

## **Star Trek: Bounty - 111 - "Love, but With More Aggressive Overtones"**

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## **Star Trek: Bounty - 111 - "Love, but With More Aggressive Overtones"**

by [BountyTrek](#)

### Summary

Klath finds his attempts at romantic overtures towards a fellow Klingon being shunned, while Denella becomes involved with a scrappy Bajoran shuttle pilot, who is being pursued by a group of wronged Pakleds.

# Prologue

## Prologue

The soothing tones of the Bajoran folk ballad filled the air inside the cockpit of the Ferengi shuttle Kendra as it warped on through space. The gentle strings and delicate flutes layered over each other in what most experts felt was the most relaxing musical genre in the whole galaxy.

Without warning, the calming melody transformed into a violently harsh and discordant crackle, before the cockpit was plunged into an unerring silence. For a moment, at least, before a distinctly irked voice filled the void.

“Computer, you have got to be freaking kidding me.”

“Please restate the request,” a clipped male voice replied, a distinct audio crackle accompanying the words of the computer as well.

“Ugh. Just...resume playback!”

There was a brief flurry of clicks and chirps from the Kendra’s computer, indicating that the system was valiantly attempting to carry out that deceptively simple request. But the strings and flutes showed no sign of returning.

“Unable to comply. Corruption of audio files in primary databank.”

This dispassionate announcement was greeted with a deeply frustrated scream, a response that the computer also failed to recognise as a legitimate request.

Juna Erami dragged herself out from underneath the main console of the shuttle, her face streaked with dirt from the repairs she had been in the middle of attempting to complete. “The whole lot?” she groaned, “Tell me the file backups are recoverable, at least. If I’ve lost all my music, you’re gonna have one pissed-off pilot on your hands.”

“Secondary databank is online,” the computer affirmed.

“Well, that’s something, I guess.”

The Bajoran woman ran a hand through her matted hair and took a deep calming breath. Looking around the worn-down interior of the Kendra, she had to admit that she’d made better impulse buys.

At the time, she thought she was getting a good deal. She had needed transportation and had plenty to barter with, and she had gotten herself more than just a ride. She’d gotten a whole ship. But, as soon as she’d actually started to push the Kendra out in space, the problems began. And any attempt to correct one malfunction seemed to lead to three more developing, like the whole vessel had been cursed by the Pah-wraiths. It was starting to get to her.

With another sigh, she accepted that she was going to be working in silence and crouched back down to return to the more pressing issue of bypassing the shuttle’s broken aft deflector grid.

“You know,” she tutted into the ether as she worked, “It’s a good job you’re here. Otherwise I’d end up talking to myself.”

“Please restate the request.”

“Ugh. I really need to meet some new people—”

She was cut off by a sudden shower of sparks that belched out from the panel she was working on, causing her to stumble back in shock.

“Agh! Crap! Crapping crapping crap!” she cursed as she hopped around, shaking her hand where the sparks had stung her palm.

And then, as always happened with the Kendra, one problem begot another one.

“Warning,” the computer calmly sounded out, “Power overload in warp coil. Emergency deceleration is imminent.”

Erami braced herself as best she could as the Kendra suddenly and violently slowed, pushing the inertial dampeners of the tiny vessel to their limits. “Thanks for the warning,” she grimaced.

“Warp drive offline,” the computer confirmed, without any apparent concern for her well-being.

After making sure she was still in one piece, she flopped down into the tattered pilot’s chair and tapped the controls with renewed urgency.

“Please say we made it into the system before all that. Cos I am really not in the mood to spend the next three months coasting in on impulse, talking to you.”

The computer didn’t respond, but she was relieved to see that they had indeed arrived at the Kervala system before the failure. Kervala Prime, and the spaceport she had been aiming for, was a short journey away.

“Well,” she smiled as she laid in a course, “Nice to have a bit of luck for once.”

“Warning. Corruption of audio files in secondary databank.”

Her mood darkened all over again as the Kendra limped on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Juna Erami strode down the steps at the side of her shuttle and took in the view.

She had landed on one of the outer pads at the main port on Kerval Prime, some distance away from the bulbous main structure. It made the journey there a little more of a trek, but the parking costs were cheaper this far out, and she needed to save latinum for the repairs themselves.

Usually, landing pads this far out tended to be deserted. But today, she found that she was in the company of some fellow cheapskates. On the other side of the rectangular landing area stood a battered Ju'Day-type raider.

She ambled over, intrigued by the ship itself, and also by the figure that she could see was working on it. A green-skinned woman in oversized overalls. She looked both the ship and the engineer over and smiled.

"Nice ship."

As soon as she opened her mouth, the Orion spun around, caught off-guard. In an act of instinctive self-defence, she brought the object in her hand to bear on the stranger.

Erami looked down at the small engineering tool she was being threatened with and scrunched her wrinkled nose up in amusement. "Is that... an isodyne coupler?"

The green-skinned woman sheepishly looked at the somewhat inoffensive object, then at the disarmingly friendly face of the Bajoran, with her straggly mass of black hair and dusty brown tunic and trousers, and struggled for an answer.

"Well," Erami continued with a grin, holding her hands up in mock surrender, "Take whatever you want, but please don't couple my isodynes."

The Orion lowered the engineering tool and shrugged apologetically. "Sorry. I just don't like—I didn't hear you come over."

"Hey, no, I get it. My fault. I know what it's like, working on your own at a port like this. Still...all I said was 'nice ship'."

The other woman cast a glance up at her ship, the hodgepodge of different shades and colours of metal panels indicating the constant running repairs it had been through in over thirty years of long-suffering service. As far as she was concerned, it was the most magnificent ship in the galaxy. But she was entirely used to being in a minority of one on that particular subject.

"Yep," the Bajoran continued, as she glanced over the ship's hull, "She's a beauty."

"Um," the Orion managed, "Thanks? I guess we're not used to getting compliments."

"Ah, I don't believe that for a second."

She accompanied her comment with a warm enough smile, but the taller woman immediately flinched, and her grip on the isodyne coupler tightened. Erami noted the telltale signs that she was laying it on a little strong, and turned her attention back to the ship, walking around the port wing of the raider with continued admiration.

"Ju'Day-type, right?" she continued, "Yeah, used to do a bit of work with the Maquis, as it happens. They swore by the things. Maybe a bit old, a little underpowered, but they were scrappy and resilient as hell. One guy told me that, out in the Badlands, two of these working together could take out a Galor-class warship."

"Can't say we've ever tried that," the Orion replied, pocketing her tool and wiping her hands on her overalls, more relaxed now the conversation had switched back to the ship, "But we do ok."

Erami nodded, then paused at the rear of the ship and gestured upwards. "I don't remember the thruster vents looking like that, though."

The other woman stepped over, conflicting looks of embarrassment and pride fighting a pitched battle for control of her face. "Ah. Yeah, that's, um, my design. Stupid things were always overheating in atmospheric flight, so I widened the cooling slats and added a few extra vents along the dorsal side."

Erami stared back at her with a look of mild incredulity. "You redesigned your ship's thruster vents?"

"I mean," the Orion replied with a shrug, gesturing to the ageing ship above them, "It's not like she's still under warranty or anything."

Erami smiled wider and shook her head, before gesturing back to her own vessel. "Well, I could use some of that ingenuity right now. Behold, the mighty Kendra. Sixteen previous owners, about 15,000 light years on the clock, impulse drive as slow as a Lurian transport sled, and for the life of me I cannot get the pilot's seat to tilt back the way I like it."

"Na'Far-class," the Orion noted, "I worked on one of those a while back, with my father."

She paused and flinched again. It was a reaction that Erami knew all too well, the look of a painful memory being dredged up from the back of one's mind. Of someone freshly mourning an old loss.

“Um,” the engineer continued, regaining some composure, “I remember we had a hell of a time trying to get the plasma injectors to stop overloading the warp coil.”

“Three guesses what I’m here to fix,” Erami smiled knowingly.

The Orion woman mustered a smile back, and the ever-resourceful Erami spied an opportunity to get a little closer to her new friend.

“Hey, crazy thought, but if you could see your way to giving me some pointers with those plasma injectors, I’d really appreciate it. I’ve tried everything with the damn things.”

“Ah, I dunno. I’ve got a full repair schedule to work through—”

“Woah,” the Bajoran cut in with a disarming gesture, “I’m not trying to take advantage of you. We can work something out. If you give me a hand with the Kendra, I can help you with...?”

She let her words tail off, gesturing for the still-reluctant Orion to complete the sentence.

“Well,” the other woman sighed eventually, “I...guess I could use a hand rewiring our secondary deflector array.”

“Ah, perfect. It’s a deal!”

She smiled even wider and held out her hand in front of her. The Orion woman wiped her own dirty hand again, and tentatively accepted the handshake.

“Juna Erami,” the Bajoran woman said, by way of a formal introduction.

“Denella,” replied Denella.

\* \* \* \* \*

A short while later, the two slightly incongruous figures walked down the main promenade area of Kervala Prime’s main spaceport.

All around them were bustling shops, bars and restaurants offering all manner of ways for a lonely traveller to part with their latinum. Each venue was a cultural melting pot of disparate species. But even given the dizzying mixture of faces up and down the promenade, Denella couldn’t help but feel like she and her Bajoran companion were attracting more than their fair share of stares.

She tried to dismiss her concerns. After all, attracting a lot of stares was a depressingly familiar part of her life a lot of the time. So she did what she always did, and focused on the job. “There’s a salvage yard just down here,” she explained to Erami, “Cheaper than trying to source new parts. Hopefully they’ll have some compatible injectors for you, and a lot of spare wiring for me.”

“Wow,” the Bajoran grinned back, “You’re all business, aren’t you? We’re not even gonna stop for a quick raktajino?”

She gestured to one side of the promenade, as they passed a gaudy Ferengi coffee chain outlet with a huge snaking line leading up to an understaffed counter, where a trio of underpaid workers slaved away under a large board advertising their new range of I’danian spiced lattes.

“Got coffee back at the ship,” Denella pointed out.

“Huh,” Erami griped, “This is gonna be no fun at all.”

They walked on in silence for a moment, before Erami looked over quizzically at her new companion.

“By the way, I was meaning to ask. How come your secondary deflector array needs rewiring?”

Denella looked back at her and shrugged.

“Tribbles.”

Erami studied the completely sincere face of the Orion woman for a moment, then threw her head back and laughed heartily. “Ok, I was totally wrong,” she managed eventually, “This is gonna be a hell of a lot of fun.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the bustling Ferengi coffee shop, two figures sat perched at a tall table on the edge of the establishment, staring out at the Bajoran woman walking alongside the Orion from behind two enormous I’danian spiced lattes in replicated takeaway cups.

Both women were too absorbed in their conversation to notice. Denella might have picked up on the unwelcome attention, but it was just a couple of stares amongst the dozens that they were getting, so the two figures were free to focus entirely on the Bajoran.

The shorter of the two Pakleds turned to his colleague with excitement at having finally tracked down their quarry.

“It is her,” he whispered, “She came here after all!”

The taller Pakled took a slow sip of what had turned out to be an incredibly underwhelming drink for how much it had cost, and nodded darkly.

“Yes,” he grunted back, “She is not smart...”

## Part 1A

### Part One

Klath stood and stared out of the window at the view of the spaceport outside.

It wasn't an especially interesting view, consisting of little more than a nondescript and mostly empty street branching off from the main shopping area. But that didn't really matter, because he wasn't really taking in the view. Instead, he was lost in thought.

It had been two days since the Bounty had arrived on Kervala Prime for some much needed repairs to the damage caused by the infestation of tribbles they had picked up on their mission inside the borders of the Klingon Empire. Since then, while Denella had focused on the repairs, and the rest of the Bounty's crew had availed themselves of the dubious pleasures of the port itself, the Bounty's Klingon weapons chief had found himself caught up with another issue entirely.

Something so powerful that there was no direct translation of the Klingon word for it.

par'Mach.

For simplicity's sake, most universal translators simply took it to be the Klingon word for love, and left it there. But from what Klath had seen about the concept of love in other cultures, he considered that particular mistranslation to be a gross slander against the Klingon people.

A few months ago, in order to quell the boredom during a particularly quiet long-haul delivery, he had resorted to reading through a few chapters of one of Sunek's collection of trashy romance novels that cluttered up a not insignificant portion of the Bounty's onboard database.

And while he had admittedly been intrigued by some of the basic practicalities of the story, which had concerned a love triangle between a human, a Deltan and a type of touch-telepathic sentient moss that the other two characters had found growing on the wall of their holiday home on Betazed, he found little to dissuade his opinion that love was a somewhat spurious, fleeting and mostly trifling concept. Something that other humanoids - and, apparently, certain mosses - seemed capable of falling into and out of at a moment's notice throughout their lives.

And so, he was certain that par'Mach most certainly wasn't love. It went far, far beyond that.

It was a feeling that, when one was consumed by it, seemed to affect every atom of your body. A scaldingly intense combination of passion, devotion, admiration and lust which one particularly florid ancient Klingon poet had claimed 'burned in the depths of the cauldron of the soul'.

Klath would be the first to admit that he didn't have anything like that sort of way with words. But based on how he was feeling, he was also certain that the gist of the metaphor was accurate.

Throughout his life, Klath had felt the blood lust of the battlefield and the searing rage of combat. He had led warriors to war, commanded a crew through countless firefights, and felt the combined pain of dozens of weapons tearing into his flesh. But he had never felt anything like the tumult that currently consumed him. It felt like his soul was roasting above the flames of Gre'thor itself, and not even the strength of a thousand rampaging sarks could pull him away from it.

He was in par'Mach. Big time.

"You look troubled."

He turned from the window as she emerged from the small sleeping area of the lodgings that she had found at the port, adjusting her tunic top as she finished dressing.

Klath was usually, as the rest of the Bounty's crew would readily attest, a rather stoic and grumpy individual. But as soon as he saw her face, his own features contorted into a scowling smile.

K'Veth, daughter of B'Eleya, approached him and matched his expression.

They had first met on Mentok colony, where the Bounty had answered a call to help deal with a tribble infestation. There, he had become an unwitting pawn in a scheme by K'Veth's father to discredit a member of the High Council using a plague of said tribbles. A scheme that K'Veth herself had been an unwilling participant in.

But Klath had discovered the truth in the nick of time. And then, with the help of K'Veth and the blessing of Toran, the council member in question, they had personally dealt with the infestation by slaying every last tribble on the premises. A shared experience that had served to further kindle their growing passion for each other.

Ever since they had first consummated their desires onboard the Bounty on their way to Kervala Prime, they had barely been apart. They had spent most of the journey in Klath's cabin, and had now transferred their passions to the modest accommodation K'Veth had found at the port. And with every minute they spent together, the yearning feelings of par'Mach continued to spread and consume him, like an army marching through enemy territory. And he was sure that she was going through the same internal battle.

She joined him at the window and idly ran a finger across a deep scratch on his left cheek, left behind by one of her sturdy nails, a remnant of one of the more violent passages of their most recent attempt to sate their desires for each other.

"You should find a dermal regenerator," she offered, "Otherwise this will become permanent."

"Perhaps that is what I want," he countered, "For it to remain there forever, as a mark of our shared passion."

K'Veth studied his deadly serious expression with a trace of amusement. "On top of everything else, it seems you have a way with words, Klath, son of Morad. I did not realise that about you."

"I did not realise that about myself," he conceded, "It may be something that being with you has...brought out of me."

Suddenly feeling a little self-conscious, and silently cursing his par'Mach for making him speak so openly and frankly with this particular Klingon, he elected to change the subject.

"What are your plans now? My ship will not remain here forever."

K'Veth stepped away from him and considered the question, taking in the modest confines of her current accommodation with a hint of sadness. It was a question she had spent plenty of time considering over the past few days, when she hadn't been otherwise occupied with Klath. And it wasn't one she had found much of an answer for.

"I do not know," she admitted, "Not exactly. I know that I cannot return to my father now. So I will remain here while I can, and look for passage elsewhere. I hope to find a...suitable colony elsewhere to live out my exile."

"We can provide you with transport. If you wish."

"You and your crew have already done enough for me. At some point, I must find my own path."

Klath paused for a moment, doing his best to keep a lid on the fire that was burning with fresh intensity inside his soul as he looked at her. And he also considered his own exile, and the miserable time he had endured trying to find his place in the universe, and how empty his life had felt. How he had drifted without direction, from one colony to the next. And from one fight to the next. A dishonoured exile to his people, and an unwanted outsider to everyone else.

Until he had found the Bounty.

"If that is what you wish," he replied eventually, "But...perhaps you have already found your path."

"I do not require your pity, Klath," she replied curtly, sizing him up with a sudden edge of distrust, "I know that I am dishonoured, so do not waste your time with empty words."

Klath shook his head firmly and stepped back towards her. He didn't know if he was being driven by the par'Mach itself, but he had become increasingly certain during his contemplative staring out of the window what the right path was.

"I am not offering pity."

"Then what?"

He stiffened slightly. And at the critical moment, his earlier way with words seemed to let him down, and he reverted to a less passionate angle.

"Given what has happened, it would be for the best if we were...joined."

K'Veth's expression cycled through several expressions. She covered shock, incredulity and amusement in double quick time, before settling on simmering defiance. None of which were really what Klath had been hoping for.

"You want to take me as your wife?" she scoffed.

"That is my wish," Klath affirmed, despite her tone, "But the decision is yours."

She stared back at him and shook her head. "So, what? You would have us find a Celebrant at this port? Light the candles, recite the vows? And, before all that, you and your crewmates would perform all six trials of the Kal'Hyah ritual, I assume? Yes, son of Morad, I have been taught all about this part of our culture. Even in exile."

Klath picked up on the mocking edge to her words, but he remained deadly serious, powered by the fire inside him. "I am willing to...forgo some of the ceremonies," he conceded, "But it is the right thing to do. As I have tried to tell you ever since we first met, it is important that Klingons maintain their ways and traditions. Even two Klingons like us."

"I think our mating has blinded you, son of Morad."

Klath shook his head, more aggressively this time. He felt his mood beginning to sour.

"My eyes are open."

She stared back at him, searching for a trace of a sign on his face that he was anything other than serious. But she saw nothing. She glanced at the wound on his cheek and realised that she was going to have to hurt him even more this time.

"In which case," she sighed, with a hint of reluctance, "As per our people's...proud traditions, I decline your request."

Klath's chest imploded. He felt a sudden, uncontrollable urge to collapse to the ground under the weight of the loss he felt. When experiencing par'Mach, the times of loss hit home just as hard as the times of joy.

But whatever he was feeling inside, he was still a proud Klingon. So he internalised all of that, and digested all of his swirling, conflicted feelings down into a simple nod, accompanied by a slightly displeased grunt.

“That is your right.”

With that, he turned on his heels and made for the door without another word.

“You do not need to—”

She didn't get any further before he walked silently out of the door, and kept on walking. With each step he felt the aching sensation of his par'Mach-infused heart inside his chest. Which now felt more like a disease infecting his every fibre rather than a proud army marching onwards.

And K'Veth could do nothing but watch the door slowly close behind him.



## Part 1B

### Part One (Cont'd)

“It’s not a date.”

For the fifth or sixth time since Denella had returned to the Bounty, she found herself saying those exact words, as well as wishing that she hadn’t said anything to her colleague about her plans for the evening. As she stalked around her cabin, cleaning herself up after a long day of repairs on both the Bounty and the Kendra, the object of her frustrations sat at the small desk in the corner of the room, looking back at her excitedly.

“Sure, right,” Natasha Kinsen, the ex-Starfleet human doctor of the Bounty, nodded knowingly, “It’s not a date. You’re just meeting up with this Bajoran. Tonight. For dinner. Just the two of you. At a fancy restaurant.”

Denella stopped and stared at her, sighing with frustration. “I don’t think it’s all that fancy—Ok, it’s just that we need to discuss tomorrow’s repair schedule, and we’re both hungry. So Erami suggested we grab something to eat. That’s all.”

“Uh huh,” Natasha nodded again, her knowing look ratcheting up another notch, “Except...if you just wanted a bite to eat, we’ve got a perfectly good replicator right here?”

Denella went to counter this latest point from the increasingly irritating woman sitting at her desk, but couldn’t quite find a salient retort. In the end, she fell back on an old favourite.

“It’s not a date.”

For the sixth or seventh time, that did little to convince Natasha, who stood up and paced across the room towards Denella’s closet. “Well, agree to disagree,” she shrugged, “Either way, you still need to get ready for tonight. And I know it’s kinda super lame from an enlightened 24th century perspective, but I always used to love a bit of pre-date girly time.”

Denella couldn’t have offered a more nonplussed expression if she had tried.

“‘Girly time’?”

“Yeah,” Natasha nodded, as she reached the closet, “Back at the Academy, me and my friends used to have this whole pre-gaming ritual we’d go through whenever one of us had a hot date—”

“It’s not a date.”

“—We’d all meet up a couple of hours beforehand, then we’d replicate a few cocktails, paint her nails, do her hair, and help her pick out her best—”

She stopped herself as she swung open the closet door.

“Overalls.”

Staring back at her from inside the modest confines of the closet were a dozen or so identical sets of oversized engineering overalls, each one a slightly different hue or colour.

Entirely unabashed by her limited wardrobe, Denella called out as she grabbed a towel and made for the washbasin in her bathroom. “Dark blue ones’ll do if you wanna grab them for me. Got them on rotation.”

Natasha gently closed the doors and suppressed a frustrated sigh before turning back around to the Orion, refusing to let her pursuit of the memory of her heady, youthful days at the Academy be thwarted. In the bathroom, she heard water running into the sink. “Ok, new plan,” she persisted, “I was out shopping on the promenade earlier, and I grabbed a replicator pattern for this really cute dress. So how about we load that up and see if we can—”

“Make me look pretty?” Denella called back, stepping back out of the bathroom and towelling her face off.

Natasha felt the floor immediately give way underneath her feet, as everything about Denella’s actions, and her choice of wardrobe, made immediate sense to her.

All of her awkwardness and uncertainty about what was happening wasn’t just the sort of giddy naivety of someone getting ready for a first date with an Academy classmate, or a grumpy reaction from a workaholic engineer too tied up in her repair schedule to be able to unwind. It was something far less innocent than all that.

She looked back at the woman on the other side of the cabin, with her tousled hair pulled back behind her head and her dark grey baggy overalls on, and realised the horrible faux pas that she had made.

“Oh god,” she managed to gulp out as she squirmed under the sudden rush of guilt that enveloped her, “Denella, I—”

“Yeah, I spent a hell of a lot of my life dressing up for other people. And I didn’t like it all that much. So, these days, I like to dress for myself. And I don’t do dates. Sorry if that ruins...girly time.”

Natasha internally cringed at the sudden childishness of that phrase, grasping for an appropriate response as she now realised quite how big a hole she'd been obliviously digging for herself over the last few minutes.

She had never asked for any details about Denella's past life in the Orion Syndicate, after she had been taken from the Orion Free Traders colony on Orpheus IV when barely an adult. And, understandably given what she had heard about life inside the Syndicate, Denella had never been forthcoming with any details either.

But she and the rest of the crew had run afoul of her former owner some months back, a cruel and ruthless Orion slaver called Rilen Dar. And while Denella had managed to rescue them before things had gotten too bad, and save her childhood friend in the process, even that glimpse had been enough for Natasha to realise the horrible mistake she had made.

"I am so, so, sorry," she managed, "I really, honestly, didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't," the Orion replied with a hint of sadness, "It's fine."

"It's not fine. It's—I'm an idiot. Ok? I guess it's just been so long since I've had a nice...dinner with someone, that I started trying to live vicariously through you. Because—"

"You're an idiot?"

She looked over at the now-smiling face of the Orion engineer, and accepted the charges with a humble nod. "Ok," she added with a hint of optimism, "Tell me to go throw myself into the warp core if you want, but...how about a do-over?"

"A do-over?"

Natasha nodded, then walked back over to the closet. "Yeah, let's start this whole thing all over again. So: It's not a date, we'll skip over the whole hair and nails thing, and..."

She reached into the closet and extracted a specific pair of overalls, before turning back and handing them over.

"...the dark blue ones'll be perfect."

Denella nodded thankfully and accepted the overalls. Then, she decided to offer an olive branch in return.

"Tell you what, I'll take one of those cocktails, if you're making them."

Natasha smiled wider and nodded excitedly, before rushing off in the direction of the replicator in the Bounty's dining area.

As she exited Denella's cabin, she paused for a second, wondering what the racket was that was coming from Klath's own cabin. But she elected not to worry too much about that. Truth be told, she didn't much care what the boys were up to right now.

Because girly time was back on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jirel Vincent, the unjoined Trill captain of the Bounty, considered himself a fairly tolerant man.

It was one of the traits you needed in abundance when you had a job like his, endlessly travelling around the cosmos looking for deliveries and odd jobs to drum up some latinum. Not to mention when dealing with the sort of unsavoury individuals that were willing to offer him those jobs.

But even Jirel's tolerance had a limit. And as the speakers in Klath's cabin began to thunder out the main aria of Act II of Kretath and Fa'vora, he realised that he'd reached that limit.

The Trill stomped over to the computer terminal on the cabin's desk and silenced the playback, earning himself an angry glare from the Klingon, where he sat on his bare metal slab of a bed, and a look of relief from Sunek, the Bounty's wiry and emotional Vulcan pilot.

"I was listening to that," Klath pointed out with a growl.

"Yeah, you know who else was?" Sunek chimed in, rubbing his pointed ears with irritation, "My parents. Back on Vulcan. Eleventy bajillion light years away."

Klath shot the Vulcan an even darker scowl, before he leaned back on the wall behind his bed and took another long slug from the bottle of bloodwine he was working his way through.

He hadn't offered his two guests any. Mainly because he hadn't asked them to come here. They had shown up entirely unannounced, as far as he was concerned. Firstly to complain about the volume of his music, even after he had tried to get them to see how important sound levels were to truly appreciate Klingon opera. And then, in that irritating way that the rest of the crew tended to do when he wanted to be alone, they had stuck around in the misguided belief that he needed help.

Even though, as he had repeatedly made clear to them, he was fine.

"Ok," Jirel sighed, glad of the respite from another wave of Klingon mezzo-soprano, "Just...help me to understand all this, buddy. So, the nice

Klingon lady you've been seeing for, what, five days? You proposed to her?"

Klath growled with irritation. He felt as though he had spent far too much of his time recently trying to explain the intricacies of Klingon culture. "I did not...propose," he countered, "I merely suggested to K'Veth that, given the manner in which our circumstances had progressed together, it would only be appropriate for us to be joined. As is the tradition of our people."

Jirel considered this response and shrugged. "Ok, so you kinda proposed...Klath-style. Light on the romance, heavy on the practicality."

"Some girls like that," Sunek offered from the other side of the cabin.

"So, what?" Jirel persisted, ignoring the Vulcan, "You're gonna get married, and then...you stay here on Kervala Prime? Get a job at the port? Have yourself some little baby Klaths? Or are you planning on knocking through to the spare cabin and making this your marital home?"

Klath didn't reply immediately. Because he didn't really have any answers. Despite Jirel's earlier jibe about his practical nature, par'Mach had meant that he had rushed headlong into this particular plan without thinking anywhere near that far ahead.

"Well, great," Jirel continued, correctly taking Klath's silence for what it implied, "Sounds like you've really got this all figured out."

"Also," Sunek added, gesturing to the still-present wound on his cheek, "What the hell happened to your face?"

"That is none of your concern," Klath responded quickly.

"Huh," Sunek nodded, immediately putting two and two together, "You Klingons don't even do hickeys by halves, do you?"

Klath growled quietly to himself, resisting the sudden urge he had to leap across the cabin, grab Sunek where he was slouching against the wall and tear his head clean off his shoulders.

He put that urge down to the par'Mach as well.

"Whatever I said to her is irrelevant," he said to Jirel, eager to end the discussion that he had not asked to happen, "She declined my offer. The matter is settled."

"And you're fine with that?" Jirel asked with a pointed look.

"Yes."

The Trill sighed and gestured to the clearly sulking Klingon where he sat, holding what was clearly the latest of several bottles of bloodwine he had worked his way through so far this evening. "Ok. Right. You're fine with it. Even though, after she turned you down, you came back here, locked yourself in your cabin, drank three bottles of bloodwine and started playing Klingon opera loud enough to wake someone from cryosleep?"

Klath remained defiant, sitting up a little straighter on his bare metal bed. "Yes," he repeated, "I am fine."

Jirel whirled away in exasperation at his friend's continued stubbornness, and despite his better judgement, gestured over to Sunek. "I give up. I'm tagging you in."

The tousle-haired Vulcan in the unnecessarily loud Hawaiian shirt shrugged and stepped closer to where the Klingon lay, entirely unaware of the ongoing potential threat to his current head/shoulder arrangement.

"Ok, Klath, brace yourself, cos what I'm about to say might shock you. I have also, on occasion, been dumped."

Sunek paused to allow that bombshell of a statement to sink in, and was a little bit hurt when neither of his colleagues expressed any visible signs of surprise. Still, he kept his focus on trying to help the morose Klingon in front of him.

"So, yeah, I know how much it can hurt. And believe me when I say that I am here for you. Whatever you wanna do to get over this. You wanna get blackout drunk? I am buying the first round. You wanna pick up a friendly local on the rebound? I will be the best goddamn wingman you've ever seen. You wanna eat your bodyweight in frozen dessert? Just point me to that replicator and hand me a spoon! So, come on, pal. Name it. What do you want to do, right now?"

To the surprise of both Sunek and Jirel, Klath suddenly looked thoughtful, as he considered the Vulcan's offer and tried to accurately translate the writhing tumult of par'Mach-based feelings inside him into a concrete list of real-world needs.

"I want to...hunt a wild meK'lar beast, with my bare hands. And then feast on its flesh. Then, I want to recreate the ancient, four-day battle between Karg the Unyielding and Korath the Merciless. With live painstiks."

The Vulcan responsible for the genesis of this plan suddenly looked a lot less sure of himself, as he heard what he seemed to have let himself in for.

"Ok," he managed eventually, "Or, counterproposal: This spaceport has holosuites. We could go see if they've got any nude-y lady programmes—?"

"Right, I'm tagging you back out," Jirel jumped in quickly, "Klath, come on, I know you're just saying all that to try and get us to leave you alone. But can you please just...talk to us? What do you really want?"

Klath knew what he really wanted. Or more specifically, who he wanted. Who every atom of his being was currently yearning for. But he knew he would never be able to explain that to the Trill and the Vulcan. All they knew was love. They knew nothing of par'Mach.

So, instead, he took a long swig from his bloodwine, and gestured at the door of his cabin.

“I want to be left alone.”

Jirel looked over from Klath to Sunek, the Vulcan shrugging in acceptance that they weren't going to get anything more out of their colleague.

“Ok,” the Trill sighed, “If that's really what you—”

“That is what I want.”

Jirel cast one more concerned look at his troubled friend, before he and Sunek walked back out of the cabin.

“What the hell is a meK'lar beast?” Sunek asked, as the door closed behind them.

Seconds later, the unmistakable sound of the main aria of Act II of Kretath and Fa'vora being played at full volume thundered out from behind the door.

## Part 1C

### Part One (Cont'd)

This is a date, Denella thought to herself.

At the very least, that certainly seemed to be what her dining partner thought it was. And it had become impossible for the Orion to even deny it to herself. Whatever it was they were doing tonight, they weren't just grabbing a quick bite to eat and discussing tomorrow's repair schedule.

They sat at a table for two next to one of the large panoramic windows that covered the walls of the fanciest restaurant Denella had ever been in. Small padds in front of them displayed an extensive list of fittingly expensive cuisine.

Around the rest of the restaurant, the tables were filled with impeccably dressed patrons enjoying their own meals. Next to the sea of tailored suits and elegant dresses, she found herself feeling thoroughly out of place in her shabby dark blue overalls. Even if it had been their turn on rotation.

Opposite her, Juna Erami was having a lot less trouble fitting in. Denella had arrived at the restaurant the Bajoran had chosen for them to find that she was already seated, and had found the time to slip into a long, flowing black dress, complete with a polished silver necklace and a subtle perfume that hung in the air around the table.

Even though this didn't seem like the sort of place the pilot of the shuttle Kendra would often frequent, Erami had somehow made herself look as though she had been born to dine here.

Since Denella had escaped from the Syndicate, she was used to brushing off any overtly romantic overtures towards her. They were such a tiresome occurrence as soon as anyone saw the green skin that she had developed the confidence to deal with them. But in this situation, something was different. And she couldn't put her finger on what.

It seemed like everything, from the chic surroundings, to Erami's look, to her own attire, was making her feel incredibly awkward and unsure of herself.

Not to mention the fact that this was clearly, definitely, a date.

"Um," she managed, as she looked around at the other diners, "I was kinda expecting to go somewhere more...casual."

As usual, she felt as though she was attracting a lot of stares from around the room. Though this time, most of them felt entirely disdainful.

In contrast, Erami seemed completely at ease with her dining companion's choice of attire. "Hey, don't worry," she smiled, leaning forwards and subtly gesturing around the restaurant, "You know how many women in this place are jealous about how comfortable you look right now?"

Denella noted a Denobulan woman in a satin evening dress giving her an especially sour look from a nearby table, and knew that regardless of how comfortable her clothing might look, she couldn't have felt more uncomfortable if she had tried.

"But, I mean," she muttered, gesturing back at Erami's getup for the evening, "You look..."

"Psh, this old thing—? No, you know what? Not gonna bother with the false modesty bit. Took me two hours to get ready. I look amazing."

She smiled back warmly, but the Orion didn't relax one iota. A brief, awkward silence descended before Erami patiently continued.

"So...like I said when I suggested we meet up tonight, I thought this might give us a chance to, y'know, talk?"

Denella relaxed slightly at this, seeing a chance to return to familiar territory. "Right," she nodded, "That's actually a really good idea. Cos I was thinking that, tomorrow morning, instead of starting with the Bounty, first we should finish reassembling your warp coil and make sure we get the alignment of the—"

"Woah, woah," Erami jumped in, stifling a laugh, "We can talk shop tomorrow. Was kinda hoping for a bit less of an engineering debrief and a bit more, y'know, friendly conversation?"

Denella stifled the latest of what felt like a never-ending spree of grimaces and managed a nod of understanding. "Yeah, I know. It's just—I'm not...great. With new people. Like this."

The Bajoran nodded sympathetically and took a sip from one of the glasses of water on the otherwise empty table. "Ok," she smiled, "How about I go first, then. What do you wanna know?"

Denella even struggled for a response to that, so Erami continued for her.

"So, I was born on Bajor. Rakantha Province. Grew up in a labour camp with my family. After the liberation, I got the hell out of there. Worked on a Bajoran freighter for a while making shuttle runs to Tellar Prime. Then, eventually saved up enough to get my own ship and set out on my own."

"The Kendra?" Denella asked, putting her discomfort aside for long enough to ask the question, feeling a little more relaxed now Erami was leading the conversation.

She noted the slightest of flinches on the Bajoran's face before she replied.

"Let's just say I've been through a fair few ships since then," she offered, before breezily changing the subject again, "Let's see, what else. I'm a big fan of old Bajoran folk music, which is totally dorky but you don't ever get to say that to my face. My favourite food is Kava root stew, but only the way my mother used to make it. And I once flew a sublight raider into a white dwarf star's atmosphere for a bet and spent six weeks in a medical unit getting treated for radiation burns. Son of a katterpod farmer that made the bet with me didn't even pay up."

She took a breath and another sip of water at the end of her flowing monologue, and gestured back across the table with another warm smile.

"See? How easy was that? Right, your turn."

Denella breathed out slowly and nervously looked around again. She seemed to be getting less stares now, though she was wondering why the waiting staff seemed to be ignoring them. After a moment, she turned her attention back to Erami's expectant face.

It's just a nice meal, in a nice restaurant, with a nice person, she told herself.

"I grew up on Orpheus IV," she began, her throat suddenly feeling as dry as sandpaper, "An Orion colony. Free Traders."

"You don't say?" Erami murmured, seemingly entranced with this most basic of facts, "You know, there's a trader with a stall right here on Kervala Prime that gets a shipment from the Orpheus system once a month. But I've never been. Nice place?"

Denella felt her insides constrict slightly. She looked down at the table, sadly. "It was," she replied quietly, "Before..."

She tailed off immediately and reached for her own glass of water, taking a long gulp that seemed to do nothing to help her dry throat. Erami winced in understanding.

"Sorry, that's probably a bad place for us to start, hmm?"

"No, no," Denella lied quickly, "It's just—I don't usually talk about that part of my life. With anyone, really. I don't know why I..."

"I get it," Erami nodded sadly, "You probably noticed that I kinda glossed over the 'labour camp' part of my bio. But we can talk about anything else, honestly. Whatever makes you comfortable."

Denella took another glug of water, then shrugged. "You wanna hear about how I recalibrated the Bounty's impulse drive last month to improve her reaction control times in orbital flight?"

"Kinda walked into that one, didn't I?" Erami smiled back with a slight shake of her head.

"I'm sorry," Denella sighed, glancing at a passing waiter who once again completely ignored their empty table, "I'm not usually like this. Or... maybe I am, I dunno. I don't usually do this kind of—I'm just—I'm better around people I know. You know?"

"Fair enough," Erami nodded, "So, how does someone become one of those people?"

She offered another disarming smile, but Denella felt her discomfort levels rising again. Whether the Bajoran had meant it or not, there was something behind her smile. An obvious edge of attraction that she'd seen in smiles sent her way too many times over the years.

Another waiter sauntered past the table, carrying a steaming plate of fragrant stew to another group of patrons.

"Maybe I just need to order something," she managed, "I'm starving."

Erami's face dropped. "Oh," she said awkwardly, "You haven't ordered yet?"

"How could I?" Denella asked, looking around in confusion, "The staff are all walking past. Nobody's come over to take our—"

She turned back around to see a slender member of the waiting staff in an impeccably replicated white shirt placing three small plates of aromatic food in front of Erami, before immediately turning and walking off again.

"Crap," the Bajoran sighed, "I thought you knew. It's a Lumerian restaurant. All the staff are low level empaths."

"Wh—?" Denella gasped, glancing worriedly at a passing waiter, "They're all reading our—?"

"Really not as weird as it sounds. Everything on the menu is designed to elicit a very subtle and specific emotional reaction, which the staff are trained to filter out specifically. To order, you just look through the menu, and concentrate on the dishes you want."

She paused thoughtfully for a moment, then shrugged.

"Ok, It's kinda exactly as weird as it sounds. But, y'know, these fancy places need a gimmick to stand out these days. You know there's a Tellarite restaurant on Kovar IV where you're encouraged to burst into the kitchen and verbally abuse the chef in lieu of a tip?"

Flustered, Denella looked down at the menu and tried to make sense of the dizzying array of options listed on the padd. "B—But, all I'm feeling now is embarrassed! What happens then? They bring me a plate of leftovers and tip it over my head?"

Erami stifled a giggle, just as the same waiter brought over three more small plates and set them down in front of her. "Don't worry," she said, "I ordered way too much anyway. We can just share."

But her soothing words didn't seem to have an impact on the flustered woman in the scruffy overalls on the other side of the table, who on top of everything else was now convinced that the Denobulan woman in the satin dress was staring at her again.

“I just—I don’t know what any of this is! Crap, is this the dessert menu?”

As she continued to fret, Erami reached out her hand and placed it gently on top of Denella’s own hand that was resting on the table.

It was meant as a calming measure, but as soon as their hands made contact, the Orion woman pulled her hand away so fast, it was as if she’d just touched a live plasma circuit. In an instant, she realised that she didn’t want to be here any more.

Erami realised her mistake immediately, but it was too late.

“Ah,” she managed, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s fine,” Denella said as she dropped the padd, “It’s not your—I just—I think I need to go.”

She stood up so quickly that she ended up knocking the glasses of water over, soaking the pristine tablecloth in the process and earning herself a fresh round of stares from the other patrons.

“Denella—” Erami began.

But before she could get any further, Denella had taken off for the exit.

Erami sighed in frustration and looked down at the selection of untouched food in front of her, idly wondering exactly what the protocol was to extricate herself from an empathic restaurant.

In the end she decided: To hell with protocol.

“Hey!” she called out to the nearest waiter, “Can I get this to go?”

A short distance away, the Denobulan woman in the satin dress found a new target to stare at.

## Part 1D

### Part One (Cont'd)

“She was definitely checking me out.”

“She was definitely not doing that.”

The debate hadn't really progressed beyond each side's opening remarks in the ten minutes they had been at the table, but it was at least killing some time.

Jirel did his best to ignore the continued bickering as he idly toyed with his glass of Andorian brandy and checked the time again. His attention was still focused on Klath, and specifically with the person they were here to meet, who appeared to be running late.

The bar itself was a particularly cheesy theme bar located on the main promenade of Kerval Prime's spaceport. The sort of establishment that drew you in despite the best efforts of your dignity with the promise of copious cheap drinks and a raucous atmosphere.

It was called the Treaty of Organia, a reference that only Natasha got. And the theme, from what any of them could gather, was mid-23rd century Starfleet. The walls of the two-storey establishment were decorated by facsimiles of information panels and control circuits, covered in dozens of individual blinking lights and buttons, and the waitresses that meandered through the seated areas of the bar were all dressed in crudely-rendered blue, red or yellow mini dresses, noting down orders with stylus pens on enormous electronic clipboards.

If you wanted to browse the drinks menu, each table had a curious viewing device as a centrepiece, which appeared to have been fashioned out of an old-school tricorder, designed to present information on the tiny viewing screen, and also to call a waitress over. All in all, it was a gaudy and kitsch sort of a place. But it was also cheap and easy to find. And, as Jirel's drinking companions were demonstrating, a decent place for a robust debate.

“I'm telling you,” Sunek insisted, “That Caitian at the bar was checking me out.”

“And I'm telling you,” Natasha countered, “She definitely wasn't.”

“Was too—”

“Guys,” Jirel sighed, “Can we please try to focus a little bit? I can't believe you're not more worried about Klath.”

Natasha conceded for the moment with a nod, but Sunek seemed less keen on going along with the real reason Jirel had brought them all here. “Why would we be worried about him? It's just Klath. You know how he is.”

“Actually, I'm not sure I do,” the Trill sighed, “You saw him in his cabin. He's like a lovelorn teenager. I can't believe how hard this is hitting him.”

“Maybe I should have a word with him,” Natasha mused as she sipped her own cocktail, “After all, as someone who has actually been married, I'm always willing to let other people know just how much of a terrible mistake it is.”

Jirel ignored the residual pang of jealousy that still annoyingly fired off inside him at the mention of Cameron Kinsen, her ex-husband, who at this point was many thousands of light years away on a survey mission in the Gamma Quadrant. “Might call that Plan B,” he offered back with a shrug, before gesturing to Sunek, “Take it you've not got any pearls of marriage wisdom to give him either?”

Now it was the Vulcan's turn to internalise a pang of something.

His own marriage had been one of convenience, many years ago, to a fellow V'tosh ka'tur member called T'Len. After the ceremony, he hadn't seen her until a few months ago, when she had dragged him into a dark revenge plot by several former members of the Vulcans without Logic movement. An experience that had plagued his emotional state for some time.

Still, he was sure he was over all that now. She he suppressed the pain, and affixed a far more Sunek-ian grin to his face. “Sure,” he shrugged, “Always make sure you consummate things first before you decide not to see each other for the best part of 30 years.”

Jirel met this with a withering glance, but before he could offer a retort, he spotted a familiar face walking through the crowd towards them.

K'Veth sat awkwardly down in the empty seat at their table and nodded at the three of them, before glancing around at the gaudy surroundings, and a passing waitress in a cheap red mini dress, with a thoroughly disgusted glower.

“Don't worry,” Jirel offered with a friendly smile, “They stock bloodwine.”

“I will not be staying,” the Klingon woman grunted back to him, “But I received your message, and I still owe you and your crew for getting me here from Brexis II. So, I am here.”

With that, she folded her arms in front of her in a manner that rather underlined to Jirel that there wasn't much point attempting any further pleasantries.

“Fair enough,” he nodded, “Truth is, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“Klath, yes,” she replied curtly, “We mated.”



Jirel was a little taken aback by her candour, to the point that he had to take a sip of brandy. An action which gave Sunek enough time to jump in.

“We know,” the Vulcan smirked, “The whole ship knows you mated. Thin walls on those cabins, you know? Hey, by the way, did you see if there was a Caitian standing at the bar when you came in? Kinda average height, short skirt, looked like she had a thing for ruggedly handsome Vulcans—?”

“Shut up, Sunek,” Natasha muttered on everyone’s behalf.

“I was more talking about the whole...proposal thing,” Jirel persisted to K’Veth.

“Ah, yes, I see,” the Klingon nodded back, “He suggested that we be joined. And I declined. What more is there for you to know?”

“Is that really all that happened?” he pressed, “Because he’s entirely messed up about all this, and I feel like I’m missing something. I just wanna help him.”

K’Veth paused for a moment, looking a little uncertain. While she had no issue candidly discussing her mating habits, she was more circumspect about other factors that were at play here. “I...apologise if I caused him pain.”

“Nah,” Sunek chipped in, “I think he liked that part.”

“I fear,” K’Veth continued, having learned to ignore the Vulcan, “Klath may have allowed himself to see more in me than there really is. I am dishonoured. An exile.”

“Um,” Natasha offered, feeling she was stating the obvious, “So is Klath?”

K’Veth shook her head, suppressing the irritation she was starting to feel about having to talk about these matters with people she barely knew. The details of her family’s history, of her grandfather’s part in the Khitomer conspiracy, had all come out back on Brexis II. But still, she didn’t want to delve too personally into her own shame.

“It is not the same. Klath has dealt with his dishonour. And he continues to deal with it well. But I have not. Especially after my part in my father’s attempted treachery on Brexis II, on top of our house’s past crimes. I cannot inflict that on Klath. And, deep down, he knows this to be true.”

“But—” Jirel began. She cut him off immediately.

“He will recover, in time. He will find peace with his emotions. But I cannot drag him down with me. I cannot be his wife. And that is how it must be.”

With that, she stood from the table and walked back out of the Treaty of Organia, pushing her way past a waitress in a blue mini dress without so much as an apology.

Jirel watched her leave with a sad sigh, feeling no nearer to being able to help his friend.

“So,” Natasha offered, after a moment of contemplative silence had consumed the table, “What are we gonna do now?”

Jirel didn’t really have an answer. Sunek, inevitably, did.

“Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I’m gonna go see if that Caitian’s still around...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hey, wait!”

Denella reluctantly paused in her hurried retreat just as she reached the outer landing pad where the Bounty was parked. She turned to see Erami racing across the pad from the covered walkway that led all the way back to the main dome of the base. Even though night had fallen around the spaceport, great striplights all around the pad made it almost feel like high noon.

“Wow,” the Bajoran managed as she caught up and caught her breath, “You can really move when you want to, can’t you?”

Denella stifled a sigh. She felt a curious mix of shame and anger. Shame at herself for what she knew had been a completely over the top reaction back in the restaurant. But also anger at everything in her life that had led to this being so difficult for her.

“Ok, I’m sorry for leaving. But I—”

“Hey, say no more,” Erami countered quickly, “I get it. And it was my fault for going so over the top for a friendly night out. I mean, empathic waiters? What was I thinking?”

She laughed, and Denella found that she couldn’t help but join in. The Bajoran seemed to have that sort of effect on her. Besides, it was also clear to her that whatever Erami might have been trying to cultivate between them, it was at least based on good intentions. Which was not something that she was used to dealing with.

“Yeah,” she managed in reply, “Although, given the sort of emotions I was giving off as I left, I feel like I should go back and apologise to

them.”

“I wouldn’t,” Erami grinned, “I did a runner.”

Denella’s expression hardened for a moment, even as Erami’s features creased into another grin.

“Kidding.”

The Orion found that she wasn’t quite sure if she believed her.

Erami gestured for them to continue walking, as they headed over to where their respective ships were parked up on the landing pad.

“Anyway,” she continued, “That was all dumb of me. The whole evening. And I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. So…friends?”

She held out her hand for a handshake, and Denella accepted it. A far more well-telegraphed form of contact than the Bajoran’s unexpected hand across the table in the restaurant. “Friends,” she nodded back, “But I really do need to go get some rest. Like I said, first thing tomorrow, we should—”

She stopped with a gasp of shock as she saw the state of the Kendra.

“Holy crap.”

Erami looked over to what she was referring to and immediately grimaced. The Kendra’s side door was wide open, and various items from inside had been left strewn around the landing pad next to the ship itself. It was immediately clear that the small shuttle had been thoroughly ransacked.

The two women approached the mess with some caution, but there were no sounds apparent from inside. Erami poked her head inside to make sure, as Denella surveyed the situation. “Nobody there,” the Bajoran reported, turning back and shrugging, “It’s fine.”

“It’s fine?” Denella scoffed, “Erami, someone’s broken into your—”

“I said it’s fine,” she replied, a little too quickly, “Nothing’s taken. Must’ve just been bandits looking for latinum. Guess I forgot to lock her down.”

The Orion looked back at the Bajoran with mild incredulity, not believing a word that she was telling her. Erami, for her part, started to idly pick up the detritus strewn across the pad and toss it back through the open door of the Kendra.

“What the hell is going on?” Denella pressed.

Erami glanced back at her and forced her most convincing smile onto her face. “Nothing,” she lied, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, she picked up the final few bits, climbed up the step next to the shuttle’s doorway and disappeared inside. The door closed behind her, leaving the Orion woman alone on the pad.

And despite Erami’s suggestion, she found that she was very worried indeed.

**End of Part One**

## Part 2A

### Part Two

Denella was still worried about Erami the following morning, even as she pored over her repair schedule for the day in the Bounty's dining area as she finished breakfast.

She tried to keep her attention on the scuffed padd in front of her, detailing the remaining tasks to be completed on the Kendra's warp coil, as well as the rest of the work she still had to do with the Bounty to fix the damage the tribble infestation had caused. But she couldn't help but worry about the Bajoran in the Ferengi shuttle on the other side of the landing pad, wondering exactly what was going on with her. Why someone had ransacked her ship, and why she had been so casually certain that nothing had been taken.

As her attention drifted away from the padd and the remains of her half-eaten breakfast once again, and she began to daydream her way through her other problems, the door opened and Jirel stepped into the room, shaking her back to the present.

"Hey," the Trill nodded as he walked to the replicator and ordered himself a jumja tea, "You seen Klath around?"

"Should I have?"

Jirel walked over to the table and sipped his tea. "Not especially," he shrugged affably, "But I just checked, and he's not in his cabin. And you know it's not like him to get up this early. Especially given how much bloodwine he was putting away last night."

Denella stood up and carried her leftovers to the replicator to dispose of them, finding herself still focused on her own issues, rather than Klath's. "I dunno. Maybe he's gone over to the port. Buy his lady friend something nice?"

"They split up."

This was enough for her to pause as she grabbed the padd from the table.

"Oh," she offered, "Really?"

He nodded, as they walked over to the door together and stepped back out into the Bounty's main corridor, heading for the rear cargo bay and the ramp down to the landing pad.

"Apparently, he asked her to become his wife. Because they'd been...y'know. And she declined, because she didn't feel honourable enough to accept it. You know, Klingon crap."

"Got it," Denella nodded back as they entered the deserted cargo bay and she tapped the controls to lower the ramp.

"And ever since then, he's been moping around, and I can't get through to the guy. And now he's vanished."

Denella forced her own issues to the back of her mind for a moment in order to focus on what Jirel was saying, and paused at the top of the ramp as the metal structure made contact with the landing pad below with a gentle thud.

"Hey," the Trill continued after a sip of tea, "You're closer to the big idiot than I am."

"You think so?"

"I know so. And I'm fine with it. Honestly. So, with all the weapons training and Klingon studies you've been getting up to with him, have you got any idea what I'm missing here?"

She considered the question for a moment, then nodded.

"par'Mach."

"Gesundheit."

"No," she smiled patiently as they started to descend the ramp, "It's what Klingons have instead of love."

Jirel paused halfway down the ramp and looked back at her with a hint of amusement. "Klath talked to you about love? Why was I not invited to that conversation?"

"You think he talked to me about it? The galaxy's most repressed man? No, it came up in something else I was reading. And, as you might expect with Klingons, it sounds pretty intense."

"How intense?"

"The way it was described in what I read was that it was part love, part lust, part passion, part anger, part hunger, part yearning, part extreme violence. All wrapped up in a physical longing that can consume even the hardest of warriors."

"Huh," Jirel mused, taking another sip of tea.

"There was a case study of a human anthropologist asking a Klingon colleague to explain how it made them feel, and she demonstrated by strangling all three heads of an Aldebaran serpent, then skinning it with the nails of her fingers. And, while the anthropologist suggested that

his colleague might have been exaggerating for dramatic effect, the point is that if he's experiencing par'Mach, this is gonna be hitting him a lot harder than one of your moments of pining."

Jirel paused mid-sip and stared back at her. "Um, what is that supposed to mean?"

Denella gave him a knowing look before she resumed her descent down the ramp. Jirel quickly followed her.

"You know what I mean," she sighed, "The little looks you give our friendly local doctor every now and again. You're not great at disguising it."

"Psh," Jirel retorted, a little too quickly, "Wh—? I mean—That's stupid. You're stupid. Do you have any idea how stupid you're being right now—?"

"All really strong denials. Either way, if that is really how Klath feels for K'Veth, then it's gonna take him a while to get over it. So, if you are gonna try and help, make sure you're at least a little bit tactful, hmm?"

"Hey, I'm always tactful."

Denella offered him a raised eyebrow as they reached the foot of the ramp, just in time to see Erami making her way over from the Kendra. Without even thinking about it, her face lit up into a broad smile as she saw the Bajoran. A reaction that she immediately told herself was due to the fact that she was simply glad to see that she was ok after last night's issues, rather than anything else.

"Hey," Erami smiled back, "Reporting for duty. All set for another day of hard graft. Ready to go?"

"Absolutely," she nodded back, before gesturing to the Trill next to her, "Um, this is Jirel. Jirel, this is Juna Erami."

Erami extended her hand and Jirel accepted the handshake.

"Nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you," he replied with a cheeky grin, "So, tell me, what are your intentions towards my engineer?"

Erami suppressed a smirk at this impish comment, as Denella fixed the Trill with a significantly less happy look.

"Maybe work a bit harder on that tact."

\* \* \* \* \*

The promenade was just as busy as it had been the previous day. But this time, even though she was still sensing a lot of stares being fired off at them, Denella found that she cared a lot less about all that. She definitely felt more comfortable.

She was still some way from actually being comfortable, but still, she was sure that she was decidedly less uncomfortable than she had been. Which she was taking as progress.

They were on their way to the same salvage yard as yesterday, located some way past the promenade and in the less glamorous sections of the port. One final trip was needed for some additional spare parts for the Bounty's ongoing repairs.

"You know," Erami offered from her side, "We definitely have time to stop for a coffee today. We're way ahead of schedule."

That much was true. Back at the landing pad, the Kendra was now back up and running, which just left a few remaining tasks on the Bounty on her repair schedule. Still, Denella was entirely focused on the work, and so they kept walking. Leaving Erami to glance frustratedly at the queue for I'danian spiced lattes as they hurried past.

They eventually reached the far end of the gaudy main strip of shops and bars and entered the significantly less fancy and utilitarian confines of the port's supply and repair area. Here, near to the central core of the port's structure, the corridors were more like that of an orbital station or starship, narrower and gunmetal grey. The walls showed signs of wear and tear, a revealing blemish that hinted at just how long Kervala Prime's spaceport had sat here, servicing passing ships of all shapes and sizes.

This was where the salvage yards, the scrap heaps and the vast stores of spare parts and raw materials were stored. And where the two women were hoping to find the final parts for their repairs to the Bounty.

The conversation had been flowing between them all day so far, despite the awkwardness of the previous evening. But it had only really covered surface level topics. Their schedule for the day, Erami's long list of favourite Bajoran folk artists, and other such frivolities. But now, away from the hullabaloo of the promenade, Denella decided to shift the conversation onto slightly more serious matters.

"So," she said, as Erami finished casually listing her top five uses for leftover hasperat, "Wanna talk about what happened last night?"

The Bajoran paused. She'd been expecting that question to come at some point, but she also knew that there wasn't really an answer she could give that would keep her happy. At least, not one that involved the truth. So, instead, she did what she normally did whenever people started to ask her difficult questions, and she tried to style the whole thing out.

"About the bandits? Yeah, had a word with port security and they're gonna check the sensor records, see what they can pull up—"

“Come on,” Denella sighed, stopping in the middle of the corridor that they were walking down and turning to her.

“I know, I told them the same thing. They really need to boost security on those outer landing pads if they want people to keep parking up out there.”

Denella shook her head and folded her arms in front of her, indicating that Erami was going to need to style things out a lot better than that. “Just tell me what the hell’s going on. Are you in trouble? Whoever it was that trashed your ship last night was clearly looking for something. Something specific.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because when you looked inside the ship to see if anything had been taken, you barely took five seconds before you said nothing was missing. Which means that either you knew exactly what they were looking for, and it was still there. Or you knew it wasn’t even there in the first place.”

Erami couldn’t help but muster a sideways smile and a shake of her head, even as Denella maintained her entirely serious stance. “You sure you’re an engineer, not a detective?” the Bajoran replied.

“What I am is someone waiting for an answer.”

“It’s really not that interesting.”

“It’s interesting enough for someone to break into your shuttle.”

Erami scrutinised the Orion’s unflinching face for a moment, then sighed and walked on down the corridor, with Denella falling into step alongside her.

“Tell you what,” the Bajoran offered as she walked, “With everything that happened last night, the stupid empathic restaurant, the bandits, everything else, how about we just...start again, hmm? Pretend all that never happened?”

“A do-over?” Denella snorted, echoing Natasha’s phrase from earlier.

“A what?”

“Whatever, fine, we can start again. And we can start with the truth.”

“I told you, it’s really not that—”

“And, just so you’re aware, you are being a huge hypocrite right now.”

Erami snorted at this, as they rounded another intersection in the corridor, her mood darkening as the debate continued in an orderly direction towards becoming a full-on argument. “How am I being a hypocrite?”

“Because you spent last night - hell, all of yesterday - trying to get me to talk about myself, and my past. And now, the second I want to know something about you that isn’t your favourite type of stew, or some boring fact about folk music, you’re just gonna clam up?”

“Hey,” the Bajoran snapped, “Careful what you say about my music. And this is completely different, Denella!”

“How is it any different?”

Erami growled in frustration and set off down the corridor with a faster pace, trying in vain to somehow outpace the argument she was involved in. “Look, let’s just go get these stupid parts, finish the repairs on your ship, and then I’ll be more than happy to get the hell out of your hair, ok? Cos I am telling you for the last time that this is none of your concern!”

“Ugh,” Denella sighed, rushing to keep up, “I didn’t mean—!”

Both women, and their argument, stopped dead just around the next corner of the corridor.

Ahead of them, from either side of a branching junction a few paces away, a Pakled emerged. Each wore a dirty brown uniform, and each held a stubby grey disruptor pistol. Both weapons were levelled straight at them.

“Put up your hands,” the Pakled on the left grunted.

With no immediate alternative course of action available, both women complied, raising their hands to the ceiling of the corridor.

“You owe us,” the Pakled on the right nodded, directing his comment at Erami.

Denella kept her hands diligently raised, but looked over at the Bajoran, with a singularly unimpressed glare.

“Kinda feels like this is becoming my concern.”

## Part 2B

### Part Two (Cont'd)

The door opened after the third insistent ring of the buzzer.

K'Veth stood in the doorway and stared out at Klath, with a look that suggested that she was not entirely happy to see him.

"You," she grunted at him, underlining that suggestion.

For his part, Klath paused for a moment before responding. Because he still wasn't quite sure what he wanted to say.

He had left the Bounty early in the morning, before any of the others had stirred, still nursing something of a mild to moderate bloodwine-induced hangover. And since then, he had spent his entire time indulging in a mild to moderate amount of meandering. And trying to figure out what he wanted to say.

He had meandered down the promenade, but found little there amongst the boisterous early morning crowds to inspire him, and certainly nothing to ease his headache.

He had meandered through the quieter streets of the settlement that surrounded the port complex itself, one of the larger urban areas on Kervala Prime. But even though he had walked down the endless narrow streets for long enough to have to reluctantly stop and ask for directions from a passing Kervalan resident, he hadn't gotten any closer to finding the right words.

He had even meandered back to the spaceport's bank of holosuites, and parted with a few slips of latinum in order to take a bracing meander within a meander, all the way to the peak of Kang's Summit back on Qo'noS during the annual autumn storms, hoping that the thunder and the raging winds would provide the spark he needed.

But nothing had helped. He was feeling par'Mach stronger than ever, and yet he was still bereft of the right words. So, in the end, he had meandered all the way back here. Hoping inspiration might strike upon seeing her once again.

"Yes," he said eventually, "Me."

Inspiration was clearly still escaping him.

"I have not changed my mind," she replied guardedly, still standing in the doorway and tacitly avoiding inviting him in, "I do not want to be joined with you."

He ignored the stab of anguish her words caused inside him, like a d'k tahg blade to the stomach, and merely nodded back. "I understand," he managed, "I merely...wish to speak with you."

It felt like an entirely reasonable request to him, even if he still didn't know what he was actually going to say.

K'Veth studied his face in silence for a moment. "You have not removed the scar," she pointed out, gesturing to the wound on his cheek.

"No, I have not."

After another short burst of awkward silence, she stepped back slightly reluctantly and allowed him back into her limited lodgings. Klath strode in and took in the familiar surroundings, hoping that the recent memories of the two of them together in this place would bring the words to him and put an end to his entirely stilted comments so far.

"I have booked passage away from here," she offered eventually, in the absence of any attempt at conversation from him, "There is a transport departing for the Brakka system tomorrow."

Externally, Klath greeted this news with a curt nod. Internally, he felt the sharpened blade of a second d'k tahg joining the first.

"The Brakka system? Why?"

"I understand there is a colony there. With a small group of exiled Klingons amongst their number. I felt it would be somewhere for me to head. If I throw myself at their mercy, perhaps they will allow me to join them. Either way, I cannot stay caged up here."

Klath mentally extracted the blades from his stomach and fronted up to her. He still didn't know what he was going to say, but he now realised that he was running out of time to say it. "K'Veth," he started, "It is...not easy for me to discuss these matters. But I believe that I have not been clear with you. About my feelings—"

"You have been perfectly clear," she said with a hint of a smile, "In your actions, if not in your words."

She gestured again to his cheek to underline her point, before she continued.

"But there is nothing you can say to make me change my mind. I must set out on my own. And, perhaps in time, I can rediscover some honour. As you have in your life."

A light went off in Klath's head at this comment, as he got a clearer idea of why she was rejecting him so entirely. He recalled his own sense of humiliation when he had been exiled, and how hard it had been for him to restore a sense of pride.

“So,” he nodded in understanding, “That is what troubles you.”

“It is not all that troubles me,” she countered, “But it is what troubles me the most.”

Klath stepped towards her instinctively, recalling the way they had fought side-by-side against the infestation of tribbles on Brexis II. Back when he had first talked to her about the need for her to reclaim her own personal sense of honour.

“But,” he pointed out, “We have already fought for your honour, when we—”

“Pah,” she growled with a sudden burst of anger, “Do not insult me by trying to claim that slaughter was a true battle.”

“K’Veth, it was a glorious—”

“It was pest control!” she spat, “You can try to pretend otherwise, but everyone knows the truth. In all of my years as a Klingon, I have still never tasted a true battle.”

Through his par’Mach-addled brain, the penny fully dropped with Klath. He now realised the full extent of what she was craving.

After all, when he was sent into exile, he had still served a long and noble career in the Klingon Defence Force. He had commanded a ship in battle many times over, and slain many a warrior with his blade. And although all of that meant that his discommendation had hit all the more hard, at least he always had that sense of honour and history to fall back on. To keep him going.

In contrast, she had nothing. She had been born into exile, lived her entire life there. And now, thanks to her part in her father’s plot, she would surely die there as well.

“I see,” he nodded, taking another step towards her, “That is what you crave. You seek a real battle, one worthy of a Klingon.”

She didn’t answer him, but her silence spoke enough. Riding a wave of emotion, he took a final step up close to her and grabbed her arm with a burly hand, feeling the words now coming to him.

“Then we will go, together, out into the stars!” he barked out, “We will fight battle after battle, until the ground beneath our feet is drenched with the blood of our enemies, and you have found the true honour of a warrior, even in exile!”

He even impressed himself with the poetry of his words. But they didn’t seem to have the same effect on K’Veth, who wrenched her arm free of his grasp and spun away.

“You are a fool! And I have already told you: I do not want your pity!”

“This is not pity!”

“No,” she snarled, “This is just your latest plot to make me your wife. That is your only goal in all of this, is it not? To merely satisfy your own feelings.”

Klath went to deny her claim, but stopped himself. The words suddenly deserted him again. She jumped on that reaction immediately, swinging her arm at him with all of her might with a growl of anguish.

His own reactions kicked in the second she began to move. He shot out a hand and grabbed her arm before she made contact, snarling at her as he did so. She snarled back. And all of a sudden, both of them felt a familiar sensation running through their veins as they stared at each other, both of them fiercely baring their teeth.

Without saying another word, she grabbed for his other arm, and sniffed at his wrist. Klath immediately reciprocated, as the mating ritual began in earnest.

And a few seconds later, par’Mach consumed them both entirely once more. Their altercations and arguments all forgotten for the moment.

And they were right back where they had started.

## Part 2C

### Part Two (Cont'd)

The two Pakleds led their hostages quickly into a side room off from the main corridor.

The floor space of the small storage area was mostly empty, with the perimeter of the room lined instead with rows and rows of shelves, all groaning under the weight of various crates and containers. Which meant that, while the room wasn't exactly vast, there was enough room for the Pakleds to keep a safe distance away from the two women.

Both of their disruptors were still raised. And both Denella and Erami still had their hands raised above their heads as a result.

"So," Denella offered, directing her words at Erami as much as at the Pakleds in front of her, "Now we're all alone, does anyone wanna get me up to speed on what's going on?"

Erami kept her mouth shut, but the Pakleds seemed more amenable to replying. "She owes us for what she took," the slightly taller of their assailants grunted, "And we have found her now."

"We are smart," the shorter one affirmed with a definitive tone.

The taller one nodded in agreement, and took a half step closer to Erami. "Grumtrag knows that you come here. Kervala Prime base. You come here a lot, to make your ship go. And we waited for you."

"It was all Grumtrag's idea," the other Pakled added, gesturing to his colleague with deference, "He is the smartest of all."

"Great," Erami replied with heavy sarcasm, "Maybe you're not as dumb as you look. I'd congratulate you, but I'm afraid I'm fresh out of cookies."

Both of the Pakleds looked her up and down, apparently considering whether or not to conduct a quick pat down to confirm or deny the report of her lack of cookies. In the end, they opted to maintain their distance.

"I take it that means these are the guys that trashed your shuttle," Denella chimed in.

"Wow," Erami sighed, sarcasm still in place, "I am just surrounded by geniuses right now, aren't I?"

"She took our prize!" the Pakled that had identified himself as Grumtrag spat out, "We looked for it in her ship. It was not there."

Denella shook her head, remaining calm in the face of the disruptors being pointed at her. This sort of thing was all part of a day's work onboard the Bounty, after all.

"This is really just a big misunderstanding," Erami insisted, despite the mounting evidence.

"Really?" the Orion snorted.

"What?" she persisted, "You're telling me there's nobody out there that you and your crew have a few misunderstandings with?"

Denella paused for a moment, silently conceding to herself with a slightly rueful grimace that the Bajoran had a point there. "Ok," she said eventually, changing tack, "What's the issue here? What's this prize all about? Latinum?"

Grumtrag shook his balding head at this, keeping his disruptor pointed at them even as he took another menacing half-step forwards. "No latinum. But our prize is worth much of that."

He narrowed his eyes as he focused on Erami. Denella noted that, with all of the half-steps he had been taking, the weapon in his hand was now within striking range.

"You owe us our prize," he continued, "And if you no longer have it, then that will make Grumtrag very angry..."

As the Pakled's face twisted into an approximation of a sneer, Denella managed to catch Erami's eye for a split second. She tried her best to convey her intentions with that single split-second look.

It was the sort of thing that she would be confident of being able to do with Klath, or even Jirel. Someone that she knew she could trust, and who was on the same wavelength. A shared intuition they had honed by being caught up in far too many similar scrapes over the years. But she didn't have that intuition with Erami. And by this point, given what had happened to them, she certainly wasn't sure she could trust her.

Still, given their predicament, she was more prepared to trust her than she was the two armed Pakleds. So she put her faith in the power of her look. One that had conveyed a single word across the storage room.

Now.

Without waiting any longer, she sprung into action, whipping her hand out to grab Grumtrag's hand that clasped his disruptor and wrenching it backwards with immediate force. The shock of the action caused the taller Pakled to cry out in pain and drop the weapon to the ground with a sharp clatter.



While Denella grappled with one of their captors, the silent message had mercifully been received by Erami. At almost the same time that the Orion had pounced, the Bajoran had braced herself and charged the shorter Pakled. He had managed to get a reactive shot off from his disruptor, but in the sudden chaos the shot did little more than leave a smoking hole in a crate of self-sealing stem bolts on one of the shelves.

Erami flew into her target's midriff and sent them both crashing to the ground in a heap.

Denella remained on her feet, even as Grumtrag broke away from her grip and turned to face her. She adopted a defensive pose, but took the opportunity to grab her trusty Orion dagger from her belt, hefting it in her hand with purpose.

She didn't really want to use deadly force against this particular adversary, given that she still wasn't sure she was on the right side of the fight. But she did want to get out of here, and she was hoping that the presence of a bladed weapon might convince the now-unarmed Pakled to beat a hasty retreat.

In the periphery of her vision, she could see that Erami and the other Pakled were still frantically grappling on the ground, but she couldn't worry about that for now. She kept her focus on her own opponent.

The Pakled's eyes widened as he saw the blade. But either through a surprising amount of bravery or a less surprising amount of stupidity, he didn't back off, or run away. Instead, he made a break for the disruptor where he had dropped it onto the ground moments earlier.

Denella pounced, reaching Grumtrag before he was able to get a stubby hand on the weapon and taking down the off-balance Pakled with a sharp elbow to the ribs. He fell back to the ground on his front, and the Orion deftly ended his brief attempt at resistance by spinning her dagger around and driving the handle of the weapon down onto the back of Grumtrag's substantial skull, knocking him clean out with a satisfying thud.

Without pausing for breath, she jumped back to her feet and spun around, aware that there was another fight going on.

On the other side of the room, Erami and Grumtrag's subordinate were back on their feet. The fearful Pakled charged towards her gamely, but like his superior, his technique in this sort of close combat left a lot to be desired.

Erami was able to evade his swinging arm and grab his other arm in an elegant pirouette, using the momentum of her spin to swing the hapless, lumbering Pakled around her centre of gravity until he impacted with some force into the shelves behind her. The defeated Pakled collapsed to the ground with an ungainly thump, knocked unconscious. He was followed by a box of duranium screws, which toppled off the shelves and landed next to him, sending its contents skittering across the floor.

Erami turned back to the begrudgingly impressed Orion and smiled. "Not just a pretty face, huh?" she shrugged, "Five years in the Bajoran Resistance teaches you a thing or two about handing yourself. Not to mention another few years as a solo shuttle pilot in spaceports like this."

Denella nodded in understanding, as Erami wiped the sweat from her brow and paced over to one of the discarded disruptors, checking the power levels.

"I guess it's time for us to make ourselves scarce," the Orion added as she looked at the forms of the two unconscious Pakleds, "We can always send port security a tip-off about these two once we're safely back at the landing pad."

Erami nodded, then idly gestured over to the other disruptor where it lay discarded on the ground and gave her a warm smile. "Wanna grab that, just in case?"

Denella holstered her dagger, then turned and stepped over to the other weapon.

She instantly realised her mistake.

Because, while she and Erami had made a good team when they were fighting the Pakleds, she still had some serious doubts about her. Especially given her continued evasion when it came to the reasons that the two armed Pakleds had been interested in her in the first place, and what exactly this 'prize' was that they were after.

But, in a rare lapse of concentration, possibly brought on by the warm smile the Bajoran had given her, she had let her guard down and turned her back on her.

Her fears about how much of a mistake this was didn't have long to fully coalesce, as a fraction of a second after they had first popped up in her mind, she felt the unmistakable sensation of the butt of a disruptor pistol impacting on the back of her skull. She barely had time to silently chide herself for making such an elementary tactical blunder before she slumped down to the ground, joining the two Pakleds in a state of entirely involuntary unconsciousness.

Erami sighed as she looked down at the Orion's unmoving form.

"Sorry about that," she muttered with a slight grimace, "But I guess this is how it's got to be."

With another grimace, she stepped towards Denella's prone form.

## Part 2D

### Part Two (Cont'd)

“Are you even listening to me?”

Jirel looked across the table at Sunek, who seemed to be otherwise distracted by something over at the bar area. After a second, the Trill’s glare finally got through to the Vulcan, who reluctantly switched his attention back to his drinking companion.

“Would it really hurt your feelings if I said no?”

Jirel sighed and shook his head, taking a sip of his drink.

If anything, the Treaty of Organia was even more busy tonight. They had just about managed to find a table, but the entire bar was swarming with a multitude of patrons, along with several tired waitresses in cheap mini-dresses being rushed off their high heels. Still, the drinks prices were as cheap as ever, so there had been very little time wasted by either of them with the idea that they should try somewhere else. Truth be told, Jirel had just wanted somewhere to sit and stew on his problems for a while.

Not that his distracted drinking buddy was helping him out with any of those.

“I was just saying,” he persisted, toying with his half-finished Andorian brandy, “What Denella said this morning...that’s not what everyone thinks, is it? About me, and Natasha, and the...looks?”

Sunek’s attention had partially drifted back over to the bar area, but he forced himself to at least glance back at the Trill, even if he looked entirely uninterested in what he was saying.

“Yeah,” he shrugged.

“Really?”

“Or...no? I dunno, Jirel, what do you want me to say?”

Jirel sighed in frustration as Sunek’s attention was once again diverted back to the bar, the Vulcan craning his neck to look through the crowds with fresh intrigue. “I want you to at least try to pay attention to—What are you looking at, anyway?”

At this, the Vulcan immediately perked up and turned back to him, his attention now entirely on their discussion. “The Caitian. She’s back!”

“Really?” Jirel replied, failing to catch his withering eye roll before it was already in progress, “You’re still on that?”

“Heh,” the Vulcan grinned with a glint in his eye, “Not yet, but—”

“Ok, really bad choice of words. But Natasha was right. There’s no way she’s interested in you, so can we please focus on something more important?”

“Like you pining over our doctor?”

“Like,” Jirel grimaced, “What we’re gonna do about Klath. I still have no idea where he is. I sent him a message telling him where we were going, but...nothing.”

Sunek made a valiant effort to feign interest in what his colleague was saying, but in truth it was clear that his focus was still elsewhere.

“Tell you what’ll make you feel better,” he said eventually, downing the rest of his drink, “Another round. My treat.”

His entirely surprising offer coincided with Natasha, who they had left behind back on the promenade to do some more shopping, slipping into one of the vacant seats at the table with a look of surprise. “Sunek offering to buy a round?” she smiled, “Have we fallen through an anomaly into another dimension?”

“Funny,” the Vulcan retorted, “You want a drink or not?”

Jirel leaned over to Natasha to clarify things, making extra sure not to do anything that anyone could misinterpret as a ‘look’ as he did so. “Our Caitian friend is back.”

“Ah,” Natasha sighed patiently at the Bounty’s pilot, “You have to understand that she’s really not into you, right?”

Even as she embarked on another round of gentle ribbing, she felt a little bit of trepidation about pushing things too far with Sunek on this particular subject, given what the Vulcan knew about her own past. Specifically, an incident some years ago on Wrigley’s Pleasure Planet when she had been on shore leave as a junior ensign. An incident involving her, a handsome Betazoid civilian negotiator, a bed with a predictive ergonomic mattress, and her best friend from the USS Tripoli, Ensign T’Vess.

And an incident that Sunek knew in lurid detail, thanks to a sequence of shared memories via a desperate mind meld to try and contact her after she had been incapacitated by a psychoactive plant venom some months ago.

After the crisis was over, the Vulcan had sworn himself to secrecy when it came to everything he had inadvertently seen of her past, and had

even offered up an acutely embarrassing story from his own past to ensure that he couldn't blackmail her. Which had reassured her slightly. Still, when it came to dealing with the Bounty's laughing Vulcan, she struggled to feel entirely certain that his complicated emotional state wouldn't prevent him from slipping up at some point. Especially if she insisted on goading him on the subject of Caitians.

Still, at least right now she had some backup, from a Trill that was entirely oblivious to that incident in her past.

"Yeah," Jirel chimed in on cue, "I don't know what to tell you, Sunek. But she is definitely not checking you out."

"You don't think I can get a date with her?"

"No," Jirel added with a shake of his head, "I know you can't get a date with her."

"Yep," Natasha added, "She's at a bar, by herself, in the middle of a huge spaceport. You're just gonna be one of dozens of creepy spacefaring weirdos who've tried it on with her tonight. Knowing Caitians, she'll probably just claw your eyes out."

"Huh," Jirel mused thoughtfully at this new information, "You know, I'm suddenly entirely onboard with this little experiment."

Despite the double attack on his carefully cultivated charming personality from the two grinning co-conspirators at the table in front of him, Sunek remained cockily defiant.

He stood up, smoothed his unruly mop of hair down as best he could, wiggled his eyebrows knowingly, and fixed his best seductive smile onto his face. Which, both Natasha and Jirel noted, was some way short of what a seductive smile was supposed to look like.

"Think what you like," the Vulcan in full flirtation mode offered back, "But I can be very charming when I want to be."

"I find that... basically impossible to believe," Natasha replied flatly.

"Yeah, well, you know what? You can buy your own round. Cos I'm gonna go over there, I'm gonna say hello, and then me and her are going to hit it off. Guaranteed."

He took a moment to adjust his lurid, slightly creased Hawaiian shirt, then nodded in satisfaction.

"Don't wait up..."

With that, he walked off confidently in the direction of the bar. Natasha turned to Jirel.

"Think he'll do it?"

"I think it'll be a miracle if he comes back here with his ears intact. But, knowing Sunek, he's probably gonna get turned down, then spend a couple of hours hiding somewhere so he can pretend that he actually did hit it off with her."

They shared a laugh, before a slightly awkward silence descended over proceedings.

"So," Jirel managed eventually, "Then there were two, I guess. Here's to those of us with nothing better to do tonight."

He raised his glass in a toast and then downed the rest of his brandy, earning an amused smile from Natasha as she began to browse the drinks menu on the curious old tricorder arrangement in the middle of the table.

"You know, it's kinda cute," she mused as she browsed, "Denella's off with her new friend, Klath's trying his best to get married, Sunek's... doing what he's doing."

"You jealous?" Jirel couldn't help but ask, once again making sure he wasn't doing anything that might be misconstrued as a 'look'.

She snorted and shook her head, then offered a more noncommittal shrug. "I mean, I guess I was thinking when I was talking to Denella yesterday. It has been a while since someone took me out for dinner."

"What about our old friend Mizar Bal?" Jirel asked somewhat candidly, referring to a handsome Ktarian that she had indulged in a liaison with recently.

A handsome Ktarian who had then gone on to tie the pair of them to a bomb in the Bounty's cargo bay while he had forced the others to undertake a complicated latinum heist on the surface of a Ktarian colony.

"Well," she offered back, "He didn't take me out for dinner. That was just good, old-fashioned, hot, sweaty—"

"Ok. Good to hear."

Jirel sank back in his chair as Natasha stifled a smile, recalling how much he had annoyed her during that whole Ktarian incident, as his jealous streak had made an unwelcome appearance.

Regardless of how often she had reiterated that their night together immediately after the Bounty had first rescued her had just been a one night thing, a need for companionship after three months marooned on a hostile planet following the destruction of the USS Navajo, that jealous streak had never entirely gone away. Even though, as she had put it at the time, she had just been scratching an itch. There was no deeper feeling there, certainly from her side. She was sure of that.

She continued to idly browse the drinks list, and reiterated to herself that she was definitely sure of that. No feelings at all.

"Well," Jirel managed eventually, "I'm not gonna take you out for dinner, but I think I can stretch to a round of drinks. Deal?"

She looked up at him and smiled, the same smile that had caused Jirel's insides to start doing backflips the first time he'd seen it. But he wasn't about to spend any time thinking about that right now. And he definitely wasn't about to give her any sort of 'look'.

As the Trill started to look around for a passing waitress, Natasha leaned back in her chair and studied him for a moment. She had to admit that, when he wasn't with the others, or he wasn't trying to impress someone with his wannabe space captain routine, he was surprisingly good company. Not that she'd be telling him that any time soon.

Before she realised she was doing it, she also considered how, of all the unhappy romantic encounters she had had in her life to date, that one night in his cabin might have been the least unhappy of them all.

She certainly wouldn't be telling him that.

Still, she thought, as Jirel finally and slightly clumsily caught the eye of a waitress, there were definitely worse ways to scratch an itch.

"So," Jirel said with a grin, turning back to her and gesturing to the waitress who stood poised with an electronic clipboard, "What should we get?"

She wasn't sure exactly what made her say it. Whether it was a subconscious reaction to everything she was feeling. Whether it was a moment of thoughtless desperation. Or whether it was just a straightforward desire to be substantially less sober than she currently was. Either way, she said it.

"Shots?"

Jirel looked a little bit confused at this suggestion.

"Shots?" he echoed.

Having said it, she elected not to put too much effort into overthinking why she said it. After all, they were just two friends. Having a few drinks.

"Shots," she nodded back, with certainty.

Just two lonely people. Having a few drinks.

Jirel shrugged and looked back up at the waitress with the clipboard.

"Shots," he confirmed.

Natasha leaned back in her chair, and patiently waited for her first drink of the night.

This was fine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denella slowly came to, her vision coalescing back into a definable view.

At first, her surroundings seemed entirely alien. She certainly wasn't in the storage area in the port anymore. Then, she realised. She was in the rear section of a Ferengi Na'Far-class shuttle. She was onboard the Kendra.

She forced herself to sit up, even as her dazed head cried out for more rest. She was lying on a simple single bed in what passed for the onboard accommodation of the small shuttle. There was little else in the room save for a small single table and chair, and a two-person sofa-style seat pushed up against the far wall.

The walls themselves were a dirty orange hue, much like the exterior of the vessel, and the air smelt vaguely musty, indicating that amongst her many other faults, the Kendra was also due a service of her filtration systems. The engineer's sense in her also immediately picked up on the tell-tale hum of the shuttle's warp core. A faint noise on such a small vessel, but still detectable. Which meant that the Kendra was back up and running at full power.

She checked herself over and was relieved to find that, aside from a sore head where she had been struck, she seemed otherwise unharmed. Although, having been as stupid as to turn her back on someone she had no reason to trust, her ego had taken a serious beating. She wondered what Klath would have had to say about that particular tactic of hers.

She forced herself off the bed and onto her feet and took in her wider situation. She was surprised to find that she still had her dagger on her belt.

Seconds later, she drew it with a single deft movement, as a figure entered the room.

"Morning," Erami smiled, gesturing to the glinting blade of the dagger, "Hey, no need for all that."

She appeared to be completely unarmed, and her manner was entirely casual, but nevertheless Denella kept the weapon drawn, not wanting to underestimate the Bajoran again. No matter how unthreatening she seemed to be.

"You hungry?" Erami continued, "The replicator on this crate isn't the best, but I think I can rustle up something edible."

Denella's aching head swam with further confusion. Specifically as to why the Bajoran was reacting like nothing untoward had happened earlier. "What the hell did you do to me?" she replied sharply, "And why did you bring me back here?"

Erami saw that the dagger was going nowhere and sighed, holding her hands up in a show of good-natured surrender. "Hey, I'm sorry, ok? I didn't want to hit you like that. But we really needed to get away from those Pakleds, and I didn't have time to explain."

"Get away from the unconscious Pakleds? Pretty sure you had time to explain."

"There might have been more of them on the way, I had no idea," Erami insisted, not entirely convincingly, "So I...had to do something."

She tried an even warmer smile, a similar one to the smile that had so disarmed Denella earlier and caused her to make a tactical error. This time, the Orion kept her weapon raised, and her focus entirely on the other woman.

"You had to knock me out? And bring me back here? Really?"

Erami's smile faltered slightly, as she gestured to the dagger again. "Come on, you're making me nervous now. Put that away."

Denella shook her head. "Not after what just happened," she replied, "And I'm getting out of here now. Back to the Bounty. Alone."

Erami watched her carefully manoeuvre her way to the exit, keeping herself facing towards the Bajoran at all times.

"Um," she managed, "That might be a bit tricky right now..."

Denella looked confused at this comment. Then, her engineering senses picked up on something else as she stood on the deck plates of the Kendra. Not only was there the tell-tale hum from the reactivated warp core, there was something else there, another unmistakable sensation.

They were moving.

She turned and rushed the short distance to the Kendra's cockpit, dagger still in her hand, hoping that she wasn't making another crucial tactical mistake by turning her back on the seemingly unarmed Erami for a second time.

And she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the view through the cockpit window. She wasn't on Kervala Prime any more.

They were in space. At warp.

Not only had she allowed herself to be taken by surprise by Erami back in the storage area, it seemed that she had also allowed herself to be kidnapped.

Behind her, Erami stepped into the cockpit and peered over her shoulder.

"Like I said, we really needed to get away from those Pakleds..."

**End of Part Two**

## Part 3A

### Part Three

Natasha groaned as she slowly stirred from her deep slumber.

She recognised the tell-tale split second moment of cognisance in her mind. One that she had felt plenty of times before throughout her life, and one that was immediately familiar to anyone who had the pleasure of indulging in the dubious delights of real alcohol.

It was the barely perceptible instant between waking up and being hit with the full force of the hangover. The tiniest of liminal moments between one state and another, which always seemed like your brain's way of telling you to brace yourself for the misery that was about to be unleashed.

And then, an instant later and right on schedule, the sledgehammer hit home. The intense pounding headache, the sudden rush of nausea, the myriad aches and pains throughout her body. Plus an unerring and unshakable sense of shame.

It seemed that, despite what she had been telling herself at the time, shots had been a bad idea.

"Ugh," she managed to grunt to herself as she shifted around in her bed.

The cabin was otherwise silent, save for the gentle chirping sound coming from Spotty, the infertile tribble that she had adopted on their last adventure. As it always did every morning, Spotty sat patiently trilling in its cage on her desk, waiting for its morning meal.

As she shifted around and started to force herself to open her eyes, she felt a growing sense of something else, alongside the barrage of unwanted sensations that her hangover was punishing her with.

She got the distinct feeling that she wasn't alone.

"Ugh," a second voice said.

She forced her eyes fully open with a few painful blinks, then looked over to her side.

"We've really got to stop doing this, you know," Jirel managed, forcing a grin onto his face despite the fact that he was undergoing a similar internal trauma to what she was going through as the hangover fully coalesced. Alcohol's effect on humanoids was almost a galactic constant.

Natasha didn't return the grin. Instead, she pulled the bed sheet up over her head and groaned again, more deeply and painfully than before.

She forced herself to try to remember what had happened after her fateful drinks order in the Treaty of Organia. Piecing together fragments of half memories to try and figure out how she had chosen to end up, for the second time in her life, spending the night with the Trill.

"What the hell happened last night?" she miserably muttered, her voice sounding slightly muffled by the sheet.

Jirel did his best not to take too much offence from this particular reaction from someone who had discovered themselves in bed with him, and forced himself to sit up as he tried to deal with his own pounding headache by rubbing his hands on his temples. "Um," he managed eventually, tasting the post-alcohol fuzz on his tongue, "I remember shots. Lots and lots of shots."

"Ugh," she grunted, "Yep. Remember those."

"Then I remember we walked all the way back here. Except halfway back you said your feet were hurting and you insisted I carried you the rest of the way on my back."

She stifled the latest in a long series of unhappy grimaces and nodded under the sheet. That had been one of her trademark methods of rudimentary drunken flirtation in her Academy days.

"Um," he continued, "Then I think we went for the liquor cabinet when we got back here. And we definitely drank some Scotch whisky, Saurian brandy, and something we figured out was probably an old bottle of Kanar that had gone bad."

"This ship has way too much booze on it."

"And then...oh god," he winced, "Then I'm pretty sure we started singing."

Another, more prolonged grimace took shape underneath the bed sheet. "Yep," she sighed, "I remember the singing."

"And then, after all that, you...came on to me."

In a split second, she snapped the sheet down from her face and glared up at the Trill. "Um, excuse me?" she scoffed, "I did no such—you came on to me!"

"Nope," he insisted with a definitive shake of his head, "I was halfway through a pitch perfect rendition of an old Klingon drinking ballad that Klath once taught me when you just...launched yourself at me from across the room."

"Wh—? Ok, that's not what happened. I think you'll find that I was just getting to the end of my Academy karaoke playlist when you made your move. You took advantage of me!"

“Hey, no. I didn’t—If anyone took advantage of anyone last night it was you taking advantage of me!”

She went to retort again, but the growing fog that was covering her brain was stifling her usual power for rational debate. Instead, she just lifted the sheet back over her head and screamed into it.

“Look, I get it,” Jirel continued, his grin making a return to the discussion, “It’s hard for most women to resist me at the best of times—”

“Don’t, Jirel. Don’t joke about it. Don’t do that stupid little grin of yours. Don’t try to make me breakfast. Just—Get dressed and get out!”

Jirel tried his best not to take further offence from that tirade. Especially the reference to the elaborate breakfast feast he had cooked up the morning after their previous liaison. One that she had casually declined in humiliating fashion after explaining that it had just been a one night thing.

“Really? You’re gonna kick me out? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” she affirmed from under the sheet, “And do it quickly. I need to get up, feed Spotty, and then work on some way of erasing my short term memory.”

Jirel sighed and shook his head, then swung his legs out of the bed and reached for his clothes. “Fine,” he said as he got dressed, “I can go. But don’t tell me this doesn’t mean—”

“And don’t do that,” she snapped, pulling the sheet back down to emphasise her point with the firmest of glares, “This didn’t mean anything, so don’t go pretending that it did. Please.”

“Come on, Nat. A one night stand is one thing. But twice? Plus, you’re the one that suggested we do shots. You’re the one that was flirting with me on the walk back. You sure this was a mistake?”

“After this conversation? Definitely.”

The Trill shook his head as he slipped his boots on.

“Fine. Be like that.”

“Oh no,” she shook her head, pointing at him with an accusing finger, “Don’t do that either.”

“What now?”

“That thing where I’m telling you it was a mistake, and it’s obvious that it was a mistake, but you still think it wasn’t a mistake. Because it was. A mistake.”

“You done?”

She went to add something more, but concluded that nothing more needed to be said.

“Ok then,” Jirel continued, “You win. It was a mistake.”

She eyed him up warily as he stood up, ready to leave. “You mean that?”

“Yep. You’re absolutely right about everything. We got horrifically drunk, we weren’t thinking straight, and whoever came on to who, it was all a mistake.”

She continued to eye him up warily, as he offered back an entirely credulous poker face. “Ok, good,” she nodded eventually, “I’m...glad we agree.”

“Cool. So, if there’s nothing else you wanna talk about, I’m gonna go find some breakfast. A light breakfast. For one. Just for me.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

With their conversation having reached an apparently agreeable conclusion, Jirel turned and exited her cabin.

As he walked out the door, she was unable to see the slight trace of a grin that crossed his face as he did so. Because he knew there was no way this had just been a mistake.

As the door closed behind him, Natasha flopped back down onto the pillow with a frustrated groan. The cabin was now silent, save for the now distinctly insistent chirping of a tribble still awaiting its morning meal.

As she lay back and stared up at the ceiling, she tried to organise her terribly jumbled, confused and hungover thoughts into some sort of coherence. And as she did so, one particularly nagging and annoying thought refused to go away. A thought that was as surprising to her as it was unwelcome.

What if it hadn’t been a mistake?

## Part 3B

### Part Three (Cont'd)

“It’s not a kidnapping.”

Denella raised an entirely unconvinced eyebrow and kept her weapon raised at the Bajoran on the other side of the Kendra’s cockpit. “Really?” the Orion countered, “Cos, as far as I can see, you knocked me unconscious, got me all the way back to your ship somehow, and then took off into space. Presumably without telling anyone where we’re going?”

Erami cringed slightly at that list of undeniable facts and reluctantly sighed. “Ok, granted, there are a few similarities with a kidnapping. But this was all for your own safety.”

“My own safety?”

“Like I said,” Erami shrugged, “We needed to make a quick escape, and there wasn’t really time to explain. We needed to get away from Kervala Prime before the Pakleds got themselves back together, and I couldn’t risk them going after you if I left you there.”

“And now what? You’re just gonna keep me onboard your shuttle forever? Is this how you normally hire your crews?”

“No,” Erami smiled patiently, “We just need to find somewhere to hide for a bit. Just until the Pakleds clear out of the system to try and find us. I’ve done my best to mask our warp trail, so give it a few hours and then we should be safe to head back.”

The Orion still didn’t look convinced. Erami sighed again and gestured to the dagger that Denella was still wielding defensively in front of her.

“Look, if this really was a kidnapping, would you still have that? And wouldn’t I have tied you up instead of leaving you to wake up and hold me at knifepoint? Trust me, I’m familiar with the concept of a kidnapping. And this isn’t one.”

Denella had to concede that these were some good points. At the very least, if she was a kidnapper, Erami was taking an awful lot of liberties. “Well,” she managed eventually, “I, um, guess that makes sense.”

“You really thought I’d kidnapped you?” Erami chuckled with an amused shake of her head.

“Wouldn’t you?”

Now it was Erami’s turn to concede the point, as Denella rubbed the back of her head with a pained wince.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the Bajoran winced, “If you, um, put the knife away, I can take a look at you with the medkit?”

Denella shook her head, but found herself holstering the dagger regardless. “It’s fine,” the Orion assured her, “Don’t think there’s a concussion. But you couldn’t have been a bit more gentle?”

“Don’t know my own strength, do I?” Erami grinned, rolling up her sleeve and flexing her bicep to underline her point.

Denella smiled back, and the Bajoran relaxed now the weapon was removed from the discussion.

“Well,” she continued, “Now that’s all cleared up, I’ll ask you again: You hungry?”

Denella considered trying to deny it, but she was completely famished. She nodded back, eliciting a wider smile from the other woman.

“Perfect,” Erami replied with satisfaction, “Cos I’ve got just the thing. Call it an apology. For, um, not kidnapping you.”

The Bajoran stepped over towards the controls of the shuttle and deftly tapped them. The Kendra had a simple bank of controls, with two seats at the front of the cockpit for a pilot and co-pilot, and much like the rest of the ship they showed clear signs of a lifetime of running repairs, the metal plates and control surfaces a mishmash of different designs and colours.

As Erami worked at the controls, Denella felt the shuttle slow to sublight speeds.

“Cos,” she continued, “I’ve told you we’re hiding from the Pakleds, but you haven’t seen where we’re hiding yet.”

She nodded towards the shuttle’s cockpit window, and Denella turned back to the view, just as the Bajoran swung the ship to her port side.

Denella couldn’t help but gasp, as she saw that the typical starscape view had been replaced by that of a dazzling nebula. It was a swirling mass of pink and purple hues, tendrils of gas twisting and curling around each other in a cosmic dance of charged particles. The light from the view bathed the entire cockpit in a warm pinkish tinge as the Kendra slowed to an impulse crawl just on the periphery of the nebula.

Regardless of exactly how she’d got here, she couldn’t help but be captivated by it.

“May I introduce you to the Kervala Nebula,” Erami smiled as she gazed at the beauty of the view herself, “Figured that if you’re stuck laying low with me for a while, the least I could do was take you someplace nice.”

Denella was still staring through the cockpit window, too transfixed to answer. Erami smiled and stood from her seat, walking over to the rear of the cockpit.



“And get you something nice to eat,” she added.

Denella tore herself away from the view and turned around to see the Bajoran ostentatiously spreading a thick woollen blanket across the deck of the cockpit. Next to her sat a small replicated wicker hamper, overflowing with various food and drink.

“You...made a picnic?” Denella asked, with mild incredulity.

“Yeah,” Erami nodded as she smoothed the blanket out, “And if you ever dare tell anyone about how cute I’m being right now, I’ll give you another whack on the head. Got a reputation as a hard-ass shuttle pilot to maintain.”

Denella felt herself smiling again, as Erami gestured for her to sit down on the blanket.

“So,” she added with a smile of her own, “Wanna try that dinner again?”

She paused, then shrugged before continuing.

“I mean, technically this is brunch, but whatever.”

Denella took another look at the beauty of the swirling nebula, then turned back to the impromptu picnic scene.

And she nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

High above the surface of Kervala Prime’s overpopulated spaceport, the Pakled vessel Martan hung silently in orbit.

It wasn’t much to look at. Externally, the hull was that of a decades-old Andorian freighter, consisting of a spherical forward section and a blocky rectangular midsection, complete with twin warp nacelles that branched off on elevated pylons.

When it had been used by the Andorians, it had served as little more than a supply ship, completing short runs between colonies with raw materials and other resources. But, like all Pakled ships, once Grumtrag and his crew had come into possession of it, they had made plenty of adjustments under the skin. Using whatever extra resources they had been able to buy, steal or otherwise acquire, the rechristened Martan had been thoroughly overhauled from the ground up.

Her warp drive had been replaced with one from a Terrelian cruiser. Her shields had been upgraded using a generator from an old Vulcan transport. And she had been kitted out with weapons systems sourced from half a dozen other vessels.

In combination, the disparate requirements of each system shouldn’t have worked in tandem. But the Pakleds found a way to patch everything together in a way that worked. As a result, despite the rather unthreatening exterior of the Martan, it packed a hefty punch when the need arose.

Not that Grumtrag felt comforted by that fact as he stalked onto the Martan’s bridge.

He had woken up several minutes earlier, to find that he and his trusty first mate had been left behind in the storage room in the port. The Bajoran and her Orion companion had clearly long gone, and hadn’t even bothered taking their disruptors with them. In something of a foul mood, he had immediately signalled to the Martan to beam them back aboard, and in the same transmission, he had also told his crew to work on getting a trace on any ships that had left the port recently.

By the time he had reached the bridge, little had changed about his mood. But then, he finally received some positive news. His tactical chief, a stout Pakled by the name of Grivnog, had a report for him as soon as he sat down in his command chair.

Because, not only had Grumtrag and his crew thoroughly upgraded the Martan’s propulsion, defensive and weapons systems over the last few months. They had also completed extensive work on the external sensors.

Thanks to a lucky find on a derelict they had come across a few sectors from Kervala Prime, there was now a full set of sensor modules from a Ferengi Marauder installed. Which meant that not only was the unassuming Martan packing a hefty punch, it was also excellent at locating its prey.

And while Juna Erami had done her best to hide her shuttle’s warp trail, she hadn’t reckoned with the beefed up systems of the Pakled vessel.

“We see where they have gone, Grumtrag,” Grivnog reported excitedly, “They tried to hide their path from us, but we have found it. Because we are smart.”

Grumtrag nodded in complete agreement with Grivnog’s final assessment. They were indeed smart. Smarter than the Bajoran that had taken their prize, at least. “Take us to them,” he barked out without a moment’s hesitation, “Fastest speed!”

The bald Pakled at the helm nodded and prodded at his controls.

The Martan broke orbit from Kervala Prime, and turned in the direction indicated by Grivnog’s sensor data, before exploding forwards in a burst of light as the Terrelian warp drive got to work.

The hunt was on.

One of the things that Natasha had found difficult to adjust to with the size of the Bounty, compared to the Starfleet ships she was used to, was that it was impossible to avoid anyone for very long.

Back in her days onboard the USS Tripoli, or the late USS Navajo, if she really wanted to avoid someone then there were ways to make it happen. Provided they worked in a different department, she could reschedule shifts, stagger her trips to the mess hall, hide away in a holodeck for a few hours, or even just walk the corridors of the engineering decks for an evening if necessary.

But on the Bounty, she had no such options available. And she couldn't even relax in her cabin for hours on end as she could on a starship. Because she was hungry. And the only replicator onboard the Bounty was in the dining area. And as soon as she walked into the dining area, she saw that she wasn't the only bedraggled individual who had sought out the universal hangover cure of a huge breakfast.

"Oh. Hey," Jirel nodded from where he sat at the table, his fifth jumja tea of the morning in his hand.

For a second, she considered whether she could get away with simply nodding back and walking out again. No matter how ridiculous that would have looked. But ultimately, the combined strength of her growling stomach and her pounding head overruled any other plan she might have had. She medically needed to eat something, and while she would rather have dealt with that issue without bumping into Jirel, that wasn't a luxury afforded to her onboard a ship of this size.

"Hi," she replied simply, swiftly pacing over to the replicator and ordering up her hangover cure of choice.

Seconds later, she sat down opposite the Trill, with a steaming mug of triple filtered raktajino and a plate containing a double stack of pancakes complete with butter and syrup.

She could guess the look on Jirel's face in response to the impending display of gluttony, but she kept her focus on the gooey, sugary mass in front of her and simply pointed at him with her fork.

"Don't judge me, ok? As a medical professional, I'm aware there are plenty of actual hangover cures in the medical bay. But given how bad I feel right now, I've earned the right to cure this one the old fashioned way. By eating a huge plateful of crap."

Jirel smiled and sipped his tea as she unapologetically attacked the stack of pancakes. "Hey, I'm not judging," he half-lied, "I've always thought that sticking a hypospray in your neck to cure a hangover is cheating. If you don't want to do the time, don't do the crime. Or just stick to synthehol."

She looked up at him, her mouth full of buttery, syrupy goodness, and she nodded.

The moment of hungover camaraderie almost immediately gave way to a more uncomfortable silence. The unspoken issues surrounding their night together hung thick in the air like a fog. Issues that Natasha really didn't want to deal with while she felt like this.

"So," Jirel ventured, with a click of his tongue, "About what happened—"

"What's the plan after we're done with the repairs?" she jumped in, swallowing another mouthful of pancake, "We gonna try and find a job in the port, or head to that trade convention on Corvin VII?"

"Oh," Jirel replied, a little taken aback, "I hadn't really thought about—"

"Cos I think we may as well look for something here first, right? Maybe a delivery we can make on our way over there? Bit of extra latinum?"

Jirel set his mug down on the table and mustered a nod, wondering how the conversation had drifted onto this particular subject from the one he had been intending to discuss. "Right, sure," he shrugged, "But, um, all I wanted to say was—"

"Where are the others, by the way?" she continued, her words slightly muffled through another mouthful of food, "I might see if Denella needs a hand with the repairs. Sooner we get them done, sooner we can get moving, after all."

Jirel sighed inwardly, gradually picking up on the hint that the conversation he had been preparing to have in his head throughout his own carb-heavy breakfast was destined not to happen.

The silence returned, as Natasha continued her meal and Jirel contemplated if there was another way for him to broach his preferred subject.

"So, um—"

That was as far as he got.

Although, this time, he wasn't interrupted by another deliberate non sequitur from Natasha. Instead, the interruption came from outside the room, a curious noise from elsewhere in the ship.

Intrigued, and a little relieved at the disturbance, they stood up in unison and went to investigate. It didn't take long for them to find the source of the disturbance. Klath had noisily returned to his ship, and to his cabin.

And he appeared to be packing.

The Klingon was in the middle of carefully placing the various bladed weapons that usually hung from the wall of his cabin into a stout metal carrying container when he looked up to see the two figures standing in the doorway.

“And where have you been all night, young man?” Jirel chided, gesturing at himself and Natasha with a sliver of amusement, “Do you have any idea how worried we both were?”

Klath didn't look especially amused by this. Nor, in truth, did Natasha.

“I have...been with K'Veth,” he begrudgingly replied, as he slid his prized mek'leth into the container, “And I believe I now know what I must do to change her mind.”

“What?” Natasha couldn't help but ask.

The Klingon looked back at her with steely determination. His cheek was still scarred by the mark left behind by K'Veth some days ago. And he still had no intention of doing anything to remove it.

He didn't know for sure whether he was acting rationally, or whether he was again allowing the feeling of par'Mach inside him to dictate his actions, at the expense of his more rational side. But equally, after spending another night with K'Veth, he was more convinced than ever that he didn't care either way. He wanted to be with her. And it was clear to him now that there was only one way that would ever happen.

“She believes her dishonour is too great,” he grunted by way of explanation, “That our great victory back on Brexis II was not enough to remove the stain of what she has done.”

“Great victory...?” Natasha asked in confusion.

“The tribble hunt,” Jirel reminded her, eliciting an unhappy shake the doctor's head as she recalled the mass slaughter that Klath and K'Veth had carried out in the stores of the Klingon High Council member, “Hey, who knew that didn't count as a proper battle?”

Klath ignored that comment. He didn't have time to get into another debate about the morals of the Klingon people's approach to tribble infestations. It was already taking a great deal of his willpower not to go and kill the one creature that remained in Natasha's cabin. So, instead, he focused on his packing.

“But,” Natasha persisted, “Where are you going?”

Klath paused again and looked up at her, still deadly serious. “I must leave the Bounty, perhaps forever. And she and I must travel far from here, to find a battle worthy of reclaiming her sense of honour. And we must not stop until our blades are coated with the blood of our slain enemies.”

As Natasha took in the entirety of that statement, Jirel couldn't help but chime in from her side.

“You had to ask...”

## Part 3C

### Part Three (Cont'd)

Shuttlepod Kendra gently hung next to the wispy tendrils of the Kervala nebula as the swirling vista continued to endlessly coalesce and separate in front of the tiny ship.

But it had been some time since either of the shuttle's occupants had bothered to gaze out at the picturesque view itself. As soon as their impromptu picnic brunch had started, the conversation had begun to flow.

Unlike the entirely public and formal setting of their attempt at dinner together back on Kervala Prime, Denella was finding this environment significantly more relaxing and easy to manage, which meant that she had actually started to enjoy herself. She had even found that she had moved away from exclusively telling anecdotes about various engineering solutions that she had come up with during her life, and moved onto stories that seemed to keep Erami's attention a little more easily.

To underline that particular point, as they sat on the blanket and picked at the banquet of delicacies that Erami had hastily replicated, the Bajoran woman threw her head back and laughed out loud in response to Denella's latest story, filling the cockpit with the sound of joy.

"You're kidding me," she chuckled as she chewed on a piece of mapa bread, "The Sheliak Corporate have a bounty...on the Bounty?"

"That's why we don't talk about it much," Denella replied, as she popped a slice of kava fruit into her mouth, "Cos it sounds so stupid. But, yeah, we tend to give that whole area of space a wide berth these days."

Erami laughed again and shook her head. "Ok, if that's really true, and I'm still not entirely sure you're not winding me up, then I really don't think it's fair for you to have given me such a hard time for falling out with a few Pakleds."

"Huh. Falling out with them? Interesting. So we're past 'just a big misunderstanding'?"

"You really don't quit, do you?"

"Call me old fashioned," Denella shrugged, "But if I'm getting disruptors pointed at me, I like to know whether I deserve it or not."

She looked back at the Bajoran with a friendly but determined edge to her demeanour. She still wanted an answer. Erami toyed with the remains of the piece of bread in her hand, then grimaced and sighed in defeat.

"Ugh, fine, ok. I may have...relieved Grumtrag and his merry men of something of theirs a few weeks ago."

"So you did steal something?"

"I mean," the Bajoran muttered, "If you wanna put a label on it..."

"What was it?" Denella pressed, happy to be finally getting some answers about what exactly she had stumbled into the middle of.

"That's not important."

"Seems to be important to them?"

"Ugh," Erami sighed with a frustrated smile, "Look, they weren't even using it. You know what they're like. Their ships are full of junk they buy, or steal, or find somewhere. And they have no idea what to do with most of it. Plus I really didn't think they'd go this far to track me down."

She paused and smiled ruefully for a moment.

"Then again, I guess they figured it was a pretty good bet that I'd wind up swinging back by Kervala Prime sooner or later. I'm never too far away from this place."

"Why?" Denella asked with genuine interest as she sipped from a glass of sweet springwine.

Erami looked up at her, then jabbed a finger at something over the Orion's right shoulder. "Cos of that."

Denella turned to see the Kervala nebula in all of its glory through the cockpit window, still bathing the room in a pinkish glow. For a second, she found herself captivated by it all over again.

She had been flying around space for long enough for nebulae to be a run of the mill sight. Usually, she only really saw them as either a nuisance, a phenomenon likely to send sensor readings haywire or cause corrosion to the Bounty's bussard collectors, or as a threat, a hiding place for bandits and other nefarious elements, ready to spring a trap on an unsuspecting passing ship.

But there was something about this one that seemed to captivate her. To the point that she didn't even care that, for the second time in two days, she had allowed herself to turn her back on a woman that she still didn't feel she entirely trusted.

"I guess I can see why," she mused, a little in awe, "It's incredible."

"Yep," Erami nodded in agreement, "But it's more than that. When I was little, growing up in that labour camp back on Bajor, there wasn't a

lot of beauty around. Except, on a clear night, among all the stars, you could just about make out this tiny little speck of pink.”

Denella turned back to see an unmistakable trace of emotion playing across Erami’s features. For some reason, she found it hit home with herself harder than she’d expected.

“Whenever we saw it, my mother used to tell me it was the most beautiful thing in the whole universe. A...jewel of the prophets. That was what she called it.”

She scoffed slightly at the memory and took a sip from her own glass to compose herself.

“Anyway, I guess it kept me going more times than I can remember during the occupation. Even after I’d grown up. Seeing that little pink speck out there in the cosmos was...I dunno. A comfort. And once it was all over, and we’d kicked every last Cardassian out of town, the first thing I wanted to do was get myself up into deep space, and come and see it for myself.”

“Long way from Bajor,” Denella whispered. She had forgotten all about the food and drink in front of her, focused entirely on her dining companion’s story.

“Yeah. Tell me about it. Took weeks to get all the way out here. And every minute I was sat in that old beaten up Bajoran transport, I was terrified.”

“Terrified?”

“Yeah. Cos I thought there was no way this ‘jewel of the Prophets’ was actually gonna be as perfect as my mother said it was. As perfect as I’d pictured it being whenever I saw it up in the sky back on Bajor. Then, the captain came to tell us we were making a pass of the nebula, and I swear I pushed a couple of dozen people out of the way to get a look out of the windows. And...there it was.”

She smiled wistfully at the view out of the window, and almost lost herself in a pang of emotion for a second, before she managed to stifle the sob that had rushed forwards and took a long gulp of springwine to rediscover her more usual casual demeanour.

Without thinking, Denella went to reach out her hand to Erami’s to comfort her. But she stopped herself short of actually making contact and quickly withdrew it again. If the Bajoran noticed her movement, she kept it to herself.

“Sorry,” Erami continued after she finished composing herself, “Guess I can’t help myself, can I? Try to keep things light and breezy, and then out come the Occupation stories.”

They shared a smile as a moment of silence descended. Then, Denella felt a curious urge inside of her. Having seen Erami sharing a story of her past, she found herself compelled to reciprocate. She wanted to talk. Or at least, she thought she wanted to.

“I get what you’re saying,” she began, “Orpheus IV was just as beautiful. Rolling hills, clean air, the greenest grass. The view from my parents house across the valley was...spectacular.”

She paused for a second and looked down at the blanket, sadly toying with a stray fibre.

“But I know I’ll never see that again. It’s all Syndicate territory now...”

“Hey,” Erami muttered gently, “You don’t have to talk about all that if you don’t want to—”

“I’ve never told anyone this, But I’ve tried to recreate it. The little area where I grew up. In a holosuite. I’d try programming the whole thing from scratch, or just do the whole ‘Computer, increase grassland coverage by 25%’ or ‘Computer, decrease humidity by 15%’ thing and hope to hit it lucky.”

“Did you hit it lucky?”

“I’ve gotten close once or twice,” she shrugged, surprising herself with how freely the story was flowing, “But I’m an engineer, not a terraformer. I can get the look right. But not the feel of it.”

She grabbed a small berry from one of the bowls on the blanket and rolled it around in her fingers, focusing on that as she went on.

“On Orpheus IV, there are these flowers. And I’ve got no idea how it worked, botanically-speaking, but they used to bloom all year round. In stages. Like a...ripple, flowing slowly across the valley. So, every morning, when you stepped out of the door, you could smell those flowers in the breeze.”

She smiled sadly and clasped the berry into the palm of her hand.

“The holosuite never got the scent of the flowers right. So, no matter how close it got to the real thing, it was always fake to me. So, I dunno, I guess I just gave up.”

Erami nodded thoughtfully for a moment as Denella idly popped the well-rolled berry into her mouth to help her stifle her own rush of emotion.

“You know earlier,” the Bajoran said eventually, “I told you my mother’s kava root stew was my favourite food?”

Denella nodded. Erami smiled sadly and shook her head.

“Well, that’s not really true. I mean, her stew was the best I’ve ever tasted, bar none. But...in the camp, after she died, my father took it upon himself to make it for me and my sister.”

She toyed with a piece of hasperat on her plate as she pictured the memory.

“Wasn’t exactly easy to get the ingredients together in a labour camp, you know? You weren’t even supposed to make our own meals. But the guards used to turn a blind eye. Less scraps they’d have to bother feeding us, I guess. Still, it used to take forever to forage for everything. Maybe once a month we’d get enough together for my father to give it a go.”

Denella propped her head on her knee as she listened to this latest story, captivated again somehow.

“So he’d get a fire going, and even though he was exhausted from another long day in the camp, he’d stand in front of that cooking pot for hours. And...he’d completely screw it up.”

She let out an involuntary chuckle, causing Denella to lift her head up in surprise.

“I mean,” Erami continued, “Every time, he’d find some new thing to mess up. He’d cook it for too long, or not long enough, or he’d forget an ingredient or two. It was crazy how bad he was at cooking. But...that was my favourite kava root stew. Cos no matter how weird it tasted, that man was giving everything he could to try and recreate the memory we had of our mother’s cooking. And that meant it didn’t have to be perfect.”

“So,” Denella muttered, with a glimmer of understanding, “You’re saying...?”

“I’m saying that you shouldn’t give up on making that program of yours. So long as it brings back some good memories, then that’s enough.”

Denella nodded back and smiled, surprised at how easily she had shared that secret. Especially with someone that had knocked her unconscious yesterday.

Erami smiled back, and reached out a hopeful hand across the blanket, leaving it dangling in mid air above the remains of the picnic.

And this time, feeling closer to this relative stranger after their shared stories over the picnic, Denella felt comfortable enough to reach out and take her hand, without such an action being accompanied by the instinctive need to flee.

They held hands and smiled at each other across the Bajoran cuisine.

And as they enjoyed a silent moment of friendship, neither of them even thought to check on the Kendra’s controls, or the silent blip on the main panel. The blip that calmly confirmed that the shuttle’s temperamental sensor array had picked up a ship on long-range scans.

A ship that was getting closer.

## Part 3D

### Part Three (Cont'd)

“You are being a fool!”

Klath ignored the ferocity with which the comment was fired at him with, and finished placing his spare tunics into the transport container. On the other side of the cabin, K’Veth gestured at his actions with frustrated incredulity.

Neither Klingon could remember which of them had started the fight. But, in typical Klingon fashion, neither of them were even close to admitting defeat.

In the doorway of the cabin, Jirel and Natasha awkwardly watched the two feuding forms trading passive-aggressive barbs, not entirely sure what else to do.

“Remind me again why you let her onboard?” Natasha muttered to the Trill.

Jirel struggled to find an answer to that. When K’Veth had arrived where they were parked and asked to come onboard, it had seemed like the right thing to do. After all, he and Natasha had failed to find a way of talking Klath out of his sudden plan to leave the Bounty on some sort of improvised quest for the perfect battle. So, it had seemed like a good idea to let someone else have a go at talking some sense into him.

Except, the Klingon method of talking sense into someone seemed to involve instantly starting a very heated argument, with an ever-present undertone of violence.

Klath was at least keeping himself measured in his responses, despite K’Veth’s continued angry comments, keeping the par’Mach-based passions inside him for the time being. “I have explained the plan, K’Veth,” he persisted as he closed up the container, “It will be a glorious quest to rediscover your sense of honour. For both of us.”

“It will be a futile task,” she spat back, “By a stubborn fool who still refuses to see how his feelings have blinded him to the truth. There is no honour out there for me, Klath.”

“There is honour out there for everyone,” he countered, his tone almost zen-like despite the ferocious passions that still swirled inside him.

She threw her hands up in an ostentatious display of frustration, stepping closer to the other Klingon and snarling at him. For an uncomfortable moment, the two person audience in the doorway wondered if they were about to get a front row seat to another Klingon mating ritual.

But Klath remained stoic, even as K’Veth snarled.

“You still patronise me,” she accused him, “You claim to know what is right for me, and you do not even listen to what I am trying to say!”

“I know what is right,” Klath retorted, “For both of us. I feel it. Inside.”

He pounded his fist on his chest to emphasise his point, not caring if two of his colleagues were watching on. But he got nothing more than a scoff back from the Klingon woman.

“What you feel inside is nothing but lust. Brought on by a lonely warrior finding one of his own to mate with after so long alone.”

Her words caused a surge of anger inside him, as she continued to seem determined to prod and poke him into some sort of retaliation.

And she seemed to have finally been successful.

“You challenge me to prove myself?” he growled at her.

“Willingly,” she snarled back.

Without breaking eye contact, Klath reached into a second packing container in front of him on the deck of his cabin and retrieved the mek’leth that he had stowed away earlier, tossing it across the room to her. She caught the end of the handle with practised ease, her fighting skills having been honed like any other Klingon, even in exile.

Then, she raised the blade above her head in anger.

“Defend yourself!”

The corners of Klath’s mouth curved into a trace of a smile as he relished the impromptu fight that was about to unfold. With a single deft movement, he unsheathed his bat’leth from where it hung on his back and brought it to bear.

In the doorway, Jirel and Natasha glanced at each other.

“We should...” the Trill managed, nodding his head back into the corridor.

Natasha nodded in agreement. They stepped back in unison and allowed the cabin door to close, just as the two weapons clashed together for the first time accompanied by furious growls from both participants. The sound of clashing blades continued apace through the door, as they stood in the Bounty’s main corridor.

Jirel looked at Natasha again and offered a shrug.

“Let’s, um, give them five minutes.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“A quantum singularity?”

Denella couldn’t help but laugh as she sat cross-legged on the picnic blanket, shaking her head at the Bajoran on the other side, who was now reclining on her side after the meal.

“I mean,” Erami offered with a shrug, “Technically, yes.”

“You stole a quantum singularity?”

Erami sat up straight and maintained a defiant smile. “Well, you’re the engineer. You know what a Romulan warp core is, right? So, I guess, yeah. Technically, I stole a quantum singularity.”

Denella went to respond, then simply shook her head again.

She had finally gotten Erami to give her the full story of what was going on between her and the Pakleds, and why exactly they seemed so determined to chase her down. She had been expecting the usual story. One of stolen latinum, or purloined spare parts. Something manageable for a Bajoran woman in a shuttlecraft to have been able to swipe on her own without the Pakleds being able to stop her.

She hadn’t been expecting the actual answer.

“Hang on,” she suddenly realised, looking back at the Bajoran with sudden amusement, “You stole a quantum singularity, and you thought the idea of me redesigning the Bounty’s thruster vents was far-fetched?”

The two women shared a burst of laughter, before Erami was able to control herself and offer up her defence. “It’s like I said, the Pakleds didn’t even know what it was. It was just lying around inside their cargo bay behind a set of Terrelian impulse coils. So, I figured that they wouldn’t miss it, and there might be a tidy little profit to be made by flipping it to someone else.”

“You didn’t think to maybe tell them what it was, in return for a share of the profits?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Denella found herself smiling again, as Erami continued.

“Besides, if I’d have told them what it was, they’d have tried to fit it to their own ship, and ended up blowing up half the sector. This way, everyone wins.”

“Apart from the Pakleds,” Denella pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

In truth, while she was still persisting with her questioning tone, she found that she was more doing it to wind the other woman up than anything else at this point. She found that she didn’t much care about the perceived crime Erami had committed, now she knew the truth. After all, it wasn’t as though she and the Bounty’s crew were above liberating certain things from their owners when things got especially desperate.

And Erami was right, it was probably better for everyone that a group of Pakleds didn’t have a Romulan warp core available to them any more.

“So,” the Bajoran concluded, scrunching up her nose, sitting up and holding her hands in the air, “You talked it out of me. That’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Any more confessions you want to get out of me before you lock me up, officer?”

Denella kept up her stern front in this little role play, as she realised that there was another thing she wanted to ask about, while she had the chance. “The other day,” she asked, “Did you really do a runner from that restaurant?”

“Huh,” Erami groused, “Guess I walked into that one as well. But you really think I—?”

Before she could get any further, the Kendra began to shake all around them.

In an instant, the two women switched back into business mode, as they both jumped up off the blanket and rushed to the two seats at the front of the cockpit. Neither bothered to cast a glance at the beauty of the view in front of them this time, focusing entirely on the task at hand.

Before they had even reached the controls, Denella already had a sense of what was happening, and it only took a cursory glance of the readouts to confirm that her instincts were correct.

“That didn’t feel like a bit of turbulence from the nebula,” Erami offered.

“Nope,” the Orion replied from where she had slid into the co-pilot’s seat next to the Bajoran, “We’re caught in a tractor beam.”

“We’re being hailed,” Erami added, as she flipped the comms link open.

“Hello, shuttlecraft,” Grumtrag’s familia voice came out over the speakers, “This is the Pakled vessel Martan. We have got you now, and we



will not let go.”

“Looks like your friends found us,” Denella pointed out unnecessarily, “I thought you said you masked your warp trail?”

“I did,” Erami insisted, “Usually these guys don’t know an ion trace from a tachyon eddy. They must’ve upgraded their sensors.”

“You will give us our prize,” Grumtrag continued over the comms link, “Or we will break your ship. We are good at that. We are strong.”

“Hey,” Erami fired back, jabbing her finger down on the comms panel, “Next time, say please.”

With that, she clicked the link off, even as the Kendra shuddered again.

“They’re pulling us in,” Denella reported, “And while I appreciate a good bit of defiance, it might be the time to admit defeat on this one and give them their prize back.”

“Might be a bit of a problem,” Erami grimaced, “You were right earlier when you called me out about the Kendra getting ransacked. I don’t have the warp core any more. Exchanged it with a Ferengi trader two weeks ago.”

Denella sighed in frustration as the shuttle shook harder. “Ok, so give them the latinum. That should hopefully keep them happy.”

“No latinum. Like I said, I exchanged it.”

“For what?”

“You’re sitting in it.”

Denella glanced at the Bajoran, then looked around the entirely modest confines of the Kendra and shook her head. “You exchanged a Romulan warp core for this heap of junk?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” Erami fired back, “We’re very religious people, us Bajorans. Makes us terrible negotiators. We’re way too trusting.”

Denella sighed and turned back to the controls in front of her, contemplating the fact that they seemed to have nothing to barter for their lives with. “Alright then. Guess we’re gonna have to fight our way out of this one. What have we got, weapon-wise?”

“One phaser array,” Erami replied, “Tends to seize up after a few shots.”

“Perfect,” Denella muttered with heavy sarcasm, “Time to improvise, then.”

She went to work on the controls, her green fingers dancing across the surface of the console as Erami watched on.

“Looks like they’re using a Nausicaan tractor beam,” she nodded with satisfaction, “Which means that I might have a little trick we can use.”

“How come?”

“We run into a lot of Nausicaans.”

Despite their perilous situation, Erami couldn’t help but laugh at this, as Denella continued to work at her controls.

“I’m gonna use our power grid to send a surge of feedback up the beam, right to the source. If we give it enough juice, it should short out their emitter.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Erami nodded back.

As the Kendra crept ever closer to the Martan, still ensnared in its tractor beam, Denella finally completed her work. “Ok,” she called out, “Get ready to get us the hell out of here.”

She tapped one final command, and a burst of fizzing green energy surged back up the beam being emitted by the Pakled vessel.

Just as the Orion had hoped, it impacted with the tractor beam emitters and overloaded the poorly-installed components. In an instant, the beam was broken. The Kendra was free.

“Getting us the hell out of here, sir,” Erami called back with a grin, as she tapped at her own bank of controls.

Before the Pakled ship could bring its weapons to bear, the Kendra jumped forwards. Straight into the Kervala nebula.

Seconds later, their pursuers followed.

“They’re still on our tail,” Erami reported, as she swung the Kendra away from the first incoming disruptor blast, “And now they’re angry. Any more ideas?”

Denella gritted her teeth and nodded.

“I think,” she said, as the Kendra bucked around in the tumult, “We need some backup.”

**End of Part Three**

## Part 4A

### Part Four

The two Klingons panted from their exertions as they glared at each other from opposite sides of the small cabin.

The entire room was now in a state of frantic disarray. What furniture there had been was now overturned or tipped over, and there were several deep gouges in the inner metal walls of the room where one or both of the bladed weapons had become temporarily impaled during the fight.

Klath and K'Veth themselves were both covered in sweat, their bodies aching from the strains of the ongoing fight. But still, neither was willing to back down. Even if both of them had both been willing to take a short break.

"You fight well," Klath grunted, as he stood back up straight and hefted his bat'leth, preparing for the next clash of blades.

"And you still patronise me," K'Veth countered, bringing her own weapon to bear, "Just because I am dishonoured does not mean I cannot fight."

"Then you should agree to my plan. Use that ability in our quest for a battle worthy of the name, instead of lashing out at me."

"Perhaps," she hissed, with a slightly satisfied smile, "I enjoy lashing out at you."

Before he could reply, she charged again, forcing him to parry the fiercely swung mek'leth with the edge of his bat'leth. She spun around instantly and swung at him with a follow-up blow, which he caught with the trailing side of his twin-bladed weapon and fenced away.

They faced off against each other again, growling gently at each other as they circled around the edge of the cabin.

Klath still felt a chaos of emotion inside of him. The blood lust brought on by the battle now mixed with his existing feelings of par'Mach that had been ravaging him for days, in a way that gave him a rush like he couldn't remember feeling before.

In a curious way, he had never felt more like a Klingon.

Then, just as he prepared to charge into the melee once again, the fight was unceremoniously interrupted by the altogether non-Klingon sound of the cabin's door buzzer.

He paused. As did K'Veth. Despite Klath's long past within the empire, and everything K'Veth had learned about her people in exile, neither were quite sure what the accepted protocol was for a fight like this being disturbed by a doorbell.

In the end, Klath reluctantly lowered his weapon. K'Veth warily mirrored his move.

"Yes!" he barked out.

A few seconds later, the door slowly opened, and Jirel awkwardly poked his head into the cabin, doing his best to ignore the scene of carnage all around the room and keep his focus on his unhappy weapons chief. "Um, hey, so, hate to break up...whatever this is. But we've got a problem."

"What?" Klath grunted angrily.

"We just got a call from Denella. She's in trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Not entirely sure," the Trill admitted, "But there's Pakleds involved."

All thoughts of the fight in front of him now left Klath's mind. He quickly sheathed the bat'leth behind his back, knowing that there would be no time to resolve his personal matters with K'Veth here and now, no matter how much he wanted to.

Because he could sense that there was a bigger battle ahead of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Moments later, Jirel led the two Klingons up the steps into the Bounty's cockpit. Natasha was already seated at the rear engineering console usually manned by the absent Denella, having figured that she'd be more useful there on a rescue mission than her improvised sensor console.

Without thinking, Klath slid straight into his own tactical console on the left side of the room, while Jirel jumped into the centre seat and K'Veth hung back for the time being.

"Ok," Jirel nodded, "Let's go save—"

He stopped mid-sentence, as he swivelled around to the front of the cockpit and, for the first time, noticed that the pilot's seat was empty. They

were missing one irritating, grinning Vulcan.

“Where the hell’s Sunek?”

Jirel swivelled back around to the other three individuals in the cockpit, but they didn’t have an answer. Natasha offered him a shrug, as Jirel recalled the last time they had seen their absent colleague.

“You don’t think he actually...y’know, with the Caitian?” he asked her.

“No,” Natasha shook her head definitively, “No. Definitely not. No.”

There was a brief pause, as the two Klingons looked confused and Natasha continued to weigh up Jirel’s question.

“I mean,” she added eventually, “Probably not?”

“Ok, we’ll have to figure that out later,” Jirel sighed with a wave of his arm, “One missing crew member at a time.”

He looked around and considered the options available to him, then had a sudden brainwave.

“Hey, buddy,” he motioned to Klath with a nod of his head, “You two still looking for that proud and noble battle of yours?”

“Yes,” Klath nodded, despite K’Veth’s unhappy glare, “But I do not see how that is relevant to our current predicament—”

Jirel stood from the centre seat and gestured to it. “I’m the best pilot we’ve got left onboard, so I guess I’ll take over up front. So...how about it, Captain Klath?”

Klath looked at the chair he was being offered, then back at K’Veth, who looked unconvinced by this sudden twist. As if she was now being patronised by the entire crew.

“K’Veth,” he urged with a warrior’s relish, “We must save Denella. This is a true battle for us. If you will accept.”

She felt a fresh rush of blood lust inside, the like of which she had never felt before. Certainly it was more than she felt when she had been marching towards the mass of tribbles back on Brexis II. And she realised that perhaps there was something to what Klath had been saying.

This was a true battle. And she was ready.

“I accept,” she nodded forcefully.

Klath stood from the tactical console and gestured for her to take his place. She slid in and immediately began to familiarise herself with the controls.

With K’Veth in position, Jirel at the pilot’s controls and Natasha at engineering, Klath strode over and dropped his frame into the centre seat. And for the first time since his final fateful actions in the Klingon Defence Force, when he had lost his own sense of honour in the eyes of the empire, he took command of a vessel.

“Take us into orbit,” he called out for his first order.

“Aye aye, captain,” Jirel shot back with a grin as he tapped the slightly unfamiliar bank of controls in front of him, “And don’t worry yourselves. I used to handle all the flying around here before Sunek came along.”

The Bounty slowly rose up from the landing pad on the outskirts of the spaceport and began to ascend.

As Jirel tapped another command, a series of shrill alarms suddenly sounded out. The entire ship bucked wildly under their feet, and for a nauseating second the view through the cockpit seemed to spiral out of control, before the Trill got them stable.

“Yep, that’s right,” he continued, a little more sheepishly, “Always engage inertial dampeners before switching to impulse power. Just... keeping you all on your toes.”

“Um, Captain Klath,” Natasha called out, as the Bounty broke through the atmosphere and returned to space, “So you’re aware, I took an advanced shuttle piloting course at the Academy. Finished top five in every practical exam. Just in case you feel the need for any crew reassignments.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Klath nodded, maintaining a serious poker face as part of the act, “I will...bear that in mind.”

“No, really, that’s all very funny,” Jirel griped as he manoeuvred the ship into high orbit, “I’m starting to see why Sunek gets so paranoid up here...”

Natasha mustered a smirk, as Klath stole a glance at K’Veth, who was entirely ignoring the short burst of the Bounty crew’s usual cockpit banter in favour of continuing to study the weapons controls.

With a slight smile of satisfaction, he turned back to the front of the cockpit and called out to his slightly humbled pilot. “Set course for the source of Denella’s distress call. Maximum speed.”

Seconds later, the Bounty shot forwards. On the way to save their friend.

The shower of sparks that exploded out of the panel behind them was all the warning they needed to know that the Kendra had been hit. Still, the shuttle's computer elected to underline the gravity of their situation by adding a further pair of alert sirens to the cacophony that was already ringing out all around them.

"Any chance you can shut those damn things off?" Denella called out over the impromptu symphony, as Erami swung the Kendra away from another Pakled disruptor blast.

"Kinda busy right now stopping us from dying!" the Bajoran called back.

The vessel shuddered again as another hit smashed into their buckling shields, sending another cascade of sparks out from above their heads.

"A job you're really sucking at, just FYI," Denella grimaced as she swiftly rerouted a handful of additional power reserves back into their defensive systems, "Shields are getting shredded, and there's not much juice left to give them."

Erami turned the shuttle into a sharp dive to the right, just as another blast skimmed past, missing them by inches.

The Pakleds had them easily outgunned, that had never been in doubt. But at least at sublight speeds, and with the additional disruption of the nebula, Erami was able to use the small shuttle's manoeuvrability to keep them half a step ahead. For the time being, at least.

"Those are Klingon disruptors they're packing," Denella reported as she checked on what scans she could get from the Kendra's systems, "I'm also reading a Terrelian warp core, a Ferengi impulse drive and a computer core from...actually, I have no idea who."

Erami shook her head as the shuttle shuddered again. "Alright, new plan," she called out, "There's a pocket of deuterium bearing 121 mark 4. Ready with that phaser bank when I say!"

Denella nodded and then desperately gripped onto the console in front of her as the ship entered another dizzying turn. The captivating hues of the nebula that had once looked so beautiful were now starting to make her a little nauseous.

Erami steadied their course and gritted her teeth, using her years of experience piloting endless battered ships past their manufacturing tolerances to keep the Kendra on course. "The Pakleds are right on our tail," she bellowed as she saw the patchy sensor readings, "Ready, and...now!"

Denella fired the tiny phaser cannon of the Kendra directly ahead, into the denser pocket of gas. It immediately ignited in a crimson fireball, just as Erami desperately pulled the nose of the tiny ship upwards.

"Ok, this is gonna be a lot closer than I—!"

The whole cockpit juddered as the explosion rocked the shields of the ship, causing them to flare bright orange. Denella was slammed into the console in front of her, briefly knocking the wind out of her body with the force of it. But while they caught a glancing blow from the explosion, the Martan took a direct hit, causing their own shields to groan under the impact and forcing them to briefly break off from direct pursuit.

Erami kept the Kendra's nose pointing up, even as the shields continued to flare, and then shot them away from their more cumbersome pursuers.

"Little trick I learned flying raiders with the Resistance," she smiled in satisfaction, "A bunch of us once used that same idea to blind the sensors of a whole Cardassian transport convoy. Should be enough to throw them off for a bit."

"Nice," Denella coughed as she rubbed her aching midriff, "Love how borderline suicidal it was."

Erami stifled a smile as she levelled their course. "Come on, you loved it really. Besides, when was the last time you got to do something like this?"

Denella considered her response. She had in fact done something similar to this very recently. When she had embarked on a desperate solo quest inside a far less inviting nebula to rescue a childhood friend from within the Orion Syndicate, culminating in her destroying an entire Orion Cruiser belonging to her former owner Rilen Dar, killing everyone left onboard.

But she decided that, even if she had felt comfortable enough to open up a little about her past during brunch, she really wasn't ready to share that story. So instead, she shrugged and turned her focus back to her readouts.

"By the way, that little trick of yours pretty much took out the rest of the shields."

"Nobody's perfect," Erami replied, "I'm gonna try and head deeper into the gas cloud. See if we can hide as best we can before they get ship-shape. Your friends on the way or what?"

"They'll be here," Denella affirmed, as the Kendra limped deeper into the nebula.

She just hoped she was right.

## Part 4B

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The Bounty was shaking slightly from the stress being put through her engines as they chased down the distance between them and the battle.

It wasn't a long journey from Kerval Prime to the nearby nebula that shared the star system's name, but every second still counted. So they were taking the engines past the redline.

Klath knew it was a risk that they were taking, given that the ship's redoubtable engineer wasn't onboard if anything were to go wrong. But his command instincts told him that it was an acceptable risk. They should get ample warning from the computer if the stresses were getting too high, and it was imperative they made the best time possible.

As he sat in the command chair, he couldn't help but think back to the last time he had taken a ship into battle, when he commanded the IKS Grontar. A battle that had ultimately turned out to be the needless slaughter of an undefended freighter. And one that ultimately cost him his place in the Empire.

He silently resolved that this was going to be a very different mission. Not one where someone's honour would be lost forever, but where someone's would be gained for the first time.

"Phaser cannons are fully charged," K'Veth barked out from his side, "Micro torpedo tubes are all loaded."

Klath nodded back with a proud look, and she felt another surge of blood lust in her veins. She had settled into her new role entirely, all thoughts of her former shame and distrust of Klath's motives now forgotten. Her eyes were almost glowing with the strength she was feeling inside.

Klath returned his attention to the forward view, gaining succour from his own blood lust. He was sure that this would be a glorious battle.

Tempering his growing confidence in their quest, Natasha chimed in a warning from the engineering station.

"Just bear in mind that we still have some secondary systems offline for repairs. We're not gonna have a lot of backups to work with."

"Nice report, Lieutenant Buzzkill," Jirel quipped from the pilot's seat.

In the command chair, Klath took a moment to fire a stern glare at the Trill in front of him. "The pilot should keep his focus on his work when we are at battle readiness," he grunted, "A lesser commander may tolerate a level of...inane behaviour from his crew. I do not."

Natasha stifled an amused smile at Klath's deadpan delivery, as Jirel turned around to eye the Klingon's prideful face.

"Don't go getting too comfy in that chair, ok, buddy?"

Klath didn't answer him. He merely gripped the armrests of the chair tighter and stared grimly at the view ahead, as the Bounty sped on towards the source of Denella's distress call. The overworked ship shaking with stress all the while.

Slowly but surely, the pink and purple mass of the nebula in front of them loomed larger.

\* \* \* \* \*

It hadn't taken long for the Martan to relocate the Kendra.

The Pakled ship moved slowly through the swirling gases of the nebula, and fired both disruptor cannons at the small orange shuttle.

"Incoming!" Denella cried out from the co-pilot's seat.

Erami was already on it, swinging the ship away and barely evading the two deadly balls of green energy that fizzed past the hull. In the same movement, she was able to bring the Kendra to bear on the port side of the Martan as it lumbered through a pitched turn of its own.

Denella didn't need a second invitation. She fired off another few spits of phaser fire, which impacted hard on the Martan's shields. Though it barely slowed them down.

"We're not making a dent," she growled in frustration, "May as well be firing witty insults at them."

"They'd never understand them if we did," Erami replied, as she banked the Kendra up and over the top of the other ship's rectangular midsection, "I'm gonna try and circle in close around them, make it hard for them to target their weapons."

Just as she said that, she was forced to wrench the Kendra on another nauseating turn to the left to avoid a fresh disruptor blast.

"Hard-ish," she added quickly, "If you've got any more ideas, this'd be a good time to use 'em."

Denella ignored the three new alert warnings that flashed up on the panel and danced her fingers across the controls. "Ok, it's a long shot, but

I'm gonna channel power from every system we're not using right now into that phaser cannon. Give it the supercharger treatment."

Erami nodded in understanding and turned the shuttle around again, checking her readouts on the enemy ship as she did so. "Looks like their shields are weakest around their starboard three-quarter section. Gonna line you up for a shot at that."

The Kendra shook again as a plasma relay at the rear of the cockpit exploded in a fiery blast, only being quelled by the despairing hiss of the automated suppression systems.

"Ugh, she's falling apart!" the Bajoran cursed as she wrestled with the controls.

"She can take it," Denella affirmed, her long-honed engineering instincts giving her a sixth sense for when any ship was close to breaking point.

Eventually, Erami swung them back around, bringing them to bear on the exact part of the Martan that she had indicated.

"Ok, have at it!"

Denella nodded, mentally crossed her fingers, and pressed the firing button.

A surge of energy shot out of the single phaser cannon in the Kendra's nose. One far greater than the cannon itself was designed to handle. The energy impacted on the Pakled ship's shields and caused a crackle of energy to cascade out across the surface in a chaotic pattern of light that illuminated the already-colourful scene inside the Kervala nebula.

"Yes!" Erami yelled out, "Got 'em!"

As soon as her celebrations began in earnest, however, the entire section of controls in front of Denella immediately fizzed and crackled, sparks flying everywhere, causing the Orion to jump back in shock to avoid a nasty burn. The Kendra shuddered once again from the latest misfortune to befall it.

"Warning," the shuttle's dispassionate computer voice intoned, "Power overload in main weapons control."

"Wondered when you'd chime in," Erami grunted mirthlessly in the direction of the computer voice as she glanced at the recovering Orion, "How bad?"

"Ugh. That one shot just fried the entire phaser array! Really wasn't designed to handle that much power. And if we're not careful, it'll spread to—!"

Before she could get any further, a further burning shower of sparks burst out from the wall behind them, as Erami tapped her controls fruitlessly.

"We just lost main power completely! Warp drive offline, impulse engines are cooked!"

"Goddamnit!" Denella growled in frustration, "Power overload must've cascaded through every system on the ship. Stupid idea!"

"Hey," Erami smiled across at her as the Kendra continued to fall apart all around them, "At least we got in one good punch. Always gotta get in one good punch, whoever you're fighting."

Her supportive words didn't entirely quell Denella's frustrations. She was still kicking herself for going all-in on the phaser plan. Which had brought them a bit of time, but at the cost of entirely crippling the shuttle. She watched helplessly as the fizzing and the crackling on the Martan's temporarily overwhelmed shields began to subside and the larger vessel began to right itself.

"I take it that we're too late for a friendly surrender?" Erami added with gallows humour.

Even as she spoke, she saw the twin disruptor banks either side of the Martan's spherical forward section glowing ominously with fire.

"I think we're past that point," Denella offered simply.

She wondered if this was it. No warp drive, no impulse, and a pair of Klingon disruptors attached to a Pakled ship about to obliterate them.

"Screw this," Erami cried out, "Shunt all available reserve power into the thrusters!"

Even as the glow from the disruptors reached its peak, Denella got the transfer done, though she was sure it would be too late.

Erami jabbed her finger down on the Kendra's thruster controls, sending the remaining auxiliary power into the tiny engines at the same time the Martan fired. The sudden burst of momentum propelled the shuttle almost out of the path of the blasts, but not entirely. The second disruptor shot caught the Kendra with a heavy glancing blow.

Denella felt herself falling, and caught the sound of a bone snapping somewhere as she landed on the deck with an awkward thump. She caught sight of Erami sprawled in a similarly undignified heap to her right.

The view from the cockpit window was one of chaos, as the shuttle tumbled out of control through the gas cloud. A new cacophony of alarms sprung into life, as another plasma relay blew out at the rear of the cockpit.

"Warning," the computer's voice calmly intoned, "Antimatter containment failure is imminent."

"Ugh," Erami groaned as both women dragged themselves back towards the controls, "That guy never shuts up!"

Denella forced herself back into the co-pilot's seat and went to work, as Erami clambered back into her own seat and tried vainly to level off their course. "Trying to lock down antimatter storage," she called out, "It's on the redline!"

"Great," the Bajoran replied, "So even if the Pakleds don't kill us, my own ship's gonna do the job for them!"

Denella concentrated all her engineering skills into the crisis, even as Erami managed to arrest their spin and get them close to stability.

"Ok," the Orion puffed eventually, "Containment stabilised—"

She stopped as the two women saw the Pakled ship bearing down on them again, disruptors glowing. This time, there was no time for evasive action.

"Crap," Erami said simply.

Denella was about to wholeheartedly agree with her analysis, when a new alert suddenly flashed up on her console.

"Wait! There's another ship coming in. It's the Bounty!"

The reassuringly familiar sight of the Ju'Day-type raider filled the view ahead of them, as the Bounty swept between the Martan and the Kendra and took the full force of the disruptor blasts for them on their own shields.

Erami stared in shock, before glancing over at Denella.

"See?" the green-skinned woman smiled through the smoke of half a dozen burned-out plasma relays, "Told you they'd be here."

## Part 4C

### Part Four (Cont'd)

Jirel felt like a kid again as he busied himself at the helm of his ship.

Before he had found Sunek, he'd done all of his own flying. And while his egotistical side enjoyed the feeling of sitting in the centre chair, regardless of how little he'd actually done to earn it, he had to admit that he'd missed the rush that came from a bit more of a hands-on role.

It may have been tired and beaten up, and it may be far from the fastest ship in the galaxy, but the Bounty was still a nimble old slugger of a vessel, ever-willing and ready for this sort of close combat at impulse speeds, with plenty of deadly firepower and flight controls tight enough to turn it on a proverbial sixpence.

And Jirel was making sure it did just that. He would be the first to admit he wasn't half the pilot that Sunek was, though he'd never do it within earshot of the Vulcan, but he was still capable of holding his own when the chips were down.

Having drawn the fire of the Pakled ship, he deftly swung the Bounty back around and brought it to bear on the form of the modified Andorian freighter.

"Fire!" Klath bellowed from the chair behind him.

K'Veth tapped her controls. Twin blasts of phaser energy shot out from the Bounty's wing-mounted cannons, followed by a volley of micro torpedoes.

The Pakled ship had nothing like the Bounty's reaction speeds, and the cumbersome larger vessel's shields glowed white hot as they absorbed them. Seconds later, they returned fire from their deadly disruptors.

"Evasive!" Klath called out, now in full-on battle-hardened Klingon captain mode, "And bring us to bearing 285 mark 2. Target their aft shields!"

Jirel's fingers jumped over the helm controls as the Bounty gracefully avoided most of the disruptor blasts, but one impacted heavily on the Bounty's own shields, causing the lights to momentarily dim in the cockpit.

"Shields weakening," Natasha reported, "Looks like they're packing a hell of a punch."

"They are Klingon disruptors," Klath noted.

"Gotta love the Pakleds," Jirel grimaced.

"They are an old design," the Bounty's temporary captain continued, "Designed to operate on a regularly modulating energy frequency. Try to match the harmonics of our own shields to their weapons, it should give us some additional protection."

"On it," Natasha nodded, digging deep into her Academy era engineering training to carry out the complex task.

Meanwhile, the Bounty swung past the aft section of their quarry, just as Klath had ordered, and K'Veth fired again. "Direct hit!" she reported, her voice energised with the violence of the battle.

"Unknown vessel," the voice of a Pakled filled the air over the comms link, "We do not know you. But don't try to stop us, because we are smart. And we are strong."

"Nobody likes a show-off," Jirel muttered.

Several more disruptor blasts came rushing towards them. Jirel swerved the Bounty around a few of them, but several hit home. An access panel on the left side of the cockpit blew out.

"Return fire!" Klath bellowed, "Continue targeting aft shields!"

"Are we responding to their hail?" Natasha asked.

"We just did," the Klingon pointed out.

K'Veth's latest round of weapons fire impacted directly on their enemy's weak spot again. "Their aft shields are bucking," she reported with relish.

Another explosion rocked the Bounty. Two more relays exploded above their heads and showered them with bright, white-hot sparks.

"So are ours!" Natasha cried out.

Amongst the chaos and the carnage Klath remained almost zen-like. He watched the battle unfold and directed his troops as if he was still on the bridge of the Grontar. "Match their movement," he called out to Jirel, "Come to 310 mark 5. Fire at will!"

He kept a tight grip on the armrests of his chair, as the battle continued all around him.

The blood lust continued to course through his body.



\* \* \* \* \*

“Damnit!”

Denella spat the word out as she thumped her hand down on the almost useless controls in front of her, emphasising her frustrations.

“I take it that means we’re not getting main power back anytime soon?” Erami asked mirthlessly from the other seat.

“We’re not getting anything back. Power, warp drive, weapons. Even the impulse controls are dead.”

“Huh. I really did get ripped off for that quantum singularity, didn’t I?”

Denella didn’t offer a smile, and looked back out of the Kendra’s cockpit window at the battle still raging in the Kervala nebula.

The good news was that the Bounty has successfully diverted the Pakled’s attention entirely away from their shattered shuttle. The bad news was that her precious ship was now getting the full force of their weaponry. And there was nothing that they could do to help them.

“They’re taking a beating from those disruptors,” she despaired as yet another volley of fire from the Pakled ship slammed into the Bounty’s collapsing shields, “We’ve got to do something.”

“I’m all ears,” Erami shrugged.

Denella couldn’t find anything to add. They had been left entirely impotent in the fight. A pair of hapless spectators to what was happening in front of them, waiting for a rescue. Like a couple of damsels in distress.

And then, she had a sudden spark of inspiration.

“Actually, we do have something we can use.”

Leaving Erami looking a little baffled, she stood up from her seat and clambered across to the rear of the cockpit, stepping over the remains of the picnic that were now strewn all around the deck from the chaotic journey the Kendra had been on since brunch.

“What?” Erami called back to her.

She ignored the question for the time being, focusing on bypassing the dozen or so safety protocols in place behind the panel she was working at that she needed to circumvent in order to carry out her plan. Satisfied with her work, she rushed back to the front of the cockpit and jabbed a finger down on the comms link.

“Denella to Bounty,” she called out.

“Bounty here,” the voice of a stressed Natasha came back, accompanied by the sound of a small explosion, “Bit busy right now!”

“I can see that,” the Orion replied, “But I think I’ve got a plan. I’m gonna eject the antimatter pod and lay a trap. Just get the Pakleds over here.”

“Got it,” Natasha’s response came, before the comms link clocked off.

Satisfied her message had got through, Denella started to frantically tap her controls, preparing her trap now the safety protocols were bypassed.

“We’re ejecting our antimatter pod, are we?” Erami piped up from her side, “I’m not quite the engineer you are, but don’t we need that to, y’know, escape?”

“We’re not getting the warp drive back online,” Denella pointed out, “If we’re escaping from this one, it’s certainly not gonna be under our own steam. So, if we’re not gonna be using that antimatter pod for anything...”

Erami considered this entirely valid point, then shrugged. “Alright, what the hell. Stupid warp coils never worked on this crate anyway.”

Denella nodded back as she continued to work.

“One question,” Erami added, with a little less confidence, “We dump the pod and, I’m assuming, blow it up in the faces of those Pakleds, you sure we’re gonna have enough juice left to get away from that with just our thrusters?”

Denella kept her focus on her controls, but nodded firmly.

“Definitely,” she lied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite their perilous situation, K'Veth was still enjoying every second of the fight.

It didn't take a seasoned warrior to see that things were not going in their favour. The enemy had greater firepower and stronger defences. The battle may well be lost.

But, in some ways, that was making her first true experience of fighting on the battlefield even more glorious to experience. The idea that she might actually die in battle, the highest possible honour for any Klingon warrior, just made her heart beat faster as she fired at the enemy again.

Even if their enemy was a modified Andorian freighter full of Pakleds, and the battle was taking place in a pink and purple nebula, she still felt an unfamiliar sensation inside. One that she didn't think she'd ever experienced before in her lifetime of exile.

A feeling of pride.

Klath had been right. She was discovering her personal sense of honour. Of self-belief. Perhaps for the first time ever. And suddenly it felt like there was nothing she couldn't do. Maybe, she thought, as she glanced over at the man in the centre seat, who still willingly carried the scar she had left behind on his cheek, she could even consider his offer of joining.

But for the time being, she had more pressing engagements to look after.

"Their shields are weakening," she reported excitedly after her latest volley.

"Not by enough," Jirel chimed out from the pilot's seat.

"You all heard Denella's plan," Klath commanded from the centre of the room, "Get us to their position, and make sure you bring our enemies with us."

The Bounty shuddered again from another glancing blow from the Pakled ship's disruptors, as Jirel swung the ship around through the swirling gases. "Don't think we're going to need to worry about that part," he called back grimly.

"Ventral shields have collapsed," Natasha reported, "The hull is exposed!"

"Divert power," Klath barked.

"There's not much left to divert!"

Klath spun back around to Jirel, even as K'Veth fired a flurry of micro torpedoes from the Bounty's aft launcher into the Pakled vessel, slowing them a tad. "Keep our exposed side from their line of fire," he ordered, "And increase speed to full impulse."

"Aye, aye, Captain Klath!"

They raced on towards the trap that was being set.

As they neared the Kendra's position, K'Veth fired again, ensuring that the Pakleds were still in hot pursuit of them. She felt another surge of adrenaline inside as every last micro torpedo slammed home. The blood lust rose higher and higher inside her.

Her only regret was that it would be the antimatter pod, rather than her own weapons, that delivered the fatal blow.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gisjacheh!"

This time, Denella opted to loudly curse in her native tongue into the smoke-filled cockpit, as she desperately grappled with her controls.

"I beg your pardon?" Erami offered from her side.

"Pod ejection systems are offline," she reported despairingly, "And every power transfer relay to the system is fried!"

"Warning," the computer noted, "Antimatter pod ejection systems are offline."

Both occupants of the cockpit fixed the increasingly annoying computer with a stern glare, before Erami clambered out of her seat. "On it," she nodded, as she rushed for the cockpit exit, "I'll eject it manually."

"Be careful!"

Denella called out before she'd even realised what she was saying. It was enough to cause Erami to stop in the doorway and look back at her. But despite the slight curl of a smile on her face, she didn't offer any sort of quip in return, she just nodded back.

"Always am," she added.

With that, she exited the cockpit, heading for the rear section of the shuttle, while Denella composed herself and focused on the scene out of the cockpit window. Ahead of them, she could see the Bounty was gaining, with the Pakleds right behind them.

In her mind, she willed Erami to hurry up, wondering if she should have gone back there to do what was needed, and feeling helpless once again.

But ultimately, she elected to trust her.

She watched in horror as a further blast from the disruptor banks of their pursuers collapsed the Bounty's shields entirely. One more hit and the hull would be compromised. Or worse.

It was now or never.

"Ok!" Erami shouted out over the shuttle's crackling comms link, "Pulling the ejection levers...now!"

There was the slightest of shudders that passed through the Kendra like a ripple, as the shuttle's tiny and seemingly harmless antimatter pod departed from a hatch on the underside of the dirty orange-hued hull. As soon as she felt that sensation, Denella fired the Kendra's thrusters, pushing the tiny ship backwards and away from the pod, as fast as the remaining propulsion system would allow.

The Bounty and the chasing Pakleds loomed ever nearer.

"Get back up here!" she called out, "I'm gonna have to detonate it any second!"

The Bounty swept over the top of the shuttle. The Martan was closing, its disruptors glowing in preparation for another assault that would cripple the Ju'Day-type raider. And the Pakled ship was now directly above the pod.

Erami arrived back in the doorway of the cockpit. But there was no time to brace herself.

They were out of time.

Denella detonated the pod.

## Part 4D

### Part Four (Cont'd)

The antimatter pod annihilated itself in a coruscating burst of energy. The shockwave from the explosion travelled out in all directions through the nebula.

The Bounty avoided the worst of it, Jirel keeping the impulse engines working overtime to steer them clear of the blast.

Behind them, the Martan caught the detonation fully in the face. The huge explosion tipped the larger ship up and off its axis entirely, causing the shields to flare bright white one final time, before they flickered and died.

Given the precarious way that the Pakled crew had assembled the Martan, from all manner of different systems jumbled together, the sudden shock also caused further failures across the board, as main power and various other systems were overwhelmed and overloaded.

The Martan gently tumbled end over end through the nebula, now bereft of both weapons and propulsion. The explosion had done its job. The Pakled ship was disabled.

But the shockwave didn't stop there. And the Kendra, limping away on thruster power, didn't stand a chance.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the same time that she detonated the pod, Denella called back to Erami.

"Hang on!"

It was a futile warning, but with the Martan's glowing disruptors ready to fire, it was all that she could do.

The shockwave hit barely a second later. Even as the Martan was spiralling away in the opposite direction, the leading edge of the wave slammed into the Kendra.

Denella's world was turned upside down. Even though she had been seated, and bracing for the impact, she was still immediately tossed onto the deck below.

She heard a thud elsewhere, as Erami was also thrown to the ground alongside her.

She tried to cry out, or to call for the Bajoran, but it was all she could do to keep herself from being thrown about in myriad other directions as the Kendra was tossed around like a rag doll. The pink and purple glow from outside began to swirl around like a kaleidoscope, as they continued their out of control journey.

"Warning," the ever-unwelcome voice of the computer calmly reported, "Hull stresses exceeding design tolerances."

Denella tried to claw her way towards the controls, to try and do something to arrest their dizzying flight. But the forces at play were too strong. She couldn't stand, or even crawl her way back over to the pilot's controls. She heard the sound of a power line rupturing somewhere, and smelt the acrid stench of a fire that had sprung up nearby. A rush of nausea rose up from her stomach as the atmosphere grew darker all around.

She was sure she could hear the Kendra's hull starting to creak, as the structure began to fail.

And she closed her eyes, waiting for the end.

Then, she felt something. A hand, grasping hers.

She forced her eyes back open and saw Erami, blood trickling from a blow to her head, looking back at her through the chaos. As the Kendra continued to groan and strain, and it seemed as though the end was near, all of Denella's other instincts were overridden by the immediacy of the moment.

She dragged herself towards the Bajoran. Erami did the same. And as the shuttle fell apart around them, they held each other close.

And waited for it to all be over.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Qapla'!"

From the centre seat of the Bounty, Klath bellowed with pride as he saw the crippled Pakled ship through the cockpit window.

“Reading massive power fluctuations over there,” Natasha reported, a tad more formally, “Main power is offline. But...minimal casualties.”

She added the final part of her report with the measured tone of a field medic. Regardless of who they were fighting, she never liked to see too many casualties. On either side. She had seen too much carnage in her later years with Starfleet.

“A glorious battle,” Klath nodded with satisfaction.

Alongside him K’Veth found that she wasn’t entirely in agreement. The blood lust was still beating inside of her. She felt unsatisfied somehow. She looked out at the stricken form of their enemy. And her eyes narrowed.

“Now,” Klath continued, “We must locate the shuttle, and—”

“Qapla’!”

His order was interrupted by the battle cry from K’Veth. He swivelled around in his seat just in time to see her tapping the weapons controls once again, her eyes flaring with fury.

“K’Veth,” he bellowed instinctively, “No!”

But it was too late. The blood lust in the first-time warrior was too strong.

He stood from his chair and stared out through the cockpit window, as the flurry of micro-torpedoes burst forwards from the Bounty’s forward launcher and impacted on the Martan’s now entirely exposed hull. And as the torpedoes slammed home, the jury-rigged nature of the Pakled ship worked against it once again.

The torpedoes were not deadly in their own right, but they caused a chain reaction of failures across further systems, spreading out through the vessel like a disease, much too quickly for the Pakleds to do anything about.

And then the Martan was enveloped in a fiery explosion.

K’Veth felt a satisfaction inside that she had never experienced before. It lasted until she set eyes on Klath, who was scowling at her in anger. Elsewhere in the cockpit, Jirel and Natasha stared at her as well, both in shock.

“We are victorious,” she called out.

“We were already victorious,” Klath spat back with a growl, “They were defeated. And...there was no honour in that action!”

Before K’Veth could say another word, Klath looked back at Jirel.

“The ship is yours again,” he said simply, “You should recover Denella and the shuttle, and then we must put back for repairs.”

Jirel nodded silently, still shocked by what he had just witnessed.

With that, Klath turned and stormed out of the cockpit, disappearing down the steps without even a glance at his fellow Klingon at the tactical console.

K’Veth watched him leave in silence, as the full consequences of her actions slowly began to sink in with her. The blood lust was gone. The feelings of triumph and glory had vanished. Her pride had disappeared as quickly as it had fleetingly appeared.

And the sense of shame had returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sensation of the Bounty’s tractor beam gently enveloping the Kendra was enough to stir the two forms lying on the deck of the shuttle back into the present.

The gentle tug of the tractor beam was accompanied by a reassuringly familiar voice. “Bounty to Kendra,” Jirel called out over the comms link, “You ok over there?”

Denella opened her eyes and blinked back at Erami. The two of them smiled.

Then, they broke their impromptu hug on the Kendra’s deck plates and helped each other back to their feet, uncertainly standing up amongst the smoking wreck of the cockpit.

The air was still thick with the scent of burning, as the fire suppression systems struggled to cope with the multiple sources of flames. The lighting was dimmed, and across the control panels at the front of the cockpit, dozens of warning lights continued to flicker off and on. And to cap off the scene of devastation, the remains of their picnic were now smeared across every available surface.

But, for all of that, they were alive. They had made it.

“We’re ok,” Denella confirmed back over the comms link with a tired sigh of relief, “We could use a tow though.”

A second later, a significantly more relieved-sounding Jirel came through over the link. “We’re glad to hear that. And you know what? I’ll

even waive the salvage fee.”

Denella stifled a smile, then looked out of the cockpit window at the oddly empty scene in front of the Kendra.

“Um, also, what the hell happened to the Pakleds—?”

“Long story,” Jirel said quickly, “We’ll, um, explain everything when we’re safely back at Kerval Prime.”

Denella considered this for a second, as the comms link clicked off, not entirely sure that she wanted to know exactly what that was supposed to mean. But she didn’t have long to consider that. With the immediate crisis over, and her usual self returning, she felt a slight rush of awkwardness as she looked over at the relieved Erami.

“Listen,” she managed, “I, um—I mean, about the—”

“I know,” Erami nodded, “I thought I was going to die too. And it’s always nice to feel like you’re not gonna die alone.”

She smiled and gently reached out towards Denella’s head. The Orion found herself suppressing the need to flinch at the impromptu moment of contact.

The tension she felt was defused when Erami simply picked a slightly sorry slice of kava fruit out of her hair. Denella looked at the offending piece of leftover picnic food and couldn’t help but laugh. Erami joined in with the moment of shared relief.

Then, as the laughter subsided, and the Kendra slowly began to move out of the nebula, tethered to the Bounty, Erami looked around at the carnage and shrugged.

“So,” she offered, “Wanna help with some repairs?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Klath had stormed out of the Bounty’s cockpit, but he hadn’t been bound for his cabin. Instead, he had marched straight down the steps and into the small unoccupied medical bay of the ship, and busied himself searching through the ship’s supplies for a specific implement.

As he searched, he tried to avoid thinking about the feelings he now had inside of him.

He felt a definite rush of anger, at the way K’Veth had lashed out and destroyed the Pakled ship, ruining their proud battle. He felt frustration with himself, for not having seen the issue ahead of time, and for allowing her to overreact in the heat of the moment. He felt an undeniable sense of guilt. Once again, a ship under his command had destroyed a defenceless ship. Just like the Grontar had so many years ago. And he also felt regret, because he knew that his attempts to kindle a sense of honour inside the woman he had obsessed with for so long had been ruined.

But there was one thing he no longer felt. Something that was no longer there.

He no longer felt par’Mach.

Eventually, he found the tool he had been searching for. He stood in front of a small mirror on the wall of the medical bay, and started to run the dermal regenerator up and down his cheek.

And he didn’t stop until every trace of the scar had vanished.

**End of Part Four**

## Part 5 (Epilogue)

### Part Five

Once the Bounty and the Kendra had returned to Kervala Prime, the repair work had been completed much faster than before. Because this time, Denella found that she had a lot more help from the others.

Having been told about the final moments of the battle with the Pakleds, she understood entirely why Klath had enthusiastically volunteered to help, the Klingon wanting to get away from here as quickly as possible. She was less clear on the reasons for Jirel and Natasha offering their own help, nor why they seemed eager to work on separate parts of the ship so often, as if they didn't want to be left alone with each other. But either way, she was happy for the help.

As a result, the repairs to the Bounty were coming along well enough without her constant attention, and she had been free to focus on fixing up the Kendra with Erami. The battered Ferengi shuttle was now spaceworthy once again, well ahead of schedule.

Which was good news for her reputation as an engineer, but bad news for what she found was an increasing desire to spend time with the Bajoran.

Not that she could quite find a way to articulate that desire.

"So," Erami smiled as she stood next to the open door of the Kendra, "I guess this is goodbye?"

"I mean," Denella shrugged, "Repairs are all done. Unless you want me to disable the computer's audio settings? It's an easy job."

"Nah. It's annoying, but at least it gives me someone to talk to out there."

Denella nodded, then kicked her feet on the metal landing bay. An uncomfortable silence started to foment between them, neither one quite ready to separate entirely.

"You know," the Orion said eventually, "I wasn't really happy with the work we did on the power junctions of the sensor array. It might be best if we strip them down completely and replace—"

"I get it," Erami smiled, stopping her transparent attempt to prolong their time together, "But I've got places to be. And I'm sure you and your crew do as well."

"They won't care," Denella shrugged, "Plenty of bars over in the port."

Erami suppressed a laugh, then folded her arms and sighed, a little more seriously. "Ok, cards on the table. If I stayed so you could pretend to do whatever you want with those power junctions, and I went and booked another fancy dinner and put that - I'm just gonna say it - incredibly uncomfortable dress back on, would you run away again?"

Denella began to shake her head, but faltered immediately under the weight of the truth. There was no real point in lying.

"I, um, I might just do a fast walk this time?"

"That's kinda what I thought," Erami nodded sadly.

"Right," Denella sighed, "I guess I'm not really ready for...all that."

"And that's cool. Still, I had a lot of fun."

"So did I," Denella replied, with complete sincerity, before adding, "Apart from when you nearly got me killed by a bunch of marauding Pakleds."

"What can I say? My dates are memorable, at least. And now I know you're less of a 'fancy restaurant' gal and more of a 'pitched battle to the death inside a nebula' gal."

They shared a laugh, before Denella looked a little more serious again. "You wanna...keep in touch?"

"Try and stop me. I wanna know all about what you're getting up to. And any time you wanna grab a picnic, I'll be there."

She paused and gestured back at the Kendra.

"Eventually. Big galaxy, slow ship."

Denella smiled again. Both of them paused and shifted on their feet slightly, aware that they had probably reached the natural end of their conversation without wanting to acknowledge that it was over.

Then, Erami had a spark of a thought, slapping her forehead with her hand in exasperation. "Crap, I'm so stupid. Almost forgot. I got you something."

She jumped up the steps and disappeared into the Kendra for a moment. A variety of clattering sounds indicated the intensity of the search she was conducting inside.

“Now,” she called out from inside as she searched, “Before you say anything, I know how lame this is. But...I told you there was a trader on Kervala Prime who gets deliveries from the Orpheus System, right?”

Denella immediately tensed up on hearing the name of her old home. But then Erami emerged from the Kendra with her present, and she felt her heart melt.

“I, um, just hope it’s the right one.”

The Bajoran stepped down from the shuttle’s door and handed her a single deep orange flower growing in a ceramic pot. A particular flower that, as soon as the Orion woman saw it, brought an emotional tear to her eye as she fought back a wave of memories from her childhood.

“That—It’s—” she tried to say.

“I thought, I dunno, you could do some sort of clever analysis of it. Try to figure out how to program the scent right in those holosuite programs of yours.”

Denella stifled the tears that were building up inside as she took the flower from Erami’s hands. She braced herself, closed her eyes, leaned in towards the petals, and gently sniffed.

She was back at home. With her mother and father. And everything was good.

She opened her moistened eyes and blinked away the stray tears as she looked back at Erami, who smiled back at her.

“Thank you.”

She was happy.

So happy, in fact, that she didn’t even think about flinching as Erami wrapped her arms around her and gave her a warm hug, and a gentle kiss goodbye.

“Now,” Erami added, brushing away a tear of her own as she stepped back, “I really gotta go. Heard a Kobheerian cruiser just arrived in orbit. And if you thought the Pakleds were bad, you should see what I took from them.”

A long, telling pause, as Denella stared back in incredulity.

“Kidding. Obviously.”

With an enigmatic grin, Juna Erami turned and disappeared back inside the Kendra, closing the door behind her. Still clutching onto the flower in the pot, Denella stepped back to a safe distance to watch the Ferengi shuttle leave. And she decided that she wasn’t going to check whether any Kobheerian ships really had arrived in orbit today.

Best not to know about that.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Kendra lifted off just as Klath, Jirel and Natasha were descending the Bounty’s rear ramp, on their way for another evening in the port itself after a long day of repair work. They reached the bottom of the ramp just as they saw K’Veth approaching them.

Jirel and Natasha shared a quick glance, and decided to give the Klingons some space.

“We’ll, um, see you there,” Jirel muttered.

Klath ignored him as they walked off, both mustering awkward nods at K’Veth as they passed. She walked up to Klath, who stood proudly next to the Bounty’s ramp.

“I thought you should know,” she began, “I have re-booked passage away from here.”

“The Brakka system?” Klath asked, recalling her previously planned destination, but finding that he didn’t really care much what her answer would be.

She nodded. Klath remained stoic, keeping his hands clasped behind his back.

“That would be for the best,” he added.

“Klath, son of Morad,” she sighed, “I truly thought that I was—”

“I know. I should have taken better command of the situation. It was your first battle, you were in charge of the weapons, I should have—”

“You still make excuses for me? Do your feelings really run that deep?”

Klath stiffened slightly, then looked down at her for the first time since the conversation had begun, fixing his gaze directly on her. “No,” he said firmly, “Those...feelings have passed.”



“They have?”

His jaw tightened slightly.

“They have,” he confirmed with a firm nod.

He was lying. He knew he was lying. He may no longer have par’Mach, but he definitely still felt something for her. Still, the important thing was for him to make sure that she didn’t know that he was lying.

She studied his face. He maintained a firm glare, as if he was staring out at a wild targ on a hunt back in the forests of Qo’noS. He may have still felt something for her, but he also knew that it was destined not to work. Not after what had happened in the nebula, in a manner that was so inexorably linked with the memories of his own dishonour.

And so, he kept his expression as firm as he could, burying whatever else he felt deep down inside him. And eventually, she nodded in acceptance.

“I see,” she replied, “Then that is how it shall be.”

He didn’t move. He didn’t even respond.

She gave him one last look, and gestured to his now blemish-free cheek. “You look a finer man now that is gone,” she said, more softly.

And with that, she turned and walked away across the landing pad. And Klath resisted every urge he felt to pursue her, instead watching her walk off the landing pad until she disappeared from view and back into the covered walkway that led back to the main port itself.

It was only when he finally turned away that he noticed he wasn’t alone.

“Hey,” Denella smiled apologetically, “I didn’t mean to—I wasn’t listening, don’t worry.”

The Kendra had long gone, up into the atmosphere and away from Kervala Prime, but Denella had kept a respectful distance from the two Klingons, only making her way over with the flower in the pot after K’Veth had left.

Klath felt a tinge of embarrassment at having more of his personal matters aired in public, but he maintained an outwardly calm expression. “It does not matter,” he offered to his friend, “The...situation is over.”

“Right,” she nodded, “I’m sorry. You ok?”

“Yes,” he replied. Another lie.

“Wanna go get drunk with the others?”

“Yes,” he replied.

That one wasn’t a lie.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I mean, it’s probably for the best. What the hell do you even buy a Klingon for a wedding present, anyway?”

Natasha and Jirel sat together at a table on the lower level of the Treaty of Organia, with two tall glasses of Altair water in front of them. Even though it had been a long, hard day of repairs, they had both instinctively avoided ordering any sort of hard liquor. Natasha had silently sworn it off for a while.

“I dunno,” Jirel shrugged as he considered her question, “I’m assuming something with a lot of sharp edges.”

They shared a slight chuckle, lifting the awkward tension that had set in between them. To the point that Jirel wondered if it was acceptable to soberly broach the unbroachable topic.

“So,” he began, absently swirling the water in his glass, “About—”

“Is this gonna be about the other night?”

“...No?”

It was a feeble lie, even by his own standards, and one that elicited an unhappy raised eyebrow from his drinking partner.

“Ok, fine,” Natasha sighed, “If you really want to do this: What happened happened. There’s no point denying that. We were drunk, we were maybe feeling a bit lonely, and...it happened. But that’s the end of it. It meant nothing, and any residual feelings you might have is just because we work together, and we’ve become...friends over the past year. And that’s that. Ok?”

“That’s what you’re going with?”

She knew it wasn’t the full truth. She knew that she had felt something a bit more than just a random drunken fumble. But she was equally sure

that would pass. And she was definitely sure that she didn't want to get into the full truth. Especially not in a theme bar staffed by waitresses in gaudy 23rd century Starfleet mini dresses.

"That's what we're both going with," she corrected him with an air of complete certainty, "And that's the end of it."

Jirel studied her face for a moment and sipped his drink.

"Ok," he nodded eventually, "That's the end of it."

"Exactly."

"Exactly," he echoed, "And, the next time we're both a bit drunk, and a bit lonely—"

"The next time, I'll deal with it some other way. Actually, when we walked in here tonight, I'm pretty sure that cute Andorian at the bar was checking me out."

"What?" Jirel jumped in, a little too quickly, "An Andorian? Blue skin? White hair? Weird...antennae things?"

She nodded, maintaining an entirely innocent air as her drinking partner became more and more wound up. "I like the antennae," she shrugged, "You know, apparently, the bigger the antennae, the bigger the—"

"You know what? I really don't think we need to..."

He stopped himself as he saw the smirk that was taking root on her face.

"Right," he nodded in understanding, "You're messing with me. Again."

"Just making sure you understand that there won't be a next time."

"A next time for what?"

The two seated figures quickly turned at the sound of the new voice and saw Denella and Klath arriving at their table, both without the women they had spent most of their time with on Kervala Prime up to this point. They couldn't help but notice that the Orion looked a little happier with themselves than the Klingon, who seemed even more surly than usual.

"Oh," Natasha floundered, "A next time for, um—"

"A next time for us to bail you out of one of your dates," Jirel offered with a grin, gamely covering for Natasha's flustered discomfort.

Denella took the comment on the chin, surprising herself by how unfazed she was by it.

"Yeah, fine. It was a date. And...it was nice."

Natasha looked visibly gleeful at this, but was stopped from saying anything by a hasty raised finger from the Orion.

"But there won't be another one for a while. So you can just go ahead and park girly time for now, ok?"

Natasha looked a little upset by this. Jirel just looked confused, before he turned to Klath.

"What about you, buddy?"

Klath looked at the others around the table a little uncomfortably, before he reluctantly shrugged his burly shoulders. "The joining will not be happening. And...I am fine."

He cut off any follow-up questions before they arrived by studying the drinks menu on the old tricorder in the middle of the table, just as a waitress in a medical mini dress toddled over to the table, clipboard at the ready.

"What can I get for you folks?"

It didn't take long for Klath to locate what he was looking for.

"Bloodwine," he grunted.

The waitress smiled and nodded gamely. "Excellent choice. Right now, we have a case of the—"

"Yes," he replied, "Two bottles."

The waitress took this in her stride and noted down the order, as Denella took a moment to glance over the menu herself.

"Can I get a...Bajoran springwine?"

"Aw—!" Natasha began.

"Seriously," the Orion cautioned, "Don't do that."

The chastened Natasha nodded back as the waitress scribbled the order down on her old-school clipboard, before looking over at Jirel. "By the way," she asked, "Are you Jirel Vincent?"

Jirel nodded back at her in affirmation. The waitress casually gestured over to the other side of the room.

“There’s a message for you, just came in,” she explained, “At the bar.”

The Trill looked at his colleagues and shrugged, before he stood up and walked over in the direction of the bar. The waitress also departed, to fetch their chosen drinks.

Just as she leaned back in her seat and sipped her water, Natasha saw someone else in the crowded bar, walking towards them.

“Oh my god...” she whispered.

Klath and Denella turned around to where she was looking, and saw a familiar form arrive at the table and flop down into an empty seat, looking even more dishevelled than usual.

Sunek looked around the group from under a mop of wilfully untidy hair. His face appeared to be covered in several small, but painful-looking scratches, and his garish Hawaiian shirt of choice seemed to be torn in several places.

“Well, well, well,” Natasha couldn’t resist the opportunity to say, “Look what the cat dragged in.”

Despite the scratches, and the slightly pained wince he made when he sat down, Sunek found it within himself to muster up a grin. “And you said it couldn’t be done, doc,” he scoffed, “That Caitian lady couldn’t get enough of me, I tell you.”

“Looks that way,” Denella nodded, glancing at a fresh wound on his arm with a wry smile of amusement.

“Oh yeah,” the Vulcan continued, “Spaceport fling complete. Caitian lady’s world rocked. Bucket list item ticked off. Dunno what you idiots have been up to while I’ve been away, but frankly I bet it paled in comparison with the Erotic Adventures of Sunek.”

Natasha suppressed a slight shudder at that particular title, while Denella shrugged in an entirely unconvinced manner. Klath merely growled quietly.

After a moment, the grin slipped slightly from Sunek’s scratched-up features, and he looked over at Natasha with a slightly more sheepish expression. “Hey, um,” he muttered, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “We got anything back on the ship to treat...claw marks?”

He coughed a few times to clear his throat.

“Also, hairballs—?”

“Oh god, please, no more,” Natasha cut in quickly, holding her hands up in defeat, “I will treat you when we get back if you promise to never tell me the rest of this story.”

Sunek shrugged and reattached his grin to his face, just as Jirel returned to the table. “Hey Jirel,” the Vulcan proudly called out as the Trill sat down, “Who’s got two pointed ears and totally made it with a—?”

Sunek’s unnecessary question was interrupted by the clattering sound of Jirel dropping a small padd device down onto the table in front of everyone. Everyone could see that something was wrong. Mainly because he was completely ignoring the state of Sunek, which warranted some sort of comment now more than ever.

Instead, he looked around the table, and then down to the padd, containing the message that had been left for him at the bar.

“Trouble?” Klath grunted, his senses immediately back on edge.

Jirel flicked the padd on and sat down in his seat. The others craned their necks to get a view of the screen of the device.

The padd itself was clearly a proprietary item from The Treaty of Organia. Built to resemble an old-fashioned flip-top Starfleet communicator, albeit with a small touchpad screen where the old hand controls would have been.

As far as Natasha could make out, all that was displayed on the screen was a simple string of numbers, followed by a small single ‘x’. She recognised the meaning of both the numbers and the single letter immediately.

They were a set of specific coordinates. Sealed with a kiss.

She looked back at Jirel, who now had a face like thunder.

“What is it?” she asked, in all seriousness.

Jirel grimaced deeper, then nodded at Klath, indicating that the Klingon had been right with his initial supposition.

“Trouble.”

**The End**