the Klingon Empire's vast borders.

They had arrived after receiving a request for immediate assistance that had been broadcast out across all local shipping lanes. One that Klath had found impossible to resist.

Because the third moon of Mentok III had a problem. An infestation of polygeminus grex. Or, to give them their more affectionate name, tribbles.

The call had come from Mortath, an exiled Klingon who appeared to serve as the informal leading figure of the colony.

His position of exile from the Empire was common across all of the Klingons in the system. And was also an unwanted status shared by Klath, who carried the weight of his own discommendation every day of his life.

His exile, coupled with his life onboard the Bounty, meant that Klath rarely had an opportunity to indulge in his old Klingon ways. Which meant that, as soon as the Bounty had picked up Mortath's message, he had pretty much demanded that they join the hunt.

In truth, even Klath knew that it wasn't all that much of a hunt. But it was the Klingon way, dating all the way back to the era of General K'Vusk. After all, even tribbles deserved the honour of dying in combat.

And so the tribble hunt on the third moon of Mentok III had been organised. Teams of Klingon residents from across the system, alongside merchant crews like the Bounty that had answered the call to arms, worked in shift patterns around the clock to cut down every last one of the enemy scourge and eradicate the infestation for good.

As the Bounty's crew descended down the ship's rear ramp onto the dark brown expanse of the terraformed scrubland that made up most of the moon's surface, they saw the previous shift making their way from the battlefield. Around a dozen Klingons, their armour coated in blood, carried heavy sacks filled with the bodies of those they had slain over their backs.

Even though the combat had been as one-sided as anyone would have expected, Klath still found that he felt a curious sense of pride as he watched the weary but satisfied warriors returning home, a feeling that he hadn't felt for a long time.

It wasn't a feeling shared by everyone present.

"Disgusting," Natasha tutted from behind him.

Her latest complaints, like all of her previous complaints she had voiced all the way to them arriving at Mentok colony, fell on a collection of deaf ears.

Still, she looked over at Jirel and persisted. "You're really gonna do this? You're really gonna spend the whole evening out here murdering innocent animals?"

"Of course not," the Trill replied patiently, "Our shift's only for four hours."

Her unhappy glare ratcheted up several more notches. Jirel did his best not to notice, and kept his kut'luch primed and ready for action.

"You know what I mean," she shot back, "I can't believe you're all just going to go along with this...this slaughter!"

"Hey, this is important to Klath. And if it's important to him, then it's important to us. You know how we do things on the Bounty by now. What is it we say? One for all, and all for one?"

"You're not a musketeer, Jirel," she sighed with her deepest of withering tones, "You're a delivery man. You say things like 'Yes, of course we can get that to you by the end of the week', or 'No, I'm definitely not a musketeer'."

"Yeah, well, suck it up. Cos for the next four hours, I'm a stone cold tribble killing machine—"

Klath brought the latest round of bickering between the Bounty's captain and doctor to an end with a sudden sharp grunt. He stopped on the spot and gestured for the rest of the group to halt.

He sniffed the air, as he felt the blood lust beginning to rise inside of him. The enemy was near. He could sense it.

He gestured over to a dense patch of scrubland ahead of them, and crept onwards, raising his weapon up in front of him. The rest of the Bounty's crew followed in his wake.

The hunt was on.

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

“That...was awesome.”

A thoroughly exhausted Sunek staggered back over to the rear ramp of the Bounty, dragging two heavy cloth sacks along the ground behind him. His loaned d’k tahg was tucked into his belt, blood still visibly covering the blade. Denella was already standing by the ramp, her dagger wiped clean and placed back in its sheath at her waist. Her oversized overalls were spattered with blood, and she had a bulging sack of her own down at her feet.

Both of them were thoroughly dishevelled after four hours on the battlefield.

The third moon of Mentok III was a humid environment, even in the late evening, and Denella’s face was streaked with sweat, her frazzled hair loosely bunched behind her head. And while Sunek’s physiology meant that he had no such issues with sweat, his unruly mane of hair was even more unkempt than usual, and his painstakingly applied camouflage makeup was now streaked with dust and dirt from the moon’s terrain. Nevertheless, they both looked proud of their efforts during their shift.

“I mean,” Sunek continued, “It was also kinda really super gross. But totally awesome.”

Denella nodded back, wiping a dusty hand across her tired face. “Yeah. Not exactly the most challenging fight I’ve ever had, but it turns out a tribble hunt is a great way to work off a few frustrations. Makes up for missing yesterday’s meditation session, I guess?”

Sunek nodded awkwardly. He still preferred to keep their sessions, and the deeper emotional issues he’d been suffering from the last few months, a secret. He didn’t like it when things got serious.

He glanced down at the knife in his hand and recalled the last time he had wielded a similar weapon, when a sudden blind rage had seen him nearly kill a defenceless and defeated outlaw on Nimbus III.

Before he could properly respond, they heard footsteps approaching, and turned to see Natasha arriving back at the Bounty. She was still scowling deeply, her weapon was clean of any sign of blood, and she wasn’t carrying anything else with her.

“Hey,” Sunek said, gesturing to her lack of possessions, “You’re supposed to bag up all your kills, doc. Otherwise they don’t count towards our payment.”

She tossed the unused mek’leth onto the dusty ground in front of her and folded her arms across her chest in protest. “There was nothing to bag up. Because I didn’t kill any poor tribbles. I just went for a four hour hike instead. And the worst part is that it turns out this is a very, very boring moon!”

Sunek and Denella glanced at each other, then looked back at the gently simmering doctor.

“You know why we’re here, right?” Sunek asked with a slight grin, all his worries about his emotional secrets having vanished now there was a chance to wind up his colleague.

“Yes!” Natasha snapped, “And as I’ve repeatedly told you, I’m not going to be a party to any of it! Because I’m some sort of psychopath who wants to spend their time butchering innocent creatures with a big stupid sword!”

Denella and Sunek looked at each other again. Sunek could see from the amused twinkle in the green-skinned woman’s eye that she was up for joining in with the fun.

“I had a knife,” Sunek pointed out to the doctor with a shrug.

“Dagger here,” Denella added.

Natasha sighed in exasperation, her increasing sense of righteous indignation clouding her from the clear fact that she was being so entirely wound up. “You know what I mean. I had a sword, at least.”

She paused and looked down at the stubby mek’leth on the ground, seeming less sure of herself all of a sudden.

“At least, I think that’s a sword—? Hang on, this is wildly not the point! The point is—!”

“Come on,” Jirel’s voice sounded out from behind her, “Not a single one? Really?”

The group turned to see the tired Trill staggering over to them with two sacks full of kills on his back. Alongside him, Klath carried four full sacks on his own back without breaking sweat. As they arrived and dropped their cargo onto the ground, Jirel gestured to the complete lack of evidence of any kills around Natasha’s own feet.

“You couldn’t even have found one or two that had died of natural causes and claimed them for the sake of it?”

She glared back at the Trill, who met her look with a disarming lop-sided grin.

Klath ignored the latest round of bickering entirely, and focused on the positives of their situation, looking around at their combined tribble haul with satisfaction. “A fine hunt,” he said with a proud nod, “We have done well.”

Jirel clobbered the single sack at Denella's feet and gestured to it with the bloodied knife in his hand. "Just the one bag, Denella? Kinda lame for the big wannabe Klingon."

The Orion raised an eyebrow and gestured over to the other side of the Bounty's ramp, where five further sacks of tribbles were standing.

"Wanna do a recount?"

She addressed the question as much to Klath as she did to the Trill, glancing at the Klingon in a manner not dissimilar to an eager daughter fishing for her father's validation. She received another proud nod from Klath for her troubles, along with a slightly annoyed look from Jirel.

"You know," he muttered at her smiling face, "Smugness is a very bad look for you."

Denella ignored his comment, choosing instead to revel in her smugness for a few moments longer, even as Klath gestured back up the Bounty's ramp. "We should clean up," he offered, "Mortath has invited us to dine in his residence tonight."

Leaving the chance for further bickering behind, Jirel regarded his friend with no small amount of curiosity. He had been acting like a new man ever since the Bounty had responded to Mortath's open transmission. Although the message requesting assistance had come from a disgraced Klingon, Klath had instantly treated it with the utmost sincerity. Even when the details of the request became clear and it turned out to be a need for some glorified pest control.

Still, while it might not have been the most epic of tasks for a warrior, the Bounty's weapons chief had treated it with the utmost seriousness throughout.

"So," Jirel offered, "What's this Mortath guy's deal, anyway? How come he found himself out here in the heady, tribble-infested hinterlands?"

Klath stifled a slight grimace before he responded. "It is...not proper for Klingons to discuss the reasons for their discommendation. I do not know the details. And none of you should ask for them. If you wish to make it through dinner."

He suppressed the urge to glance at Sunek as he talked about discommendations. Of all of the Bounty's crew, the Vulcan was the only one who knew the details of his own exile from the Empire, thanks to a vengeful and particularly talkative Klingon that he and Klath had crossed paths with some months ago.

The Vulcan had promised to keep it all a secret, and so far he seemed to have stayed true to his word. Still, he certainly wouldn't have been Klath's first choice of confidant.

Instead of dwelling on that unhappy matter any further, he retrieved his mek'leth from the ground where Natasha had dropped it and moved towards the ramp, even as the doctor's protests started up again.

"Ugh! Seriously, everyone needs to look at what they're doing here. These things are defenceless animals, and—"

"They are a menace," Klath interjected forcefully, pausing midway up the ramp, "A plague. They destroy crops, obliterate entire planets of any useful produce and condemn other life to famine and hunger. This was an honourable battle."

"Really?" Natasha persisted, "How many bat'leths did the tribbles have?"

Klath didn't respond to this latest comment, apart from grumbling unhappily under his breath and starting back up the ramp towards his cabin.

"Seriously," Jirel sighed at Natasha as the Klingon departed, "There wasn't one course on 'letting it go' at Starfleet Academy? Even a beginner one?"

"I know you all know I'm right, deep down," she retorted, "This is all completely inhumane."

"Um," Denella interjected, gesturing to her green skin, "Not a human?"

"Yeah," Sunek chimed in as he pointed to himself, the Orion and the Trill, "Read the room, maybe?"

Natasha rolled her eyes, once again allowing her righteousness to cloud her ability to see that her colleagues were successfully winding her up for a second time. "Bad choice of words, but you know what I mean," she persisted, "And while we're on this stupid - and I'll stress this again: very boring - moon, I'm not going anywhere near any tribbles!"

She folded her arms and stared back at the other three with defiance. Denella merely offered a knowing shrug as she turned to start up the ramp.

"Fair enough," she called back, "But I have to warn you, you're gonna really hate supper..."

* * * * *

The bowl of raw tribble meat was set down in front of her by a stout Klingon woman, who smiled a toothy grin as she did so.

Natasha looked down at the bloody mess in the bowl and suppressed a sudden rush of nausea. She had seen far worse sights during her often perilous career in Starfleet without so much as flinching, but apparently her usual hardy nature drew the line at this particular piece of Klingon cuisine.

The Bounty's crew had cleaned up and headed for the main residence of the estate. Mortath's own home, located on the outskirts of the main settlement on the southern hemisphere of the moon.

It was a large building, a towering stone-clad complex that had definitely been built in the style of most of the buildings back on Qo'noS, even if the building's main resident was an exile. And despite the lowly status of Mortath, and of every other Klingon throughout the colony, he still appeared to be a traditional Klingon in all other respects. A claim that was backed up by the lavish feast that had been laid on in his main banqueting hall, complete with raucous conversation and a never-ending supply of bloodwine.

Not to mention, all the raw tribble meat anyone could wish for.

In truth, there was very little meat actually on a tribble. The majority of the body mass of each creature comprised an indigestible reproductive system, leaving precious little nutrition elsewhere. This was the primary reason that efforts to farm tribbles in the mid-23rd century as a protein resource for long-range colonisation projects had been swiftly abandoned. The colonists found that they expended far more grain and pulses in feeding the tribbles than they got back in edible meat.

Still, the infestation on Mentok colony was severe enough to keep everyone's plates full for at least one evening.

"Iwllj jachjaj!"

It wasn't clear which of the Klingons at the table had called out this time, but even those members of the Bounty's crew with no real training in conversational Klingonese had quickly caught onto what the shrill call meant. Around the table, everyone grabbed their goblets of bloodwine and took a generous gulp in candid celebration, breaking up the meal completely.

Natasha wasn't especially unhappy about the interruption, given the food on offer. But the apparent need to propose a new toast, seemingly apropos of nothing, every few seconds, coupled with the fact that she hadn't had a thing to eat since lunchtime, meant that she was quickly getting a little tipsy.

Next to her, Sunek stared down at his own plate of pungent nourishment. For the first time since he had turned his back on Vulcan traditions and embraced his wilder side as a member of the V'tosh ka'tur, he wondered if it was too late to return to a vegetarian diet.

Further down, Jirel toyed unhappily with his own portion, taking another long slug of bloodwine to try and summon up enough Dutch courage to actually take a bite and not quite getting there.

Next to him, Denella looked at her own repast and gritted her teeth, significantly more determined than the others to make a good impression. For Klath's sake, if nothing else.

Opposite her, the Klingon woman that had served them sat and chewed on a mouthful of meat, regarding the four unhappy Bounty crew members with an amused leer. "Not hungry?" she offered with a mocking tone, "Or perhaps we could prepare something a little milder? We have plenty of children's food in storage, I believe."

She punctuated her comment with a derisive laugh, one shared by several other Klingons around the table.

Hackles sufficiently raised, Denella stared back at the woman. Then she reached down with her hand, grabbed a large portion of the slippery mass on her plate and, to the horror of her watching colleagues, shoved it into her mouth without a second thought.

She chewed noisily on the mouthful of raw tribble meat, and put all of her energy into trying to ignore the fact that she was currently chewing noisily on a mouthful of raw tribble meat. Finally, she forced herself to swallow the whole thing.

"Delicious," she called back across the table, theatrically licking her fingers for good measure, "But it could use a little more, what's the word...la'yIgh."

The leer from the Klingon woman switched from one of disdain to one of grudging respect, even as the other three Bounty crew members grew a little paler. She nodded back at Denella, as she gamely swallowed the last remnants of her mouthful and grabbed her goblet of bloodwine.

"Iwllj jachjaj!" she called out.

She took a long slug of her drink, simply to get the taste of the food out of her mouth, as the rest of the guests around the table mirrored her impromptu toast.

At the head of the table, Klath watched the Orion engineer's efforts with a small amount of pride.

As soon as they had arrived at the lavish banqueting hall, which was decked out in a similarly extravagant Klingon style to the building's exterior, complete with carved stone arches and a huge dining table complete with long communal benches on each side, Mortath had beckoned for Klath to leave his crewmates and join him by his side.

Mortath was a Klingon of advancing age, and one whose most glorious days were clearly behind him, discommendation or no discommendation. His grey hair and portly frame were testament to that, and also testament to his appetite, which he had shown off during the four portions of tribble meat that he had consumed so far.

Klath sat to his left along one side of the table. To Mortath's right sat his son and daughter, Karn and K'Veth. Both had acknowledged Klath when they had been introduced, but both had left the lion's share of the conversation to their father.

Mortath himself had picked up on Denella's display further down the table, and the look of pride in Klath's eyes, and chuckled heartily, slapping the younger Klingon on the back for effect. "Ah," the rotund Klingon grunted, "Some very interesting company you're keeping,

Klath.”

Klath looked back at his welcoming host and nodded. “They are a...memorable crew.”

Mortath chuckled again, shovelling another dripping handful of meat into his mouth and gesturing for someone to pass him one of the communal platters on the table in order to load up his fifth portion of supper.

“I must say,” he said as he worked, “It was good to see a fellow Klingon answer my call and join us for such a great hunt. The other merchant crews that have come will do their duties out there, but it takes a Klingon warrior to really appreciate the glory of victory.”

Klath looked at the elderly Klingon, and took in the sight of the others down the length of both sides of the banquet table. This was, he noted with a touch of regret, the most of his own people that he had been with since that fateful day in the chambers of the High Council, when his shameful fate had been sealed, as each council member had turned their back on him in turn. His punishment for his actions in the Tygon Nebula, and the beginning of his exile.

He shook those thoughts away and tried to focus on the here and now.

“It is an honour to be a part of your hunt,” he responded to Mortath, truthfully.

Mortath’s broad smile slipped slightly at this comment, and Klath noted that both Karn and K’Veth looked down at their own plates in unison.

“Yes,” Mortath managed eventually, “Well, there might not be a lot of honour for those of us on Mentok colony as far as the High Council is concerned, but I do my best to make sure we keep the traditions alive. We still live as Klingons.”

Klath looked around the banquet hall again and nodded in satisfaction. “I can see,” he replied appreciatively, “It feels good to be here.”

As he said this and turned back to the master of the house, his eyes momentarily glanced at K’Veth, before he looked away when he saw that she was looking right back at him.

Mortath didn’t pick up on that, but his smile did return to full strength as a result of his guest’s words, and he slapped Klath on the back again for good measure. “You know, even now I have more hunting parties out across the plains, eradicating our enemy. With luck, and thanks in no small part to you and your...memorable crew, we will be completely victorious any day now.”

At this, Karn grabbed his goblet and held it aloft.

“Iwlj jachjaj!”

As Klath downed a generous mouthful as part of the latest toast, he nearly choked himself when he heard the sound from the other end of the table.

Natasha hadn’t intended her scoff to be quite as audible as it had been. But due to the amount of potent Klingon alcohol she had been imbibing on what remained a very empty stomach, it had come out loudly enough for the entire room to hear.

The previous cheery and raucous atmosphere was silenced in an instant, as everyone else at the table turned to regard the human doctor. At the head of the table, Mortath coughed unhappily and set his latest handful of tribble meat back down onto his overflowing plate.

“You have something to say, Doctor Kinsen of the Bounty?”

“Uh oh...” Sunek muttered with an amused raise of his eyebrow.

Under the gaze of a dozen or more Klingon warriors, Natasha couldn’t help but squirm slightly. It didn’t take a body language expert to suggest that she might have overstepped the mark. “Um,” she managed, somewhat self-consciously, “I, ah, just meant—”

“Hey,” Jirel jumped in, gamely trying to steer the conversation elsewhere by gesturing to his plate of food, “What’s the, um, recipe for this, by the way? Cos it is...something else.”

The stout Klingon woman sitting opposite him at the table shrugged her broad shoulders. “We skin the beasts with the blades of our daggers while their bodies are still warm. Then we flay the flesh from the carcass, and serve it dripping in its own blood.”

Fully furnished with the details of the recipe, the Trill’s face looked even paler under his spots as he mustered the weakest of nods back across the table.

“Huh,” he managed eventually, “And, so, does this come with, like, a salad, or...?”

A satisfied smile spread across the Klingon woman’s face. “Do not kill an animal unless you intend to eat it,” she replied, as she scooped up another mouthful of flesh with her heavy fingers.

Jirel’s distraction, such that it had been, entirely ran out of steam amidst another wave of nausea passing through the Trill. Throughout the little exchange, Mortath had kept his attention squarely on Natasha.

“You were saying, Doctor Kinsen? No need to be shy. We are all friends here.”

Natasha had some slight doubts about that particular statement, but before she could attempt some sort of appeasing response, Karn jumped in from Mortath’s side.

“She was in Starfleet,” the significantly more brash Klingon spat out dismissively, “It is thanks to her and her people that we are being forced

to deal with this plague all over again!”

She flinched slightly, recalling the now-infamous story of how tribbles were reintroduced into the galaxy, an entirely unplanned result of a dangerous trip back through time by the crew of the USS Defiant several years ago. Until that point, the Klingon Empire had successfully and entirely eradicated the species of polygeminus grex, in a long struggle that had culminated in General K’Vusk’s mission to Iota Geminorum IV.

Their unfortunate reintroduction was an incident that didn’t just cause a stir in the world of Temporal Investigations. It had also caused a diplomatic incident between the Federation and the Empire, just when the Klingon-Federation War was reaching its height. Chancellor Gowron himself suggested that the reintroduction of tribbles was a form of temporal warfare against his people.

Things had been smoothed over eventually thanks to a herculean diplomatic effort, but the cork was out of the bottle, tribble-wise.

“That was an accident—” Natasha began to explain.

“Pah!” Karn spat, standing and jabbing a finger down the table at her, “The same excuse we always hear. But we all know that this menace was brought back deliberately. A Starfleet trick—!”

“Karn,” Mortath growled from the head of the table, “Another time, perhaps.”

The younger Klingon snarled unhappily at his father’s intervention. But he acquiesced to his wishes nonetheless.

An uncomfortable silence descended on proceedings. Once again, Klath found that his gaze had drifted over to K’Veth. And once again, he immediately looked away as soon as she saw that he was staring at her. Despite his reaction, she grabbed her goblet and raised it high in the air, electing to end the silence in a manner that was in keeping with the broad theme of the meal so far.

“TwlIj jachjaj!”

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

The blade of the bat'leth swung through the air, missing her by inches. She spun back around on her toes and brought her own blade down in a tight arc, the two heavy metal weapons impacting in a shower of sparks.

Not for the first time since the fight had begun, Denella regretted indulging in quite so much bloodwine last night.

The two bat'leths remained locked together, as their respective owners desperately strained against each other. She felt beads of sweat on her forehead from the effort she was having to put in just to maintain her position, and she grimaced with exertion as she stared across at her opponent.

On the other side of the bat'leths, Karn seemed more at ease with the situation. He smiled back at her, using his brute strength to force her own weapon down towards the ground.

The Orion shook off the fog on her brain and focused on her predicament. Realising that Karn was likely to overpower her in their current position, she broke away from the bind, wrenching her blade away from his and whirling backwards at the same time, causing him to falter slightly as he was caught off-balance.

He quickly recovered his footing, however, and swung his blade around at her again, forcing her to swiftly parry the blow in another burning shower of sparks.

This wasn't exactly how she'd been planning to spend her morning, but she'd woken to find that she and Klath had been invited to join some of the colonists in a session of light morning training. And Klath had been very insistent that they accept the offer.

It was the honourable response, after all.

And so, slightly groggy and more than slightly hungover, she found herself thrown into the midst of a particularly frantic duel with Mortath's own son, wielding a weapon that she wasn't especially used to wielding. While Klath had given her some rudimentary training with it, she preferred the familiarity of her own Orion dagger when it came to bladed weapons.

Still, thanks to everything else she had learned during her sparring sessions with Klath back on the Bounty, she was managing to improvise enough to hold her own.

She parried another swing from her opponent, and spun away across the wide expanse of the training area inside Mortath's compound to set herself for the next inevitable attack. Feeling her arms starting to ache, she opted to alter her tactics.

It was clear that the bulky Klingon had her beaten in terms of brute strength. But then, so did Klath, and she more than held her own against him during their sparring. She knew that power was rarely all it was cracked up to be, provided she knew when to improvise.

Karn charged at her once again, a whirlwind of snarling teeth and Klingon energy racing towards her across the stone floor, bat'leth raised in anger. She tensed, then at the last second, she dived away from the incoming blade, while simultaneously sweeping her trailing leg up and across Karn's path.

The Klingon, taken entirely by surprise, tripped over her outstretched limb with enough momentum to topple clean over onto the ground. Before he had a chance to right himself, Denella sprung back to her feet and brought her bat'leth's blade down towards his prone form, the sharp leading edge of the blade stopping a scant few millimetres from Karn's exposed neck.

She looked down at her defeated opponent and smiled with satisfaction.

"Very good!"

The voice of Mortath came from behind her. But she didn't turn around and acknowledge the comment until Karn had definitively conceded with an angry nod.

Mortath stood by the side of the room, flanked by Klath and K'Veth, forming a small but clearly appreciative audience for the fight that had just unfolded.

"You fight as well as a Klingon," the elderly Mortath continued with further appreciation.

Denella mustered a nod back at the group, still panting from the exertion of the fight. She held out a hand to help Karn back to his feet, but the somewhat humiliated Klingon forced himself back up without her assistance. "Fight better than some of them," the Orion couldn't help but grin.

"That was a cheap trick," Karn snarled back at her, "I should have known you would not fight like a warrior—!"

"She fought properly," Klath interjected sternly, "You left yourself wide open to such a counterattack by charging in as you did. Have the courage to admit your mistakes."

Karn scowled even more deeply at this, seemingly prepared to admit nothing. Instead, he grabbed his bat'leth from the ground and skulked away towards the exit.

To Mortath's side, K'Veth looked over at Klath, who felt the intensity of her gaze on him and did his best to try not to acknowledge the look, nor the stirring sensation inside of him. "Perhaps our other guest wants to show his own skills?" she offered, "I would...be honoured to spar with you."

It seemed as close as a Klingon could get to flirting without resorting to violence, and it caused Klath to shift uncomfortably on his feet, suddenly keenly aware of how warm it was inside this particular room of Mortath's compound.

"Not now, K'Veth," Mortath grunted amiably, patting Klath on the shoulder, "I have much to discuss with Klath. Perhaps you wish to pit your skills against...our champion."

K'Veth nodded, trying not to let her disappointment show, before grabbing her own bat'leth from a wooden bench at the side of the room and striding out towards Denella.

The Orion winced, still feeling the combined effects of her exertions against Karn, and also her exertions from last night's feast. But she knew it wouldn't be honourable to decline such a request. So she forced herself back up straight, held up her bat'leth, and bowed her head at her opponent.

As the next sparring contest began in earnest, Mortath smiled and shook his head, before leading Klath over to the corner of the room to talk more privately.

"A Klingon warrior teaching an Orion Slave Girl the ways of the Empire," the grey-haired Klingon chuckled, "This galaxy never ceases to surprise me."

Klath looked back at the fight, just as Denella parried yet another blow, and again forced himself not to spend too long watching K'Veth, turning back to Mortath instead and shaking his head.

"She is not a slave girl," Klath corrected him.

"No. She is your student."

"She is my colleague."

Mortath considered this correction for a moment. "Still," he offered back, "You seem to have taught her a lot."

"I taught her very little. I merely helped to hone that which she already knew."

"Huh," Mortath grunted appreciably, "Spoken like a true warrior. Even after all this time."

Klath felt his jaw clench slightly at the sudden reminder of his discommendation, which he had briefly been able to forget about in his familiar Klingon-style surroundings. But he kept himself outwardly impassive.

"Regardless of what the High Council may have done to my name," he replied, "I still do my best to maintain my personal sense of honour. And my people's traditions."

Mortath glanced back over at the bat'leth-wielding Orion, then back at Klath. He nodded. "Yes. You do, don't you. You even came all this way, with your...memorable crew. To help rid me of the menace that had blighted this moon."

Klath felt a surge of pride at the memory of yesterday's hunt. Enough to distract him from the Klingon woman on the other side of the room. "I would have done the same for any Klingon," he replied.

"I'm sure you would."

Mortath paused for a second, as the sound of crashing blades continued elsewhere, before he elected to continue.

"Tell me, Klath, what would you say if I told you I might have something for you, and your sense of honour? Something more than killing pests for latinum. A way back into the Empire?"

"I would strike you down for mocking me," Klath responded, entirely truthfully.

Mortath chuckled again at his candour, and patted in on the shoulder again. "Of course," he nodded, "But, if you would keep your blade on your back for a moment, you might allow me to explain myself."

Klath allowed his host to do just that. And once he was done with his explanation, his blade remained on his back.

* * * * *

Jirel groaned in pain, as if every weapon in Mortath's residence had been simultaneously plunged into his stomach.

As he lay on the single bed of the Bounty's tiny medical bay, Natasha ran a battered old tricorder over him and shot the groaning Trill a smug look.

"I know what you're gonna say," he managed to cough out, "But I was just trying to be a gracious guest."

Her smug smile remained in place as she double checked the readings. “Well,” she casually replied, despite the suffering her queasy patient was going through, “At least now we know the effect that raw tribble meat has on a Trill’s metabolism.”

“Ugh. I just assumed we were made of sterner stuff. We’re designed to share our bellies with a great big slug, after all.”

Natasha raised an amused eyebrow as she paced over to the stock of medicines she had available and started to mix up a hypospray.

“They could have at least cooked it,” Jirel continued to grumble as she worked.

“Why would they do that? When have you ever known Klath to cook anything?”

She turned back with the prepared hypospray and put on her best impression of Klath’s deep, booming voice.

“To cook the meat,” she grunted, “Is to lose all of the flavour.”

She chuckled to herself at the strength of the impression as she strode back over to the bed, where Jirel wasn’t smiling back.

“Whatever,” he muttered, gesturing at the hypospray, “That gonna fix my stomach?”

“Should do. Anti-nausea shot for the effects, analgesic for the irritation. Although, I’m not really sure you deserve it. Given how you only got yourself into this mess in the first place by killing a bunch of defenceless—”

“Nat, I swear, I cannot hear that speech again right now. Please, first do no harm?”

“Fine,” she sighed, reluctantly pressing the hypospray into his neck with a hiss.

He nodded in thanks and took a few moments for the remedy to settle him down. As he waited, they both heard the distinctive sounds of activity from elsewhere onboard. “What the hell is that?” the Trill muttered, stepping down off the bed with a grimace.

The two of them exited the medical bay and walked down the Bounty’s single main corridor towards the source of the noise, which was coming from the Ju’Day-type raider’s cargo bay.

They arrived to find two unfamiliar Klingons from Mentok colony placing the latest of several large wooden crates down on the deck and securing them in place. There was a telltale clinking of glass bottles from inside.

“What’s all this?” Jirel asked the nearest Klingon with genuine confusion.

“Bloodwine,” he replied simply, before walking back down the rear ramp with his colleague.

“Ask a stupid question.”

Seeing Klath standing with Mortath on the other side of the pile of crates, Jirel and Natasha approached them, hoping for a slightly more complete explanation.

“Hey, Klath,” Jirel offered with a grin, “Planning a party?”

“Planning a mission,” he replied in all seriousness, handing the Trill a small rust-brown padd.

Jirel and Natasha looked at the details on the padd, still entirely confused, even as Mortath explained the details of the Bounty’s latest delivery job.

“Sixteen crates of vintage bloodwine from my very own cellar. The 2349 vintage, to be precise. A quite exceptional year. And this is all bound for a private residence on Brexis II, just a few sectors away from here.”

Jirel saw the delivery information on the padd and looked up at Klath with surprise. “Um, according to this, Brexis II is inside the Empire’s boundaries. You sure that’s...ok?”

Klath’s face tightened slightly, but he nodded back.

“I suggested that Klath take on this mission,” Mortath continued, “The delivery is for Toran, son of Kradon. He is one of the newest members of the High Council. And he very much appreciates a good bloodwine.”

Jirel kept his focus on Klath, feeling like he was missing a big piece of the jigsaw. Especially now their task had been instantly upgraded from a trip inside the Klingon Empire to a trip to a High Council member’s own residence.

Klath could see the dozens of questions written across his long-time friend’s face, begrudgingly feeling that he had to acknowledge it.

“I will...explain later. Once the rest of the cargo is aboard.”

The Trill watched as the two Klingons from before marched back up the Bounty’s loading ramp with another crate of bloodwine and sighed.

“Damn right, you will.”

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

There was a slight delay after the cargo was loaded before they could get underway.

As per standard requirements during a tribble infestation, the Bounty was being subjected to a thorough pre-flight check and decontamination process by Mortath's men, to ensure that there was no trace of polygeminus grex onboard. Not even a stray hair.

Which gave the Bounty's crew ample time to gather around the table in the ship's dining area and wait for Klath's promised explanation. The Klingon still didn't want to get into too many details, but he also knew that he owed his colleagues something.

"It is Mortath's idea," he began, "Toran is a younger and somewhat...liberal member of the High Council. But also an increasingly influential voice inside the Empire. The bloodwine is for a gathering of other council members he is hosting at his private residence in a few days."

"But," Denella sighed from across the table, "Why you?"

Klath squirmed slightly in his chair before reluctantly continuing, wondering just how much of an explanation he would have to provide to satisfy the unspoken social contract at play.

"Toran has developed a reputation for being willing to reassess past discommendations. He is a firm believer that the High Council has often been too rash and quick to hand out such an extreme punishment in the past. And that the reasoning is often inconsistent and flawed."

"Huh," Sunek quipped as he leaned back in his chair, "Klingons acting too rashly? You think you know a guy..."

"Shut up, Sunek," Jirel sighed, his focus still on Klath, "So, what? You bring this guy some free booze and he just lets you off?"

Klath felt his irritation creep higher, felt the walls inside him straining to close up again. But he did his best to power through. "Not exactly. But Mortath believes it will be enough of a gesture to be granted an audience with him. For me to...argue my case."

"And then what?" the Trill persisted.

"Then, if Toran believes my cause to be honourable, and my punishment worthy of reassessment, he will discuss it with the rest of the council. And then..."

He tailed off. On the other side of the table, Denella smiled at her friend and nodded. "And then you can go home."

Jirel felt himself inwardly flinch at that, suddenly realising what his closest friend was talking about.

Klath, for his part, just nodded back at the Orion engineer.

"You really think you have a case?"

To everyone's surprise, the question came from Sunek. Klath glared at the Vulcan, who offered him a knowing look back that reminded the Klingon that the Bounty's pilot was the only one onboard who knew the details about his discommendation.

He fought back the desire to try and ignore that comment, to try and distance himself from what the Vulcan knew. But instead, he felt compelled to respond. "Yes, I believe we do."

"Huh," Sunek muttered to himself, "Holy crap."

As the gathered throng around the table took in everything that Klath had told them, it took a moment for the specific grammar of his final comment to register. When it did, it was Natasha who got to the follow-up question first.

"Who's 'we'?"

* * * * *

Karn and K'Veth stood patiently in the entrance hall of their father's residence, as Mortath strode over to them, returning from the Bounty.

"You are both ready to leave?" the older Klingon grunted at his offspring.

"Everything will go according to plan," Karn nodded, fixing his father with a determined glare, "Be sure of that, father."

"We will do everything you have asked," K'Veth added, looking a little more wary.

Mortath nodded back in satisfaction. He had made a personal request to Klath that, along with the cargo of bloodwine, he also bring along his son and daughter to Brexis II, so that they might argue their own cases with Toran.

Or, at least, that was the story that he had given to the other Klingon. There was no need to give him any reason to suspect that there might be

anything else to the delivery.

“Just make sure the delivery is completed,” Mortath added, “And that Toran receives...all of the cargo.”

The siblings nodded again, before turning and marching off towards the waiting Bounty.

Mortath watched them walk away, and allowed himself a satisfied smile.

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

The Bounty streaked through space at warp, the cargo bay loaded up with vintage bloodwine.

From the forward pilot's console, Sunek gazed out of the window at the streaking starscape ahead and tried to use his innate Vulcan senses to tell precisely when it was going to happen. There wouldn't be any outward sign that it had happened. One patch of space was much the same as the others in most respects. But still, he knew that they were just about to cross a particular metaphorical Rubicon.

Any second...now.

He glanced back down at his instruments and tutted unhappily. He'd been five point two seconds off.

Must be losing it, he thought to himself.

"We're now entering Klingon space," he called out five point two seconds later, "ETA to Brexis II, thirty-two hours."

The news didn't come as much of a surprise to anyone. They had transmitted their details to a nearby sentry post to secure passage across the border a scant few minutes ago. Still, it felt like the sort of thing that deserved an announcement.

To the right of the cockpit, where Klath sat at his usual tactical station, he couldn't help but feel something inside him as he heard the Vulcan's words. A mixture of happiness and unease as he returned to Klingon territory. He didn't think he'd given away any outward sign of his true feelings, but he hadn't factored in quite how well his crewmates knew him.

"So," Denella asked gently from the rear engineering station, "How does it feel to be back?"

Klath snapped a glare at the kind face of the engineer, as the unease suddenly swamped the happiness inside. "It is just another region of space," he replied with as casual a tone as he could muster, "There is nothing to...feel about it."

"Right," she nodded back, evidently not convinced.

Klath found himself quietly grinding his teeth at this, and decided that he would rather be elsewhere, before Denella decided to discuss his feelings any further. "I should check over our paperwork," he announced to the rest of the crew as he stood, "Everything must be in order for our arrival."

He turned and walked down the steps at the rear of the cockpit, just as Jirel swivelled round in his centre chair.

"I'll give him a hand."

"Jirel," Denella cautioned as the Trill strode towards the steps in the Klingon's wake, "Don't try to get to the guy. This is bigger than some tribble hunt, ok?"

"Hey, you know what it's like with paperwork. Just gonna lend him a hand. Scout's honour."

Before Denella could argue her point any further, he disappeared down the steps.

Natasha watched the exchange from her own console on the left side of the cockpit. It still wasn't clear what the console had been used for in the past. When she had first been offered it as a place to sit, the entire thing had been powered down and broken. But Denella had since found time to rig up a few of the consoles, turning it into a rudimentary station showing a variety of sensor readouts.

And right now, she kept a close eye on what the sensors were telling her.

There was something about travelling the galaxy in a ship as small as the Bounty that made her a little more wary of something like flying into Klingon space, compared to how she had felt onboard starships in the past.

She could acknowledge the irony of her concerns, given that the last time she had been onboard a starship, the USS Navajo had been destroyed with all other hands by Jem'Hadar fighters. Still, compared to the surroundings of the Excelsior-class ship, the Bounty often felt like she was flying around the galaxy in a tin can.

"Surprised nobody's come to meet us yet," she offered into the silence that had descended.

To her surprise, a new voice responded to her concern, as Karn stomped up the steps and into the cockpit.

"The border points have received your registry," he grunted, "Besides, I don't suppose anyone would bother to alter course for a...garbage scow like this."

As the young Klingon somewhat pompously glanced around the Bounty's weathered cockpit, his verbal attack made Denella's defences rise faster than a deflector shield. "If you don't like it here," she replied, as calmly as possible, "I'm more than happy to give you a brief tour of the airlock."

Karn swivelled around and glared at her, with no small amount of menace. For her part, Denella held her own just as much as she had done during their bat'leth fight. She even felt confident enough to lick her lips and reach into her growing list of Klingon phrases.

“Or, perhaps I should say: maml’ DaneH’a’! nItEbHa’ maml’ DaneH’a’!”

Karn looked a little taken aback to hear her respond in Klingonese. Or, more specifically, that she had chosen to respond with that particular bit of Klingonese.

“You just asked me if I wanted to dance.”

“Oh,” Denella replied, looking a little less sure of herself, “Well, what’s the one that goes: Your mother has a smooth forehead, and your father drinks Romulan ale with Starfleet admirals?”

Karn considered this for a moment.

“I’m not telling you,” he grunted back eventually, “Besides, it was merely a...friendly passing observation about your vessel.”

From behind her console, Natasha struggled to remember ever hearing the word ‘friendly’ being delivered with less friendliness. Still, Denella was determined to defend the Bounty’s honour.

“Yeah, well, pass your observations somewhere else. Because there’s nothing wrong with her.”

For once, that statement was actually true. For the first time in a very long time indeed, Denella had finally managed to repair and resolve every single one of the Bounty’s most pressing issues on her to-do list. And while there were still plenty of refits and improvements that she had in mind, every ship’s system was - at this moment in time - fully functional.

Until a sudden alert chimed out from her engineering station in front of her.

Karn’s face twisted into a slight sneer, as Sunek spun around in his pilot’s seat and innocently gestured at her console.

“What’s that noise?”

Denella shot an annoyed glare at the Vulcan and his ever-present ability to see a hornet’s nest and elect to prod at it for his own amusement. With a slight sigh, she forced herself to acknowledge the alert.

“There’s nothing wrong with her...apart from a minor power drain in the secondary EPS transfer system.”

“Huh,” Karn grunted, “Not just a garbage scow, but a broken one—”

“She’s not broken!” Denella snapped, before reluctantly correcting herself, “I mean, technically, in a more accurate sense, a very small part of her is a little bit broken. But that’s it!”

Karn’s sneer widened, to the point that Denella’s anger caused her to jump up from her seat and stare the Klingon down from across the cockpit. Natasha noted the stand-off, and the way that Denella’s hands had balled into fists by her side, and decided it was time to step in.

“Um, Denella...?” she managed to calmly whisper across the room.

The fuming Orion and the sneering Klingon stared each other out for a few more seconds, before the engineer finally backed down and retook her seat, still quietly simmering away.

At the front of the cockpit, Sunek turned back to his own controls with a wry smile.

“ETA to Brexis II, thirty one hours, forty nine minutes...”

* * * * *

Klath sat in the dining area of the Bounty and stared at the screen of the padd in his hand. Though he wasn’t really reading anything off the screen.

He was being distracted from the mundanity of the paperwork by a gnawing feeling inside him, one that he was struggling to pinpoint. It definitely felt familiar, but like something he hadn’t experienced for some time. As such, he was having a hard time figuring out exactly what it was.

He was also being distracted by the presence of an elephant in the room. Or, more accurately, the presence of a Trill in the room.

Jirel sat on the other side of the table with a padd of his own, doing his best impression of someone doing vital paperwork. Rather than someone looking to have an awkward conversation.

“Tsk,” he tutted, breaking the silence and forcing Klath to look up.

The Klingon’s irritation grew as his colleague theatrically wagged a finger at the padd.

“Import duty,” Jirel continued, “That’s where they get you. Every time, with the import duty...”

Klath didn’t really know what to do with that. But he could recognise it as a clumsy attempt at small talk. And there were few things in the galaxy that Klath despised more than small talk. Especially the sort of clumsy small talk that seemed to be disguising a deeper desire from the

speaker to discuss something more important. He really despised that.

So, rather than offer what he felt would be a needless opinion of his own on the intricacies of galactic import taxation, he returned his attention to the padd. Or at least he returned to staring at the padd, while he contemplated exactly what it was he was feeling inside.

“Course,” Jirel tutted again moments later, “It’s not as bad as that stupid new transit tax the Ferengi Commerce Authority seem to slap on everything these days—”

“Jirel,” Klath snapped, a little more harshly than he’d intended, “Is there something specific you require from me?”

“Wha—? No! No. Not really. We’re just, y’know, two friends, hanging out and working on some paperwork together, right?”

Klath was perplexed by this comment. After all, he hadn’t asked anyone to ‘hang out’ with him. And he was almost certain that Jirel wasn’t really working on their paperwork in any way. Given that all of the forms for their delivery to Brexis II were on the padd in Klath’s own hands.

Part of him wanted to ignore him entirely. He had more than enough on his mind as it was without getting involved in a conversation he didn’t want to have. But bitter experience had taught him that his crewmates tended to persist at times like these, so he elected to confront the issue head-on.

“You clearly have something to say,” he grunted, “So, say it.”

Jirel squirmed a little more for a moment, not anticipating quite such a direct approach, even from Klath. But ultimately, he relented. “Fine. I guess I’m just a bit weirded out by you and all this…Klingon stuff.”

Klath’s look of confusion deepened at this. “You are aware that I am a Klingon?”

“Yeah, I’d noticed that. And yeah, you’re a Klingon, and Klingons like Klingon stuff. But… I dunno, I’m just surprised how seriously you’re taking all this. The tribbles, the meal, the delivery. And now you’re—I mean, do you really think you can get this guy to reverse your discommendation thingy?”

Now it was Klath’s turn to squirm slightly, as that subject came up. “You know I cannot explain the reasons for—”

“I know. It’s not right to talk about what you did, or why you were exiled. And you know what? Ever since you first told me that, I’ve never once pushed you on it, have I?”

Klath conceded this point with a slightly thankful nod.

“I mean,” Jirel continued, “If you want secrets, that’s fine by me. Hell, everyone on this ship has plenty of them. But… I dunno, I guess I don’t know if you’re getting a bit too eager about all this, y’know?”

Klath set the padd to one side and stared across the table at his friend. He hadn’t wanted to have this conversation, but Jirel seemed to be insisting on it.

“I am not sure you want to hear my truthful thoughts on this mission.”

“Try me.”

Klath stared for a few moments longer, then began to speak. “Jirel, you are my friend. We have served together on this vessel for many years now. You should know that I appreciate everything you and the others have done for me in that time. And I have greatly enjoyed my time here. But…if there is even a chance that I can return to the Empire, and to my people, then I would leave all of this behind in an instant.”

On the other side of the table, Jirel felt the frank certainty with which Klath delivered those words hit home with the strength of a bat’leth strike.

“Couldn’t have minced your words a bit?”

Klath shrugged his burly shoulders. Any guilt he might have felt for his comments was being entirely overwhelmed by the other feeling he still had inside. One that he was pretty sure he had now managed to identify. “Klingons do not ‘mince words,’” he offered back.

A moment of silence descended, which Klath took to mean that this latest round of small talk was at an end. He tapped at the padd a few more times, before standing up and handing the device over to the Trill.

“I have finished the paperwork,” he reported simply.

Jirel accepted the padd with a slight nod, before Klath took off towards the door. Just as he was about to walk through, the feeling of guilt inside temporarily overwhelmed the other, now definitively identified, emotion. He paused.

“I…apologise. If I was too harsh.”

Jirel turned back to his friend and mustered a half-smile. “No. You weren’t,” he lied, “I guess… I just didn’t realise that you still wanted the whole warrior Empire thing, y’know?”

“That,” Klath replied, with complete sincerity, “Is all I have ever wanted.”

With that, he walked out of the door, heading for his cabin. As he walked, the sense of guilt melted away, and his mind was now entirely filled

with the other feeling. The one he had now identified. And one that he had probably not felt since well before the fateful day of his discommendation.

It was a feeling of hope.

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

He had been intending to rest, but once Klath got back to his cabin, he found that such a pursuit was beyond him.

The feeling of hope was becoming infectious, and that was starting to concern him. As Jirel had said in the dining area, he had to avoid getting too eager about their mission. Too much hope, he knew, was a dangerous thing.

Firstly, there was no guarantee that Toran wouldn't just kill him as soon as he saw a disgraced Klingon in his presence. That certainly wouldn't be unprecedented. Then, even if Toran was as liberal a council member as Mortath had suggested, and even if he did agree to hear his case, there was no guarantee he would be swayed by his argument. He could easily see Klath's discommendation as an entirely legitimate decision.

And, deep down below all of the new-found hope, part of Klath wondered whether or not that was true.

He paused midway through his twentieth lap of his cabin and closed his eyes. He pictured those fateful moments on the bridge of the IKS Grontar, as he sat in the command chair of a Bird of Prey for the final time.

He recalled how, in the midst of the Klingon Civil War, his crew had detected an unidentified vessel in the Tygon Nebula and altered course to investigate. Finding that the ship was in a region of the border rumoured to be used by the House of Duras to smuggle in illegal weapons to boost their supplies, and seeing that it appeared to be deliberately hiding from their scans in the denser gases of the nebula, he had opened fire.

And destroyed an unarmed and entirely undefended freighter on a resupply mission to a border outpost. Condemning the twenty-seven Klingons aboard to a death without honour, denying them a chance to enter Sto-vo-kor.

He had already been forced to relive those fateful events several months ago, when Kolar, a brother of two of the crew members from the freighter, had tracked down and murdered each of the surviving members of the Grontar's crew. Before Klath had been able to defeat him in battle.

And he had returned to those memories several times since. Each time, he wondered if he could have acted differently, if he could have been less impulsive and taken time to further observe and study the mysterious vessel from a distance.

He had known that Duras's forces had become infamous for springing traps from nebulae and other sensor-masking areas, using their cover to remain hidden with their shields raised and weapons armed, as squadrons travelling under cloak were unable to do.

But it should also have been clear to him that one vessel was not a squadron, or a battle fleet. And even if he had suspected the one vessel to be working as a lookout, with the rest of the trap hidden deeper inside the nebula, he should also have considered the alternative explanation. That it was merely a supply ship, bereft of a cloak or weapons, trying to protect itself and avoid enemy forces during a time of war.

Yet he hadn't considered that, even for a second. He had trusted his warrior's instinct. And his warrior's instinct had been wrong. He had been wrong.

And that was why he was trying to control this new-found feeling of hope before it threatened to get out of control. Because if even he felt as though his actions had been wrong, if even he questioned whether he deserved to return to the Empire, then what chance did he have of convincing Toran?

His contemplative pacing was interrupted by the door buzzer, which he initially acknowledged only with a grunt of irritation. He really didn't want to deal with another round of small talk from Jirel, or another of his colleagues checking up on him.

But the Bounty wasn't exactly the sort of ship where you could pretend that you weren't in.

"Enter," he called out reluctantly.

He was surprised to see that it wasn't Jirel who walked into his cabin. Nor any of his other shipmates. Instead, K'Veth walked in. As he stared at her, he tried and failed to recall the last time he had been this close to a Klingon female. And he couldn't help but recognise the stirring of another feeling inside him. There was an element of hope attached to this one, as well.

But whatever feelings of desire he might have been experiencing, they were entirely overridden by his greater sense of shame. A discommended Klingon trapped in exile did not deserve to indulge in such things.

"You," he grunted as she allowed the door to close behind her.

It wasn't exactly his best opener, he had to admit to himself. Even if she did acknowledge it with a slight nod as she looked around his sparse cabin.

"You are not with your brother?" he added, in what he was forced to concede was a pretty poor follow-up line as well.

She looked back at him and his awkwardly rigid stance and mustered a smile. Then, she stepped over to the solid, hard metal slab that served as Klath's bed, and sat down. "No," she replied with a trace of humour, "Karn is...checking over your ship. And, I am sure, making his opinions known to your shipmates."

Klath nodded back, struggling to reciprocate her more casual air. "He is a forthright individual."

“He is an arrogant fool,” she snorted back with derision, surprising Klath all over again, “He talks of honour and of what it is to be a true Klingon, but he knows so little about what that really means. Neither of us do.”

Klath maintained his rigid, formal stance. He wasn't quite sure how to respond to this.

“You do not wish to know the reasons for our own exile?” she continued.

At this, he looked down at her where she sat, a little insulted by the question. “I should not have to tell you that it is not proper for Klingons to discuss such things. A Klingon's discommendation is between themselves and the High Council.”

K'Veth's expression shifted slightly, and she stood back up before taking a step across the small cabin. “You may know that, but I don't,” she replied sadly, “For Karn and I, our shame is not our own. We were born into exile. We share Mortath's house, and his dishonour.”

Klath shifted uncomfortably on his feet. Despite his efforts to discourage her, she seemed intent on getting dangerously close to talking about the exact thing he had suggested that they shouldn't talk about. He silently cursed this latest intricacy of small talk.

“That is why Mortath has not joined us,” she continued, “He feels that he is beyond saving, but without him, we may be able to convince Toran to reappraise our personal cases.”

She looked over at the far wall of his cabin, where his small but perfectly maintained collection of weapons was displayed, including those he had loaned to his shipmates for the tribble hunt. She gazed at the shining blades with awe, and a hint of sadness.

“Our father has tried to teach us our people's ways on Mentok colony. To be sure that we know what it means to be a Klingon. And yet we have never even set foot on Qo'noS...”

She turned back to him with a look of fascination.

“But you have. Ever since we first met, I have seen that you are surely a true warrior, born to the Empire.”

Internally, Klath was now feeling too many conflicting emotions to keep track of them. A sudden flash of pride had now joined the party as a result of K'Veth's comment. Swiftly followed by a fresh helping of shame as he again recalled the Tygon Nebula.

“As I said,” he managed to reply, “It would not be proper to discuss it further.”

She stepped a little closer, keeping her eyes focused on him. Klath felt his heart beat a little faster as she did so.

Five years.

It had been five years since he had been this close to a Klingon female, he now remembered. A brief, torrid affair with a bounty hunter he had crossed paths with at a Mizarian spaceport.

“But you feel we have a chance of pleading our cases?”

Her unfortunate choice of words briefly distracted him from his other feelings.

“Klingons do not plead,” he noted with a glare, “But based on what your father has told me, and what I have read about Toran since then, I believe there is...a chance. Toran is a growing influence on the High Council, offering a more progressive view of the past. He sees that nothing is absolute, that all things are fluid and worthy of reappraisal. Several other dishonoured warriors have already had their family honour reinstated thanks to him. It may be unlikely, but there is a chance.”

She nodded and drew herself even closer to him. Klath felt a fresh pang of desire shoot through his entire body. “And you would leave all that you have here behind for that chance?”

He forced himself to look away from her to take in the confines of the Bounty and think about his friends. But he already knew the answer. He'd made that clear to Jirel earlier.

“Yes. I would.”

She smiled and leaned up towards him, tilting her head to whisper into his ear. “How very...honourable,” she hissed.

For a fleeting moment, Klath was almost overcome with the urge to act. But just as suddenly, he saw the bridge of the Grontar. And amongst her talk of honour, he felt his sense of shame return with a vengeance.

He stepped back from her with a single decisive movement.

“It might be wise for us to focus on our mission.”

If K'Veth was offended or ashamed by his actions, she didn't let it show. She didn't even do what Klath might realistically have expected a Klingon woman to do in the face of such an apparent rejection, and reach for one of the weapons on the wall to challenge him to a fight to the death. Perhaps another aspect of the legacy of her upbringing away from the Empire.

Instead, she mustered as proud a nod as she could manage, before turning and making for the door to the cabin.

She stopped at the exit and looked back at him with a slightly curved smile.

“At least now I know that...there is a chance.”

With that, she walked through the door and left Klath alone, not entirely sure how to take her parting words.

Five years, he thought to himself bitterly.

Still feeling a swirling mass of conflicting and contradictory emotions inside, he spun smartly on his heels and headed for the bathroom of his cabin.

Intending to take a very high frequency sonic shower.

* * * * *

K'Veth walked the short distance over to the Bounty's guest cabin where she was staying for their journey to Brexis II. She maintained her proud air as she stepped inside, and only allowed her shoulders to slump down when the doors had closed behind her.

As she looked around the empty cabin, she wondered how long she had to contemplate her issues in private, before Karn tracked her down to demand an update.

The truth was that she was failing in her task, in two quite distinct ways.

Firstly, she was failing to keep Klath suitably distracted on their journey to Brexis II. She wasn't entirely sure how, given that she was pretty sure she couldn't have been less subtle about her intentions if she had tried. And yet, he had remained impassive.

And secondly, she was increasingly concerned that the attraction she was showing towards the Bounty's burly weapons chief had ceased to simply be a falsehood, but was actually becoming a genuine thing.

Perhaps it was her fascination at meeting a Klingon warrior so well versed in the ways of the Empire that she had heard so much about. Perhaps it was the excitement about her mission as a whole, and the anticipation she felt as they got closer to its completion. Or perhaps it was simply nothing more than a genuine attraction between two entirely eligible and available Klingons.

Either way, she thought to herself as she paced over to the sonic shower, it would probably be best to keep that part of her situation to herself when Karn demanded his update.

Things had definitely gotten more complicated.

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

“So...what now?”

It was a legitimate question that Sunek was posing.

The Bounty had dropped out of warp and come to a dead stop on the fringes of the Brexis system. They were still some distance from their intended destination in the inner part of the system, but it seemed like it wasn't a good idea to make the rest of the journey just at the moment, given the circumstances.

Jirel sat in the centre chair of the cockpit and looked grimly out of the window. At the forms of the two Birds of Prey that had decloaked and intercepted them as soon as they had approached the boundaries of the system.

Behind and to his right, at her newly functional console, Natasha again felt very keenly aware of the relatively flimsy vessel she was currently sitting in.

Neither of them had much of an answer to the Vulcan's question, not being especially well versed in dealing with the Klingon Defence Force.

With no response forthcoming, and despite the twin sets of disruptor cannons that were still being pointed at them with menace from the ends of the wings of the two dark green vessels, Sunek couldn't help but swivel around and gesture at Denella. “Come on then, time to break out all that conversational Klingon of yours again. You...know how to say ‘hello’, right?”

The Orion engineer offered the grinning Vulcan a withering glare, a mouthful of phlegm and a sharp dose of Klingonese.

“Targhllj yIngagh, yIrch!”

“Takes one to know one,” Sunek shrugged back.

Before the bickering could continue, the four individuals in the cockpit heard three sets of heavy footsteps marching up the steps at the rear of the room.

Klath walked in and stared out at the view ahead with an unerring feeling of kinship. It had been nearly a decade since he had seen a Klingon Defence Force ship in the flesh, and he was immediately drawn to the familiar lines of the two small but potent escort ships. Both of them were of the smaller B'rel-class. Just like his own former command.

Behind him, Karn and K'Veth stared out with more of a look of awe. Outside of simulators and holosuites, neither had ever seen a Bird of Prey before.

Breaking up the collective moment of reflection, Jirel swivelled around in his seat and gestured to Klath. “So, small issue, the locals don't seem to want to let us past. We've sent over our delivery papers, we've tried hailing them, and they shadow us whenever we even try to back off.”

“Also,” Sunek piped up, “They've got lots and lots of guns.”

“Also, that.”

Klath dropped into his usual weapons station and quickly tapped at his controls. After a moment, he nodded in satisfaction. “They do not yet have weapons charged,” he reported, “That is a good sign.”

“Not exactly filling me with confidence,” Jirel replied with a slightly nervous edge.

Klath remained calm as he looked over at the Trill, significantly more accepting of the situation than anyone else in the cockpit. “They will be ships from Toran's honour guard.”

“They're not being very talkative,” Natasha pointed out with a slight shiver.

“They are not supposed to be talkative,” Klath countered, “They are here to protect him from any potential incoming threats. Right now, they will be assessing our papers and our transmissions and deciding which action to take.”

“And then they let us past?” Jirel asked.

“Hopefully.”

The Trill gave his Klingon colleague an especially unhappy look, as Sunek piped up from the pilot's seat again, a little less amused than usual.

“Ugh. This is such a dumb way to run an empire, you know? Literally every ship in the universe has a comms link. If you guys just talked a bit more, you'd save yourselves a hell of a lot of trouble.”

Klath ignored the Vulcan's latest slight against his people, and also chose not to ask himself how much of his comment was a reference to the events in the Tygon Nebula. After all, on that occasion as well, Klath had chosen to act first, rather than to talk.

Sunek, for his part, just spun back around to his controls, and suppressed the latest nervous gulp that threatened to jump out of his mouth as he again saw the menacing ships off their bow.

Eventually, the two hawk-like vessels both eased back on thruster control, their twin wings lifting up to a more even keel as they prepared for cruise mode, and then turned to face back into the inner Brexis system.

“They have reached a decision,” Klath pointed out, “They will escort us to Brexis II.”

“Neat,” Sunek muttered sarcastically, just as his navigational computer piped out an alert, “Receiving coordinates and course information from them. Finally. They say we’re to proceed to our destination at warp two.”

“Whatever you do,” Jirel said, still warily eyeing up their escorts, “Don’t improvise.”

Sunek tutted as he tapped his controls with precision, mildly affronted at the very idea that he wouldn’t do what he was told. Then, in unison, the three ships jumped into low warp, as they sped towards their destination.

Still watching the sleek Birds of Prey as they shadowed the Bounty in tight formation, Karn’s eyes glinted with awe. “Such magnificent vessels,” he muttered.

“Psh,” Denella couldn’t stop herself from firing back, “The Bounty’s twice the ship either of those things are—”

She was immediately interrupted by another unwelcome alert from her console, and responded with a choice, untranslatable expletive in her native Orion tongue.

“What?” Jirel asked, swivelling around to the frustrated engineer.

“Ugh, nothing. Just...a malfunction in the secondary deflector array. I’ll take a look as soon as we’ve landed.”

Karn couldn’t help but offer a superior sneer at this latest issue, as he turned and exited the cockpit with K’Veth in tow. Once they were gone, Denella calmed herself down and patted her console as patiently as she could manage. “Hey, listen,” she cooed at the ship, “You know I think you’re the best no matter what, but could you just try to work with me on this one? Please?”

Jirel mustered a grin, as he turned back to watch the stars warping by. And he tried not to feel too unnerved by the sight of their ever-present escorts.

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

A short while later, the Bounty sat on the landing area in the grounds of Toran's vast homestead on the surface of Brexis II.

The residence was the sort of place that, even for those not especially well-versed in Klingon politics, immediately told you someone important lived here.

The central building was a lavishly tall structure, some four stories high. It was rendered in a deep red stone that had evidently been mined from the similarly coloured rocks of the hills and mountains in the distance. The grounds of the compound were filled with several smaller buildings and vast open plan spaces, and there was even a fenced-off enclosure to the south side of the estate which housed the foraging forms of Toran's collection of pure-bred pet targs.

As the Bounty's crew and their two Klingon guests descended the ship's rear ramp. They were met by an imposing sight in keeping with the rest of the residence.

From the front gate of the estate, two lines of Toran's honour guard were lined up along each side of the entrance. They stood with ceremonial swords raised, awaiting their master. Jirel took in the scene with an impressed nod. It was likely the most effort anyone had ever made to welcome a slightly battered decades-old Ju'Day-type raider landing on their planet.

He looked over at Klath, who was quietly grinding his teeth as they waited.

"Hey, don't do that. You're gonna ruin that beautiful smile of yours."

Klath shot an unamused glance back at the Trill. "Please, Jirel," he muttered, "I have told you how important this is to me."

"Yep, ok, I get it," Jirel replied with sincerity, holding his hands up by way of apology, "I mean, I don't think I 'get it' get it, but I get it. Get it?"

Klath didn't really get it at all, but he nodded back. It would have to do.

"Huh," Denella mused as she glanced at the padd she was holding, "Klath, did you know you're the named sponsor for this delivery? Isn't this all from Mortath?"

Klath paused before he responded, a little confused by that turn of events himself. That gave Karn the chance to jump in with the answer. "I would assume that was done on purpose by Mortath," he explained, "If the bloodwine has come from Klath himself, that might curry more favour with Toran."

"That would make sense," K'Veth nodded, "Perhaps our father did it as a...note of thanks. For agreeing to bring myself and Karn along with you."

Denella considered those answers for a moment, not entirely satisfied with them. But before she was able to ask any follow-up questions, there was movement at the front gate.

Toran, son of Kradon, came striding out in full battle armour, flanked by two more sword-carrying members of his guard.

Again, even a casual observer couldn't have mistaken him for anyone other than a very important individual. He carried himself with an air of supreme confidence that suggested he didn't mind people making that assumption whatsoever.

His long, lustrous black hair cascaded behind him like a lion's mane. His armour was made of thick, studded red and black leather-type material, topped off with a heavy silvery metal jacket and shoulder pads. And it clearly housed an imposing physical form. The overall look was capped off by the shining blade of the bat'leth that was slung proudly behind his back.

Toran paced up to the Bounty's significantly less imposing crew in his heavy black boots, and regarded them in turn with a slight look of superiority, and a healthy dose of distrust. "So," he bellowed at them, "I am told you bring me bloodwine."

Denella overcame the slightly overwhelmed feeling she got from being in the tall Klingon's presence, and silently proffered him the padd in her hand. One of the guards swiftly accepted the device, gave it a distrusting once over, then passed it on to his master. The Orion couldn't help but wonder whether that particular bit of ceremony had been necessary. How dangerous could a padd be?

Toran gave the details on the screen a cursory glance, then nodded in apparent appreciation. "Sixteen crates of the 2349. An impressive haul indeed. And who is it that brings me such a bounty?"

Entirely oblivious to the pun he had just made, Toran addressed his question directly to the three Klingons in the motley group. As if it was impossible for anyone else to be in charge. Jirel couldn't help but feel a little affronted at being so casually snubbed, but also rather glad that he didn't have to talk directly to this particular Klingon, who he noticed had a few inches in height over even Klath.

Klath, feeling the beating of his warrior's heart as he stared back at a genuine member of the High Council, took a firm step forwards, towards Toran.

"I do," he called back proudly, "Klath, son of Morad."

Toran's eyes narrowed a fraction, the only outward sign that he recognised something about the name. He gestured to the other two Klingons in the group with a jerk of his head.

"You. Speak."

Karn and K'Veth glanced at each other, a little more wary than Klath had been about announcing themselves. But, in the end, they stepped forward and spoke in turn.

"Karn, son of Mortath."

"K'Veth, daughter of B'Eleya."

"Sunek, son of—Ow!"

The Vulcan's unwanted cameo was halted by a swift and sharp kick to his shin by Denella, and any pithy follow-up he might have been planning was stopped by her accompanying angry glare.

Toran ignored the idiocy going on elsewhere in the group, and kept his attention on the trio of Klingons in front of him. "Hmm, Mortath. A name I recognise."

He stared directly at Klath with a fierce glare.

"I recognise yours also. And I have no wish to take any bloodwine from you."

He threw the padd to the dusty ground at Klath's feet with anger and spat out an all too familiar invective directly at his face.

"biHnuch!"

In a single swift motion, Toran clasped his hands tightly in front of his chest and whirled his entire body around, turning his back on the dishonoured trio. His two guards copied his actions one after the other.

It was the timeless gesture of disgrace towards a dishonoured warrior, and one that caused Klath to feel a fresh pang of shame as he recalled the similar gestures he had received during his final moments inside of the halls of the High Council on Qo'noS.

Behind him, Denella and Jirel shared a worried glance. Neither of them were entirely well versed in the intricacies of this part of Klingon culture, but it seemed clear that this wasn't a positive step for their friend. Elsewhere in the group, Natasha felt herself tensing up. Even Sunek was silenced, watching the scene in front of them in rapt attention for once.

But Klath, much as he felt ashamed, had also been expecting such a response. His proud stance didn't weaken a single iota as he spoke directly to Toran's back. "We bring this wine to you, Toran, son of Kradon. And request that you grant us an audience, to present our cases."

His words were met with a moment of silence. A curious stand-off set in between Klath and the three other Klingons looking off in the opposite direction to him.

Eventually, Toran broke the silence, though he kept his back turned. "Huh," he grunted, "You seek restoration?"

"We merely seek the right to tell our stories," Klath clarified, with due deference to the warrior in front of him, "Whatever you wish to do is for you and your wisdom to decide. We do not have the honour to seek anything more."

Toran considered this statement for a moment.

"My reputation is becoming a nuisance," he grunted unhappily, "It is true that I have reassessed the crimes of several others, and that I feel the Council has been too inconsistent with its punishments in past times. But that does not mean that I am prepared to listen while every miserable exile in the quadrant pleads for the restoration of their name. Besides, I have honoured guests arriving soon, and I must prepare for them."

Klath remained stony-faced, refusing to show any sign of weakness, even to the backs of the three Klingons in front of him. "Very well," he nodded with a bow of his head, "Then, if you will permit it, we will leave the bloodwine as a mark of respect, and we will never return."

As soon as he finished speaking, he shot a fierce glare at Karn and K'Veth, silencing any words either of them had been ready to speak.

There was a long pause. Klath felt the hope inside start to dissipate, as he began to wonder if he had gone too far.

Finally, Toran replied.

"Having travelled all this way, and risked so much to get here, a lesser exile would have got down on their knees and begged me to hear them out."

"Yes," Klath replied simply, "They would."

"And, for that sort of cowardly display, I would have cut them down where they stood."

"Yes. You should."

To the surprise of everyone, not least Klath, Toran turned back around at this and glowered at him for a moment, before his face creased into a toothy smile, and he nodded. "Very good, Klath, son of Morad. I will accept your bloodwine. And I will take the time to look at your cases. But know this: I promise nothing more."

Klath kept his response to little more than a curt nod of acknowledgement, despite the sudden burst of fresh hope that exploded inside of him.

Toran turned away again, and gestured to his guards with a bark of Klingonese.

“Ha’!”

The guards walked in lockstep with Toran back to the front gate of the estate. Klath began to follow, a respectful distance behind, and gestured for Karn and K’Veth to come along.

The remaining quartet of Bounty crew members exhaled as one. None of them had the slightest urge to follow them.

“So, I’m confused,” Jirel managed, “Did that go well, or not?”

Denella puffed out her cheeks and mustered a shrug. “As anyone who’s heard my Klingonese will tell you, I’m not exactly an expert, but I’d say that went just about as well as it could have done. For now.”

“Huh,” the Trill replied.

He realised immediately that his somewhat equivocal response had elicited some curious looks from the others, and he quickly moved to disguise his deeper feelings on the matter.

“I mean, um, that’s great news.”

Denella gave him a look that suggested his disguise wasn’t entirely successful, then nodded back in the direction of the Bounty’s interior. “Well, for being such a good friend, you wanna help me fix the poor girl’s latest bunch of system failures?”

Jirel sighed and nodded, as Sunek yawned loudly.

“Guess I’ll head for a quick nap while you’re—”

“Nuh huh,” Natasha interjected, jabbing her finger at the Vulcan, “We’ve got some bloodwine to unload, mister.”

“Ugh,” Sunek griped as the four figures started back up the ramp, “They’d better be paying us well for all this…”

* * * * *

The Bounty’s engine room, such that it was, was a small area located directly behind the main cockpit, accessible via a short walkway to the side of the steps that ran down to the main deck of the ship.

There was no need for the room to be permanently manned, as Denella could manage all of the ship’s systems from her console in the cockpit, so it was usually empty, save for the squat, gently pulsing warp core assembly that powered the vessel’s recessed warp engines. Which meant that, against the backdrop of the gentle hum of the core, it was often the perfect place onboard to have an argument.

“Who said I wasn’t pleased for the guy?” Jirel sighed.

“You did,” Denella retorted, “Maybe not in your words, but you don’t need to be a body language expert to pick up on what’s wrong with you.”

They were working their way along a succession of access hatches in the ceiling of the engineering bay, Jirel patiently opening each hatch in turn before Denella scanned the components inside with a bulky engineering tricorder to try and pin down the source of one of the Bounty’s latest maladies.

She knew there was a power drain in the Bounty’s secondary EPS transfer system. But finding the exact source was proving more of a challenge than she’d hoped. Especially as she was being distracted by their ongoing argument.

“You know I’m right,” she added, as she peered at the readings from behind the latest hatch, before shaking her head and gesturing for Jirel to close it back up.

“You’re not—!” Jirel went to fire back, before he stopped himself and sighed, “Ok, fine. I guess I’m a teeny tiny bit unhappy with all this. I guess I just didn’t realise how much all this stuff still meant to him.”

He finished tightening the catch on the panel with his hand, and they walked on to the next one, as Denella shook her head in disbelief. “Come on. You’ve known him for way longer than I have. And you didn’t get the sense that he wanted his honour back?”

“I dunno. I just assumed that was why we’re all here. You, me, Sunek, everyone. We’re here cos we’ve left our pasts well behind us. We’re all running away from something, right?”

Denella’s jaw clenched slightly, recalling her own miserable past with the Syndicate, as Jirel started to unlatch the next panel and gently lower it down.

“That might be the case for some of us,” she admitted, “But I don’t think that’s true for Klath. And besides, just because the rest of us don’t wanna go back to where we came from, that doesn’t mean we’ll always be here, Jirel. And you have to be ok with that. You’ve had a pretty healthy turnover of crew down the years, right? You know none of this is forever.”

Jirel considered this in silence as Denella scanned inside the latest panel, then scrunched her face up in frustration.

“Ugh,” she tutted, “What the hell is causing this? We’ve been over just about every circuit and junction box in the whole unit.”

Jirel shrugged as he dutifully fixed the latest panel back into place, pausing in the middle of tightening the catch to look back at the Orion. “So, what’s in your future? What are you gonna leave me for?”

She looked up from her tricorder and shrugged, the atmosphere between them settling down again after their slightly heated discussion. “Field promotion to chief engineer on one of those fancy new Starfleet ships that split into three bits.”

“Huh. Is that right?”

“Oh yeah. I mean, after spending this long on the Bounty, imagine working with a ship that’s actually designed to fall to pieces all the time.”

They shared a laugh as they walked on to the next panel, the tension of their argument now dissipating, as Jirel gestured around at the ship.

“You sure that your, um, close personal friend isn’t gonna take offence to that comment?”

“Nah,” Denella replied, reaching over and patting the hull plating, “She knows I’m only joking. And she also knows the truth. I’m here until one of us dies.”

Jirel smiled again, then paused underneath the latest panel, his expression turning a tad more serious once more. “Still, you’re probably even closer to him than I am. You’re really telling me that you’ll be happy to see him go?”

She sighed, as he started unhooking the panel. “When that big Klingon lummoX finally walks off this ship for good, I’m gonna bawl my eyes out for days. But you know what? If he does that here and now, after being accepted back into the Empire? I’m also gonna be happier than I’ve ever been for anyone. And that’s what you need to do as well. Instead of being selfish.”

“I’m not being—!” he began to retort before he stopped himself again, reluctantly acknowledging the truth of her statement, “You’re right. I can do that.”

“And that’s all we really can do. Just support him, and make sure we don’t do anything that might affect his chances—”

Before she could finish speaking, she jumped back in shock.

As soon as Jirel finished unhooking the latest panel, he realised it felt different to the others they had worked on so far. It was like there was an additional force above it. The reasons for that additional force became clear a split second later, as the panel was sent crashing down to the deck at his feet.

It was followed by an avalanche of tribbles.

Jirel didn’t even have time to move before he was sent crashing to the deck as he was swamped by the small, furry and chittering creatures, a seemingly never-ending supply tumbling out of the conduit behind the panel and down onto the Trill.

Denella realised that she had found the source of her EPS power drain.

The tribbles were in the Bounty’s machinery.

And more than that, as Jirel’s head disappeared under the tribble mountain, she realised what else this all meant. They had brought an infestation of tribbles to Brexis II. Right to the home of a member of the Klingon High Council. The only man in the galaxy who might be able to restore Klath’s honour.

From the centre of the pile of fluff and fur, Jirel managed to push his head back above the surface, as even now, the odd chirping tribble fell from the conduit and onto his head.

“So,” he managed, spitting a strand of tribble hair from his mouth, “Scale of one to ten, how do you think this is gonna affect his chances?”

The two friends surveyed the scale of the problem, as the tribbles continued to chirp away.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

Some distance away from the unfolding tribble-based calamity on the Bounty, Klath was digging a hole through the floor of Toran's main residence.

The Klingon paced back and forth across the rough, hardened floor of the anteroom that he, Karn and K'Veth had been taken to by Toran's honour guard. Where they had been told to wait.

And they had waited. For hour after hour. Mostly in silence. Without any further contact from any of Toran's people. They hadn't even been offered any sort of refreshment.

While Klath paced, the other two Klingons were sitting on a couple of firm, unyielding high-backed chairs next to a small table in the corner of the anteroom. Another chair, presumably meant for Klath, remained empty. He hadn't used it at all. Instead, he had been feverishly threatening to wear a groove into the solid ground throughout their entire time here.

K'Veth could see that the incessant pacing was beginning to irritate Karn, but there was no sign that Klath intended to stop any time soon. In fact, he seemed to be determined to set a new walking distance record for Brexis II without leaving the confines of the room.

"Perhaps you should rest?" she offered eventually, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Klath didn't respond, and simply turned around to commence his latest return leg back across to the other side of the room.

"You should listen to her," Karn offered, failing to hide his irritation, "You have no idea how long they plan to keep us here."

Klath looked back at where they were sitting, the hope inside him now very much at the forefront of his thoughts.

"Toran has agreed to look at our cases. This is a very encouraging step. And yet you both sit there so calmly. Do you not feel the hunger inside you, to be back within the Empire?"

"Nothing has changed," Karn retorted with a scoff, "We are still exiles, without honour. And for all we know, Toran simply felt it would be more entertaining to have us wait here all day, enduring yet more humiliation, before he kills us."

Klath ignored the younger Klingon's cynicism, even if the same thought had occasionally popped up in his own head when the hope had allowed it to. "You should both stand while we wait," he offered instead, gesturing to where they were sitting.

Karn's face creased into a slight sneer as he recognised a chance to annoy the other Klingon right back, leaning back in his chair and lazily crossing one leg over the other. "Why? What good would that do?"

Klath bristled with frustration at the level of disdain the younger man was showing.

The passion he felt inside at being back within the Empire almost made him respond to his dismissive comment by drawing his faithful bat'leth from where it was slung behind his back and wiping the sneer off Karn's face that way. But instead, he managed to control himself, and hit back verbally instead.

"Your father has given you both a chance to restore your honour. Toran has shown us all respect we do not deserve by accepting us into his residence. And you have shown nothing but insolence since we began this journey. Do you really think this is how you win back your standing in the Empire?"

Before Karn could fire off another retort, Klath aimed a fierce kick at the leg of his chair, with almost enough force to topple it over.

"Now. Stand up!"

Karn flashed his teeth at his fellow Klingon in a further act of defiance. Then, the deadlock was broken from elsewhere, as K'Veth stood from her own seat and stepped over to Klath's side, staring down at her brother.

"He is right, Karn," she hissed, "As Klingons, we should show the proper respect."

Klath resisted the temptation to look over at her, and kept his attention solely on Karn, who looked from him to her and back again with a mocking sneer.

"Well, well, if it isn't Kahless and Lukara. If I had known I would be in the presence of such greatness, I would have—"

He was silenced by another kick to his chair from Klath's foot.

"Are you going to stand, or do I have to drag you to your feet and impale you to the wall with my blade?"

Just for a second, it looked as though Karn was going to continue to resist. But in the end, he opted for a more passive piece of defiance, rising out of his seat as slowly as he possibly could and ending his piece of theatre by gesturing at his stance once he was done.

"Now what?" he growled at Klath.

“Now, we wait.”

“For how long, exactly?”

“For as long as it takes.”

With that statement, and without waiting for any further questions, Klath turned away and resumed his impatient pacing up and down the room.

Once his back was turned, Karn shot K’Veth a sharp glare, but she kept her own focus on the pacing form of the other Klingon, growing more intrigued with every action he took.

“Earlier, on the landing pad, how did you know?” she asked, “How did you know that Toran would not just send us away when you gave him that option?”

Klath was a little irritated that his vitally important pacing was again being interrupted, but for some reason, he felt compelled to answer her. “I did not,” he admitted, “But I had to let him know that I was aware of that option, and that the decision was entirely his to make. He was then able to appear benevolent and merciful in front of his guards, rather than weak, or easily swayed.”

“And that is important to Toran,” K’Veth nodded in apparent understanding.

“It is important to any Klingon. But especially to a member of the High Council. You cannot rise to such a position without taking care to maintain your public image in such a way. A weak Council member will not last very long.”

K’Veth considered this latest lesson in Klingon culture, even as Karn folded his arms in front of him with an unimpressed glare. “Perhaps,” she mused, “Our father has not been as thorough in his teaching as he claimed.”

“Perhaps,” her brother muttered, “None of that will matter if we are successful here.”

As he spoke, he fixed K’Veth with a particularly knowing look. One strong enough to cause her to feel compelled to nod back in understanding.

Klath, for his part, failed to pick up on anything particularly suspicious in Karn’s comment. Instead, he continued to plough his furrow in the floor of the room.

Had he been more attentive, he might have spotted something. But he was now entirely at the mercy of his ever-growing feeling of hope. A feeling that had been well and truly cultivated ever since they had arrived, and he had taken in the sights, sounds and smells of the Empire once again. His warrior’s passion inside was growing stronger with every passing minute.

So he continued to pace the room. As he had done for several hours already.

Waiting for his redemption.

* * * * *

“One thousand, three hundred and sixteen.”

Natasha reported the total from the screen of her tricorder, after she and Sunek had joined Denella, Jirel and the ever-growing pile of tribbles in the Bounty’s engineering bay. After a second, the tricorder quietly beeped an alert.

“Correction. One thousand, three hundred and seventeen.”

Next to her, Jirel shook his head and sighed. With some help from Denella, he had managed to extricate himself from the pile of tribbles that had buried him so entirely. None of the creatures seemed to care as he had clambered out over them. They had just kept chirping. And multiplying.

Natasha continued to wave her tricorder across the pile of fur. “And the good news is, they’re all healthy.”

“That’s not good news,” Jirel countered, “That’s very, very bad news.”

“It’s good news for the tribbles.”

“How the hell did this happen?” Denella asked in tired exasperation, “We went through a complete decontamination back at Mentok colony. They wouldn’t even let us return to orbit until they’d checked and irradiated every square inch of the ship.”

To the frustrated Orion’s side, Sunek was struggling to prevent another thoroughly amused grin from fully cultivating across his face as he gestured to the mass of tribbles. “Looks like they missed a spot.”

She shot him an irritated glare as she waved her own tricorder in the direction of the conduits above their heads.

“And who knows what else they’ve got up to inside there. No wonder we’ve been having system failures. Damn things have probably eaten their way through half our vital systems by now!”

“Hang on,” Sunek chimed in again, “I thought these things only went into turbo replication mode when they were well fed.”

“That’s the general idea,” Natasha shrugged, “Food goes in, tribbles come out.”

Her tricorder beeped again.

“Specifically: One thousand, three hundred and eighteen tribbles.”

“Then, apart from a bunch of our power relays, what the hell have they been eating? What, they brought a packed lunch with them?”

Natasha paused. For once in his contradictory life, the Vulcan had actually asked a perfectly reasonable question about the situation they had found themselves in. And it was a question that she didn’t have an immediate answer to.

“Ok, what they’re eating isn’t the big issue here,” Jirel interjected, “The issue is what we’re going to do about them.”

“Why do we always have to do something about them?” Natasha sighed, thinking back to the slaughter on Mentok colony.

“Because they’re eating my goddamn ship!” Denella spat back, entirely reasonably.

“Also,” Jirel added, stifling a grimace, “If any of those Klingons out there get wind of this, Klath’s not gonna be regaining any sort of honour here.”

He glanced at Denella, who nodded back sadly. While Jirel still didn’t exactly want Klath to leave, he also really didn’t want this to be the reason he stayed.

“So,” he continued, “What do we do?”

“I’m gonna have to strip everything down,” Denella sighed, “I’ve heard reports of what these things do when they get into your machinery. We’ll have to organise a full physical diagnostic of every component.”

“Can’t exactly do that right now,” Jirel countered, “Unless you wanna explain to the High Council member why we’re casually fumigating our ship for tribbles in his favourite parking spot?”

“Ugh. Right. So, what else can we do with this pile of—”

Another beep.

“One thousand, three hundred and nineteen tribbles.”

The Orion engineer shot a withering look at the human doctor with the tricorder. “That’s really not helping, you know.”

“Transporter?” Jirel offered, chewing his lip thoughtfully.

“With our old transporter?” Denella tutted, gesturing to the growing mountain in front of them, “By the time we’ve filled each pad and beamed them off, we’ll have a dozen more of the things to deal with. Besides, where are we even beaming them to in this little scenario?”

Jirel considered this and offered a deep sigh in response, in lieu of an actual answer. In the brief silence that followed, Natasha’s tricorder beeped again, but she elected against offering a fresh update on the running total.

“We’ve got a bigger problem than the ones onboard,” she reluctantly pointed out instead, “We just potentially carried a few special guests into Toran’s compound in those sixteen crates of vintage bloodwine.”

Jirel and Denella shared a worried look, then spun around to the other two.

“Didn’t you check?” the Trill asked accusingly.

“Were we supposed to?” Sunek offered back.

“Yes!” Jirel snapped, pointing to the pile of tribbles, “Clearly, you were supposed to!”

“Ok,” the Vulcan griped, “Here’s a quick list of things I don’t usually think to check our cargo for when I’m offloading it. One: Horta eggs. Two: Crystalline Entities. Three: Quantum singularities—”

“I think he gets it,” Natasha cut in, as her tricorder beeped again.

“Great,” Jirel sighed again, stomping in an annoyed arc around the tribbles, “So we’re totally and completely screwed, are we?”

There was a long pause. Eventually, and slightly reluctantly, Sunek stepped forward. “Alright, fine, idiots,” he tutted, “You lot take some tricorders, get out there and go check the cargo, and I’ll deal with all of...this.”

He gestured dismissively at the pile of tribbles. The others looked back at him, waiting for some more information that didn’t seem to be coming.

“You wanna give us a bit more on that?” Denella asked.

“Probably best you don’t know the details. But I’ll need someone’s help to verify a quick trip back to orbit with the guards down here. Also, for insurance purposes, you should probably make sure everything in your cabins is fully stowed.”

He turned and started back towards the Bounty's cockpit, before pausing and turning back with an enigmatic grin on his face.

"And by 'stowed', I mean, like, really nailed down."

The three faces looking back at him dropped to the floor in unison.

"Um," Jirel managed, "Please don't say you're planning on flying back into orbit, blowing all the outer hatches and dumping one thousand, three hundred and tw—"

"Thirty one."

"—Thirty one tribbles out into space?"

Sunek considered the phrasing of the question, then shrugged again. "Ok. I won't say that."

With that, he turned back and exited the engine room. The others looked at each other for a moment with slight uncertainty.

"He's not really gonna...?" Natasha asked eventually.

"What? No. Nah. No way," Jirel replied with a firm shake of his head.

"He's just messing with us, like always," Denella nodded in affirmation.

Everyone in the engine room looked at each other again, then at the chirping mass of tribbles next to them. Then, Jirel turned on his heels and hurried towards the exit.

"I...might just go seal off my cabin."

The other two quickly followed.

Part 3B

Part Three (Cont'd)

The great hall of Toran's residence was just as imposing as the rest of his estate.

It was positioned at the very centre of his main residence, and took up a sizeable chunk of the floor plan. The ceiling of the room itself seemed to reach up at least two or three stories into the building, and great stone columns supported the structure at strategic points.

Klath, Karn and K'Veth were led into the hall as one, flanked by the two guards who had come to fetch them from the anteroom.

When the guards had arrived, all three of them had still been standing, as per Klath's command. None of them knew exactly how long they had been left waiting in the end, but it had been several hours. Still, Klath had barely stopped pacing throughout.

And even now, he strode into the room with an air of pride and confidence.

Inside, he felt his warrior's passion continuing to grow. He felt stronger with every minute he was spending back inside Klingon territory, as if he was absorbing some sort of invisible energy directly from his surroundings. And, although he was still trying to ward off such thoughts, the sense of hope inside him was growing as well.

Because of that, even though he had been on his feet for almost the whole day now, he felt refreshed and invigorated, his body's needs being fed by the fire of his ever-growing fervour.

The guards led the trio to the head of the main hall, where an imposing throne-like chair was positioned on a high podium. It was fairly obvious to all concerned which one was Toran's seat.

Klath stood formally in front of the empty chair, clasping his hands behind his rigid back, while Karn and K'Veth took up positions next to him. The guards stepped to the side of the room, and for a moment, nothing happened.

Just when it appeared as though they had been led into this room simply in order to be ignored in a slightly different environment, a heavy door to one side of the hall opened, and Toran strode in, still decked out in his full regalia.

While Karn and K'Veth both watched him approach the throne, Klath continued to stare straight ahead, his head held high, as the Council member's heavy footsteps paced across the hard floor of the room.

Once Toran was seated, he took a further moment to look over the three Klingons in front of him, mulling over his words.

Klath's heart was beating faster inside his chest. The hope was now unashamedly allowing himself to believe.

Eventually, Toran spoke, his booming voice echoing around the vast and somewhat sparse expanse of the hall.

"Klath, son of Morad. Karn, son of Mortath. K'Veth, daughter of B'Eleya."

A pause. Klath drew himself up even taller.

"I have reviewed each of your cases, and the reasons for each of your discommendations, based on all of the information in the High Council records. Just as I gave my word that I would do. And you have all dutifully waited for my decision. That has been noted."

Something inside Klath made him begin to question the situation. There was something in the tone of Toran's words that gave him cause to suddenly doubt himself.

"Having so reviewed them," Toran continued, "And having considered each of them wisely, I have concluded that there are no cases to be answered here."

Klath felt himself falling.

He was tumbling down an open ravine, into a dark, endless chasm.

Alongside him, although he couldn't see their reactions, K'Veth glanced down at the ground, while Karn simply offered a slight sneer and a shake of his head, as if he hadn't been expecting any other possible answer.

Ignoring all of their reactions from up on the podium, Toran remained seated, and simply waved a dismissive hand at the three of them. "Now, as you knew before you arrived here, I am a tolerant man. So I do not intend to have my guards deal with three dishonoured Klingons in my presence as they might wish to. You are free to return to your ship, and leave."

He paused, and leaned forwards in his chair, eyeballing each one of them in turn.

"But do not return to this place. Or to any Klingon territory. Take the stench of your dishonour far away from us."

Klath was still falling.

He was desperately trying to find something to grasp, to arrest his plunge. But there was nothing to cling onto. He was falling away from his pride, and his hope. And towards something else.

A consuming pit of anger.

Before he could stop himself, he found himself stepping forwards, towards Toran.

“That is all you have to say?” he growled.

If Toran was surprised by his outburst, he didn't allow it to show. His two guards stepped towards the snarling adversary, but he waved them off with a flick of his hand, keeping his attention on Klath at all times. “What more would you have me say, son of Morad?” he asked, “Or do you now plan to beg, just as I warned you not to do before?”

Klath's eyes narrowed. He felt the blood lust beginning to curdle in his veins. “I will not beg,” he snarled, “I travelled here to offer myself in service to the Empire once again, and to prove that my dishonour was not—”

“The Empire has no need for you,” Toran grunted back, “A wasted journey.”

The Council member leaned back in his throne once again, happy that the matter was settled. Klath remained where he was. He felt a hand on his arm, trying to pull him away. His instincts told him it belonged to K'Veth, but he ignored it and snarled at Toran again.

He fell further down, consumed by the darkness of the chasm, of the humiliations he had endured and of the pain he had suffered. And he reached for his bat'leth, drawing it from behind his back with a carefully practised motion.

“Defend yourself!”

The guards stepped forwards again, but Toran dismissed them just as casually as he had done the first time.

The imposing Klingon stood from his throne in his full battle dress and stared back at Klath where he stood with his blade poised. Klath maintained his aggressive posture, preparing for the battle he had just instigated. He took deep breaths as his heart pumped with adrenaline.

But Toran made no attempt to draw his own weapon from its sheath on his back. He simply continued to stare.

“No.”

The single word cut through Klath's soul like a dagger.

Toran slowly stepped down from the podium and boldly stood within striking distance of Klath's weapon, entirely at ease with the situation he was in.

“A challenge from a dishonoured Klingon...is no challenge at all.”

Klath felt his body burning with anger and humiliation. All hope had been extinguished.

He also knew, as Toran clearly did, that there was nothing he could do about it. Even if he did lash out with his bat'leth and take down the defenceless man in front of him, that would merely seal his own fate. The guards would retaliate in seconds, and killing an unarmed Klingon would merely serve to cement his eternal dishonour.

If Toran had drawn his weapon and fought, at least he might have died in battle. There would have been some honour in that. But instead, Toran offered nothing. Having refused his case for restoration, he now refused him the satisfaction of the fight.

Behind him, Karn and K'Veth both watched on with rapt attention at the fresh dose of Klingon drama that was playing out in front of them.

“What's the matter, son of Morad?” Toran leered at him with a knowing look, “I thought you preferred your enemies to be defenceless?”

Klath's mind was filled again with an image of the bridge of the IKS Grontar. And his final act as captain in the Defence Force. One that Toran was clearly well versed in.

The fresh shame caused him to falter. He lowered his weapon.

Toran shook his head with disgust and turned his back on him, a fresh act of disrespect towards the still-armed Klingon. Without another word, he strode back out of the great hall.

Klath could offer nothing more. The shame overwhelmed him. The hope had gone. His plunge down the ravine continued.

If he was dishonoured before, now his humiliation was complete.

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

Jirel, Denella and Natasha cautiously approached the front gate of Toran's residence.

Each of them were armed with nothing more than a tricorder and their best disarming smile as they slowly approached the two imposing members of Toran's honour guard that stood on watchful sentry duty.

Moments earlier, after a not inconsiderable amount of hassle from the Brexis II transit authorities, and an even less inconsiderable amount of righteous indignation from Natasha about the morality of what he was proposing, Sunek had taken off in the Bounty, bound for orbit. Her complaints had only been quelled when Sunek had promised to flood the ship with anesthizine gas before he dutifully blew the hatches and solved their tribble infestation.

Which had left the others with the job of checking the cargo, to make sure they hadn't just introduced tribbles to Brexis II itself. And the first part of that job involved getting back past the guards with some manner of plausible excuse.

"What are we telling them, exactly?" Denella muttered to Jirel as they neared the gate.

The guards had already taken note of them as they approached, regarding them with curious expressions, but keeping their sharpened mek'leth weapons sheathed at their waists for the time being.

"Just relax," Jirel replied confidently, "I'm gonna turn on my natural charm."

Natasha couldn't help but lean across to Denella from her other side and mutter into her ear.

"We're going to die."

They reached the guards before Jirel could offer a retort. So instead, he fired up his promised charm. "Hi there," he smiled at the distrusting faces of the guards, "We're just, um, doing a quick check on the cargo we delivered before. Standard procedure."

The taller of the two guards looked the Trill up and down before responding.

"What sort of standard procedure?"

Jirel kept his natural charm pointed squarely at the guard, grinning winningly. "Nothing to worry about. We just need to double check, make sure it's all accounted for. You know?"

The guards glanced at each other, visibly unconvinced by both the charm and the excuse.

"There were sixteen crates in the delivery," the shorter guard replied, "And you carried sixteen crates into the stores."

"Do you have trouble counting that high?" the taller one added with an amused grunt.

Jirel smiled warmly, using his reserves of charm to calmly absorb the mocking edge to the comment. "Heh. Good one. But, um, the thing is that this is a random...spot check. Gotta do it for, y'know, audit reasons."

The guards glanced at each other again. To the still-smiling Jirel's side, Natasha worked hard to suppress a weary sigh.

"Audit reasons?" the taller guard echoed.

Jirel gently opened the taps of his natural charm a little further, a little surprised at quite how much of it he was needing to use. "Hey, you know how it is, right? If I had a slip of latinum for every auditor that's gotten on my case for missing a random spot check this year, I'd have five slips of latinum, y'know?"

He chanced a particularly fine winning smile at the pair of heavily armed Klingons, ratcheting up his charm to maximum levels.

The guards shared another, longer glance. While they were certainly not being charmed, they were reaching the point where they were simply keen to do anything to stop talking to the perma-smiling Trill in front of them as soon as possible.

Eventually, the taller guard grunted and stuck a thumb out in the direction of the stores.

"Do your checks," he muttered, opting to get rid of the Trill by the most expedient means available, "But do them quickly. Toran wishes to prepare that bloodwine for his gathering with the other council members tomorrow."

"See, that's why I like Klingons," Jirel replied, his charm continuing to ooze out, "Very understanding people. I've always said so—"

"Quickly," the shorter guard hissed, underlining his colleague's point.

With that cue, Jirel dialled back the charm a tad, and just nodded back, as Denella and Natasha gently pushed him through the gate in the direction of the stores.

As soon as they were out of earshot, the Trill glanced over at the two women.

“See? All it took was a little charm.”

Denella shook her head patiently and forced a smile as they walked on, while Natasha just muttered to herself.

“We are definitely going to die...”

* * * * *

“It was terrible. To witness something like that.”

“That may be your opinion. I found it quite entertaining.”

The two Klingon siblings continued to bicker as they sat in the same anteroom as before, where they had all been led back to after their fractious audience with Toran.

They were supposed to have returned to the Bounty to leave immediately, but the guards had informed them that the ship had temporarily returned to orbit, and had instead led them back here to wait for it to return.

Unlike before, Klath had not stood around in the room for long. He had almost immediately slipped out into the small outside space next to the anteroom without saying a word. Leaving Karn and K’Veth to debate what had just happened.

“Karn,” K’Veth said admonishingly, “You cannot mean that. You have to see that we have all lost here. Not just Klath.”

Karn’s sneer returned to his face as he leaned back in the high-backed chair. “There was never any real hope for our restoration here, K’Veth. You know that. Even Mortath knew that. We have carried our family’s shame on our shoulders since the day we were born. And we will carry it until we die.”

“But Klath—”

“If he had deluded himself into believing that the Empire was actually about to welcome us back with open arms, then so much the better. For my entertainment, anyway.”

She went to retort again, but he stopped her with a pointed scowl.

“You know what our mission is, sister.”

K’Veth mustered a stiff nod. She knew that well enough, and she had been prepared to carry it out when it had first been explained to her.

But since then, she had met Klath. And something had changed.

She looked towards the door of the anteroom that Klath had disappeared through some minutes before with a sad gaze.

“He has suffered far more than we have.”

“I do not care,” her brother grunted dismissively, “It is only a pity he didn’t slay Toran when he was given the chance. That would have made things even more simple.”

She flashed her brother an angry snarl, then stepped towards the door. Karn watched her walking with a distrusting air.

“Do not allow yourself to get distracted, K’Veth,” he called after her, “I will not allow your weakness to let our family down.”

She didn’t acknowledge his comment, and kept on walking.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

Klath heard the door opening behind him, but he didn't turn around.

He stood with one leg raised up on the low stone wall that delineated the small outside area from the rest of the grounds of Toran's homestead, propping up his bat'leth on the limb as he sharpened the blade with a small rock.

The blade didn't actually need sharpening. He had taken particular care to ensure it was in top condition on their journey to Brexis II. An action he now realised had been a complete waste of his time. Much as all of his actions had been throughout this whole process.

From accepting Mortath's open invitation to join the tribble hunt back on Mentok colony, to taking on the delivery of vintage bloodwine, to venturing all the way into Klingon space, and finally to his appeal to Toran. Every single one a complete waste of time.

He could see now that he had allowed himself to be consumed by a fantasy entirely of his own construction. The folly that he might actually get his honour restored. The idea that the Empire was ready to forgive his crimes in the Tygon Nebula.

His imagination had run away with itself, and he had been duly humbled.

And now, he had nothing more to do but to sharpen his bat'leth. To distract from his humiliation, and from his grim reality. And also because he needed to be alone.

Except now, someone was infiltrating that solitude.

"Has the ship returned?" he asked, still with his back to the door.

"No," K'Veth replied, as she approached him.

"Then leave me."

He dragged the rock across the blade for emphasis, sending a shower of sparks into the air. She paused mid-step, but didn't retreat. Instead, she altered her course to walk over to the edge of the stone wall a little further along, giving Klath a wide berth.

"It was a bold thing you did back there," she motioned as she gazed out at the expanse of Toran's estate.

Klath paused in the middle of another motion down the blade and snorted without amusement, gritting his teeth as he did so. "It was a foolish thing," he retorted bitterly, "A desperate act from a disgraced warrior. Toran's response was exactly what it deserved."

"What else could you have done?"

"Nothing. The decision had clearly been made. Reacting as I did merely brought further shame to me and my house."

He returned to his work, even as K'Veth's curiosity was piqued. She saw the slightest of openings for her to probe a little more into the background of the Klingon who was starting to fascinate her. "Your house," she replied, "How many more are there in the House of Morad?"

Klath paused in his work and looked up and off into the distance. Although part of him felt as though the conversation was drifting worryingly close to small talk territory, and personal small talk at that, he found himself feeling oddly compelled to answer her in a way he didn't with other people.

"None. I am the last of my house. When I die, my house dies with me. And it is now clear that it will die a coward's death, in exile."

He spoke entirely matter of factly. But inside, he felt a rush of anger. K'Veth nodded in understanding. "Karn and I will have a similar fate," she noted, "And...perhaps this was all our fault."

Klath paused midway through another run of the rock down the blade and looked over at her for the first time since she had arrived. Despite his swirling emotions inside, his own curiosity had been piqued by that comment.

"I do not understand."

She looked down at the ground, not sure how to continue without jeopardising her and Karn's task. But also feeling the need to offer him an explanation. To try and ease the humiliation he had just suffered in some small way. Eventually, she looked back up at him.

"Earlier, you told me that it is not proper to discuss a Klingon's discommendation."

"It is not. As your father should have taught you."

K'Veth stifled a slightly bitter smile. "Perhaps there are many things Mortath has not taught us correctly. Because I was not entirely truthful earlier. Like us, Mortath has also never seen the sun rise on Qo'noS."

"K'Veth," Klath cautioned, "You do not need to explain—"

"It was our grandfather," she continued, ignoring his suggestion, "Mortath's father. He was the one who brought shame and dishonour to our family. Nearly a century ago."

Klath wanted to stop her from going any further. That was the right thing to do as a Klingon, after all, rather than hear the tale of her discommendation. But just as he had felt compelled to answer her question earlier, now he felt compelled to listen to her story.

“His name was K’Rath, son of Targan. And he was part of the Khitomer conspiracy. Not at the highest levels, but an investigation found that he had assisted their efforts. He provided classified information to the conspirators about Chancellor Azetbur’s security arrangements, and as part of the High Council’s tribunals after the conspiracy failed, he was exiled before Mortath was even born.”

She looked over at Klath with a defiant expression. Not quite self-belief, but perhaps an approximation of it by someone who had never truly felt it.

“Perhaps such a crime is too much for our family’s name to ever be redeemed. And perhaps our family’s shame also brought your case down with us, by association.”

Klath pondered this new information as he set the rock down and returned his bat’leth to its sheath behind his back with a practised, fluid motion.

Part of him resented her for revealing so much about her discommendation, even after he had told her that this was not the way Klingons did things. Although, he had to concede to himself that he hadn’t even attempted to stop her. But part of him also felt sympathy for her. After all, if what she was saying was true, then the root of her family’s shame truly was too great for her to ever hope for redemption. And he was surprised at how unhappy that fact made him feel.

But either way, he knew that even if her own family’s wrongdoings dwarfed his own, that wasn’t the reason that he was where he was.

“You are mistaken,” he pointed out eventually, “Toran will have judged our cases individually. Your situation will not have impacted his decision on me.”

He glanced back out at the grounds beyond the stone wall, grimly taking in the facts of his own dishonour once again, back on the Grontar’s bridge. But his senses weren’t so distracted to ignore the fact that K’Veth used his momentary distraction to take a step towards him.

“Do not come closer,” he cautioned with a snarl.

She stopped on the spot, but didn’t back away. Klath worked to ignore the passions that were being stirred up inside of him once again.

“I thought that after all we had endured today, you would not deny yourself some...company.”

Klath grimaced again, as a heady new mixture of feelings blended together inside him to accompany the shame, the anger and the humiliation.

But regardless of the desires he might have towards her, he knew that there was now no way he could ever act on them. Not after the humbling he had endured. How could he act on such feelings when he no longer had any respect for himself. So, not for the first time since he had met K’Veth, he reacted to her advances entirely dismissively.

“You thought wrong,” he grunted.

This time, she didn’t back down. She remained where she was and snarled at him.

“Liar,” she spat out.

He jerked his head over to her, feeling his body fill with a fresh burst of anger at this latest, somewhat unexpected, assault on his character. But she stood firm and stared back at him.

Such was the depth of his internal strife at this point, he even found himself considering reaching for his freshly-sharpened bat’leth, despite her unarmed status. But he resisted the temptation for such a direct approach to this particular frustration. “If that is all you have to say to me,” he growled, keeping the violence implied, “Then leave me.”

With that, he turned his back on her, ignoring the irony of him performing the same action that Toran had done to him back in the great hall.

K’Veth stared at the stubborn Klingon’s back and snarled again. Her conflicting passions inside were burning just as intensely as those inside Klath. And much as he had considered a violent solution, she gave half a mind to charging at him and knocking him to the ground.

But she quickly regained control. And instead opted to walk back over to the door, acquiescing to his wishes.

“This may not mean anything from a Klingon like me,” she muttered back to him as she reached the door, “But with everything I have seen of your actions here, I think you may be the most honourable Klingon that I have ever met.”

Klath didn’t react.

He simply stared out at the grounds of Toran’s residence, and pictured the bridge of the IKS Grontar, until he heard the door close behind him.

Then, he sighed deeply, pulled his weapon from behind his back and reached down for a rock. And began to sharpen his bat’leth once again.

* * * * *

“This one’s clean as well.”

Jirel called out from the far side of the haphazard pile of crates in the corner of a somewhat dank storeroom on Toran's estate. Around the rest of the pile, Denella and Natasha ran their own tricorders around and studied the readings that the devices returned.

"No tribbles here either," Natasha reported.

"Hey," the Orion woman tutted, "Ixnay on the T-word. We don't know who might be listening."

Natasha stole a glance around the rest of the storeroom. They certainly seemed to be alone enough, but it was such a huge space that it was hard to be completely sure.

All around the room, which seemed to have been carved out of the bedrock of Brexis II itself, were stacks of supplies for the entire estate. Not just food and drink, though both of those appeared to be plentiful enough, but piles of building materials and electronic components as well.

Still, seeing no sign of any Klingons listening in, she clambered over to the final set of crates and continued her scans. As they worked on in silence, she reluctantly decided to address a nagging question that she wasn't quite sure she wanted to know the answer to.

"What exactly are we planning on doing if we find any...additional cargo in our audit?"

"We deal with them," Denella replied with a shrug as she stepped across to another crate.

"Kill them, you mean?"

The Orion looked over at her and rolled her eyes at this latest attempt at a guilt trip. "No, I mean we take them in, and spend the rest of our lives travelling the galaxy, finding the right billion or so people who want to adopt one of them."

Natasha's face shifted into an unhappy glare in response to Denella's sarcasm, as her tricorder chimed out another negative result.

"What if we just explained what happened? I'm sure they'd understand."

"Really?" Jirel smirked, "You have any idea what sort of punishment we'd be in line for if they found out we smuggled a bunch of these things into the house of a High Council member?"

"Not really."

Jirel paused, suddenly looking slightly less sure of himself. "Well...neither do I, off the top of my head. But we're dealing with Klingons, so I'm assuming it's gonna be something very painful."

"Besides," Denella added, still entirely oblivious to how badly their colleague's efforts at redemption were going, "We'd be completely ruining Klath's chances if we—"

She paused as her own tricorder chirped out another result.

"Huh. This one's clean as well."

The trio of Bounty crew members looked around at the pile of crates. The ones that they had now completely finished scanning their way through, without turning up a single living specimen of polygeminus grex.

"Ok, am I crazy," Jirel asked, "Or did we just totally get away with one here?"

Natasha glanced around again, double checking that they hadn't missed anything in their haste to get their job done. "All sixteen crates are here. These are definitely the ones that me and Sunek unloaded off the ship, and not a trace of a...T-word."

An unmistakable sense of relief descended over proceedings, as Denella clipped her tricorder back onto the belt of her oversized overalls. "Well, if that's everything, and we're not gonna need to make plans to go into the animal rehoming business, then I say we go see if Sunek's back with the Bounty yet. Cos I've got a hell of a lot of repairs to do on that poor ship."

"So what else is—"

Jirel didn't get any further with his quip. Because he was distracted by something he spotted on the ground of the store room, next to one of the crates.

"Huh."

He picked the object up and studied it. He didn't need a tricorder to identify what he was pretty sure the shiny silver wrapper was.

"Does, um, this look like an energy bar wrapper to anyone?"

"I guess so," Natasha replied with a shrug, as she cast an eye over the item in his hand, "I guess even Klingons can't eat raw meat for every meal."

Jirel ignored her comment, because there was something still nagging at the back of his mind. He stepped around to the rear of the crate next to where he had found the wrapper.

"What is it?" Denella asked, a little confused.

"Just...something Sunek said earlier. When he asked about what those things back on the Bounty had been eating all this time..."

His voice tailed off as he saw something else. He crouched down next to one of the crates and gestured to the others.

“Um, guys...?”

Denella and Natasha stepped over to get a look at what he was seeing.

There was a gap in the side of the crate. Not a clean hole, or some sort of ventilation spacer that was designed to be there. Instead, it was a rough and uneven hole, as if something had chewed its way out from the inside.

The three of them turned in unison to look at the stacks of food on the other side of the storage room, and the earlier sense of relief was replaced entirely by one of dread.

They slowly stepped over to a large stack of dark green containers that towered up to twice their height, and peered around the corner of the stack. The rear of one of the food containers was now open, and whatever had been inside had been mostly consumed. And it had been consumed by the large chirping pile of very contented tribbles, which had clearly decided to go forth from the crate of bloodwine and multiply.

The trio of Bounty crewmates stared at the sight in silent shock for a second.

“Alright,” Jirel managed eventually, “Nobody panic, ok?”

Seconds later, the sound of panic suddenly filled the storeroom. Except it wasn't coming from them, but from the pile of tribbles, who had switched from chirping happily to growling and writhing with sudden trepidation.

“That's weird,” Natasha noted, “They usually only react like that when they're near a—”

“Treachery!”

The three of them whirled around again, to be confronted by the two guards that had let them through to the stores a little earlier.

From their perspective, they had walked in to see what was taking so long with this supposed random spot check of the bloodwine. Only to find the Trill, the human and the Orion in their master's stores, seemingly initiating a tribble-based invasion of the premises.

And so, without missing a beat, both of them drew their mek'leths from their belts and aimed the deadly blades at the newcomers.

“Ok,” Jirel conceded, “This is probably a good time to panic.”

End of Part Three

Part 4A

Part Four

“I really can’t trust you guys to do anything, can I?”

Sunek’s comment went unanswered, as he stood next to the wall of Toran’s great hall, alongside Jirel, Denella and Natasha.

The Vulcan had landed back on Brexis II mere minutes ago, expecting to meet back up with the others, find out what happened with Klath and his efforts to reclaim his honour, and then leave the planet entirely. Ideally after a bloodwine-heavy party. Instead, as soon as he had innocently stepped down the Bounty’s ramp, he had found himself surrounded by armed guards and summarily marched straight into Toran’s main residence to join the three individuals who were now being referred to as his co-conspirators.

Which was very much not how he had wanted to spend his evening.

“Seriously,” he continued to gripe at his colleagues, “How hard is it to not get arrested? That was basically all you had to do.”

The others continued to ignore his complaints. Because their focus was on Toran himself, who strode into the great hall through one of the side entrances, still clad in full battle armour and wearing a face like thunder.

“So,” he spat at them, “That was what all of this was. A plot against me.”

“Ok, no,” Jirel began, “That’s not—”

“Be quiet!” Toran growled at the Trill, “The evidence is clear for all to see. You have come here, even as several members of the High Council are mere hours away from arriving themselves, and you have deliberately unleashed a plague upon my house!”

The enormous Klingon marched straight up to the fearful foursome with his fists clenched tightly by his side, his rage evident in his glare.

“That is the truth, isn’t it? This is all a grand conspiracy to discredit me.”

A pause. Jirel awkwardly licked his lips. “Um, do I answer that? Cos you just told me to be quiet—Oof!”

The Trill was silenced this time by Toran’s fist slamming into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him completely and leaving him entirely clear as to how much disarming banter the Klingon was willing to tolerate right now.

Toran whirled away, his armour clinking in step with his feet as he paced back down the short line of Bounty crew members. “So, my allies on the Council arrive soon, discover that I am infested with these...things throughout my residence, and my reputation is ruined. And perhaps it will work as you intended. Perhaps there is no time to resolve this crisis.”

He stopped next to Sunek and suddenly wrenched his bat’leth from behind his back, causing the Vulcan to jump back in genuine fright.

“But perhaps,” Toran continued darkly, “I may have my revenge on you before then...”

He slowly whirled the weapon around, causing Sunek’s fearful expression to increase in intensity. “Woah,” the Vulcan babbled, “C—Careful with that thing. You’ll have someone’s eye out—!”

“Toran!”

The sudden bellowed cry made the imposing Klingon Councillor pause and lower his weapon, as everyone in the room turned to see Klath bursting through another set of doors. His crewmates looked at him with varying shades of relief, but Klath’s own focus was entirely on his fellow Klingon.

“Leave,” Toran growled back dismissively, “There is nothing here for a dishonoured taHqeq.”

Klath felt the sting of the latest insult fired in his direction, but he didn’t allow it to affect him, nor did he acknowledge the pair of guards that approached his position. “I will not leave,” he retorted, “I have just been informed you have taken my crew. Why?”

Toran’s face darkened at this. “You insult me further by claiming to know nothing of their actions? What they have brought to my house? A plague worthy of calling for General K’Vusk himself!”

Klath stopped on the spot, in shock. His mind began to race as several disparate pieces of a jigsaw he wasn’t even aware existed started to resolve in his head. “Here? On Brexis II?”

“Yes. And do not try to deny your part in it, son of Morad. You likely orchestrated this whole thing, or was your name not there on the delivery papers?”

Another few pieces were added to the pile in Klath’s head, even as Toran gestured to the two guards who had intercepted him.

“Take him!”

Before Klath could think any further, his arms were grabbed by the guards.

On the other side of the room, a spark went off in Denella’s head as she dredged up a memory of a detail of Klingon culture that she and Klath

had once talked about during their time on the Bounty. She glanced over at Jirel and muttered out of the side of her mouth.

“Hey, I think we’ve got one chance of getting out of all of this. So just...follow my lead.”

Jirel managed a slight nod of affirmation back at his engineer, not entirely sure what he was agreeing to play along with.

It didn’t take long for him to realise.

“Hey! Toran, son of Kradon!” Denella suddenly called out at the hulking Klingon warrior.

Toran, still with his bat’leth in his hands, slowly turned around to the Orion woman. He looked almost a little amused at the sudden display of forcefulness.

“Oh good,” Jirel muttered unhappily, “One of those plans.”

Denella ignored him, and summoned up all of the courage she could in order to defiantly maintain eye contact with the angry face of Toran. “Klath’s an idiot,” she continued, “He had nothing to do with it. This was all us. And we got paid pretty handsomely for bringing those tribbles here, as well!”

Despite the gravity of their situation, she couldn’t help but find a trace of amusement at the way the proud and mighty Klingon warrior in full battle dress seemed to instinctively flinch slightly as soon as she said the word ‘tribble’.

“Is that so?” Toran grunted back at her.

“Oh yeah,” she persisted, silently praying that her sometimes dubious recollection of Klingon language and traditions wasn’t mistaken on this occasion, “You think a stupid Klingon could pull off something like this? We brought a plague right to the doorstep of a High Council member. That takes brains, not Klingons.”

She stole a subtle but deliberate glance at Jirel, letting him know in no uncertain terms that it was time to follow her lead.

The Trill looked back at Toran’s imposing form, not entirely wanting to follow the sort of lead that seemed to involve picking a fight with him. But, not for the first time in his life, he decided to put his life entirely in the hands of his engineer’s eye for a plan. “Um, yeah,” he managed, as confidently as he could under the circumstances, “That’s right. The four of us did all this. Klath was just a, y’know, useful idiot.”

Toran glared at him, then shifted his attention back to Denella, his eyes narrowing slightly. To Jirel’s side, Natasha leaned over.

“What the hell are you—?”

“Don’t worry about it. Me and Denella are doing the talking.”

“Yes! That’s the bit I’m worrying about!”

Before Toran could act, and just as Denella was starting to fear she’d very much missed the target on this one, Klath called out again.

“Toran!” he bellowed, “You hear their confession. They are the ones that have betrayed you, just as they have betrayed me. And so, I claim the right of QaS Devwl’.”

Toran spun back around, as Denella let out a relieved sigh at that piece of Klingonese.

“You are dishonoured!” he retorted.

“I still have the right.”

Klath stood his ground, and Toran paused for a moment, considering what he had heard. Eventually, and reluctantly, he nodded and gestured Klath forward towards the others.

“Um,” Jirel muttered to Denella, as their crewmate approached them, “What’s the right of...kassy devil?”

“I’ll explain later. But...it is gonna hurt a bit.”

Jirel’s eyes widened as Klath reached them. “You didn’t say anything about—!”

“Silence!” Klath spat at them, his words laced with entirely believable anger.

He stared into Denella’s eyes with a fierce, fictional rage. She could tell that, behind the act that he was carefully putting on, his glare was also sending her a different message. A message that said: I apologise for this.

She braced herself.

Klath moved with such speed that she didn’t even see the punch coming. But it connected with more than enough force to send her flying backwards onto the stone ground behind her with a painful thump.

Jirel watched on in shock, before Klath turned to him as well.

“Oh. Right. Great. So it’s also one of those plans—!”

With a second fierce swing of his fist, Klath sent Jirel flying back to join Denella.

Natasha's eyes boggled as Klath stepped over to her, as the Klingon prepared to continue his one man melee.

"Hey!" Sunek called out from her side, "This side of the line didn't say anything, ok? S—So how about you leave our faces alone? You know that's my best feature!"

"Enough!" Toran called out from behind them, sparing Klath the need to continue with his demonstration, much to Natasha and Sunek's relief.

Inside, Klath was equally thankful, albeit a little unhappy that he hadn't got the chance to legitimately punch his Vulcan colleague in the face. He kept up his theatrically angry scowl as he turned back to Toran.

"You may be without honour, son of Morad, but I am not. I can see your anger at your traitorous crew, and I grant you the right of QaS Devwl'. In the meantime, I will have my men secure them in the detention chamber."

Klath nodded back, as Toran signalled to his guards to take the rest of the Bounty's crew. He didn't bother to look back at them or betray any concern, not wanting to break the front he was putting on as part of Denella's plan. Instead, he strode out of the great hall with renewed purpose. The plan had bought him some time to find who was really responsible for bringing the tribbles to Brexis II.

In truth, he already had an idea who was responsible.

But now, he needed proof.

* * * * *

"See, this should be, like, a life rule for us."

Sunek paced up and down inside the small secure room they had been unceremoniously thrown into by Toran's guards. It was bereft of furnishings, and was merely a rectangular area in the basement separated from the rest of the residence by a substantial forcefield.

"Rule number one," the Vulcan continued, "Don't do business with anyone whose houses have their own detention chambers. No normal, regular person you should be doing business with lives in a house with its own detention chamber!"

As he paced back and forth, Natasha examined Denella, who seemed more than a little groggy from her run-in with Klath's fist. "You've got a concussion," she reported, checking her dilated pupils as best she could now her tricorder had been confiscated by the guards, "We're gonna need to treat that asap."

"Yep," Denella winced, "We should get right on that after we're done being executed."

Natasha gave her a mildly withering look, as Jirel raised his hand from where he was slumped against the cold wall next to them. "Um, hi? I'm also in tremendous pain?"

Natasha got Denella as comfortable as she could in the solid stone confines of their temporary accommodation, before moving on to check the Trill.

"Plus," Sunek continued to gripe, "I already went through a very traumatic experience today. Do you have any idea the kind of noise one thousand, four hundred and ninety two tribbles make when they're blown out into space? That's gonna stay with me for a while."

Natasha instantly whirled around, shooting an angry look at the Vulcan. "You said you were going to use anesthizine gas on them!"

Sunek paused in the midst of his pacing and raised an amused eyebrow.

"The cutest part about that is that you actually believed that was a thing I'd be able to do on our ship."

The doctor's unhappy look darkened even further, just as Jirel tried to steer the conversation onto more pressing matters.

"So, Denella, wanna explain why I just got punched in the face? Not that it doesn't happen a lot, but I usually like to know the reason."

"It was all I could think to do," the Orion replied, "The right of QaS Devwl' is a Klingon Defence Force tradition I remember reading about. Aboard a Klingon ship, any section leader has the right to punish those under their direct command themselves, rather than deferring to a superior. Given what Toran was about to do to us, I was hoping he'd go for that instead."

"Even though we're not Klingons? And Klath isn't our 'section leader'?"

Denella offered a weak shrug back. "Toran's been treating him like he's in charge of us since we landed. And I've found that Klingons tend to be willing to overlook a lot if it means they can follow one of their traditions. They can be relentlessly efficient when they want to be, but you're never far away from some sort of right or ceremony to use as a caveat if you want to stall them."

"Such a dumb empire," Sunek muttered to himself as he resumed his pacing.

"Huh," Jirel offered, ignoring the Vulcan, "And this right of kissy whatever is good for us because...?"

"Because if it wasn't for that, Toran would have killed us right there. Whereas now, we've been detained for an hour."

"And then?"

“And then...Klath has to kill us.”

Denella looked around the detention chamber to see the other three glaring at her. None of them seemed enthused with the details of her plan.

“Ok,” she sighed, “The point is: We’re still alive. And Klath’s still out there, not in here.”

“Hang on,” Sunek jumped in, “So you’re saying that we’re locked in here, about to be executed for crimes against the Klingon Empire. And the only thing that can save us is Klath coming up with a clever plan?”

Denella nodded back.

“Welp,” the Vulcan sighed, “It was nice knowing all of you.”

Part 4B

Part Four (Cont'd)

“Hurry up!”

Karn walked quickly across the landing pad, as K’Veth hurried to keep pace next to him.

The siblings had left Toran’s residence, and were now hurrying back to where the Bounty was parked. The guards had seen no reason to stop them from returning to their ship. After all, the sooner the stench of their dishonour left Brexis II, the better.

“Karn,” K’Veth hissed as they walked, “We cannot leave them behind—”

“That is exactly what we should do. You heard what the guards told Klath about his colleagues. Our mission here is complete. Now, we must leave and return to Mortath.”

“And what of Klath?”

“What of him?” her older brother snorted back dismissively as they approached the rear ramp of the Ju’Day-type ship, “With any luck, Toran will see fit to deal with him as well and tie up another loose end for us.”

As he started up the ramp, she reached out and grabbed his arm, causing him to stop and jerk his head back towards her with an angered glare. “Leaving them here was not part of the plan,” she implored, ignoring his glare, “It is not the honourable thing to do—”

“Honour?” Karn spat, as he wrenched his arm out of her grasp, “Has nothing that has happened here shown you how hollow that concept is? We have done nothing wrong, nor has our father, and yet still the Empire wishes to leave us to rot. For something we had no control over.”

“But—”

“There is nothing more for us to do here, but escape. And return to Mentok colony.”

With that, he stormed back up the Bounty’s ramp with renewed pace, not giving her the chance to respond.

K’Veth looked back at Toran’s residence, considering the people that were still in there. Then she reluctantly followed her brother up the ramp. She didn’t necessarily want to do that. She didn’t want to leave Klath and the others behind. But she also knew that if she wasn’t on the Bounty when it left Brexis II, then she would be stranded here, and would likely end up dead.

So she followed him. All the way back to the Bounty’s deserted cockpit.

As she bounded up the steps and into the ship’s nerve centre, her eyes were drawn to the empty tactical station and she felt a fresh pang of guilt inside as she thought about the man they were leaving behind. The man they had allowed to believe that there was still honour here to be reclaimed.

In contrast to her, Karn was having no such issues. He had already slotted himself into the pilot’s seat and was starting to go through the motions of powering up the ship. “With any luck,” he grunted, “We’ll have clearance all the way back to Mentok colony.”

She silently nodded and stepped over to stand next to the pilot’s console as he continued preparing the ship for departure.

It was then that they heard a voice behind them.

“Klingons do not believe in luck.”

They both turned in unison to see Klath standing in the doorway of the cockpit, blocking the only exit available to them. He held a blunt disruptor in his hand.

“What the hell are you doing with that thing?” Karn snapped.

Klath didn’t bother to respond, and kept the disruptor pointed at the scheming siblings. It was true that he usually preferred a bladed weapon to an energy weapon. But he also recognised that there was a time and a place for everything. And this situation required practicality.

It hadn’t taken a genius to realise that Karn and K’Veth had something to do with the infestation of Brexis II. And that if he was going to save his crewmates, he was going to need to bring them in. But it also hadn’t taken a genius to realise that he couldn’t exactly try to pull a weapon on them while they were still in the middle of Toran’s estate, given the number of equally-armed guards posted around the place.

So, he had gone against his natural confrontational instinct, and had opted for a more circumspect approach. And assuming that they would attempt to make their escape while the rest of the Bounty’s crew were incarcerated, he had stealthily slipped into the ship’s engine room, where he had been lying in wait, poised and ready to strike when his prey arrived.

It hadn’t taken much waiting.

“Power down the ship,” he grunted at Karn, “We are not going anywhere for now.”

K’Veth immediately stepped away from the console, but Karn remained seated. Still, his focus was on the disruptor, and his usual leer seemed

slightly more tempered than usual.

Klath glanced at K'Veth and shook his head. "Earlier, you asked me if there was a chance that we could reclaim our honour. But you knew that there never was. Whatever claims you, or Mortath, made about our mission here were all lies. Lies to get us here in order to deliver the... cargo."

K'Veth reached for a response, but couldn't find one, realising that any words would be a disappointment. Instead, Karn stood from the pilot's seat. "We came here to reclaim our—"

"No more lies!" Klath spat, stopping his efforts to argue further.

"So, what?" Karn offered instead, gesturing at the disruptor, "You would shoot an unarmed Klingon? Where is the honour in that?"

"There is none," Klath acknowledged, keeping the disruptor poised, "But then...I am already disgraced, am I not? And if there is nothing more to be done for my honour, then I suppose that does not matter."

With this, Karn's sneer disappeared entirely, as he saw the quandary he was in. Having secured the upper hand, Klath waved the pair towards the exit, gesturing for them to come with him.

"Wh—Where are we going?" Karn managed.

Klath maintained a determined glare.

"To reclaim the honour of my shipmates."

* * * * *

Still groggy from the punch she had received from Klath, Denella winced at the bright lights of the great hall, as the motley quartet of supposed conspirators were led back into the room.

Their hour was up.

The guards lined them up in front of the podium at the head of the vast chamber, where Toran was already waiting, sitting on his throne-like chair with an array of bladed Klingon swords and weaponry laid out on a table to one side. Denella's knowledge of many aspects of Klingon culture was still patchy, but she idly wondered if they were going to be given the right to choose the weapon for their own execution.

"Your time is up, crew of the Bounty," Toran announced solemnly from his throne, "And your QaS Devwl' is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps you made a mistake in placing your trust in one without honour."

The four of them glanced around the hall, but there was indeed no sign of Klath.

Toran slowly stood from his throne and extended himself to his full height, managing to look imposing even in the expanse of the three-storey height of the great hall. "So," he continued, "In his absence, I have the right to defend my honour, and punish those that have committed treason against the Empire."

He looked at the line of faces, then down at the weapons available to him. Denella couldn't be certain, but she was sure that she detected a slight grimace in the Klingon's face as he sized up the blades. Almost as if he wasn't looking forward to the bloodshed. Which was a very curious reaction for a Klingon warrior.

He snapped a look back at them, leaving the weapons where they were.

"Do you have anything more to say before I carry out the sentence?"

One of the Bounty's crew members was suddenly in his element.

"Oh yeah," Sunek nodded, "I've got a hell of a lot to say. You wanna know why we did it? Well, I'll tell you. In long, excruciating detail. See, we're radical animal rights activists from the Badlands. And we have long campaigned against the Klingon Empire's mistreatment of tribbles. Even though some might say that's a really, really dumb thing to get so upset about, right, doc?"

He glanced at Natasha, who tacitly refused to acknowledge the point. He shrugged and continued.

"And you'd better believe that executing us will be a huge mistake. Cos if you do, we'll be martyrs to the cause of the Tribble Liberation Front. And once the rest of the gang gets wind of what happened here, they will start a pressure campaign so intense that you'll regret ever declaring war on those little fuzzballs!"

Despite the gravity of their situation, Denella couldn't help but muster a trace of a smile as the Vulcan continued to ramble on. Only Sunek would think of trying to filibuster his own execution.

Unfortunately for him, it wasn't a tactic that Toran had much time for.

"Enough!" the Klingon bellowed, with enough force to silence Sunek right in the middle of explaining how the Tribble Liberation Front's aggressive leafletting campaign would be stepped up across the whole Beta Quadrant.

The Klingon warrior stepped up to them with a menacing leer.

“You have each committed a grave act against the Empire,” he continued, “And in the continued absence of your QaS DevwI, I shall dispense justice.”

As he scowled at Denella, she couldn't shake the idea that the High Council member might be doing a spot of filibustering of his own.

“Ok,” Sunek tried again, “New idea: You want names? Cos I can give you every last name working in the Tribble Liberation Front right now. I know I just sounded like I was standing with them, but what the hell, you make a persuasive—”

The Vulcan was finally silenced by Toran doling out a solid punch to his stomach. Sunek let out a pained yelp and doubled over in pain.

“Very well,” Toran grunted, walking back over to the tranche of weaponry, “Now I shall—”

The huge main doors to the great hall burst open, and a trio of familiar Klingons entered, Karn and K'Veth led in by a disruptor-wielding Klath. It was enough of a sight for two of Toran's honour guards to move over and intercept them.

“Great,” Sunek coughed sarcastically as he struggled to get his breath back, “He brought a gun.”

Klath grabbed Karn and K'Veth to stop them on the spot as the guards approached, before lowering his disruptor to the ground and setting it down, a clear and obvious gesture of concession to both Toran and the guards.

“What is the meaning of this?” Toran snapped.

“This petaQ has lost his mind,” Karn growled back.

Klath ignored the latest slight on his character and kept his focus on Toran. “These are the ones that are responsible for bringing the plague to Brexis II, Toran. My colleagues are innocent.”

“Lies,” Karn spat out by way of a defence, “He has no proof!”

Toran regarded the newcomers with a curious air, giving his guards a dismissive gesture to order them to step back for the time being. “He says you have no proof, son of Morad,” he reiterated, “Explain yourself.”

Klath stole a glance at K'Veth, who immediately turned away from him. He ignored whatever residual feelings he may still have had towards her, and focused on the more pressing issue. “I know that my colleagues are not behind it,” he explained, “They were here on this mission to support me in my attempts to seek restoration. And they fully supported me in that. Even if they did not...get it.”

He looked over at Jirel, who offered a half-smile and a nod of acknowledgement. Klath nodded back, before continuing.

“And it is also clear that this plague could not have been an accident. Our vessel went through a full decontamination sweep before we departed Mentok colony. The entire ship was thoroughly irradiated, following the precise procedures detailed by the Empire. And each of us had to submit to a full body sensor scan before we were allowed to board. Their presence onboard could not have been overlooked. It had to be deliberate.”

He gestured to Natasha where she stood in line as he continued.

“Furthermore, as our doctor will confirm, I understand that these...things require sustenance in order to multiply so rapidly. Something that they were unlikely to find in our cargo bay without assistance from outside.”

“Energy bars!” Natasha called out, as the pieces clicked together in her head, “We found an energy bar wrapper in with the crates of bloodwine. Sunek asked earlier if they'd brought a packed lunch with them. I guess they kinda did.”

Toran stared blankly at the human doctor for a moment, then turned back to Klath, gesturing to Karn and K'Veth. “This is all very interesting, son of Morad. But why would these exiles come all this way to meet with me and present their cases, while at the same time try to destroy me? Why not just give you and your crew the bloodwine to deliver.”

“Because they were not the masterminds of the scheme. They were merely here to ensure that everything went as planned.”

“This is all fakery—!” Karn began.

“Silence,” Toran boomed, keeping his eyes on Klath, “Then who are you suggesting was responsible for this?”

“I recall something you said when we first arrived. When we all introduced ourselves, you said that you recognised the name Mortath. I find it unlikely that a High Council member would take the trouble to memorise the name of every dishonourable exile in the galaxy. Especially when there are so many of us.”

Toran's eyes widened slightly, and he nodded.

“He already came to you, seeking restoration, did he not?” Klath continued, “Mortath, son of K'Rath. The Khitomer conspirator.”

At this, Karn flashed an angry look at K'Veth, realising that there was only one way that Klath could have been furnished with that particular detail.

“He did,” Toran nodded with a disgusted leer.

“And you dismissed his case.”

“I did. There is no room in the Empire for the son of one so traitorous. The houses of the Khitomer conspirators will remain poison for as long as the sun of Qo’noS remains burning. So I dismissed his case, and then did the same to his children.”

Klath nodded, even as Karn and K’Veth looked down at the ground in shame.

“That was what this mission was about,” he concluded, “You and your reputation had been his one hope of redemption. But instead, you humiliated Mortath, denied him his chance of restoration. He knew that you would do the same to his children. So he decided to take revenge against you, and your house.”

Klath stepped away from the guilty pair, and bowed his own head with a slight look of shame.

“And he saw his opportunity to do so when I answered his call to deal with the infestation on Mentok colony.”

“Explain,” Toran grunted.

“He used my name on the delivery request, instead of his own. To ensure that there would be no suspicion surrounding our cargo as we made our way here. He used his own men to load the bloodwine onboard our ship, back at Mentok colony. And those same men were then used to complete the decontamination screening of the ship, to ensure that the additional cargo made it through unscathed. He even sent his own children here to see the plan through.”

Klath paused for a moment, and sighed deeply.

“And Mortath also ensured that I did not sense any of this danger earlier. Because he made certain that I would be blinded to it, by offering me the one thing that I would overlook just about anything else for.”

“A chance to reclaim your honour,” Toran nodded in understanding, “No matter how futile such a quest.”

Klath tried to not feel any fresh shame from the frankness of this comment. But he was only partly successful in that pursuit.

“Exactly,” he nodded back, “And that was what Mortath needed to pursue his vengeance. He wanted to discredit you, to ruin your name and your house in return for you condemning him and his family to continued exile. And so, eighty years after Khitomer, Mortath organised his own conspiracy.”

Toran glowered at Karn and K’Veth, who both remained silent. “This is true?” he growled.

“Lies,” Karn continued to insist, “You surely cannot believe—”

“It is the truth.”

K’Veth’s voice was quieter than Karn’s, but still tinged with steel. She looked up from the ground, ignoring the fierce look from her brother, and stared at Klath with a sad smile. Klath, for his part, redoubled his efforts to ignore the feeling of strength he felt inside from the power of her look.

“You are defying your own father, K’Veth!” Karn snapped.

“Yes, I am,” she nodded, “Because this is not the Klingon way. I can see that now. A greater Klingon than our father has shown me.”

Klath shifted uncomfortably on his feet at this, as K’Veth returned her attention to Toran.

“Mortath gave us our orders,” she continued, “He told us to make sure the delivery got here, in time for your meeting with your allies from the High Council. When the infestation was discovered, it would be enough to bring shame on your house. The same shame that Mortath has endured his entire life, and the one you refused to rescue him from. That was my father’s plan.”

Toran snarled slightly at her confession, as she maintained as proud a stance as she could under the circumstances. Inside, she prepared for the punishment that he would surely dole out now the truth was known.

But Toran had no time to react further.

Because then, the attack came.

Part 4C

Part Four (Cont'd)

A short distance away, the Bounty's crew had watched on with rapt attention, and no little relief, as Klath had come through for them. Even Sunek, though he would never openly admit it if asked, gave a nod of appreciation as the Bounty's weapons chief concluded his explanation.

The sense of relief among them rose as it became clear that it might not be the day of their executions after all.

Jirel mustered a grin and glanced over at Denella. "Good plan," he whispered.

The Orion smiled and nodded back, but then her expression turned substantially more sour as she saw the attack commencing.

In one swift action, fast enough to catch everyone else completely off-guard, Karn dashed the short distance to the table where Toran's potential weapons of execution had been laid out, preparing to mete out justice to the Bounty's crew. He grabbed a mek'leth from the selection, then swung back around in a fluid motion to bring it to bear. And he charged.

Straight for Toran.

"Look out!" Denella found herself crying out.

It was a futile and meaningless gesture. The other Klingons were already keenly aware of what was happening.

As if in slow motion, the guards on either side reached for their own weapons. Toran went for the bat'leth that was sheathed on his back. But it was obvious that they were going to be too late. That Karn's blade was going to cut the High Council member down.

Karn swung his mek'leth at Toran's neck.

And it impacted with a solid metal object, mere inches from its target.

From out of nowhere, another bat'leth had entered the fray. One that had been particularly sharpened over the last few days.

And in the nick of time, Klath had come through for Toran as well.

* * * * *

The two bladed weapons collided in a kaleidoscopic shower of fiery sparks, and Klath forced Karn's blade backwards with a hefty blow.

Toran stepped back from the melee. His own weapon was now drawn, but he merely observed the fight for the moment. With a single raised hand, he stopped his guards from thinking of intervening as well. The High Council member was clearly intrigued to see how this would play out.

In the middle of the great hall, Klath and Karn growled with effort as they strained for the upper hand, with Karn pushing back on Klath's larger bat'leth with all of his might.

They broke apart, and Klath instinctively assumed a defensive posture. He knew that Karn was at a slight weight disadvantage given the size of his mek'leth. But he also knew that the smaller weapon was easier to wield and quicker to bring to bear. So he knew he had to be ready for a swift attack each time they broke apart.

Karn charged again, and the blades collided in another shower of sparks. The two Klingons drew closer as they strained against each other.

"You ruined everything!" Karn spat, "My father deserved his vengeance!"

"He deserves nothing," Klath grunted back, "For such dishonourable actions. They bring disgrace to the Empire."

"As do you!" Karn hissed back.

With a fierce growl, they broke apart again. Klath swiftly parried the next blow that came in, before sweeping his two-handed weapon around in a wide arc to force Karn back onto the defensive.

Both of them were beginning to physically tire, but the blood lust that was coursing through them was enough to spur them on. And they continued to swing and parry, each move met with an equal countermove. All around the great hall, their audience stood in rapt attention. From Toran's intrigue, to the confusion of his guards, through to the evident concern etched on the faces of the Bounty's crew, everyone's focus was on the fight.

Of all of those watching on, K'Veth stared most intently. A mass of conflicting feelings raced around inside her mind, as she tried to figure out something that seemed vitally important.

Who did she want to win?

Instinctively, she felt as though she should be wanting her brother to be victorious. They shared the same blood, after all, regardless of how their house was seen in the Empire. But after all that had happened, and all that she had seen of Klath, she realised that she didn't want that at all.

Another crashing blow from Karn's mek'leth was met by a deft two-handed block from Klath. More sparks burned through the air as the polished blades made heavy contact.

Karn whirled away and backed off, panting heavily from the exertions.

"You are well practised," Klath noted, as he took a second to catch his own breath, "If only you had not chosen this path in life."

"I was never given that chance, was I?" Karn retorted, "Thanks to the High Council, nearly a century ago. What hope was there for me, or my father?"

Klath considered this for a moment, recalling his own recent flirtation with the concept of hope, and the way it had deserted him so quickly after Toran had dismissed his case. Perhaps there was some truth in Karn's words.

But after a second, he shook his head defiantly. "There is always hope," Klath countered, "Provided the warrior remains true to themselves."

"Another lie," Karn snarled.

He sprang forwards again and their blades clashed. They grappled for a moment, then broke apart once again.

As soon as they were apart, Karn charged back in, his mek'leth raised above his head. Klath recognised the manoeuvre. It was the same one that he had criticised him for when he had used it against Denella back on Mentok colony. And once again, his rash action would prove his downfall.

He deftly evaded his charging opponent, before swinging his bat'leth back around and driving it into his side as he passed by, knocking him to the ground. The mek'leth fell from Karn's grasp and skittered away. Without hesitation, he brought the other end of his weapon to bear, the edge of the blade arcing down towards the helpless Karn's exposed neck. His adversary, sprawled in a heap on the hard floor, was defenceless.

Completely defenceless.

In a split second, he stopped the bat'leth, close enough for it to graze Karn's skin. The younger Klingon stared up in wide-eyed shock. Klath kept the blade pressed against his neck for a moment longer, then looked up at Toran, and at K'Veth.

And he stepped back.

"You have heard their confession," he grunted at Toran, "They are yours to punish as you see fit."

The towering Klingon snapped a gesture at his guards, who both immediately marched across and grabbed a conspirator apiece in their grips. As Karn struggled and K'Veth remained stoic in the face of her own impending fate, Toran kept his attention on Klath.

"You defeated him fairly in combat," he said eventually, "You had the right to kill him."

"I did not mean to kill him," Klath countered, "Merely to disable him."

"Perhaps you have grown soft in your exile."

"Perhaps."

The two proud Klingons stared each other out across the great hall for several moments, as the rest of the gathered audience of Klingon, Trill, human, Vulcan and Orion eyes watched on. Eventually, Toran continued.

"I see you fight well, son of Morad. And it would appear I owe you my life."

Klath's expression didn't change, even as Toran looked a little more regretful for a moment.

"You understand that this act cannot change my decision," he continued darkly, "There is nothing more I can do for you and your case."

"That is your decision," Klath nodded, "But I only fought to defend your honour. Regardless of what the High Council may think of me, I would always do that."

Toran mustered a nod of understanding at this, before turning to Karn. "Son of Mortath. You brought a plague to my house, and now you have tried to assassinate me with your blade. The son of Morad may have shown you leniency, but I will not be so gracious."

He waved a dismissive hand at his guards as Karn continued to angrily squirm in their grasp.

"Take him away."

As her snarling brother was dragged away, K'Veth felt Toran's gaze fall upon her, and felt a fresh rush of shame course through her.

She found herself wondering, based on what she had learned about Klingons during a lifetime in exile, whether today was a good day for her to die. And how one even knew if that was what today was.

"As for you—"

“Toran,” Klath called out, a little more intensely than he had been intending to.

The burly Klingon turned back to him, displaying further irritation on his face at this somewhat presumptive piece of interruption from the disgraced Klingon.

“The...infestation. It is still present?”

The irritation gave way to a deep scowl of anger at the mention of the menace in the stores of his estate. “My men will deal with it,” he replied icily, “For the sake of my honour, hopefully before my allies arrive. Even now, they draw ever nearer to Brexis II.”

Klath nodded, then drew himself up, presenting his bat’leth in front of him and bowing his head. For now, he forced himself to temper the blood lust that was rising inside him again.

“Toran, son of Kradon. I do not expect you to agree, and I have no honour in my name to make such a request. But, as it was my vessel that brought the enemy to your gates, I humbly offer myself, and my own blade, in order to rid you of them.”

He paused, and kept his head bowed.

“You do this to try and gain more favour?” Toran responded.

Klath finally looked back up, and shook his head firmly. “You have already made it clear that there is nothing more I can do. I merely wish to fight this battle for myself. To undo the damage that we have inadvertently caused.”

He gestured over to the other Bounty crew members, who were silently watching the scene unfold on the other side of the hall with their full attention. Even Natasha didn’t react to the threat of another tribble hunt in the offing.

“You feel that this is the Klingon way?” Toran asked.

Klath considered the question for a moment, then simply looked back at Toran and shrugged his burly shoulders.

“I am not sure,” he admitted, “But I feel that this is my way.”

Now it was Toran’s turn for a moment of consideration. It was true that he had enough men to try and deal with the plague, likely before his allies arrived. But it was equally true that he had always been a more open-minded member of the High Council.

“What you suggest is unorthodox,” he replied eventually, “But...this has been something of an unorthodox day.”

With that tacit sign of approval, Klath nodded back, hefted his bat’leth into his right hand, and then turned towards the exit. Toran gave his remaining guards a signal to suggest that they should let him leave.

Then, Klath glanced over at K’Veth, still being restrained. And he felt the need to act. “Although,” he said to Toran, as his eyes remained locked on K’Veth, “It may be more prudent for me not to go into battle alone.”

Toran looked from Klath to K’Veth and back again. Then he sighed with a hint of a snarl.

It was turning into a very unorthodox day.

Part 4D

Part Four (Cont'd)

Moments later, Klath strode purposefully through the courtyard of Toran's estate, with his bat'leth still clasped in his hand.

Alongside him, K'Veth clutched a similar weapon that had been reluctantly provided to her by one of Toran's guards.

Several other guards watched them make their way across the courtyard with curiosity. But they didn't bother to challenge the two unfamiliar armed Klingons. Toran had made sure that word got out to allow them to proceed.

As they neared the stores on the far side of the courtyard, Klath felt his blood lust rising all over again, as they approached their battleground.

"Why have you done this?" K'Veth asked as she walked alongside him, "I have made my own mistakes, and I do not want pity."

"And you will not get any," Klath affirmed, "But you must atone for what you have done here, K'Veth. You must recover your respect. And this battle will be a step towards that aim."

"It is the Klingon way?" she asked, echoing Toran's query from moments earlier.

Klath paused for a second, and suppressed a flinch, keeping a lid on the swirling passions that continued to thunder around inside of him.

"It is the only way."

She nodded in understanding as they walked on. Then, she looked at him again.

"And this will recover Toran's respect?"

He stopped on the spot, causing her to do the same. He turned and looked her squarely in the eye. "You misunderstand," he replied, "This is not a quest to recover Toran's respect for you. This is a quest to recover your respect for yourself. It is the only way to live, as a dishonoured Klingon. There are things that the High Council can never take away from us, and that is one of them."

K'Veth nodded in fuller understanding, as the two Klingons stood toe-to-toe with each other in the middle of the courtyard. "That is what you did with your life?" she asked him, "Recovered your respect for yourself?"

"That," Klath replied with complete honesty, "Is what I continue to do, every day."

With that, he snapped his attention back to the stores, and resumed his march. K'Veth fell in line alongside him once again.

"Tell me," he continued, "In all his teachings, did your father ever tell you of the story of General K'Vusk, and the Battle of Iota Geminorum?"

"No."

"Then I will tell it to you. It is a glorious story. But first..."

They reached the door to the stores.

"...This will be a glorious battle."

She nodded again, feeling her own blood lust rising inside her chest. Like Kahless and Lukara, the two of them stood proudly in front of the yawning darkness inside the stores.

Together, they raised their weapons, and charged forwards with a bloodthirsty pair of roars.

The tribbles didn't know what hit them.

* * * * *

"They're not gonna make us eat them this time, right?"

Sunek felt it was a question that needed asking, even as the Bounty's crew stood around in the great hall and waited patiently for Klath's return.

Denella shrugged back, while Jirel winced slightly at the memory of his last Klingon supper. "Don't worry," he replied quietly, "I'll make sure we make our excuses before dinner is served."

Elsewhere in the group, Natasha looked significantly less amused as she leaned on the stone wall of the hall. Now the drama of Klath's confrontation was over, her sense of righteous indignation had returned with a vengeance.

“We could have just transported these ones away, you know,” she pointed out, “Everyone knew they were there now. There was no need for subterfuge any more. And what those two are doing to those animals now is—”

“Ugh, doc, come on,” Sunek groaned, “Do you ever shut up?”

“And that’s Sunek saying that,” Jirel chimed in with a lopsided grin, “Sunek.”

The Vulcan glared unhappily at the Trill, even as Natasha tutted in disgust at the pair of them, refusing to back down just yet. “I’m just saying, if everything we’ve been through here proves anything, it’s that some Klingon traditions are just plain stupid. And I’m including ‘dealing with tribbles by murdering them all’ somewhere near the top of that list—”

“Hey,” Jirel replied, “Maybe save the rest of that speech until we’re definitely out of earshot of the dozens of heavily armed Klingons, hmm?”

“Or just save it forever?” Sunek offered, “That’s good too.”

Natasha’s grimace deepened by several degrees.

“This is just the way they handle these things,” Denella pointed out, a little more equitably, “And, in fairness, it tends to be pretty effective.”

“Yeah, well,” the other woman continued to grumble, “There’s effective, and then there’s—”

She was interrupted this time by the main doors to the great hall opening with a thud. Everyone gathered in the room turned to see that the warriors had returned from the battlefield. Klath and K’Veth walked in, side by side. Both of them were exhausted from their exploits, dripping with sweat as they clutched their bat’leths. And both of them were covered in tribble blood.

They walked up to where Toran sat on his throne-like seat, with his guards flanking him.

“It is done,” Klath said simply.

Toran nodded back. Klath looked over at the rest of the Bounty’s crew, and took in the range of looks that were staring back at him.

The openly amused look from Sunek. The understanding nod from Denella. The slightly queasy look from Jirel. And the disgusted scowl from Natasha.

He could have predicted each and every one. But he didn’t really pay any attention to them.

Because he felt satisfied.

End of Part Four

Part 5 (Epilogue)

Part Five

Klath had cleaned himself up by the time he joined the rest of the Bounty's crew at the foot of the ship's rear ramp, as they prepared to leave Brexis II.

Toran had given them his word that they could safely return beyond the boundaries of the empire without the need for an escort, provided they kept to their assigned course. It wasn't an offer that anyone had been interested in turning down.

As Klath arrived with the group, they were not entirely surprised to see that only K'Veth was with him.

"Karn?" Denella asked on everyone's behalf.

Klath shook his head.

"My brother attempted to kill Toran," K'Veth added, "He will be punished. But...Toran has no use for me. And, after our battle in the stores, has no wish to punish me either."

"She requires transportation," Klath stated flatly to Jirel, "I told her we would be able to provide it."

"Back to Mentok colony?" the Trill asked.

"I cannot go back to my father now," K'Veth replied with a shake of her head and a tinge of sadness in her voice, "And I cannot stay in Klingon space. I...do not know where I am going."

Jirel considered the Klingon woman for a moment, aware that she had, no matter how reluctantly or accidentally, nearly framed them for treason. But he eventually offered a supportive shrug. He could recognise a lost soul when he saw one. "Well," he replied, "That sounds like our kind of passenger."

K'Veth nodded, and headed up the ramp with Natasha and Sunek. Denella and Jirel lingered with Klath for a few more moments.

"What?" Klath asked simply, as he saw them looking expectantly back at him.

Denella stifled a smile at the nonplussed look on her friend's face. "So," she said, "I'm still not totally clear on each and every Klingon custom and ceremony, as you know. But is it traditional for a shipmate to give their noble warrior friend a supportive embrace for getting through all this?"

"It is not," Klath replied quickly.

"Fair enough," Denella nodded and smiled wider, "Then once we're out of sight of the Empire, I owe you a hell of a hug."

Klath nodded stiffly, indicating that he was willing to accept those terms.

To Denella's side, Jirel took a step forward, earning himself a sharp glare from the Klingon as soon as he did so. "Hey, don't worry. Not gonna hug you either. I just...wanted to say I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Firstly, for being a jerk earlier," Jirel sighed, "I need to get used to the idea that everyone's gonna leave the Bounty eventually."

As soon as he said that, Klath looked over at Denella with a trace of amusement. This was clearly something that they had discussed together as well. "You do know," he said patiently, "Starfleet does not give out field promotions to chief engineer."

"Hey," the Orion shrugged, "A girl can dream."

"And secondly," Jirel continued, "Because of everything that happened here. I guess I'm saying that I'm glad I didn't lose a friend today, but I wish you hadn't got stuck back here with us."

Klath took a longing look around the innately Klingon confines of Toran's residence, feeling the final traces of the surge of hope he had allowed himself to feel earlier dissipating away. "Yes," he admitted, "I wish that as well."

"Ok," the slightly hurt Trill sighed, "Soon as we get a spare afternoon, I'm teaching you how to mince words—"

"Jirel," Klath cut in, turning back to him, "There may be nothing I want more than to return to my people. But that is not possible. And so... there is nothing else I want more than to remain aboard this ship. There is more than enough honour for me here."

Jirel's face creased into a full smile. Realising that, if he wasn't careful, he might actually start to tear up, he stole a glance at Denella and nodded at the Klingon. "See that? The guy's fishing for hugs here."

Denella mustered a wide smile of her own, then switched to a more concerned expression as she saw something over Klath's shoulder.

"Um, Klath...?"

He turned around, and was surprised to see Toran striding across the landing pad towards them, his ever-present battle armour clinking with every step. As he reached them, he offered all three of them a curt nod.

“You are leaving now.”

It was partly a statement, partly an order, and in no way a question.

“I felt it necessary to warn you,” he continued, “Never return here, Klath, son of Morad.”

Klath felt the pain of the warning hit home like a d’k tahg being plunged into his chest, but he kept a stoic front and nodded back. He had accepted his fate now.

“Also,” Toran added, “I feel I should...apologise to your colleagues for their incarceration. I am relieved we were able to clear the matter up.”

Jirel remained silent, still a little fearful of the enormous warrior in front of them. But next to him, Denella piped up. “You knew, didn’t you?” she asked, earning a surprised look from Toran, “That we were innocent.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Cos, when our time was up and our QaS Devwl’ still wasn’t back in the hall, if you really thought we were guilty, you’d have just killed us there and then. Instead, you kept on talking, like you were trying to stall for long enough for Klath to actually show up.”

Toran stiffened slightly at this accusation, but eventually gave her a slight nod. “I had my suspicions that you were not responsible for the infestation,” he conceded.

“Why?”

Toran’s mouth curled into a slight smile. A rare sight since they had first met him.

“Because,” he replied, “You are not very good liars.”

Denella smiled and nodded back. Jirel looked a little offended, before recalling Sunek’s speech about the Tribble Liberation Front and reasoning that Toran had a point.

“But,” Toran continued, “You do have courage. I may have been stalling, but if your QaS Devwl’ had not returned when he did, I would have had to carry out the executions regardless.”

Denella suppressed a gulp and glanced over at Jirel’s rather pale-looking face.

“Good to know,” she offered with a shrug.

With that, Toran turned his attention back to Klath, and Denella took the hint. She grabbed Jirel’s arm and pulled him back up the Bounty’s ramp, backing off to a respectful distance.

“Klath, son of Morad,” Toran grunted, “Your crew are most certainly...unorthodox.”

“They are my friends,” Klath grunted back, a little self-consciously.

Toran nodded thoughtfully for a moment.

“The Vulcan talks a lot,” he replied eventually.

“Yes. He does.”

Toran nodded again, as Klath began to get the impression that the High Council was attempting small talk with him. As if he was struggling to find what he really wanted to say. “You assisted me greatly today,” the Councillor continued, “My guards have checked the entire residence twice over. The plague is truly vanquished.”

“It was a proud battle,” Klath offered back, still not happy at having to engage in such small talk, regardless of who he was engaging in it with.

“I am sure it was. And not one that you were obligated to lead. I told you it would not alter my decision. There was no honour to be gained from it.”

“Perhaps not in the eyes of the Empire,” Klath countered, “But there was for myself.”

Toran regarded the disgraced warrior in front of him. Then he looked up at the two Bounty crew members still standing on the ramp, just within earshot. And he nodded.

“I...believe I understand.”

He looked back at Klath, and his expression hardened again.

“Klath, son of Morad. I have not been able to assist you today. You and your house will still carry the burden of dishonour across the Empire. For now.”

Klath had prepared himself to accept one more humiliating speech before leaving. But Toran’s last words gave him cause to question himself, not entirely sure how to react.

“The situation in the High Council is somewhat fluid at the moment,” Toran continued, in a slightly quieter tone, as if he wanted to keep this information from everyone else, “Chancellor Martok is privately keen to reappraise much of what happened under Gowron, and there is growing support for such a move. And part of that concerns the Civil War itself.”

Klath remained a picture of stoic silence, but he couldn't help but feel a fresh rush of emotion inside as Toran continued.

“There is an increasing belief that Gowron was overly severe in punishing any act of perceived dishonour from his side during the war. A clear attempt to distance himself from the treachery of Duras, and make himself appear even more honourable in comparison. A Chancellor so pure and noble that he would not think twice of exiling any of his own men who failed to meet his standards.”

Toran sighed and shook his head.

“None of it was challenged at the time. But there may come a moment when those matters are looked into again. Our recent history may be up for some interesting revisions.”

“I see,” Klath managed.

“So,” Toran concluded, “I cannot help you today. But, given what you did for me, I felt that before you return to exile, you should know that in the future, someone else may be able to.”

Klath felt a familiar feeling growing inside, even as he responded with a simple nod. Toran nodded back, then took a firm step back from him.

“And now, my guards will be watching. So, I must do this. It is...the Klingon way.”

“Yes,” Klath replied, prepared for what was to happen, “It is.”

Toran's scowl darkened as he held his hands up and clenched his fists tightly.

“biHnuch!”

Coward.

As Toran turned his back to him, Klath played his own role in the theatre by bowing his head in shame and turning to leave under the shadow of his continued exile.

It wasn't the first time he had been on the receiving end of that tradition. Toran himself had already done it to him when he had first arrived on Brexis II. But for the first time, he didn't find himself overwhelmed with shame.

And as he walked back up the Bounty's ramp to the waiting Denella and Jirel, he realised why that was. Because there was still something else inside him besides the shame. A feeling that, however faint it may have been, was still there.

He still had hope.

* * * * *

“Klath's gonna kill you, you know that?”

Jirel looked down at the object on the table in Natasha's cabin and shook his head.

The Bounty was cruising back to neutral space at warp, leaving the Brexis system and the Klingon Empire far behind. Before they had left, Natasha found time to treat Jirel and Denella's concussions, in what she found was becoming a traditional trip to the medical bay whenever the Bounty was finished with one of their straightforward deliveries.

Elsewhere, the ship was in a state. It turned out that when you took a ship into orbit and then blew all the outer hatches in order to deal with a tribble infestation onboard, it tended to leave a bit of a mess.

Anything that hadn't been securely nailed down had been tossed and thrown around by the sudden redistribution of air around the ship, and it was going to take some time to clean up. To say nothing of the damage to the ship's internals that the tribbles had caused. So the Bounty wasn't just leaving Klingon space, it was heading for a friendly port for some much needed repairs.

Shortly after they had gotten going, with Klath having returned to his cabin to rest, Natasha had said that she had something to show the rest of them. And she had led them to her cabin, where they had soon seen what she was referring to.

She had found time to replicate a modest cage that sat on the table, filled with comfortable bedding material and a water bowl.

And inside the cage, there was a chirping brown and white spotted tribble.

To Jirel's side, Denella and Sunek looked on with similar levels of distrust on their faces, even as Natasha opened the top of the cage and gently lifted the tribble out, petting the chattering creature's fur as she did so.

“It's gonna be no trouble, trust me,” she insisted as she stroked it, “You won't even know it's onboard.”

The others shared a round of disbelieving glances as the tribble continued to coo contentedly at the fussing it was receiving.

"It's just," she continued, "Given how many of the poor things have died over the last few days, I thought it was only fair we saved one of them."

"Um," Denella sighed, "Not to needlessly point out the obvious, but how exactly is it gonna be no trouble? They're born pregnant, and that thing's siblings just ate half my ship back there."

"Yeah," Sunek added, "Trouble is kinda their deal. One tribble becomes ten, becomes a gajillion, becomes nightmare fuel when they make the noise they make when you blow them all out into the vacuum of—"

"You're not gonna need to do that with this one," Natasha jumped in quickly.

"How come?"

"Found it in the pile earlier," she explained, "Thanks to a very rare genetic abnormality, this is an infertile tribble."

"Huh," Denella offered, "That's...nice?"

"Well, not for the tribble," Natasha shrugged, "But, outside of immaculate conception, it means that we don't need to worry about any nasty surprises. One tribble is all we've got onboard, and one tribble is all we're ever gonna have onboard."

She fussed it some more and smiled, before looking back at the unimpressed trio and holding it out to Jirel.

"Wanna pet it?"

"Not even a tiny bit."

"Aw," she smiled, fussing the chirping tribble some more and addressing it directly with a put-on childish voice, "He doesn't mean to be so nasty, Spotty."

Denella and Sunek both stifled smirks, even as Jirel stared daggers at Natasha, who remained a picture of innocence as she looked back at him.

"Spotty?" the Trill replied with a dark look.

He had told her about the slightly cruel and deeply unimaginative nickname he had picked up during his time working at the Tyran Scrapyards a few weeks ago.

At the time, he had accidentally revealed that morsel of personal information while the pair of them had been tied up to a cabrodine bomb in the Bounty's cargo bay. And he had feared that she was biding her time, waiting for the right moment to use that against him, as revenge for all of the ways that he had irritated her since she had joined up with his ship.

Apparently, she had found the right moment.

"Yeah, Spotty," she repeated, still feigning ignorance as she gestured to the tribble, "Y'know. Cos of the spots."

Jirel's glare intensified further, even as Denella and Sunek both shrugged and reached out to fuss over the tribble. Both of them were entirely oblivious to the deeper meaning behind the name, but both clearly not oblivious to the surface level comparison.

"Well, I think it suits it," Denella nodded, struggling to contain her amusement even as Jirel gently simmered next to her.

"Yep," Sunek added, "It's all covered in spots, completely neutered, kinda useless, a little bit on the chubby side. Kinda reminds me of someone."

The Vulcan made no attempt to disguise his own amusement, as Natasha allowed herself a moment to look back at Jirel with the slightest look of victory on her face.

Jirel just shook his head and sighed.

"Klath's gonna kill you..."

* * * * *

Elsewhere onboard the Bounty, Klath was entirely unaware of their additional passenger. He had enough problems of his own. He had found that, even though he had retired to his cabin to rest after his exertions on Brexis II, he was struggling to follow through with that plan.

He couldn't sleep.

Inside him, there was still a swirling mass of emotions which were refusing to go away. And he was struggling to make sense of them all.

Part of it was the sense of hope that had been kindled inside him again by Toran's parting words. But there were deeper passions than just that. Something he had come to realise he had been feeling for some time, separate from the hope of the mission.

He wondered whether they were being caused by being back in Klingon space, surrounded by the Empire. And whether they would disappear as soon as the Bounty returned to neutral space. But whatever they were, they were proving troublesome.

He had even tried running through some calming Mok'bara exercises, even though he wasn't much of an expert in the practice, but that hadn't helped him much either. He had struggled to follow the controlled breathing technique that was required for the exercise, and couldn't maintain a calm and balanced centre.

And so he had resorted to pacing around his cabin, his mind still a whirlwind that showed no immediate signs of calming down.

Out of nowhere, the door buzzer sounded out. He grimaced unhappily and sighed. He didn't want company, especially when he was in this sort of state.

But, again, it wasn't exactly easy to hide away on the Bounty.

"Enter," he begrudgingly boomed out.

K'Veth walked slowly into his cabin, allowing the doors to swish closed behind her as she kept her focus on him.

And Klath suddenly felt the extra feelings he was dealing with coalescing into something stronger and more definable. A feeling that he had heard a lot about, in song and in stories. But one that he had only experienced himself on a few fleeting occasions.

A feeling far stronger than just simple lust or desire for the Klingon who was now standing so close to him. A feeling that made his heart beat faster and his brain flood with an aggressive mixture of pain and endorphins.

A feeling of par'Mach.

He didn't know if it was genuine. Or if it was just down to his proximity to a Klingon female for the first time in five years. Or even if it was just a result of an excess of energy and emotion from their long and fierce battle side by side with the hoards of tribbles back on Brexis II.

But right now, he didn't care either way.

K'Veth didn't say a word. She simply stood and stared at him across the cabin, baring her teeth slightly as she did so.

Neither Klingon really needed to say anything. It had been clear for some time that, whatever it might have been that they were feeling, it was clearly mutual.

Klath stepped over to her, meeting her stare with an angry glare of his own.

He shot out a limb and grabbed her right arm tightly, pulling it close to his face and taking in her scent. She forcefully grabbed his right arm and reciprocated the gesture, snarling aggressively at him as she did so.

Klath's mouth curved into a slight smile as he snarled back.

Like Kahless and Lukara many centuries ago, they found themselves consumed by the passions of the aftermath of the battle. They stood together and felt their hearts beat as one inside their chests.

And then, with both of them powered by feelings and emotions neither could fully explain, the two disgraced Klingons, heading back into lonely exile, dutifully took part in another long and noble Klingon tradition.

The End

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