

Star Trek: Bounty - 112 - "The Woman Who Cried, Among Other Things, Wolf"

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Star Trek: Bounty - 112 - "The Woman Who Cried, Among Other Things, Wolf"

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Summary

(1 of 2) A mysterious message from an untrustworthy old flame leads Jirel and the Bounty crew into a dangerous rescue mission, and causes Jirel to confront some old feelings as he tries to do the right thing.

Prologue

Prologue

*Tyran Scrapyards Administration Office, Tyrus III, Sector 394
Stardate 47121.8*

Bzzzz.

The shrill sound of the buzzer on the front desk was enough to rouse the snoozing form of Crax Traxanar from his impromptu mid-afternoon nap, almost startling him enough to cause him to topple out of his chair entirely.

The surly Reegrunion yawned loudly as he slowly got his bearings, blinking against the light from the huge bank of monitors in front of him.

The entire rear wall of his office on Tyrus III consisted of dozens of high-resolution screens, each one displaying a live feed from one of the bays of the vast complex of metal that made up the Tyran Scrapyards up in orbit. A gargantuan construct of tendril-like docking arms and enclosed bays connected to a single cylindrical central core that stretched out for several kilometres.

The whole structure was designed to house dozens of starships, transports and smaller vessels at any one time. There, they were methodically taken apart piece by piece, either using automated drones and robotic arms, or even via workers at the scrapyards painstakingly dismantling their hulls in EVA pressure suits, and whatever raw materials that could be salvaged were sold on.

If the vast noble shipyards of the galaxy were where great ships were born, this was where they came to die.

As the head administrator for the whole venture, Crax Traxanar was happy to monitor the goings on up in orbit from the surface of Tyrus III. Partly because the Reegrunion had never really had the legs for long stretches in space. And partly because he preferred to keep his distance from the other workers. He would be the first to admit that, whatever he was, he wasn't a people person.

And during his refreshingly isolated days down here, he certainly wasn't used to getting visitors.

Bzzzz.

With an irritated grunt, and stifling a second yawn, Crax Traxanar finally spun around in his chair to see who had decided to ruin his second favourite nap time of the day.

"Ok, ok," he muttered, "Just who the hell is—?"

He stopped mid-sentence. Glimpsing the visitor for the first time, he found himself having to suddenly catch his lower jaw on an impromptu and unplanned journey to his knees.

Aside from the rear bank of monitors, and the groaning chair that served as Crax Traxanar's favourite napping spot, the rest of the administration office consisted of little more than a wide metal desk, which neatly bisected the room in two.

And standing proudly on the other side of the deliberately unwelcoming desk was an elegantly tall and alluring human woman, wearing a dark blue jacket and trousers and with her dark crimson hair pulled back tightly in a bob. Her porcelain face was impeccably made up, and she carried herself with an almost regal air.

Crax Traxanar didn't get to see much beauty in the administration office of an orbital scrapyard, but suddenly, out of nowhere, here it was. Apparently all alone.

"Ah," she smiled politely, "So sorry to have woken you."

She didn't sound especially sincere.

The Reegrunion administrator stared at the entirely out of place woman for a few more seconds, before looking around the rest of the shabby office, trying to figure out if this was some sort of trick that someone was playing on him. Or even if all of this was a dream, and he was still actually mid-nap back in reality.

His continued silence elicited a mildly amused look from his visitor. "What's the matter?" she chided, "Cat got your tongue?"

Crax Traxanar didn't understand the reference, but the tone of the comment was enough to shake him back to business.

"What do you want?" he grunted, entirely adversarially.

The mysterious woman maintained her polite demeanour as she checked a small padd in her hand. "Now, now, is that any way to talk to a customer? I'm here to buy one of your ships."

That was enough to cause the Reegrunion to snort in amusement, now entirely sure that someone somewhere was messing with him. "I don't deal with customers," he replied dismissively.

"Then why do you have the buzzer?" she countered with a raised eyebrow.

He conceded the point with a shrug, and followed it up by standing from his chair, stepping up to the front desk, reaching down and wrenching the small buzzer clean from the recessed housing in the surface of the dirty metal desk.

“Problem solved,” he offered back, as he threw the remains of the device onto the ground.

With that, he went to turn back to the comfort of his chair, but she called out.

“I’m serious. I’m here visiting a friend, and it turns out we’re both very interested in the ship you have in bay seven right now.”

Crax Traxanar reluctantly turned back to the persistent woman and stepped back up to the counter.

“Lady, let me explain something to you,” he hissed, jabbing a finger up in the direction of the orbiting complex, “The ships up there are not for sale. What we’re operating isn’t a shipyard, but a scrapyard. You can tell the difference if you look closely at the spelling.”

He spat out a derisive chuckle at his own joke, but her patient smile didn’t flicker one iota.

“We’re willing to pay scrap value. Plus twenty percent.”

This stopped him mid-chuckle, his interest now piqued. He looked her up and down again with a slightly lecherous leer, still trying to figure her out. One thing now seemed clear to the opportunist in Crax Traxanar. She was alone, she was defenceless, and she seemed to have money to spare.

“You know,” he drawled, “Tyros III is a very risky sort of place for someone like you to be standing here looking like that, claiming to have that sort of latinum...”

Before he got any further with his thinly-veiled threat, she took a calm step back from the desk and deftly straightened her left arm, allowing something to slide down the length of her jacket’s sleeve and into her waiting hand.

Out of nowhere, Crax Traxanar found himself staring at a tiny old-school type-1 Starfleet-issue phaser.

“And what if I stand here looking like this?” she asked off-handedly.

He looked at the antique weapon, still trying to process what had just happened. She noted his confusion and smiled in satisfaction.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t it? 23rd century vintage. Picked it up from a Rigellian trader. Never leave home without it. Now, about this ship...”

The Reegrunion considered his predicament for a moment. One that even he could see would only be resolved by dealing with this particular customer. “Fine. You can have it. Scrap value, plus twenty percent—”

“Ah, hang on,” she countered, “That was my initial offer, granted. But that was before you threatened me like that. Which, I think we can both agree, wasn’t very nice.”

He didn’t respond, but his glare darkened by a few more notches.

“So,” she continued, “Now I’m thinking something more like...scrap value, minus fifty percent.”

“I’m not going to sell for—!”

His protestations were silenced by a subtle prod of the tiny phaser in his direction, backed up by a firm look that underlined the fact that she was willing to use it. “So,” she smiled thinly, “Do we have a deal?”

Crax Traxanar looked from her face, to the phaser, and back again. Perhaps if he hadn’t been so determined to work alone in the administration office, he might have had some hope of assistance if he had called out or tried to raise an alarm. But then, he had never been a people person.

So, with no other option that he could see, he reluctantly nodded across the front desk.

“There, that was easy, wasn’t it,” she smiled in quiet satisfaction, “We’re very happy to do business with you.”

“And who is ‘we’, exactly?” Crax Traxanar found himself compelled to ask.

At this, a sliver of irritation crossed her face and she tutted slightly. “Hmm, yes, it seems that my business partner in this little venture is running late. Story of his life, I suppose—”

Just then, the shimmer of a transporter effect appeared in the far corner of the office, and a figure that was familiar to both parties already present in the office coalesced. The woman with the phaser didn’t take her eyes off the Reegrunion, but she did allow herself a patient smile.

“You certainly know how to time your entrances, darling.”

For his part, Crax Traxanar stared at the newcomer in mild disbelief. “You?” he grunted, “Don’t you work for me? Up in bay twelve?”

Jirel Vincent stepped towards the impromptu standoff, seemingly unabashed by the scene he had beamed into.

“Used to,” he replied with a grin, “You fired me.”

“I don’t remember doing that.”

“Oh,” Jirel added, his grin faltering slightly, “My bad. In which case, I quit.”

The woman with the phaser afforded him a sideways glance. "You didn't get yourself fired?"

"What can I say? I'm a model employee."

He gestured to the weapon in her hand with a knowing look as he reached her side.

"And you couldn't get through this transaction without that thing?"

"This thing just got us a bargain," she chided him, lifting up the padd in her other hand, tapping the screen with a finger and passing it to the Reegrunion, "Speaking of which, check and confirm the latinum transfer, and we'll be on our way."

Crax Traxanar reluctantly took the padd and checked it over. To his surprise, given how the two visitors to the administration office could easily have taken the ship for free at this point, he found that the transfer was exactly as promised. Scrap value, minus fifty percent.

"You know," he offered as he accepted the transfer, "You're still getting a bad deal here. Even at this price. There's a reason these ships end up in scrapyards, you know?"

"We'll be the judge of that," the woman countered, "And it was bay seven we wanted, right?"

Jirel grinned wider and stared at the wall of high resolution monitors on the wall.

The sight of the Tyran Scrapyards wasn't necessarily a happy one for him to see. His months spent working here had been long and hard, and thanks to his own cockiness when he had first shown up looking for work, filled with insults and bullying and unwelcome nicknames.

But today, Spotty was leaving town.

"Oh yeah," he nodded enthusiastically, as he spied the view on one specific monitor, "Bay seven. She's absolutely perfect."

Crax Traxanar regarded the Trill with confusion, wondering whether there was something wrong with the Trill's eyesight. There were several recorded examples of scrapyard workers suffering from optic nerve damage from poorly-installed eye shields while operating laser cutters on a ship's hull.

But there was nothing wrong with Jirel's eyesight. He turned and smiled at the elegant woman with the phaser, then looked again at the monitor displaying the new arrival in bay seven.

He was starting to lose count of the number of ways he was in love.

Displayed on the monitor, third along on the second row on the wall, was the unmistakable form of a Ju'Day-type raider.

Part 1A

Part One

“You can’t bring that in here.”

Jirel adjusted the heavy satchel on his shoulder and suppressed the unnerving sense of déjà vu that he felt as he looked up at the burly owner of the gruff voice standing in front of him.

Why was it always Nausicaans?

He took a second to cast his mind back to the last time a Nausicaan bouncer had stood between him and the entrance to a bar. Back on Hestina, at the Targ and Lion, when he and the Bounty were searching for information on the final location of the late USS Navajo, and her black box.

On that occasion, the solution to the menacing and entirely overzealous doorman had been easy. A simple bribe had been enough for him to look the other way. But this time, Jirel wasn’t in the mood to play around. There was no trace of his usual laid-back look on his face. His mood was dark.

“Listen, friend,” he muttered at the enormous Nausicaan, “I really don’t have time for this.”

The bouncer shrugged his shoulders and pointed a meaty finger at the satchel again. “No entry,” he boomed, “Doorman’s discretion.”

Another wave of déjà vu washed over the Trill. It was clear that, unlike some of his kin, this particular Nausicaan was well aware of the merry dance at play here. The accepted process for a man in his line of work to negotiate a little extra cash from a frustrated wannabe patron of the establishment he was tasked with looking after.

Jirel sighed in apparent acceptance of the situation and reached for his pocket.

The Nausicaan’s look turned to one of anger when, instead of the modest amount of gold-pressed latinum he had expected the Trill to produce, he instead found himself looking down at an ugly disruptor, pointed squarely at his stomach.

“I said,” Jirel hissed, “I really don’t have time for this.”

The bouncer glared impotently at the now-armed wannabe patron in front of him. This move wasn’t in his script. But despite the sense of humiliation he felt at being bested like this by such a clearly physically inferior opponent, the cogs in his brain turned fast enough for the doorman to concede that it wasn’t worth getting killed over.

He scowled at the Trill and jabbed his finger at the entrance to the bar.

“In.”

Jirel kept the disruptor raised as he walked over to the door. The Nausicaan kept his distance.

“Glad we could sort that out,” the Trill offered.

But his mood still didn’t get any lighter.

* * * * *

Some time later, with the disruptor stowed back away, Jirel sat at the bar and stared down at the remains of his drink.

He found himself in the confines of the dingy establishment known as the Journeyman’s Rest.

The Bounty had arrived in orbit of Golos III a few hours ago, after spending several days warping over to the planet, following the coordinates that had been so mysteriously sent to him via subspace message, all the way back on the Kervala Prime spaceport. He had beamed down alone and walked the short distance to the Journeyman’s Rest, not bothering with any backup, despite some audible protestations from the rest of the Bounty’s crew.

He could see their point. The Golos system was in an especially unfriendly sector of space, barely a day’s travel from the Badlands, the turbulent expanse of plasma storms on the fringes of the Federation-Cardassian border. An area best avoided unless absolutely necessary.

For several years, the Badlands had been a hive of activity for the Maquis, who used the treacherous conditions as perfect cover for their insurgency against the Cardassian Union. But they had long since been eliminated, even before the Dominion War had begun in earnest.

Then, in the absence of the Maquis, criminals, bandits and other nefarious groups had moved in to use the storms as cover for their own illicit activities and questionable business.

The Federation side of the Badlands was still heavily patrolled, but the Cardassian side was more of a free-for-all. The shattered Union, almost razed to the ground in the final stages of the war, no longer had the resources or the manpower to oversee the more remote regions of its

boundaries. So the Badlands, and nearby outposts like the Golos system, had simply been left to fester.

Golos III itself had once been a thriving Cardassian trading post, and the Journeyman's Rest had cultivated a reputation as the classiest kanar lounge this side of the Demilitarised Zone. But over time, the neglect had taken its toll. What was left of the Cardassian authorities had been recalled to the inner regions of the Union, and plenty of the galaxy's undesirables had taken their place. And any business owners who couldn't afford to move had simply had to adapt.

As such, the Journeyman's Rest was no longer renowned for its kanar. But it was renowned for just about everything else.

Since he had made his way past the Nausicaan bouncer and taken a seat at the bar, Jirel had been sexually propositioned three times, been challenged to four separate fights, and been offered more illegal substances than he cared to remember.

But, through a combination of patience, luck, and the occasional confirmation that it was a disruptor in his pocket, and he wasn't pleased to see them, the unjoined Trill had managed to negotiate each of those incidents in turn. For the time being, he wasn't being bothered.

He looked up from the dregs in his glass and checked the chronometer on the wall. He'd now been waiting here for more than an hour. With an inward grimace, he cursed the fact that, if it was anyone else he was supposed to be meeting, he'd have long since headed back to the Bounty.

But it wasn't anyone else he was meeting. It was her. And, as ever, something was compelling him to stay.

So, he waited.

He returned his focus to the remains of his Andorian brandy, even as the Lurian bartender slowly idled his way over to him, gesturing to the glass. Jirel shook his head.

Despite the notoriously easy-going look of his species, the bartender took some significant offence to this. It was a tough job to turn a profit on Golos III these days, and there was nothing he hated more than seat-hoggers. Travellers and drifters taking up precious space at the bar while spending the entire evening nursing a single small drink.

There had been a particularly high spate of such transients in the Journeyman's Rest already that week, and this latest specimen was the straw that broke the Lurian Sludgeworm's back as far as the bartender was concerned. He was mad. Just as he was about to give the Trill a serious piece of his mind, a second figure slid effortlessly onto the empty barstool next to him, and ordered on his behalf.

"Dry martini with a twist. And he'll have another brandy. All on his tab."

The Lurian glared at the newcomer for a moment, a little put out at being denied the chance to give the impassioned speech about the need to support local businesses that he had mapped out in his head. But ultimately, he simply nodded and hobbled off to prepare the drinks.

Jirel, for his part, didn't even look up to acknowledge the new arrival.

"What the hell do you want?"

He usually prided himself on his warm and friendly attitude to just about everyone he came across on his travels throughout the galaxy, considering it to be one of his better qualities. But there wasn't a trace of that in his question.

"Really? That's all I get? Not even a hello? Tsk, you used to be such a polite young man."

He downed the remainder of the brandy in front of him, then turned to look at her. She sat as confident and assured as ever, like a ghost from his past. Dressed in a deep red suit that shimmered slightly in the dim light of the bar, with her hair in a tight bob and a silver brooch pinned to her left lapel. Her porcelain features displayed a familiar superior smile, as she met his gaze. She couldn't have stood out more against the decay of the Journeyman's Rest.

He felt an immediate flash of anger. And an even more immediate feeling of falling in love all over again. With a woman that he had fallen in love with far too many times to count. He forced himself to repress both reactions.

"Fine," he offered, with words that dripped with heavy sarcasm, "Hello, Maya. Nice to see you. Now: What the hell do you want?"

She raised an amused eyebrow as the bartender dutifully returned with their drinks. She took a sip of her cocktail and flinched slightly. "Ugh. Never trust a species that sleeps in mud to mix a decent martini."

She waited for some sort of flicker of a smile from him, but there was none forthcoming. He kept his defences well and truly raised.

"How did you even find me this time?" he pressed instead.

"Come now, Jirel. You and that crew of yours aren't exactly black ops. It's really not that difficult to track you down when I need to."

She allowed a victorious smile to cross her face as she idly stroked the delicate stem of her martini glass.

"Still," she continued, "It's nice to see that I've still got you wrapped around my little finger. One little message, and you come running."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," he countered, "We happened to be passing. That's all."

"I sent that subspace message to Kerval Prime. That's three sectors away. Must've taken you days to get here..."

The victorious smile showed no sign of leaving any time soon, as Jirel scowled in defeat, grudgingly accepting the truth of her observation. In fact, it had taken them the best part of a week to get to Golos III.

“Ok, you got me here. Congratulations. And it’s a good thing, actually. Here.”

He grabbed the satchel where it hung off his bar stool and offered it to her. She eyed the dusty bag up with a modicum of distrust.

“Latinum,” he explained, “That’s what I’ve saved up. And that’s the rest of what I owe you for the Bounty. So, take that and we’re even. And I never wanna hear from you again.”

She just scoffed, making no attempt to take the bag from him. “This isn’t about latinum, darling.”

“Then what the hell is it about?” he pressed again.

She paused for a second and took another sip from her martini, before she looked back at him, an entirely more serious look on her face.

“I...need your help.”

“Right,” Jirel scoffed, “Well, you can forget about that, for a—”

“It’s about my husband, Jirel. He’s in trouble.”

To the bartender’s delight, Jirel finished his second brandy a lot faster than he had finished the first.

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

“So, she’s Jirel’s ex?”

Natasha, the human ex-Starfleet doctor of the Bounty, broke the uneasy silence that had descended over the ship's cockpit with her question. But it did little to ease the unsettled mood that had accompanied it.

The entire modest crew complement of the Bounty were present. The ship’s emotional Vulcan pilot Sunek sat at the helm controls, their Orion engineer Denella sat at her rear console, while Klath, the Klingon weapons chief, kept a close eye on his own instruments. With the ship hanging in orbit of an unruly planet in a lawless section of space, nobody wanted to be too far away from their positions as they waited for a call from Jirel down on Golos III.

And, ever since the Trill had beamed down, nobody had seemed to be in much of a mood to talk either. Until Natasha’s question brought an inevitable quip from the Bounty’s usually talkative pilot.

“Why, doc?” Sunek couldn’t help but grin, “You jealous?”

Natasha gave the Vulcan a withering glare from behind her sensor panel on the right side of the cockpit. She also did her best to banish any thoughts she had about the latest complications in her relationship with Jirel, after the two had drunkenly ended up in bed together back on Kervala Prime.

On their long journey to the Golos system, she had tried to piece together some more information about the mysterious woman who had dragged Jirel and the rest of them across several sectors, and found her usually talkative colleagues suddenly becoming a little evasive. Especially Jirel.

What she had been able to piece together was that the message had come from one Maya Ortega, a human woman who was a former member of the Bounty’s crew. And possibly more than that, when it came to the Trill.

The fact that Jirel had warped over to the coordinates she had provided wasn’t entirely surprising to Natasha. After all, something similar had happened a few months ago when a Ferengi called Zesh, another former member of the Bounty’s roster, had called on them to help defend an investment of his on Nimbus III. When a former crewmate was in trouble, he was compelled to help.

But while the mood had been generally cheery when Zesh had called them, the mood on the trip to Golos III had been considerably less happy. Jirel had been closed off, and spent long stretches of the trip in his cabin, and the others had been cagey and on edge as well.

So, with Jirel now busy down on the planet itself, having insisted on going alone, Natasha was trying to finally get some answers.

“I’m serious,” she persisted through Sunek’s comment, “That’s who she is?”

Klath grumbled sullenly at his console, still reluctant to discuss it. But Denella looked over at the human doctor and sighed. “It’s...a bit more complicated than that.”

This seemed like enough of an opening for Natasha to start to pull at the thread. “So, then, explain it to me,” she persisted, “Who is this Maya Ortega?”

Denella sighed again, and glanced over at Klath, who simply folded his arms in front of him to indicate his reluctance to expand on the matter any further.

“I mean,” the Orion offered, “She’s gonna find out the full story sooner or later.”

“Yeah,” Sunek chimed in from the front of the cockpit, “Cos you know Jirel’s not just gonna give her that latinum and leave. She’ll want something. And you know what that means.”

Denella nodded and turned back to the expectant Natasha. “Fine. Maya Ortega is...a bit more than just Jirel’s ex.”

“Another secret ex-wife?” Natasha snorted slightly, “Thought we’d already mined that particular cliché?”

Sunek suppressed a grimace at that jibe, correctly surmising that this was a shot at him, and his ex-wife T’Len, who the Bounty’s crew had crossed paths with in somewhat unhappy fashion shortly after Natasha had joined the crew.

“No,” Denella continued, “But more than just an ex. Actually, Maya’s the one he bought the Bounty with. A long time ago. She...technically still owns a stake in her, at least until Jirel hands over that last pile of latinum.”

“Huh. Really?” Natasha replied, seemingly dumbstruck as she glanced around the Bounty’s shabby thirty-plus year old cockpit, “He actually paid money for this thing?”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that,” the overprotective engineer of the ship muttered.

“Joking,” she offered back with a friendly smile, “But I’m still not seeing what the big issue is.”

“That’s cos you haven’t met her,” Sunek chimed in.

Denella nodded knowingly. Natasha just looked even more confused. At the front of the cockpit, the Vulcan spun around in his pilot's seat, sighed, and continued.

"Ok, here's the story. Maya and Jirel have a...complicated past. They bought the Bounty together, they put most of the crew together, and their relationship was kinda chaotic. On-again, then off-again, then on-again again."

"Ah," Natasha nodded, "One of those exes."

"And when she was part of the crew, she was always trying to get us involved in crazier and crazier schemes. Properly dodgy stuff, y'know? She always figured that's where the biggest profits were. And her schemes all got too much for Jirel. So, one day, she left the Bounty behind, and so ended the romance of the century."

"Except now she's back?"

"She's been back before," Denella replied knowingly, "She'd left long before I joined the crew, but we've crossed paths a few times since then."

Natasha was reminded of Jirel reluctantly admitting the story of how they had rescued Denella from the Orion Syndicate. A spur of the moment decision they had made only after accepting a job to deliver supplies to a location inside Syndicate space. She couldn't help but wonder, if that had seemed like an acceptable job to take on after Maya Ortega had left the crew, how bad were the jobs she had been pushing for?

"So," Sunek said, picking up the story, "This is how these things tend to go down. Maya calls him up out of the blue, uses his debt to her as leverage, he drops everything to go find her, insisting that this is the last time he's gonna do it. Then he falls head over heels again, goes along with whatever dumb scheme she's pitching this time, at some point she screws us all over again, and Jirel swears never to get involved with her ever again."

"It is a predictable pattern," Klath boomed out from his console, speaking for the first time in the conversation.

Natasha shook her head and gestured to the others. "And you just keep going along with this? Even though you know what's gonna happen? Why didn't you stop him from coming here?"

"We've tried before," Denella offered, "Believe me."

"Yeah," Sunek added, "We've found that the only thing we can do is just kinda let the whole thing play out, and hope we don't lose too much latinum by the end of it."

Natasha shook her head in disbelief, as the Vulcan continued.

"I mean, we've all got someone like that, right? Someone we're so crazy about, who had such a lasting impact on us, that we'd do incredibly stupid things for, no matter how often we get hurt? For me, it's this swimming coach I met on Risa, many years ago. We just connected on a... deep spiritual level, y'know? And even to this day, I've never met anyone with such a huge pair of—"

"Shut up, Sunek," Denella cut in, even as the Vulcan's eyes glazed over at the memory.

Natasha wanted to counter the Vulcan's somewhat specious argument, but she couldn't help but remember the number of second chances she had given her ex-husband Cameron throughout their relationship, all the way up to her finding out the details of his affair with Lieutenant Ramirez on the USS Ticonderoga.

Even if it seemed as though Jirel was being an idiot over this woman, she recognised the potential for anyone to be an idiot, given the wrong circumstances.

"Huh," she managed, "I see."

"Still," Denella added, as optimistically as she could muster, "Maybe Sunek's wrong. Maybe he really will just give her the latinum and leave. And that'll be the end of it."

Natasha saw Klath's expression darken, suggesting that he didn't believe that statement for a second, while Sunek simply snorted from the front of the cockpit.

"Yeah," the Vulcan added sarcastically, "And if you believe that, I've got some prime real estate on Ceti Alpha V to sell you..."

* * * * *

"Well, you definitely have a type."

Jirel passed the comment as he looked down at the picture displayed on the small padd. Staring back at him from the screen was the face of a handsome jet black-haired Trill.

"What can I say?" Maya casually replied from the seat next to him as she patiently sipped her martini, "I like the spots."

Jirel looked up from the padd and fixed her gaze. He couldn't help but feel the sliver of a smile creeping onto his face, which he quickly

warded off. I'm not happy to see her, he reminded himself.

"So," he said aloud, gesturing to the Trill on the padd, "Marriage. This is new."

"You know I like to move fast," she offered, not doing anything to prevent her own smile from forming. "His name is Toren Kelsis. We met a few months back and...I guess you could say it was a whirlwind romance. Had the ceremony next to the Crystal Lake of Betazed."

"Guess my invite got lost in the mail?"

"Would you have wanted to come?" she retorted knowingly, "Bear in mind the ceremony was entirely traditional. So you would have had to show off...all of your spots."

Jirel tried to dismiss the mental images that particular comment conjured up and focused back on the padd. "Ok, so, you've got a husband. And he's in trouble. What trouble, specifically?"

The smile departed from her face, and she winced slightly. Jirel watched on with cautious intrigue, looking for the inevitable signs of deception from her.

"We've been working together. For a mining operation. Office-based, you understand. I don't like getting my hands dirty."

"Disagree," he remarked dryly, "But continue."

"Well, we were both based in the finance department. Not exactly glamorous work, but Toren had bigger plans than that. And so did I."

"Why do I get the feeling that we're heading somewhere illegal with this?"

Her porcelain features tightened slightly, and she accepted the jibe with a slight nod. "We thought we'd found a way to...lightly skim a modest amount off their profits—"

"There it is."

"—Barely anything, really, given the sorts of funds that the company was moving around. Unless you really started digging into every itemised transaction, it should have been virtually undetectable. It was a long play thing, you know? Just giving ourselves a nice little nest egg for whenever we decided to up and move on."

"Except, I'm guessing your plan wasn't quite as clever as you thought it was. Now, where have I heard that one before?"

"Yes, well, what we didn't realise was someone had gotten away with a similar trick a few years back. So the owner of the company had put in a bunch of extra security checks. And he wasn't impressed when he saw what we were doing."

She ran her finger down the stem of her glass again, and to Jirel's surprise, she seemed to be fighting back a genuine burst of emotion.

"Toren was—He took the blame. For all of it. Insisted that I had nothing to do with it, no matter how hard the owner's thugs punished him. He made sure none of it was traced back to me, even as they were dragging him away. And that's why I owe him, Jirel. I have to help him. And I can't do it by myself."

Jirel stared back at her, the woman that had double-crossed him almost as many times as he had fallen in love with her. Which was a lot of times. He felt certain that he wasn't getting the whole story. Because you never got the whole story from Maya Ortega. Her emotions seemed genuine. Her story seemed plausible. But deep down, he couldn't help but feel like he didn't believe her.

"And if you help me with this," she continued, gesturing to the satchel of latinum, "Then, in return, I'll not only write off the rest of your little debt, I'll pay you and your crew for your time. Twice your normal rate."

"And where are you getting that sort of money from?" he couldn't help but ask.

"You don't need to worry about that. But I'm good for it. I've called in some favours. And I'll even transfer it up front, if that's what you need me to do."

She pushed her cocktail glass away and fixed her eyes on him. He could see a trace of moisture in the corner of her eyes.

"I could have searched around and tried to find another crew to do this with me, Jirel. It's a big galaxy, after all. But I need someone I can trust. And, no matter what has happened between us in the past, I know I can still trust you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because you just dropped everything you were doing and flew across three sectors to come and find me."

Jirel went to insert a scathing counterpoint to this claim, but he found himself immediately faltering, so he remained silent instead.

"You don't believe me," she noted, correctly, "Which I suppose is understandable."

She picked the padd back up off the top of the bar, tapped the screen a few times, then passed it back to him.

"I just transferred half the payment to your account," she explained, "And this padd contains plenty of information for you to check out. About me, Toren, our employment history, and so on. Feel free to check anything you need to check in order to verify what I'm telling you."

Jirel paused for a moment, still considering just walking off and leaving her. But something inside him compelled him to reach out and take

the padd.

“Thank you.”

And he heard something he wasn't expecting to hear in her words. Something that he wasn't sure he'd ever heard from her.

Genuine thanks.

After a second, she composed herself, took a final sip from her cocktail and stood up.

“I'll be back here tomorrow evening, at the same time, for your answer,” she continued, “So, please, do whatever checks you have to. But hurry. I don't have a lot of time.”

With that, she walked off. Leaving Jirel staring blankly into space where she had once been standing, wondering how someone he thought he knew so well could still surprise him after all these years.

He still wasn't sure if he could trust her.

But at least he knew who he could.

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

"I do not trust her."

Klath offered his frank assessment of the situation to the previously silent cockpit of the Bounty from behind his tactical station.

Although nobody vocalised an immediate response, it didn't seem as though there were too many dissenting opinions to his statement.

Jirel sat in his centre chair, looking thoughtfully out of the cockpit window in front of him. Sunek and Denella, along with Klath, were all back at their posts as the Bounty remained in orbit of Golos III for a second day.

Only Natasha was missing. After Jirel had returned to the ship the night before, and he had brought everyone else up to speed with what Maya had told him, he had not hesitated in handing the padd she had given him over to the Bounty's medic. He wanted as unbiased an opinion as possible on Maya's story. And there had only been one person for the job. Someone both unbiased, having never met Maya before, and someone that Jirel knew that he could trust the judgement of.

He wasn't happy to find that she was now aware of the details of his past with Maya, thanks to some loose tongues in the cockpit while he had been down on the planet below. But given what he wanted her to do, it at least saved him some time. And Natasha had accepted the responsibility, with all the apparent zeal of her previous career as a diligent Starfleet officer.

She had been poring over the data on the padd in her cabin, checking it against whatever she could find in the limited databanks of the Bounty, since last night. Only emerging every few hours to raid the ship's sole replicator for sustenance. It wasn't even clear if she'd found time to sleep.

Not that Jirel had done much sleeping himself. He had spent most of the night going back over everything that Maya had told him down in the bar. Trying to figure out how much had been the truth, trying to figure out how much had been lies.

And trying to figure out why, even now he knew she was married, he still found himself drawn to Maya Ortega.

He shook those thoughts out of his mind again as he forced himself to turn to Klath, who seemed to be waiting for some sort of reaction to his summary of their situation.

"You can really be that sure?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Klath leaned back in his chair and folded his arms in front of him, staring back at the Trill as if the answer to that question should have been obvious.

"Because I have met her," he grunted.

Sunek couldn't help but snort in amusement from the front pilot's seat, as Jirel was forced to concede that point with a reluctant nod.

"Still," Denella offered, "This is all a little bit more elaborate than her usual schemes. Last time, she had us running crates of knock-off jellied gree-worms across the Ferengi border."

"Took two months to get the smell out of the cargo bay," Sunek nodded with a shudder, "And we got stopped by a customs shuttle before we got halfway to the drop-off point."

"At which point the esteemed Maya Ortega made herself scarce," Denella added.

"As usual," Klath grunted unhappily.

Jirel couldn't counter their comments. It was an accurate summary of their usual interaction with Maya whenever she sought them out. Which was why he was so baffled by everything that she had told him. If she was trying to scam them in some way, what was her endgame?

His train of thought was interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs at the back of the cockpit. Everyone present turned to see the final member of the ship's complement walking in, her research apparently complete.

"Well," Natasha offered, waving the padd that Maya had handed to Jirel in her hand, "I don't know what to tell you, but this woman's story seems to check out."

"All of it?" Jirel asked as he whirled around in his chair.

"I haven't exactly got access to Federation libraries to verify every single file she's given you, but from what I've managed to pull from public records, everything seems legit. Employment records from Synergy Mining Enterprises, details about Toren Kelsis, marriage certificate from Risa—"

"Wait," Jirel jumped in immediately, spotting the hole in the story already, "She said she got married on Betazed."

“She did,” Natasha shrugged, “Unofficially, at least. They got the paperwork done first, then travelled to Betazed for a proper ceremony. Transit logs are all on the padd. I guess it’s just easier to arrange a shotgun marriage on Risa.”

“Or,” Klath grunted, “It is easier to falsify transit logs than it is to obtain a fraudulent Betazoid marriage certificate.”

Natasha looked over at the Klingon with mild bemusement, before turning back to Jirel, who seemed to be seriously accepting that reading of the situation.

“I’m getting a feel for how little trust there is towards this woman,” she replied patiently, “But if she just wanted a fake marriage, why bother with the detail about Betazed at all? And why include the wedding photo on the padd? Which reminds me, I have now seen far more of this lady, her husband and their Betazoid officiant than I was planning on seeing when I started this investigation.”

“Hey doc,” Sunek called out at this, “If there’s nekkid wedding snaps on there, I think it’s only fair that we all get to—”

“Shut up, Sunek,” Jirel sighed, keeping his focus on the woman he trusted, “You’re really sure it all checks out?”

Natasha regarded the look on Jirel’s face with some concern. He looked like someone desperately searching for a reason for all of this to be a lie.

One of those exes, she thought to herself.

She knew that she had the option of making something up. Of lying about something to convince him of the lie he was sure was there. But that didn’t feel right. She hadn’t even met this Maya Ortega yet. And besides, she couldn’t lie to someone that she had somehow come to trust over the last year of misadventures. And more than that, someone that she was starting to be concerned that she was developing genuine feelings for, after their last accidental night together back on Kervala Prime.

So, she told the truth. As mildly and conservatively as she could.

“All I’m saying is...she doesn’t seem to be lying.”

“No,” Klath muttered, “She never does.”

Natasha shrugged and passed the padd back to Jirel, who reluctantly accepted it back. “Plus,” she offered additionally, “The latinum transfer was real enough. I thought you all said she was the one who usually scammed you out of money?”

Jirel glanced at Denella, and then at Klath. Neither of which seemed convinced, but neither of which had a response to the latinum issue.

In the absence of a more rational debater, Sunek sounded out once again.

“Ok, but seriously. Latinum, sob stories and nude photos aside, we’re not actually falling for this, right?”

“Falling for what?” Jirel responded quietly.

“Falling for—I dunno. Whatever the hell she’s trying to sucker us into! Which is clearly what she’s doing, because it’s what she always does! She’s obviously just—”

“And what if she isn’t?”

Jirel fired off this retort a little more firmly and harshly than he had been planning. The tone of his voice even took Sunek by surprise.

A moment of silence followed, with nobody entirely sure what to say. Eventually, Natasha took a step towards the pensive Trill in the centre chair.

“Ok, look, I still don’t really fully understand the whole story with you and her. And you can all bicker on as much as you like about all of this. But from what I can see, at the end of the day, there’s only really one question to ask here.”

Jirel looked back at her, suppressing an entirely different range of emotions that bubbled up when he looked into this woman’s eyes, and prompted her to continue.

“What do you want to do?”

He thought about this, then sighed. “I...don’t know,” he replied.

With that, he stood and walked out of the cockpit entirely, retreating to the sanctity of his cabin. The others in the cockpit watched him leave with a range of expressions.

“We’re going to do it,” Denella offered eventually.

“How can you be sure?” Natasha asked.

“Because, deep down, he’s too good of a person.”

“He’s too much of an idiot,” Sunek chipped in.

“He is...both,” Klath clarified.

Natasha looked back at where the Trill had just disappeared down the steps, and silently agreed with both points.

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

She was sitting in the same seat as the night before when he found her. Still looking entirely out of place amongst the rest of the grizzled miners, travellers, criminals and other ne'er-do-wells that populated the Journeyman's Rest. He couldn't help but notice that, on the bar in front of her, sat a fresh martini and a fresh Andorian brandy.

She knew he was going to come.

He ignored that little detail she'd been sure to leave in plain sight for his arrival and slid onto the bar stool next to her. She didn't bother to look over at him.

"You know," he said, "I'm really not a fan of this place. Seems to attract the very worst the galaxy has to offer."

She acknowledged his pointed comment with a trace of a smile, as she slid the waiting brandy over in front of him. "So, you believe me now?"

There was a confidence in her tone that riled him further, on top of the drink that had been waiting for him. A whole range of temptations flooded his mind. The temptation to walk away, the temptation to laugh, the temptation to grab a weapon and shoot her, and the temptation to get down on his knees and profess his undying love for her.

The rudimentary psychiatrist in him was forced to admit that his feelings towards her were still somewhat mixed.

"I'm not sure what I believe," he replied, in lieu of any other response he was considering, "You've screwed me around plenty of times."

"Never heard you complaining—Oh, screwed you 'around'. I see. Carry on."

"Very funny," he replied, without amusement.

She shrugged unapologetically and sipped her drink, as Jirel made a deliberate show of pushing the brandy that had been waiting for him to one side.

"So," he continued after a pause, "Let's say - for the moment - that I believe you. You're married, your husband's in trouble for embezzling funds from this Synergy Mining Enterprises. And apparently, you think I can help."

"More like: Your crew can help," she offered back, "You were always a bit of a...figurehead on that ship of yours, darling."

"Got you out of trouble enough times."

"Touche," she shrugged, "Either way, if I'm going to get Toren back, I'm going to need a particular set of skills. Denella's engineering know-how, Klath's strength, Sunek's piloting, and you and...what you have."

"Cute. You know, you're throwing out all these insults pretty casually for someone who needs me on their side."

"You're right. I'm sorry, force of habit."

She tried another disarming smile, but he maintained his glare, and fought off the persistent desire he felt to smile back. "So," he said instead, "What's the full story?"

Her smile faltered slightly. She drained her cocktail, signalled for another from the Lurian bartender at the other end of the bar, and then began.

"Fine. Like I said, Toren's in a lot of trouble. And if I'm going to get him back from where they've taken him, I'm going to need you all."

"Where have they taken him?"

"The owner of this mining company has a simple, but particularly...ruthless approach to anyone he feels has crossed him. Once he's caught you, he sends you straight to one of his mines themselves, to work off your debt. Brutal, back-breaking work on whatever mineral-rich asteroid they happen to be stripping at the time."

"Huh," Jirel offered, "Doesn't sound especially legal?"

"You don't get to be as rich as he is by doing things legally. His mining operations are more like prisons, or slave trading. Just about everyone there is his prisoner, until he considers that the debt has been worked off. Every slip of latinum. And you can bet that they're all kept well guarded from the outside world."

"Neat. Sounds like a fun trip already."

"I never said it would be fun," she pointed out, "But, with my contacts and your crew, I think we can rescue him. In return for the rest of that latinum I promised you."

Jirel stared back at her, still trying to size her up. Trying to figure out why she was looking so sincere about all of this.

"You're really—?"

He didn't get any further before he felt a burly hand grab his shoulder. He spun around to see a familiar unwelcome face staring down at him.

"Hello, Trill," the Nausicaan doorman from the day before scowled at him, "No disruptor today?"

Jirel's face dropped a little further as half a dozen more Nausicaans loomed into his view over the doorman's shoulder.

"Friends of yours?" Maya enquired from behind him.

Jirel kept his attention on the lead Nausicaan. He had drunk in enough bars like the Journeyman's Rest to recognise a bar fight when one was about to happen. With as much confidence as he could muster, he eased himself down from the bar stool, and sized up the significantly taller Nausicaans in front of him.

"Don't you work here?" he asked their ringleader, who from this angle appeared to be the tallest of them all.

The Nausicaan stretched his armour-plated face into a wider leer and cracked his knuckles in greedy anticipation. "Day off," he grunted.

Jirel sighed and nodded in acceptance. "Figures."

He knew what he had to do, if he had any chance of getting out of the Journeyman's Rest, he couldn't allow the Nausicaans the luxury of a proper fight.

So he shot first.

He swung his right fist at the Nausicaan doorman with all of his might, straight into the hulking monster's midriff. As soon as it connected, Jirel felt like his fist had exploded, as it impacted with some force squarely into some very thick body armour.

"Ow!" he cried out, loudly enough for everyone else in the bar to turn around, "Son of a—!"

That was as far as he got. Because then the enormous Nausicaan part-time doorman hit back with a firm backhanded flick of his hand, delivered with enough power to send the Trill flying backwards onto the filthy floor of the Journeyman's Rest.

Jirel barely had time to process the extent of the pain the undignified landing had caused him before he saw the entire gang of Nausicaans descending on his position.

He rolled away across the floor in a despairing motion, but felt one of his adversaries grab his left leg and pull him back. He looked down and aimed a sharp downward kick into the face of the Nausicaan that had a hold of him, connecting with enough force to stun him into releasing his grip.

He forced himself back to his feet, but as soon as he did so, he saw the rest of the Nausicaans closing in, each with their hefty fists raised.

Why was it always Nausicaans, he bemoaned, not for the first time since arriving on Golos III.

Then, out of nowhere, a familiar voice called out.

"Excuse me, boys."

The gang of Nausicaan thugs stopped on the spot, entirely thrown off by the silky female voice that had crashed into their old-fashioned pummelling. They turned to see Maya standing behind them, her hands casually affixed to her hips.

"Me and my friend were right in the middle of a conversation. This is all very impolite of you."

The Nausicaan nearest to her leered darkly, and stepped towards her.

In a flash, her left arm dropped from her hip, and a tiny vintage type-1 phaser rolled out of her sleeve and into the palm of her hand. Before the Nausicaans could process what was happening, she fired off three bursts of energy, stunning half of the brawling gang, who each dropped to the floor with a heavy thud.

"You see," she purred at the remaining three, "That was heavy stun. Now that's polite."

Just as the lead Nausicaan took another half-step towards her, she thumbed the phaser's controls.

"And now, it's set to kill. Even my manners only stretch so far."

The Nausicaan stopped on the spot, and eyed the weapon uncomfortably, as the pained Jirel awkwardly hobbled over to where Maya stood, gesturing at the object in her hand.

"You had that the whole time? And you let me try to fight them?"

"Never leave home without it," she reminded him, "But I like to watch you fight. You never did know when to give up."

Jirel sighed and shook his head, as her face twisted into a knowing smile.

"Now," she continued, "Are we leaving, or not? Because I suspect it might be in our best interests not to stick around for last orders."

The sudden intervention of the Nausicaans seemed to have put a lot of Jirel's previous worries into immediate perspective, and he nodded back.

Moving together, the human and the Trill slowly but surely stepped towards the exit of the bar, with Maya keeping her phaser raised all the way to the door, warning off the remaining conscious Nausicaans, along with any of the other patrons in the Journeyman's Rest who decided that they wanted to get involved in the evening's drama.

"Just like old times, hmm?" Maya couldn't help but smile as they backed away.

Jirel, for the time being, stayed silent. As the two of them made their escape from a sticky situation, together.

Just like old times.

* * * * *

Moments later, they raced down to the end of the street outside and paused for breath around the next corner. Jirel glanced back around the corner, back towards the bar, but saw no evidence that they were being followed by any Nausicaans.

"You know," Maya opined from his side as she slipped the tiny phaser back up her sleeve, "I don't think I'll ever get bored of bailing you out of trouble."

Satisfied that they weren't being followed, Jirel steadied his breathing as he ducked back behind cover and glared at her. "You picked the bar," he pointed out.

"Yes, but you picked the Nausicaans."

Before he realised what he was doing, he felt the beginnings of a smile crossing his face. He managed to stop it before it fully blossomed, but the twinkle that appeared in her eyes suggested that she had seen it.

"Still," she continued, "Even if we're not being followed right now, I suggest we get moving. So, are you going to help me?"

He stared back at her, as his mind raced. But ultimately, he reluctantly knew there was only ever one answer to that question.

"I always do, don't I?"

She smiled in silent victory as she went to move off down the side street.

"Glad to see you're finally starting to trust me—"

The rest of her sentence was cut off when Jirel suddenly stopped her with a firm outstretched arm that shot out in front of her.

"Let's get one thing straight, Maya," he growled, "I'm bringing you along for now because you just saved my life back there. And because if what you're saying about your husband is true, then I feel like we need to help you. But don't think for a second that means I trust you. Because I don't. And the second I think you're messing me, or my crew, around again, I'm gonna drop you off on the nearest asteroid and I'm never gonna respond to one of your messages ever again. Clear?"

He was silently impressed with himself for the level of menace he managed to get into his words, his usual affable air nowhere to be seen. But whatever he personally thought about his impromptu threat, she didn't flinch at all. Instead, she kept her knowing smile firmly on her face.

"Well well," she smirked, "That's more like the Jirel I used to know."

He didn't relax the best shot at a menacing leer that was on his face, but he did allow her to idly lower his arm from in front of her as she continued.

"But believe me, darling. I'm on your side on this one."

With that, she walked off down the side street. After a second Jirel found himself diligently following behind. Still no closer to truly believing her.

* * * * *

Back in the Journeyman's Rest, the Nausicaans hadn't even attempted to follow the Trill and the human after they had made their escape. Instead, their ringleader had reluctantly told them to take a seat.

The three that had been stunned hadn't taken long to regain consciousness, and they had joined their colleagues at one of the tables inside the bar. With the impromptu bar fight over, the other patrons had all returned to their own drinks and idle conversations.

The mood at the Nausicaan table wasn't exactly conducive to idle conversations, however. Even through the silence, the ringleader could tell that the others were angry.

And he was angry too.

Regardless of why it had happened, he really didn't like losing fights. And this was now two he had lost in as many days, if you counted the minor altercation with the Trill and his disruptor on the previous evening. And his ego insisted that he did count that.

He could sense similar feelings from the others as they silently licked their wounds. Whether or not they had been one of the trio that had been stunned by the human's phaser, they had all been well and truly shown up in front of every last patron of the Journeyman's Rest this evening.

But the ringleader, and part-time bouncer, also knew that his men were aware that it had all been worth their while.

Or, at least, it soon would be.

* * * * *

Over at the bar of the Journeyman's Rest, the Lurian bartender kept an uncertain eye on the table of Nausicaan troublemakers as he polished a shot glass with a dirty rag.

He was thankful that the earlier fight hadn't caused too much lasting damage to an establishment that was already rife with lasting damage. But he wasn't entirely sure the action was over for the night, especially when the Nausicaans were still there.

Then, he watched as two newcomers entered the bar. He had trouble telling the two figures apart, but he definitely recognised them both. He was the sort of bartender that never forgot a face.

He watched on, his glass-cleaning duties temporarily forgotten, as one of the newcomers handed a stout and clearly heavy briefcase to the leader of the Nausicaans, who readily accepted it without so much as a word exchanged. And then, just as soon as the newcomers had arrived, they turned and walked straight back out again.

The Lurian half-considered chasing after them to give another non-paying pair of customers a piece of his mind. But, much like the table of Nausicaans, they didn't strike him as the sort of visitors to Golos III that he wanted to be giving a talking to.

So instead, he looked back at the lead Nausicaan, who was now dutifully doling out the latinum inside the briefcase to his men, splitting it evenly.

The Lurian wasn't surprised to see the transaction being completed. In fact, he had overheard the deal being set up a few days ago, during a quieter night in the bar. A deal that involved the Nausicaans allowing the Trill and the human to escape from them, to ensure that they left Golos III together.

He wasn't really sure why it was so vital that they did that. But he would have been happy to warn either the Trill or the human about what he had heard. He'd have talked to them at great lengths about it, if only they had asked him.

But they hadn't asked him. For all that he observed from behind the bar of the Journeyman's Rest, nobody ever asked him about anything.

And that, as far as the Lurian was concerned, was the real tragedy here.

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

*Yessik City, Barkan V Colony
Stardate 47693.4*

Jirel ran for his life.

He careered through the streets of Yessik City, slaloming through a host of confused pedestrians as he desperately raced on.

Several steps behind him, caring a lot less about avoiding anyone in their way, a group of armed goons pushed their way through the crowds, sending colonists tumbling to the ground in shock or running away in fear.

He turned down a side street just as a blast of disruptor fire whistled through the air behind him, accompanied by a few screams of panic from the crowds. Ignoring the aching in his muscles from the all-out sprint he was in the middle of, he kept on running, and at the same time, he grabbed the stubby communicator from his belt and bellowed into it in desperation.

“What part of ‘emergency beam-out’ aren’t you getting??”

There was a fizz of static over the comms link, and for a moment he feared that the device in his hand was broken again, after the hasty rewiring job he’d attempted on it last week. But, as he turned down another side street to avoid another burst of disruptor fire, the response finally came.

“I’m working on it,” Maya said over the sketchy link, as calm as ever, “There’s a lot of interference around the colony, you know. Just keep your spots on.”

Another disruptor blast whistled past, impacting on a nearby wall.

“I’m gonna be lucky to keep my head on if you don’t get that thing working!”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic.”

“I’m not being—!”

He raced around another corner and skittered to a halt. In front of him, blocking the entire width of the latest side street, stood several more armed goons. He spun around in despair, but the chasing pack head already turned the corner and cut off his only means of escape.

He was surrounded.

From within the gaggle of goons, a one-eyed Andorian stepped out of the crowd, his own disruptor raised at the Trill.

“Look, Thelev,” Jirel began, putting on his best appeasing tone, “You’ve got to understand, this was all an honest mistake. I had no idea that ___”

“No excuses, Jirel,” Thelev hissed back, his voice sounding scratchy and distorted through the scars across his larynx, old wounds that the grizzled trader wore on his face as a badge of pride, much like his eyepatch.

Jirel gulped and raised his hands above his head in surrender, as the blue-skinned man took another pace towards him, the goons behind him shadowing his moves.

“I’ve warned you before, Jirel. One of these days you’re going to end up crossing too many people. Looks like today is the day.”

Jirel saw him bring his disruptor to bear. With a wince, he looked up despairingly at the communicator in his hand and screamed out.

“Maya!”

The one-eyed Andorian jabbed his finger down on his trigger a split second after Jirel felt the transporter effect starting up.

* * * * *

As he rematerialised on the transporter pad, his first instinct was to check his body for signs of a smoking, disruptor blast-sized hole.

Once he was sure he was still in one piece, his second instinct was to begin to rant at the woman behind the transporter controls.

“Unbelievable,” he began as he stepped off the pad, “You set me up!”

“I took a calculated risk,” Maya countered with a shrug.

“A calculated—? You switched the bag of latinum I took down there to hand over in return for the dilithium with a bag full of rocks!”

“I honestly didn’t think Thelev would bother checking until you were safely back onboard with what we needed. He’s not usually that thorough.”

“Yeah, well, he checked. He definitely checked. And you didn’t think to maybe mention this little plan of yours to me before you sent me down there to make the swap?”

“If you’d have known, you’d have had to lie to him,” she pointed out, “And I really don’t trust that poker face of yours.”

He fixed her with an unamused glare, before he turned and stormed out of the transporter room, into the main corridor of the Bounty. She sighed and took off after him, persisting with her defence as they walked.

“Look, I just thought there was a good chance that we might get the dilithium and the latinum out of this little transaction.”

“Yeah, well, now we’ve got neither. Which means we’re not gonna double our money by flipping that dilithium, like you promised we would. Which means we’re gonna need to compromise on the repairs again. We can either fix the impulse stabilisers or the secondary power circuit. Not both.”

He marched on down the corridor, continuing to grumble as he did so. The walls of the corridor still looked run-down and tired, a telling reminder of the repair list they still had to work through. Even though it had now been several months since they had liberated the Bounty from the Tyran Scrapyards, they had made little progress on the myriad issues plaguing the ship that were the reasons the Ju’Day-type raider had been towed to the scrapyards in the first place.

“You’re the one that insisted on bay seven, darling,” Maya offered casually as they walked.

“And don’t ‘darling’ me, ok? Because we are absolutely, one hundred percent, definitely broken up this time.”

He stalked on, avoiding the knowing glance she gave him which suggested how much she doubted the veracity of that statement. Although he was forced to agree with it. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d broken up with her since they had first got together. But it was a lot.

Instead of dwelling on that, he marched on into the dining area, still ranting.

“So, unless you’ve got some other dumb plan to screw up, I’d really like to hear how you think we’re gonna—”

He whirled around to her and stopped immediately, as he saw the shocking sight of a huge Klingon warrior standing in the corner of the room. His eyes boggled in fright.

“Holy crap! Maya, we’ve been boarded!”

The Klingon remained standing where he was and merely turned his head nonchalantly in the Trill’s direction. He didn’t exactly look like he was here to seize the ship.

Maya, with a patient sigh, stepped over to the stoic form of the Klingon. “He was supposed to be a surprise. He returned my message while you were down on the planet. I met him down in Yessik City yesterday. He was looking for work. And you’ve said we need more muscle around here, so here he is.”

Jirel looked at Maya, then at the Klingon. His look of fright had given way to a more perplexed stare.

“I am Klath, son of Morad,” the Klingon boomed out.

“Well, Klath, son of Morad,” Maya smiled as she completed the introductions, “Meet Jirel, son of...oooh, awkward.”

The orphan Trill fixed Maya with a withering look, before he uncomfortably focused back on the impassive Klingon. “Ok, I’m not sure this is gonna work—”

Suddenly, a shrill alarm sounded out from the Bounty’s barely-functioning automated systems.

“Proximity alert,” Maya noted, now altogether more serious.

“Great,” Jirel griped as they raced for the door, “So Thelev has a ship as well. Your plan just keeps getting more amazing, you know that?”

They dashed up the steps into the Bounty’s empty cockpit, with Jirel immediately making for his pilot’s seat and checking the controls.

“Got a ship on an intercept course,” he reported, “Weapons range in eight seconds!”

He broke the Bounty out of orbit of Barkan V and pivoted the ship around to face the enemy vessel. It was a lean and squat ship, slightly larger than the Bounty, with two ugly disruptor cannons poking out of the front of the vessel. Both were glowing fiery red, ready to destroy them.

“Ah, crap,” Jirel groaned, as the disruptors fired, “Hang on!”

He swung the Bounty away just in time, as the twin blasts scorched past their port wing.

“I told you, Jirel,” the rasping voice of Thelev came over the open comms link, “You crossed the wrong guy today.”

Jirel ignored the taunts of the Andorian, and kept his focus on the firefight. “Take it we’ve still not got the shields operational?” he called back.

“Not last time I checked,” Maya replied.

“Ugh. Ok, let me try and get us—”

Before Jirel had the time to say anything else, he saw another burst of energy flying out. Except this one was from the Bounty itself, towards the enemy ship. The blast from their phaser cannons hit home onto the other vessel’s shields.

“Huh,” he mused, “We’re fighting our way out then, I guess.”

He swung the Bounty away from another disruptor blast from Thelev’s ship, and quickly executed a tight arc to bring them around to the rear of the other ship, desperately sticking to them as they tried to shake them off.

“Ok, Maya, take your shot!”

The Bounty’s twin phaser cannons flared out again, sending rapid staccato bursts of red fire that seemed to have been specifically tuned somehow. They impacted heavily on their quarry’s shields and collapsed them. A single micro-torpedo followed, slamming into the rear of the hull and crippling them entirely.

Jirel turned the Bounty away and set a course for safety, a little shocked at the ease with which Maya had dealt with their enemy. “Hey,” he called back, “Where did you learn to shoot like that—?”

He swung around in his seat to see Maya stationed behind the rear engineering console, with her arms folded in quiet satisfaction. At the weapons console, on the right side of the room, sat Klath, son of Morad.

“In the Klingon Defence Force,” he replied simply.

Jirel looked from the Klingon to the human woman and back again.

“Um,” he managed eventually, with a smile in the direction of the frowning Klingon, “Welcome aboard, I guess?”

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

“The Badlands?”

Sunek raised his eyebrow in a typically Vulcan-like way, as he delivered his distinctly un-Vulcan-like take on Maya’s plan.

“Like hell are we going into the Badlands.”

From where she stood, leaning on the centre chair where Jirel sat, Maya raised an amused eyebrow of her own at the defiant pilot. “Huh,” she tutted absently, glancing knowingly at Jirel as she did so, “That doesn’t sound like the adventurous young pilot I once had to single-handedly rescue from those half-dozen pheromone-crazed renegades from the Deltan anti-celibacy movement...”

At this, Sunek stood from his seat and pointed an accusing finger at her. “Hey! This is absolutely nothing like that, ok? Also, we have very, very different definitions of the word ‘rescue’!”

From her left-rear console position, Natasha found herself trying to blend into the background as she kept her focus on the mysterious new woman as the debate continued. A woman that she had already heard plenty about, and was now meeting for the first time.

And someone who she was starting to see had an odd level of control over more than just the Bounty’s self-appointed captain. The entire crew seemed on edge now that she was onboard.

“He’s got a point,” Jirel offered from his seat, gesturing at the unhappy Vulcan, “You didn’t say anything about this rescue happening in the Badlands.”

“And it won’t happen there,” Maya replied patiently, “But, as I was explaining to you before your excitable Vulcan so rudely interrupted me, we need some information. And the Badlands is the best place to get it.”

“What sort of...information?” Klath grunted at her.

“Information like where my husband is actually being held. Synergy Mining Enterprises are an ever-moving operation. Jumping from one mineral-rich planet or asteroid to the next, strip-mining what they can before they move on. I don’t have exact coordinates for where all their latest operations are, but I do know where one of their last ones were. Inside the Badlands.”

Jirel looked around at the rest of the Bounty’s crew, none of whom seemed entirely enthused by the plan just yet.

“If we get to the abandoned facilities that they left behind on that asteroid inside there,” Maya continued, “There’ll still be a database uplink in place at their old operations centre. With your esteemed engineer’s help, we should be able to get an exact location for where we’re heading, and details of the security situation at the new location as well.”

“Hell of a place to build a mine,” Denella chimed in from the back of the cockpit.

“The company buys the sites based on what they can get out of them. Not for the view. And when you’re effectively using slave labour to do the grunt work, you don’t need to worry too much about comfort.”

“Neat,” Sunek muttered as he slumped back into his chair, with heavy sarcasm.

“Either way,” Maya persisted, apparently unflustered by the amount of pushback she was getting from the entire room, “That’s where we’ll find the information we need.”

“And,” the Vulcan pointed out to Jirel, “That’s also where we’ll find pirates, bandits and Surak knows who else. Come on, Jirel. This is a really, really dumb idea.”

Jirel contemplated the situation for a moment, then nodded back. “You’re right,” he conceded eventually, leaning forward in his chair and shrugging, “But then, that’s our thing, isn’t it?”

Sunek’s eyebrow remained where it was, even as Jirel forcefully gestured back at the pilot’s controls behind him.

“Take us to the Badlands, Sunek.”

For a moment, it looked like the Vulcan was actually going to refuse. But after a further second or two of unimpressed staring, he swivelled back around to his controls.

“I knew you were going to say that.”

* * * * *

As the Bounty streaked on towards the maelstrom of the Badlands, Maya excused herself from the cockpit and made her way to the ship’s

small dining area for some nourishment.

As she sat alone, finishing her meal, the door opened and Natasha walked in.

She had deliberately decided to seek out the Bounty's guest to try and get more of a handle on her, and met her look with a friendly smile. She had spent far too long travelling the galaxy to let other people's opinions of someone cloud her own first impressions.

Though she had also come to trust the rest of the Bounty's crew enough over the last year to take a fair amount of healthy trepidation into the room with her.

As she walked over to the table, Maya took a sip from her cocktail and winced. "Ugh," she tutted, "Is that lovely engineer around anywhere? She needs to reprogram this new replicator of yours to fix a proper martini."

"I'm sure we could mix you up the real thing," Natasha offered back with a friendly tone, "There's more than enough actual liquor floating around onboard the Bounty. I'm, um, Natasha, by the way. We didn't really meet back in the cockpit."

She offered a handshake across the table and Maya accepted with a nod.

"Of course. Maya Ortega. I'm sure you've already heard plenty about me, but I guess Jirel never was very good at introductions. And it can be so hard for me to keep track of who he's employing these days. Is that Ferengi gentleman still around, by the way? I liked him."

Natasha had to admit that she had also liked Zesh when she had met him. Although she wasn't sure he felt the same way about her after she had successfully convinced the rest of the Bounty's crew to give away his treasured investment on Nimbus III for nothing. She offered a shrug.

"He's, um, moved on to pastures new."

"I see," Maya nodded, breaking the handshake and leaning back in her chair, "Well then, Natasha. What went wrong in your life to end up in Jirel's company?"

Natasha suppressed the image of a bloodied ensign in the burning corridors of the USS Navajo, and kept up her friendly demeanour. "What makes you think something had to go wrong?"

"Please," she replied with a knowing tut, "However Jirel might have sold it to you to get you onboard, this isn't the sort of ship you end up on if your life's going the way you planned it. Believe me."

Natasha regarded the elegant look of the woman in front of her, from the quality of her attire to her general demeanour, and shrugged. "Fair enough. I guess I'm a bit surprised to find out that someone like you ended up on this sort of ship as well."

Maya's lips pursed into a thin smile, as she swirled her martini around with practised grace. "Please don't let appearances fool you, dear. I guess you haven't quite heard my full story from the loose lips of the others?"

Natasha shook her head, still intrigued. She silently slipped herself into the seat opposite Maya at the table.

"If you must know," Maya continued, "I was born on Turkana IV."

This sent a shiver down Natasha's spine. The name Turkana IV was enough to do that to just about anyone that heard it. An infamous failed Federation colony out in the Beta Quadrant, where law and order had broken down to the point that the warring powers that sprang up across the planet had severed ties with the Federation entirely.

Its distance from the core of the Federation meant that there had never been a serious attempt to try and counter the secession. And aside from the occasional uncomfortable visit by the odd passing starship, Turkana IV was left to spiral completely out of control, a wasteland of poverty and violence.

Nobody was interested in going there, and very few people ever got to leave. Except, apparently, the woman sitting across from Natasha at the table.

"I'm going to guess from that look on your face that you're familiar with it," Maya continued, "But, yes, after a...difficult childhood, I was fortunate enough to escape. Many years ago."

Natasha was still processing this new information, as the other woman idly gestured to her own get-up, her clothing, jewellery and the rest of it.

"I know more than enough about what it's like to have nothing, you see? So once I got away, I resolved to do whatever had to be done to make sure that I never had to live like that again. And I also resolved to make sure I had a lot of fun while I was doing it..."

She offered a sliver of a smile as she sipped her drink.

"Well," Natasha nodded back eventually, "I've certainly heard about your...sense of adventure."

"I'll bet you have."

There was an undercurrent of something in her words that Natasha couldn't quite place, but that she certainly didn't like. A hint of tension, even of menace.

Just as she felt herself shift uncomfortably in her seat, the door opened again and Jirel entered. The Trill had been wrapped up in his own thoughts as he had been walking away from the cockpit, not really thinking about where he was heading. But those thoughts were quickly

replaced by new ones.

As soon as he saw the scene inside the Bounty's dining area, he felt on edge for a different reason than before. In the way that anyone gets on edge when they find two people they have previously been intimate with engaged in a private conversation.

"Oh," he blurted out, with clear discomfort, "You've—I mean, you're here. Both of you. Cool."

On the far side of the table, Maya instantly began to smile wider, looking at the Trill and the other human woman and instantly putting two and two together. "Ah," she purred, "Now I understand this latest bit of recruitment. And another redhead? I guess you've got a type as well, darling."

Jirel squirmed. Natasha's eyes widened in flustered shock at this comment, the memory of her and Jirel's most recent unplanned night together still fresh in her mind.

"We're not—" she began.

"We're just—" Jirel said at the same time.

They both stopped and looked at each other, both immediately unsure of how to proceed, after the less than definitive conclusion they had reached on what had happened between them back on Kervala Prime. After several dozen shots of liquor.

Seeing the discomfort her casual comment seemed to have caused, Maya drained the rest of her drink and stood from the table. "Well," she offered to the two squirming presences, "Glad we got all that cleared up. Now, I'll see myself to the guest cabin."

She exited, still smiling and almost without the other two noticing.

Jirel considered restarting the discussion he and Natasha had been having back on Kervala Prime, about whether or not their second night together really did mean something, and elected to focus on his primary headache. He slumped down into another seat at the table.

"Ugh," he sighed in defeat, fixing her with a distinctly more serious look, "Should I really be going through with this?"

"Where was that attitude this time last week?" she offered with a friendly smile. Though it was immediately clear from his look that this was one of the rare occasions in his life when Jirel Vincent wasn't interested in joking around.

"I'm serious," he shot back, "Am I making a mistake here? I'm sure it'll just turn out she's trying to screw us all over again somehow. Nothing's ever straightforward with her. But...if she really does need help, can I really turn her down?"

Natasha adopted a more serious posture and considered his words for a moment. Eventually, she mustered a shrug. "I don't know if I can answer that," she replied, "I barely know this woman."

He nodded at this, but continued to look at her with a slightly hopeful stare, trying to will some more useful advice out of someone he knew he trusted.

"It's just...I dunno," he said eventually, "There was something about her. Back in the day, on the Bounty, the excitement when we were hatching some new scheme. It was just kinda...thrilling. Proper seat of the pants living, you know? And no matter how crazy it all got, we always got out of it. There were never any consequences. Not when Maya was around."

He paused, then looked over at her a little sheepishly.

"Sorry. Is this weird? Me talking about this?"

"Not at all," she managed to lie, "I guess I can understand the attraction. But...if you really want my advice?"

He nodded back at her without a second's thought. She continued.

"I can't offer anything specific. But all I'll say is that, speaking as someone with plenty of bad relationships in her past to draw experience from, what you're describing doesn't sound like a very healthy way to live."

With that, she stood up and walked off in the direction of her own cabin.

Leaving Jirel with plenty to think about.

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

The view ahead was a beautiful one, there was no doubt about that.

But as much as Sunek wanted to be able to appreciate the view, all he could feel as he stared out of the Bounty's cockpit window was a growing sense of trepidation. They had been inside the Badlands for several hours by that point, and the view ahead hadn't changed all that much. And that was starting to get to him.

For the scientists of the galaxy, the Badlands were a fascinating mixture of fiery plasma storms and gravitational anomalies, still not fully explained by current astronomical theories.

For the captain of a freighter or a transport, they were a certified nuisance. A turbulent expanse of navigational headaches nearly three hundred light years across, lying pretty much right on the most direct path between Federation and Cardassian space.

For the average mercenary, they were manna from heaven. A vast region of space where detailed sensor readings were impaired, communication was patchy and effective monitoring by any form of law enforcement, especially on the post-war Cardassian side, had become virtually impossible.

But for Sunek, the Badlands were just becoming irritating. He had been trying to make sense of them ever since the Bounty had first penetrated the edge of the storm front, but he was still no nearer figuring out the best way of dealing with the unpredictable maelstrom.

The entire ship continued to gently buck and weave around from the effects of the gravitational eddies all around them. The sensor readouts he was using as a guide as he eased the ship through the storms were patchy at best. And the view ahead, of the swirling, crackling plasma storms themselves, was starting to make him a little nauseous.

It was like flying through soup. A turbulent, chaotic, vomit-inducing soup.

"FYI," he called back to the rest of the cockpit, "This sucks."

The entire ship rocked again as Sunek quickly tapped his controls to veer around the worst of the turbulence, indirectly underlining his point.

Behind him, in the centre chair, Jirel itched his spots as he kept his own attention on the view. To his side, Maya leaned against his chair, looking significantly more serene despite the ever-bucking ride the ship was on.

The rest of the crew were at their usual positions. Klath grimly kept his focus on his tactical readouts, looking for any sign of trouble in the patchy readings. Denella monitored the Bounty's essential systems as it flew on into the storm, while Natasha offered a second set of eyes on the sensor readings, trying to get first sight of their destination.

"Just keep her steady," Jirel muttered back to his tetchy pilot, "The Bounty was built for this sort of thing. This ship loves the Badlands."

"Yeah, well, this ship's pilot doesn't," the Vulcan grouched.

It was true that the Bounty was more suited than most to navigate this sort of expanse. The Maquis themselves had utilised the Ju'Day-type raider as one of their preferred vessels during their years of operation. But that fact didn't really settle Sunek's concerns. And he couldn't help but feel a slight chill passing down his spine as he stared out at the storms ahead of them.

He glanced back down at his garbled sensor readings and tutted in frustration. "Ugh," he grimaced, "This really sucks. According to Maya's coordinates, we should be right on top of this asteroid by now, but—Holy crap!"

He frantically tapped at the controls, just as a major gravitational eddy bucked the nose of the ship vertically upwards. The rest of the crew braced themselves as the inertial dampeners struggled to keep up.

Eventually, Sunek got the ship level again, and steadied his frayed nerves with a quick Vulcan breathing exercise from his youth. Just as he was about to ask what had caused that sudden burst of turbulence, he caught himself as the crackling clouds in front of them parted, and the unmistakable sight of an asteroid was revealed ahead of them.

"Um," he announced, "We're here."

Jirel turned to Natasha as Sunek delicately brought the Bounty into orbit. "Anything down there?"

"It's hard to scan through the plasma interference," she sighed, "But...I think I've got a structure. Northern hemisphere, near the pole."

"That's the old habitation section for the mining operation," Maya nodded, "The whole northern polar region was covered in roдинium deposits."

"I'm not scanning any roдинium," Natasha offered.

"Then they did a good job mining it," Maya pointed out.

Jirel did his best to ignore the discussion between two people he still would prefer to not be talking to each other, and focused on the task at hand. "Lifesigns?"

Natasha looked back down at her readings, tapped the controls, then sighed again. "Looks to be deserted," she reported back, "But again, I'm never going to be entirely sure given the interference."

"I am not detecting any vessels within range," Klath added, "Although, like the doctor, my range is somewhat...limited. It is possible there may be bandits or looters in the area."

"Did I mention how much I love this plan?" Sunek chimed in from the front of the cockpit.

Jirel cast a sideways glance at Maya, who offered a slight shrug in return, then he stood from his seat and turned to the cockpit exit. "Well, I guess we didn't come all this way to sit and stare at the thing. Maya, Denella, let's go hack a database."

As the three members of the impromptu away team made their way to the rear steps of the cockpit, Klath stood and grabbed his bat'leth from where it was hanging on the wall behind him.

"Hey," Jirel motioned to the Klingon, "I'm sure we don't need—"

"I believe it would be wiser for me to join you down there."

"You don't trust me?" Maya tutted from Jirel's side.

"I do not trust the interference," Klath replied diplomatically, "There is still a possibility that whatever has been left behind down there is being looted."

Jirel looked back at the steely gaze of his friend and mustered an understanding nod. "Fine. If you think we need backup, who am I to argue?"

With that, they continued their journey down the steps, leaving Natasha and Sunek to keep an eye on the Bounty.

As he descended the steps at the back of the group, Klath shook his head and muttered.

"You always need backup."

* * * * *

It didn't take long for Jirel to silently appreciate bringing along his backup.

The dank interior of the abandoned offices was barely illuminated by the two beams of light that shone out from the torches that he and Denella carried. It didn't make for a welcoming scene.

The Trill walked at the front of the quartet, alongside Maya, who was navigating them through to their final destination. Denella and Klath followed close behind, working together to scan for danger with the Orion's torch and the Klingon's bulky old tricorder from the Bounty's limited stash.

Not that there seemed to be any danger to scan. The entire complex was eerily quiet.

The operational headquarters of what purported to be the base for Synergy Mining Enterprises on the asteroid were somewhat modest, consisting of little more than a pair of squat modular prefab buildings.

One of them contained the limited habitation area for the miners themselves, rudimentary barracks that were little more than prison accommodation. Which made sense, given how Maya had described the operation that was run here.

The other housed the slightly more comfortable offices and accommodation for the staff of the company, overseeing operations out on the asteroid itself, which would have been conducted the old-fashioned way. Back-breaking labour in heavy EVA suits for hours at a time. Until every last drop of rodimium had been extracted from the rocks.

The two were connected via a pressurised covered walkway, which was where the four of them had beamed into. From there, they had made their way into the larger office prefab. The scant torchlight illuminated the unfriendly interior of the place. Short grey corridors that led to either sleeping racks, common areas, a cafeteria, or the main office itself. Which was where they were heading.

"This is the place," Maya nodded as they reached the end of the corridor.

She gestured to a pair of stout dark grey doors ahead of them, which remained definitely closed, powered down like the rest of the base. With a slight tut, Denella slid over to an access panel next to the door, popped the end of the torch into her mouth to free up her hands, and got to work.

As she worked, Jirel shone his torch back down the corridor, and Klath remained tense.

"Anything?" he asked the Klingon.

Klath looked down at the tricorder and growled in frustration. "The interference is significant down here as well. I am not detecting anything. But that does not mean we are alone."

"You deliberately made that sound more scary than it had to be, didn't you?" Jirel replied witheringly.

Klath didn't respond, and merely kept his attention back down the dimly-lit corridor, using his own innate Klingon senses to make up for the tricorder's failings.

"It's a wonder anyone got any mining done down here," Denella observed as she pulled a length of wiring out of the access panel, "Having to check over their shoulders all the time."

"While the mine was operational, there was a hell of a lot more security," Maya explained, "Orbital sentries, guards, armed shuttles. To keep the whole place secure from anyone trying to get in. Or get out, for that matter."

"Well," the Orion replied with a hint of satisfaction, "The good news is that this place is a whole lot less secure than it used to be."

Just as she said that, the doors to the office opened with a shudder, and Denella took her torch back out of her mouth and shone it inside.

"Good work," Jirel smiled, as they cautiously stepped inside.

"We should be able to access the database from any of these terminals over here," Maya gestured to the far side of the room.

She and Denella paced over and started to work, as Jirel and Klath kept watch at the door.

The office had been mostly cleaned out before the operation had left for good. Most of the desks and workstations had been dismantled, or had their interfaces removed. All furnishings or signs of comfort had been packed up and shipped off, leaving behind a desolate look. But some of the bulkier or older work areas remained, albeit powered down. And that was where the two women headed.

Denella withdrew a small power pack from the pocket of her overalls and plugged it into the station, giving the computer a shot of power for the first time in weeks. "Ok," she nodded, "We're online."

As she went to work, Jirel felt his spots begin to itch as he kept his torch beam aimed at the doorway. He licked his lips and called back. "How long is this gonna take?"

"Not getting scared, are we?" Maya shot back, as she kept an eye on Denella's frantic work.

"No. Just impatient."

"Tsk. No sense of adventure. Just like old times."

"I like an adventure just fine," the Trill remarked, "I just remember how all of your adventures used to end."

Despite the situation, Jirel quietly cursed himself for lapsing back into banter mode with her so quickly, feeling him starting to fall back into his own ways with her despite still not trusting this new venture of hers.

Mercifully, before their back-and-forth could become any more flirtatious, Denella called out. "Ok, I'm in. Not much to it in the end."

"There's a good engineer," Maya purred a little patronisingly, "Now we need the details of any new operations started over the past month. They'll have moved everything they took from here to another site."

"On it," Denella nodded as she tapped away at the computer, "But...there's a whole other encryption layer on some of this information. Lot of security for a mining operation, isn't there?"

There was an edge to her question, but Maya played it with a straight bat. "When you're breaking as many interstellar rules as this company is, you tend to want to keep things as secret as possible."

Denella couldn't help but accept that this made sense, as she continued to work, virtually snooping around the database of Synergy Mining Enterprises as best she could.

"Ok," she said as she worked, "Getting something here. Security protocols, staff rotas, personnel lists, and a whole bunch of requisition orders for duridium processors."

"No," Maya grimaced, shaking her head at the screen, "This isn't everything. We need exact coordinates, otherwise we're flying blind."

"Fine. Let me see what I can—"

She was stopped by the unmistakable noise of a muffled grunt from Klath. The Orion engineer looked up and peered at her colleague through the darkness, already on edge. She knew what that noise meant.

Jirel knew it as well. Even if the tricorder wasn't helping them, Klath's Klingon senses were not being inhibited by the interference that was all around them.

And in the last few seconds, Klath's senses had told him that it might be wise for him to draw his bat'leth.

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

“You sure you know how to work all that?”

Natasha did her best not to take too much offence from Sunek’s cheeky question, as she looked up from the panel in front of her. “They do teach us a thing or two about these things at Starfleet Academy, you know?”

“Cool,” the Vulcan shot back, “So all of Starfleet’s medical staff are trained in how to fire a spread of torpedoes. It’s a wonder you guys have such a bad rep in so many places, it really is.”

She shook her head patiently at this latest quip and returned her attention to the controls.

Given the Bounty’s precipitous position inside the Badlands, and given Klath’s decision to join the party down on the asteroid, she had elected to move from her usual position in the cockpit to take over the Klingon’s tactical controls. With the potential for some sort of skirmish, it seemed to make sense to have someone keep their finger on the phaser cannons.

“We all get a full round of basic training, regardless of our specialism,” she replied, “Flight control, navigation, tactical, you name it. Never hurts to make sure anyone onboard a starship can save the day if they need to. Friend of mine served on the USS Artemis during the war. They once escaped from a surprise attack from a Cardassian battle wing with the ship’s chief nurse at the helm and the mess officer at tactical.”

Sunek shrugged as he spun around in his pilot’s seat and pointed down at the bank of controls in front of her. “Whatever you say, doc. Just make sure you remember which button fires the phasers and which one arms the auto-destruct.”

She looked up again with a more withering glare, and gestured back out at the dizzying view through the cockpit window. “And how about you keep an eye out for anything I need to shoot at, hmm?”

The Vulcan reluctantly spun back around in his chair and focused on his own controls. In truth, he had just been trying to distract himself from their current situation. He was getting more and more antsy by the minute.

Natasha was feeling exactly the same way. She had already familiarised herself with the weapons controls. But that didn’t stop her from checking her work for the fifth time.

A tense silence descended on the pair of them.

Eventually, the silence became too much for her, even as she embarked on her sixth check of her understanding of the weapons console. There were several nagging questions about their situation, and she took a moment to select the most pressing one.

“Do you believe her?”

Given the context of their situation, she didn’t need to clarify the question any further.

“Seriously,” Sunek replied, keeping his response firmly in his usual conversational wheelhouse, “Are you gonna be like this with all of Jirel’s exes?”

She didn’t dignify his comment with a response, and allowed the silence to return, forcing him into a more serious answer if he wanted to break it. Eventually, he sighed and shrugged his shoulders, keeping his attention focused out of the cockpit window as he talked.

“Fine. Let’s just say that we’ve all got plenty of reasons not to believe her. Jirel more than the rest of us. So I’m pretty sure that there’s more to all this than some husband in distress.”

“Pretty sure?”

The Vulcan shrugged again. “Well, this time’s already been a little different.”

“How so?”

He took a moment to swivel around in his chair and grin back at her from under his shock of tousled hair. “This time she’s paid us up front.”

Natasha considered this point for a moment, then nodded. “So what more could there be to all of this?”

“Knowing Maya,” Sunek replied, “A hell of a lot more latinum. For her, anyway—”

He stopped himself mid-sentence and cocked his ear to the deck in a curious manner, raising an eyebrow to underline his change in focus.

“You feel that?” he asked.

Natasha looked a little confused. The Bounty had been gently bucking and rolling about ever since they had arrived in the Badlands, like an old sailing boat being tossed around in a storm. “Yeah,” she replied with a sliver of sarcasm, “Feels like a plasma storm. I wonder what could be causing that?”

“No,” Sunek hissed, entirely seriously, as he swung back around to his instruments with renewed concern, “I definitely felt it.”

“Felt what?”

“A new wavefront hitting us from somewhere. Everything’s been pretty rhythmic ever since we arrived in orbit. But that was new.”

She had to remind herself that, for everything else she was dealing with when it came to the Bounty’s resident laughing pilot, she was still dealing with a Vulcan. And a Vulcan who could still occasionally use his keen intellect, when it came to noticing the little things.

She instantly started to check her own garbled scans. “You’re thinking...?” she forced herself to ask.

“I’m thinking that something just dropped in. Opposite side to our orbital position, probably trying to use the asteroid as extra cover for their approach. But they sent out a little extra ripple in that soup out there.”

“Who else would be interested in an abandoned mine on an asteroid?”

He didn’t waste any time replying directly to her. As he tapped at the helm controls to bring the Bounty out of orbit, he also jabbed a finger down on his comms link to the others.

“Hey, Jirel!” he called out, “Bandits!”

The response took a second to come back over the static-flecked link. And when it did, it merely deepened the concern in the cockpit.

“We know!”

* * * * *

Jirel snapped his response into the communicator as he fired back over the top of his scant cover with his disruptor pistol.

From somewhere in the gloom, he heard a roar from Klath, followed by the sound of a bat’leth impacting on something heavy. But the weapons fire didn’t die down by much.

They had no idea how many bandits they were dealing with, but it was enough. As soon as Klath had sensed them, they had all looked for cover. But the shooting had started almost immediately.

Jirel fired off another few covering shots and looked around. He was hunkered down behind one of the bulky computer terminals in the office, cut off from the others. He knew Klath was enjoying himself out there somewhere, but he had no idea what had happened to Denella and Maya.

“You wanna maybe beam us up?” he called out into the communicator, “Any time now would be great!”

“On it,” Sunek’s response came through the static.

The lack of any sort of quip or comeback in the Vulcan’s reply underlined the severity of the situation more than anything else could.

With some effort, Jirel affixed his communicator back onto his belt, then began to crawl towards where Denella and Maya had been working. In the darkness, he heard another satisfied bellow from Klath, as he tackled another opponent.

He managed to crawl along behind his cover to the next row of terminals. There, he just about made out two crouched figures in the half-light. And one was clearly injured.

Paying no more attention to his own safety, he fired off a couple more warning shots, then switched to a hunched dash for the final few metres to the figures, hearing a disruptor blast whine just above his back and impact on the wall behind him. As he reached them, he saw Denella’s injury. She winced as she pressed her right hand around an ugly wound on her left arm.

“Crap,” he managed, “How bad?”

“Bad enough that I’d be up for cutting this vacation short,” the Orion replied with a pained grimace on her face.

“They’re gonna beam us up any second.”

“That’ll be nice.”

Jirel turned and fired off another few shots to keep the remaining bandits at bay. Another roar from Klath followed, followed by an agonised scream from one of their attackers.

“At least someone’s enjoying themselves,” Denella added with a pained smile.

Jirel glared over at Maya, who appeared strangely sanguine about their predicament. She gestured down at Denella and shrugged. “She’ll live.”

“She’ll—?” Jirel echoed incredulously, “What the hell have you brought us to? Was this a trap?”

“Absolutely not,” she countered, “I have no idea who these people are. Showing up here, trying to shoot everything. Presumably some passing thieves, looking to strip the place of whatever got left behind. And apparently they’re not interested in sharing.”

“Ugh. This was supposed to be the easy part of the plan! You have completely—!”

He stopped as soon as he saw her left arm straighten and the antique type-1 phaser drop into her hand. In one fluid motion, she brought the tiny weapon to bear on him, and fired.

The line of red energy spat out from the weapon, flying just over his shoulder, and into something behind him, which groaned in pain, then slumped to the floor. Jirel and Denella looked over to see the bandit, of a species they didn't recognise, slumped in a stunned, unconscious pile on the ground, his weapon by his side.

“You know,” Maya smiled smugly at Jirel as he turned back to her, “I'm starting to get tired of saving your life all the time.”

Just as Jirel went to fire off an appropriate comeback, the transporter took effect.

* * * * *

“Glad you could make it!”

Sunek called out just as he pirouetted the Bounty around to evade a blast of disruptor fire from the unidentified ship that had brought the bandits to the asteroid, and manoeuvred the ship out of orbit to try and effect an escape.

A succession of footsteps cascaded up the steps to the cockpit as Jirel, Klath and Maya arrived on the scene. Natasha, having initially been a little shocked by the *mise en scène* that materialised on the transporter pad, especially the growling Klath, mid-bat'leth attack, had taken the injured Denella straight to the Bounty's small medical bay.

“Now,” Sunek continued, as he bucked the ship around again, “If someone wouldn't mind raising the shields, that'd be awesome!”

Klath instantly slotted into his tactical position, as Maya took Denella's engineering station and Jirel slid into the centre seat. “Shields up,” the Klingon reported, “Weapons online.”

“Disabling fire only, ok?” Jirel called back.

Klath paused for a fraction of a second, bitterly recalling the last firefight the Bounty had been involved in during their trip to Kervala Prime, and the way that it had ended with his former lover slaughtering a ship full of Pakleds.

“Ok, swinging her around,” Sunek bellowed, shaking Klath back into the moment, “Give 'em both barrels!”

The whole ship turned to stare down the other vessel, a squat prowler-type design. Twin bursts of fire spat out from the Bounty's wing-mounted phaser cannons and impacted on their adversary's shields, with enough force to cause them to flare with crackling energy, fizzing against the backdrop of the plasma storms.

This show of force seemed to do the trick. Bandits tended to avoid confrontation with anything actually capable of beating them, and so the prowler turned on its axis and limped back to the asteroid itself.

“Take it we're not waiting around to exchange insurance details?” Sunek quipped from the helm.

“Hell no,” Jirel sighed, “Get us out of the Badlands.”

“With pleasure.”

Sunek tapped his controls, as Jirel swung around to where Maya was sitting, standing from his chair with an angry scowl. “Look,” she began, seeing his expression, “I know what you're going to say, but—”

“That was a really dumb plan, you know?” Jirel growled, cutting her off, “And the only thing dumber than the plan is me, for actually agreeing to it!”

“Jirel, please calm down, you're going to strain something. The important thing is we got most of the information we needed—”

“What we've got is an injured engineer, a bunch of fresh battle damage, and we still don't know where this so-called husband of yours is even being held! Why I thought flying blind into the Badlands was a good idea, I'll never know.”

“Still,” Maya persisted, “We got away. Denella will be fine. And you've got to admit, there's never a dull moment when I'm around, is there? Besides, I didn't think there'd be any bandits.”

Jirel's expression darkened a little more as he walked over to the steps, still ranting.

“This is classic you, you know that? You just assume your plans'll come off, and then we end up having to fight for our lives!”

As he descended the steps, Maya sighed and followed him.

“And another thing,” Jirel continued to rant as his voice faded, “You'd better believe you're gonna get our repairs done while Denella's recovering...”

Sunek turned and watched the two squabbling figures disappear into the bowels of the ship, before glancing over at Klath.

“Nice to have her back, isn’t it?” he offered with a dollop of sarcasm.

Klath just growled unhappily.

* * * * *

The argument continued all the way to Jirel’s cabin, as Maya followed him through the door.

“...I’m sure there’s barely any damage,” she continued, “You saw how easily they gave up back there? I doubt they left too many marks. Besides, it’s the Badlands. We were always going to have a few scrapes.”

“This isn’t a few scrapes, Maya,” Jirel fired back, “This is, once again, you recklessly endangering everyone’s lives, and me being too stupid to stop you!”

“I saved your life down there, remember?”

“Yeah, right after you endangered it!”

She stepped closer to him and he held his ground in the middle of the cabin. They both stared into each other’s eyes with renewed passion, even as their tone remained antagonistic.

“You had fun down there, admit it,” she growled.

“Fun? You think I had fun?”

“No. I know you had fun.”

A beat. Jirel suddenly found himself entirely incapable of lying.

“Of course I had fun!” he shot back angrily.

“Good boy,” she smiled back.

In an instant, they were on each other, kissing and pawing at each other’s clothes. Falling back into every aspect of their former life together on the Bounty, a sudden rush of lust being powered by the adrenaline from their narrow escape, and the intensity of their argument.

Jirel forced himself to come up for air and looked back at the woman he had fallen in love with even more times than she had saved his life. The woman that he seemed drawn to with the power of a tractor beam.

“I thought you were married?” he managed.

“I thought you liked an adventure?” she replied.

They smiled, and embraced each other again. Deep down, Jirel knew that he was making another huge mistake. Because it was always a mistake. But he equally found that he didn’t really care.

Besides, with Maya, there were never any consequences.

They fell back onto his bed, still wrapped around each other, as Jirel succumbed entirely to his latest mistake.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

*Kressari Starbase 34, Sector 34092
Stardate 48432.9*

“Huh.”

Jirel watched with no small amount of curiosity as the pompous figure in front of him stepped around the confines of the Bounty’s cockpit, running an oddly superior eye over the consoles and systems of the ship.

The figure paused in front of the pilot’s console at the front of the room, and theatrically ran a wiry finger across the smooth surface of the panel, before lifting the finger up and inspecting it for dust in the light.

“Huh,” he said again, with a non-committal voice.

As the unconvincing piece of theatre in front of him continued, Jirel leaned over to his side where Maya and Klath were standing at the rear of the cockpit. “This guy is the worst one yet,” he muttered to them under his breath.

Klath grunted an unhappy acknowledgement of that fact, but Maya offered him more of a knowing look.

“Trust me,” she whispered back.

Jirel shook his head patiently and turned back to the curious figure on the other side of the room as they continued to assess the quality of his ship.

“Huh,” the tousle-haired figure offered once more as he cast his eye over the tattered fabric of the command chair in the middle of the room.

The worn-down chair had usually been unoccupied since Jirel had found the Bounty. He usually kept himself busy at the helm. But now, with this latest recruitment push for a dedicated pilot in full flow, he was starting to eye it up as his new position.

His own captain’s chair.

Although, he had to remind himself, that was all very much dependent on them finding someone to fill the pilot’s role. A quest that had so far taken them the best part of six months, in between delivery jobs and the occasional dubious scheme of Maya’s.

The search wasn’t helped by the narrow window of requirements that they had. They were in the market for someone who was both qualified enough to fly the Bounty through the endless amount of peril it tended to find itself in, but also desperate enough to accept the meagre and inconsistent level of remuneration that they could guarantee.

Nevertheless, Maya had been certain that she’d found the right candidate during the Bounty’s extended stopover in Kressari space. So much so that she’d invited him onboard to discuss the position further before Jirel and Klath had realised what was going on. And now they had both had a chance to meet this particular candidate, neither of them could exactly bring themselves to share her level of optimism.

“Well,” the stranger said as he turned back to the trio of observers, “Firstly, you need to understand that I’m used to working with significantly more...advanced ships than this. I mean, this is gonna be a major step down for me.”

Jirel shot a glance at Maya, rolling his eyes for good measure, before he turned back to the newcomer. “Really? How much of a step down, exactly?”

The somewhat pompous individual didn’t seem to pick up on the trace of sarcasm in his question. Or at least, if he did, he didn’t allow it to impact his performance.

“If you must know, I’ve just finished some freelance work for Starfleet Intelligence. Testing out this new fighter shuttle of theirs.”

He was entirely unflustered by the blank stares this particular claim garnered from his audience. If anything, it spurred him on to double down on the lie.

“Yeah, see, they recruited me unofficially, from the Maquis. After one of their agents saw me outrun a whole fleet of Cardassian raptors in an old Bajoran transport ship in the Free Haven system. I’m sure they wanted to offer me something permanent. But there were too many rules for a guy like me, you know? Not a fan of that. I like to live by my own rules.”

“So,” Jirel cut in, sarcasm still very much heightened, “Do you...like rules, or not? That’s not actually clear.”

If the candidate was thrown by this, he still didn’t let it show. Instead, he set off on another lap of the cockpit.

“Either way...I guess I could lower myself to this sort of job. For now. But I’d be doing you a favour, you understand.”

“Clearly,” the Trill sighed, folding his arms across his chest and giving Maya another glare.

“So, given the sacrifice I’d be making, I guess I could settle for...first officer—?”

“Ok,” Jirel sighed, ending his participation in the theatre and turning to Maya, “This is your guy? All the people we’ve interviewed, and this is your guy?”

“What?” she replied defensively, “He’s perfect. Plus, he’s desperate. Which makes him cheap.”

“Hey!” the newcomer snapped, “I’m not desperate! I just told you, I’m a—!”

“You’re a liar, dear. But that’s fine. It takes one to know one.”

This seemed to shut the newcomer up for the moment. His carefully hewn resume of untruths seemingly not holding up to scrutiny quite as much as he thought it would.

Jirel sighed and turned back to the scruffy man in front of them. “Ok, I’m sorry. Mr...?”

“Sunek.”

“Mr Sunek—”

“No, just Sunek.”

“I appreciate you putting in so much...effort. But we’re looking for, y’know, an actual pilot.”

At this, Sunek’s face twisted back into a grin. A sight that Jirel found a tad disconcerting to see on the face of a Vulcan, to go along with all the other disconcerting things about the man he had noted since he had arrived for the interview. “Hey,” the laughing Vulcan replied, “I might have embellished some aspects of what I’ve been saying to you. But I am totally, one hundred gajillion percent, one hell of a pilot.”

Jirel let out an audible scoff. Klath folded his arms and shook his head. Maya just smiled.

“Ok,” she shrugged, “Prove it.”

* * * * *

In the Bivari system, on the fringes of Sector 34092, something very special was happening.

A new planet was being born.

Currently, the entirely uninhabited star system contained five planets, two small rocky inner planets and three outer gas giants. But those five, and the g-type star they orbited, were preparing to welcome a new addition to their family.

Granted, the new arrival was still roughly fifty thousand years away from fully forming. But in planetary terms, that was practically the blink of an eye.

The sixth planet of the Bivari system had already made one attempt to come into existence, during the formation of the system itself. But the tidal forces imparted by the star and the rapidly-forming outer gas planets meant that the planetary material had merely formed into a stable asteroid belt, set between the second and third planets.

And there it had remained, for several millions of years. Until half a million years ago, when a large comet had passed through the system on a tangential course to the main orbital plane, causing a subtle gravitational effect that was enough to disturb the previous delicate stability of the belt.

The transit of the comet and the subsequent stages of coalescing material in its wake had been another slow process. But the cosmic ballet involved in this rare galactic event had been so captivating that a passing member of the Q Continuum had spent a full 15,000 years perched on top of an asteroid watching the early stages play out. Though even he and his god-like command of the universe had been at a loss to fully describe the majesty of the sight when he had returned to the continuum and his wife had asked him where the hell he’d been all this time.

Slowly but surely, the pieces of rock, ice and dust had coalesced together. And several millions of years behind schedule, the Bivari system was finally getting a sixth planet.

From a distance, the concentrated field of coalescing rocks in orbit between the second and third planets, that had been tentatively christened Bivari II-a by Federation scientists in order not to upset the current naming convention, seemed tranquil. But up close, the formation process was significantly more violent. An unpredictable cavalcade of shifting gravity eddies and tumbling rocks.

Jirel gripped onto the tattered armrest of the Bounty’s command chair for dear life as the latest dirty grey rock loomed large through the cockpit window. Just as it looked like they were about to collide with it, Sunek jerked the pilot’s controls with expert precision and banked the ship left, threading the needle between the rock in their path and a second slab of material that was hurtling towards the first.

As he continued his death-defying demonstration, the Vulcan continued to ramble on and on to deliver, from what Jirel could discern despite his attention being focused on the terror of their flight, a critique of a cocktail he’d been drinking the night before.

“...I think the bartender called it a Kressari Heatwave? Dumb name if you ask me, but man, those things pack a punch...”

The Bounty pirouetted around to avoid another chunk of rock, before the nose shot upwards and to the right, missing a frozen ball of methane

by inches.

“...Cos it’s not just the booze. Oh no. These things are loaded with Kressari chilli pods. And, y’know, I can handle a bit of spice as well as the next Vulcan, but even I was starting to sweat after four of these things. If I could sweat, I mean...”

He threw the engines into reverse to avoid a particularly jagged rock that came tumbling across in front of them, then threw the throttle back up to one quarter impulse to pass through another vanishing gap he pointed the ship towards. Jirel fought against the urge to close his eyes. Going through this blind seemed worse somehow.

“...Anyway, point being, I was super hungover this morning, and I’m still not totally recovered. So this might be a bit of a rough ride from time to time—Ooh, this is gonna be a close one!...”

The Bounty skimmed close enough to the surface of another asteroid fragment to kick up a cloud of dust with its thruster exhaust. Jirel’s fingers glowed white where they were squeezing the chair’s armrest.

“...Ok, let’s go for a big finish here, folks!”

Sunek pushed the ship into a right hand turn around a vast ball of solid ice, passing through the wispy trail of vapour being expelled from its surface, before slamming the ship up to full impulse and completing a quickfire slingshot that carried them up and away from the chaotic minefield of rock and debris entirely and back into the relative safety of empty space.

Satisfied that his demonstration was complete, Sunek turned back to his audience to bask in their expected adulation. Jirel was still gripping onto his chair for dear life. Behind the engineering console, Maya looked a little queasy. Even Klath looked paler than usual at his weapons station.

“So,” the Vulcan grinned, “How about I shoot us back to the starbase, and we celebrate with a round of Kressari Heatwaves?”

Jirel slowly extracted his fingernails from the fabric of the armrests and licked his lips, realising how dry his mouth was all of a sudden.

Behind him, Maya recovered a little faster. “Do I know how to pick ‘em, or what?” she offered with a hint of satisfaction.

It was all that Jirel could do to slowly nod back, in response to both Maya and Sunek’s questions.

She could certainly pick them, And he could definitely do with a drink.

Part 3B

Part Three (Cont'd)

“Why the hell do we keep doing this?”

Jirel asked the question to himself as much as the other occupant of his cabin as he lay in bed and stared up at the dull metal of the ceiling.

In the small bathroom area to one side, the water stopped running in the sink and Maya strode back out, somehow back to her elegant best after a quick sonic shower, despite the fact that she was wearing the same clothes she had on yesterday.

“Same reason we do anything,” she shrugged at the Trill as she sat down on the corner of the bed and reached for her shoes, “Because it’s fun.”

Jirel sighed and sat up, shaking his head and gesturing to the two of them. “But, I mean, this absolutely doesn’t work. Right?”

“As a relationship? Good god, no. As a bit of fun? It works more than well enough. And that’s why we keep doing it.”

She finished pulling on her shoes and stood back up, as Jirel shook his head at her. “Is that how this husband of yours’ll see it? You know, the guy we’re supposed to be on a mission to rescue?”

She glided over to a small mirror on the wall and checked her hair, not seeming to care too much about his comment. “Toren will have about as much of a problem with this as I have about him and that dabo girl on Tavis XII. It’s the 24th century, Jirel. Live a little.”

Jirel sighed again as he stared at her from the bed. He couldn’t help but ruefully think how he’d planned everything to be straightforward this time. Just to meet her on Golos III, pay off the rest of his debt and leave it at that.

And somehow, here he was again. On a risky venture into the unknown at the behest of Maya Ortega, and now falling back into bed with her.

“So, what,” he replied, crossing his arms in front of him, “I’m your bit on the side?”

“Don’t go thinking too highly of yourself,” she offered back, as she adjusted her hair, “You’re one of my bits on the side.”

Jirel’s ego sustained another minor blow with that, as she finished attending to her hair and turned back to him, walking over to where he lay on the bed with a twinkle in her eye.

“Alright,” she continued, a little more agreeably, “You really want to know why we keep doing this?”

She sat down next to him on the bed and ran a slender finger down the spots on the right side of his chest. He suppressed a reaction to the tingle that simple gesture sent through his body and mustered a nod back at her.

“Because we both need the excitement,” she whispered.

“Hey,” Jirel managed to reply, “Things are still plenty exciting around here. Ask the others. Just last week we were in a nebula, fighting a bunch of Pakleds who were—”

“But it’s not quite the same, is it?” she cut in with a more insistent whisper, “There’s something missing. The excitement that we had together, living in the grey areas of the galaxy. The sort of excitement you wanted ever since you decided you were going to make a life for yourself out here.”

“Is that right?”

“Of course. It was always so obvious. When you first started out, you couldn’t get into Starfleet, you couldn’t impress your father, but you were damn sure you were going to have the sorts of adventures that he’d told you about.”

He felt a sudden rush of irritation inside. Partly from the presumptuous way she was judging his motivations, and partly because he worried she was judging them correctly.

“And when the two of us were together, life was just one big adventure, wasn’t it? And that’s why we keep doing this.”

Jirel went to counter what the woman who he had stupidly and completely fallen for all over again was saying, just as his cabin’s door buzzer rang out. Before he realised what was happening, Maya had stood up from his bed, idly smoothed down a crease in her clothes, and called out a response.

“Come in!”

“Hey,” Jirel began, “Wait a—!”

The door opened and Natasha stepped in, to be confronted by the entirely unexpected sight of a smiling Maya standing over a significantly more sheepish Jirel, who frantically pulled the bed sheet up to his neck in a curious and futile attempt to rescue some dignity.

“Oh,” she said, after an awkward pause.

“Um,” the Trill managed, “I can explain—”

“Don’t think you need to draw her a picture, Jirel,” Maya scoffed, “Based on the vibes I’ve been getting from you two, it’s pretty obvious that she’s seen it all before.”

Now it was Natasha’s turn to join Jirel in a moment of awkward squirming, as Maya once again seemed to revel in the uncomfortable situation she was cultivating.

“Well,” Natasha managed after a moment, “I’m starting to see why it’s so hard to find someone who speaks highly of you around here.”

Maya’s lips pursed slightly, but she maintained her smile, appreciating the opportunity for a bit of sparring that was presenting itself. “Huh. Feisty, I see. Just a shame that Jirel seems to be getting more desperate for his live-in lovers these days—”

“Ok,” Natasha fired back, heckles now very much raised, “That’s not what’s happening here, for a start. And, besides—”

“Um, ladies?” Jirel managed to cut in from the bed, “Is there any chance we could save this entire conversation until I’m profoundly less naked?”

“Oh, get over yourself, darling,” Maya sighed dryly, keeping her eyes on Natasha.

Natasha, for her part, forced herself to keep her own focus on her actual reason for turning up at Jirel’s cabin in the middle of such an uncomfortable scene in the first place.

“Jirel,” she began, as the Trill continued to squirm, “We’ve left the Badlands. Denella’s arm has recovered. And everyone wants to know what the hell we’re doing next.”

Jirel was forced to concede to himself that he didn’t really have a definitive answer for that question right now. His head was still swimming with too many conflicting thoughts. But fortunately for him, Maya jumped in with a response.

“Yes, that’s a good point,” she nodded, “I should fix myself something to eat, and then we should talk. All of us.”

With that, she turned towards the door, but momentarily stopped to glance at Natasha with a twinkle in her eye as she passed.

“He’s all yours, dear.”

Natasha mustered her best withering eye roll in response to this, as the unperturbed Maya slinked out of the cabin entirely. As the door closed behind her, Natasha turned her withering gaze to the sheepish Trill under the bed sheet.

“Ok, look,” he managed, “I’m sorry. This was all kinda tacky—”

“Jirel, I really don’t care who you’re screwing in here, ok?”

It wasn’t the complete truth, and she was a little surprised to find how much it had affected her to walk in on such a scene. But she also knew that she had been very clear that their latest night together meant as little as the first one had back when she had first been rescued by the Bounty’s crew. Which meant that she couldn’t possibly have any issues of that nature with whatever that might be happening between Jirel and Maya. She must simply be concerned for the safety of their mission and the crew.

She was sure that was it.

“Just…please, be careful?” she concluded, with a particularly knowing look.

Jirel nodded back, catching the wider implication of her words.

“I could turn us around,” he pointed out, to himself as much as to her, “Drop her off at the nearest port and tell her she and her husband are on their own from here.”

“Yes, you could. But you won’t.”

Jirel offered a silent moment of agreement to this. Natasha considered what the others had said earlier about why the Trill wouldn’t just leave Maya to affect a rescue by herself. Because he was too good of a person. And too much of an idiot.

“Well,” she sighed, “We’ll be waiting for your orders whenever they’re ready. Captain.”

She mustered a half smile at the man in front of her, who currently couldn’t have looked less like a captain if he had tried as he sat awkwardly in bed, then turned and exited.

Jirel finally found a moment to exhale, as he slumped back down onto the mattress and stared back up at the ceiling.

Why the hell did he keep doing this?

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

“Not to labour the point, but this feels considerably more suicidal than our usual plans.”

Sunek offered his opinion as Maya continued her impromptu briefing to the assembled Bounty crew in the dining area. Jirel, now mercifully dressed and feeling a little more comfortable, sat with Natasha, Sunek, Denella and Klath as their often unreliable guest outlined what they had.

“I mean,” the Vulcan continued, “Flying into the Badlands is one thing, but this?”

“This,” Maya replied calmly, “Is what the latinum I paid you was for. And what the rest of the latinum will be for. Once we get the final piece of the jigsaw.”

Maya was patiently outlining the details of the information she and Denella had been able to extract from the data link to the Synergy Mining Enterprises mainframe, just before the bandits had arrived back at the asteroid. And while she was still in the early stages of detailing what they had to work with, the general feeling around the table could be summed up by Sunek’s initial comment.

“So we didn’t get the exact location of the new operation,” Jirel sighed, “But what exactly do we know?”

“Enough to give me some confidence that we can pull this off,” Maya responded, “The information we got indicates that the new mining site is somewhere in Sector 374, which is not too far from here. And we’ve also got details of their security arrangements.”

She slid a large old-school padd into the centre of the table and tapped the screen, using it as an impromptu display screen to add some detail to her words.

The screen itself showed a nondescript planetoid, surrounded by various arrows and indicators.

“It’s a particularly mineral-rich planet, mainly duridium ore. Mining rights for which were...dubiously acquired by Synergy Mining Enterprises in the last quarter.”

“How dubious?” Denella asked.

“Dubious enough that the previous owner of the mining rights hasn’t been seen since the last quarter.”

Jirel didn’t look around, but he definitely felt at least a couple of stern glares being fired off in his direction from around the table.

“It’s a...cutthroat business,” Maya continued with a slight smile, “And it’s very much in keeping with the boss’s mantra at Synergy. High value, high risk. Given how much duridium is supposed to be down there, the whole thing will be as secretive as possible.”

“And very well-guarded,” Klath grunted, pointing to the annotations and indicators on the screen of the padd.

“Yep,” Sunek added, “Looks like this place is done up like a Romulan penal colony on red alert.”

“Yes,” Maya nodded, “Well, Synergy likes to protect their assets. And it looks like a similar setup to their usual operations. Automated sentries in orbit armed with phaser strips and micro-torpedoes, and three security protocols on the surface. An interference grid to mask sensors and tricorder scans, a dampening field around the entire mining site and a transport inhibition network around the main buildings. To stop anyone from getting in. Or getting out.”

“Ok, cool,” Sunek chimed in sarcastically, “So I guess we just break out those sentry-destroying, shield-collapsing, dampening field-penetrating missiles we’ve got packed away in storage. Knew they’d come in handy one day.”

Jirel kept his focus on Maya, but he nodded his head in the Vulcan’s direction. “He’s got a point.”

“First time for everything,” Maya retorted laconically, “And besides, he doesn’t. We’re several steps ahead of them with their defences, thanks to your engineer’s fast fingers. We’ve got the exact frequency of the dampening field and enough information about the interference pattern to cut through it. Should be able to beam down close to the inhibited area.”

“And the sentries?” Natasha asked.

Maya smiled in satisfaction and tapped a few more commands into the padd. The screen changed to show a list of transit times. “We’ve got a list of protocols and handshakes for all the regular transports they’re using to move the duridium away for processing. We can use those to disguise the Bounty from the sentries. They’ll just register us as one of their transports.”

“Still a hell of a risky plan,” Jirel muttered, stroking his chin, “You can get us through most of those defences, but we’ll still be cut off from the ship for as long as we’re inside the transport inhibitors. No way of beaming through that.”

“That is an inconvenience,” Maya conceded, “But it can’t be helped. And, if it makes you feel any better, I’m willing to go down and find Toren myself.”

“By yourself?”

“If I have to,” she shrugged, “The one good thing about this little scheme is that Synergy’s mines tend not to be overstaffed when it comes to guards down on the ground. The boss prefers to rely on all of those supposedly flawless automated systems instead.”

“Why?” Denella asked.

“Because he doesn’t have to pay them.”

Jirel sighed and looked around the table at the others, all of whom still weren’t entirely won over by their strategy. “Seems like a plan?” he managed.

“There is still one issue,” Maya continued, “We...still don’t know exactly where the planet is inside Sector 374. We weren’t able to get that far before the bandits found us. And it would take months to comb the entire sector for the right planet with the Bounty’s sensors.”

“I suppose,” Klath grunted, “You have a plan to secure this information?”

Her mouth curled into yet another smug smile, as she nodded back across the table at the unhappy Klingon.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she replied with her usual knowing tone, “But to get it, we’re going to have to...go rogue.”

* * * * *

Adjacent to the area of space designated Sector 374, the area of space designated Sector 373 was something of a disappointment.

While Sector 374 was a relatively bustling sector of the galaxy, boasting dozens of star systems, indigenous species, colony worlds and interstellar phenomenon, its neighbour was a poor relation in comparison.

The only native intelligent life that had ever existed inside the arbitrary confines of Sector 373 had existed several hundred years ago, and had limited themselves to the system designated 373-Beta by Federation scientists. Humanoid life had thrived on the second planet of the system, and had established themselves on the habitable third planet in great numbers as well.

But the relationship between the two worlds had turned sour and descended into war. And although both worlds had developed warp drive as part of an interplanetary arms race, they had merely used their first rudimentary warp-capable vessels to launch surprise bombing raids on each other, wiping out both civilisations in mutual armageddon.

Perhaps if there had been other intelligent warp-capable life in the area, they may have made contact before both sides had met their tragic end. But unfortunately for the residents of 373-Beta II and 373-Beta III, they had evolved in Sector 373.

Right now, the most interesting aspect of Sector 373 was the presence of rogue planet P373-Kappa, as designated by a Federation science vessel in 2358 during an otherwise deeply unremarkable mapping survey of the sector. According to sensor scans, this frozen drifting ice world, roughly twice the size of Earth, contained the most incredible paleontological phenomenon in the galaxy.

Millions of years ago, P373-Kappa had been a lush ocean planet, teeming with underwater life. Until its star had gone nova and expelled its orbiting bodies out into space. Without the warmth of the star, P373-Kappa had frozen solid, killing and trapping every life form in a permanent state of suspension under several kilometres of ice.

A second survey of P373-Kappa in 2361 had concluded that there was no viable way to penetrate the ice right now without disturbing the specimens inside. But, in a few hundred years, it was scheduled to transit a new star system and likely be captured in the gravity well. Scientists believed that the new star would thaw the entire planet, freeing the preserved creatures for examination.

Alas, for Sector 373, the cruel addendum was that the new star system P373-Kappa would end up a part of was actually inside the boundaries of Sector 374, meaning that the most interesting thing it had to offer was only going to get truly fascinating once it left Sector 373 altogether.

Still, a sector as boring as this one did have one thing going for it. It served as a perfect rendezvous point for any ship that wanted to stay off-grid.

The Bounty hung in temporary orbit of rogue planet P373-Kappa, its motley crew not paying any attention at all to the goldmine of paleontological treasures beneath them. Their focus was entirely elsewhere.

“I am detecting no other vessels,” Klath grunted from his tactical station, “Not even on long-range scans.”

“Me neither,” Natasha chimed in from the other side of the cockpit, checking her own readings.

Nominally, she was aware that her improvised sensor station was duplicating one of the tasks of Klath’s own console. But given the circumstances, everyone was eager to have as many eyes as possible on the situation.

They had travelled to P373-Kappa on Maya’s latest mysterious instructions, in order to meet a contact of hers. One that she claimed would have the missing information about the mining site in Sector 374 that they were missing. In theory, there was nothing overtly dangerous about what they were doing. And yet, with Maya Ortega still onboard, neither Klath nor Natasha objected to the other overlapping their work with the sensors.

Jirel spun around in his chair to glare at Maya, where she leaned against Denella’s large wraparound engineering station. “Your friend seems to be a little unreliable,” he pointed out, “So I guess you have that in common, at least.”

“Cute,” she sighed patiently, “But he’ll be on time. In fact, he’s probably already here.”

“Sure. He’s probably ducked down behind that meteoroid over there.”

“Don’t get sarcastic, Jirel. It doesn’t suit you.”

As Maya spoke, she idled over to Jirel’s command chair, and then jabbed a slender finger down onto the comms panel on his armrest, opening up the Bounty’s comms channel.

“It’s me,” she called out, seemingly to empty space, “So there’s no need to hide.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” a deep voice boomed back, seemingly from empty space.

“What the hell—?” Jirel began to whisper.

An instant later, directly in front of the Bounty where it hung in steady orbit of P373-Kappa, a section of the starscape shimmered, and a small Romulan scout ship decloaked.

“A Romulan,” Klath growled unhappily from behind his console.

“A Romulan ship,” Maya offered by way of correction, before turning and heading for the steps at the rear of the cockpit, “Now, how about we go and say hello, hmm?”

She walked on down the steps without waiting for a reply.

Jirel cast one further look out at the sleek green lines of the small Romulan vessel, roughly one third the size of the Bounty, then stood and followed her. He couldn’t help but feel the eyes of everyone else in the cockpit on him as he walked.

As he passed Klath, he noticed a particularly deep and unhappy glare on the Klingon’s face as he stood from his own console. “I will come with you,” he grunted.

“I’m sure it’s—”

“Yes,” the Klingon continued, cutting Jirel off, “I am sure it is.”

The Trill went to counter further, but ultimately mustered a slight nod and a shrug of acquiescence in his colleague’s intentions.

Inside, his discomfort in their situation was growing by the minute.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

Jirel's discomfort gave way to outright confusion a few moments later.

He and Klath stood in the Bounty's transporter room as Maya worked the controls, and watched as the form of her contact took shape on the transporter pad.

But instead of a Romulan looking back at them at the end of the process, the face of a Nuvian stared back at them. A thick-set cranial ridge ran across his forehead, with long blond hair billowing out behind him. He wore a simple blue tunic top that was stretched taut across his muscular upper body in a way that Jirel was sure must be deeply uncomfortable, a belief that was enough to temper the distinct jealous feeling he got when confronted with someone that well-built.

His nascent jealousy only got worse a moment later, when the strapping Nuvian silently stepped down off the transporter pad, smiled at Maya and kissed her deeply. She gladly reciprocated.

Jirel resisted the need to squirm and look away from this new display of dubious fidelity from Maya during the search for her husband, reminding himself that no matter how tall the Nuvian was and how big his arms were, he was probably really uncomfortable in that top.

As the kiss continued, Jirel even found time to practise ensuring that his face was displaying an appropriately casual expression for when they eventually came back up for air and acknowledged the other people in the room. A look that affirmed he was totally fine with what was happening right now between this adonis of a Nuvian and the woman he definitely hadn't fallen in love with yet again, and moreover showed that he was completely comfortable with his own choice of top.

As the kiss threatened to enter its second minute, Jirel noted that even Klath was starting to look a little uncomfortable. So, in an entirely altruistic act, completely unconnected with the feelings of jealousy he may or may not have been having towards the brawny Nuvian, he mustered up a brief but vocal cough.

The sound echoed around the confines of the transporter room with enough volume to break up the extended public display of affection.

Maya reluctantly uncoiled herself from the Nuvian and took a step back, keeping a lustful smile on her face as she did so. "I've missed that," she purred.

"And I've missed you," the Nuvian responded with an equally broad smile, "I can still remember that night in the healing pools of Klavon V, when we slipped away from the other bathers, slipped out of our costumes, and—"

"Hey there," Jirel jumped in, stepping forwards as confidently as he could and extending a hand out towards the strapping stranger, "I'm Jirel. We haven't met."

The Nuvian gave him a brief, dismissive glance, not bothering to accept the handshake.

"No. We haven't."

Jirel slowly retracted his hand, feeling a familiar desire to have the Bounty's deck plates swallow him up all of a sudden.

"You are not a Romulan," Klath grunted, taking the heat off his friend for a moment.

"Very perceptive, Klingon," the Nuvian scoffed, "But just because I don't have the ears doesn't mean I can't appreciate their ships. That cloak, in particular, has got me out of plenty of scrapes."

"And into even more, I seem to recall," Maya added.

The Nuvian shrugged his broad shoulders and produced a small data chip from the pocket of his equally tight trousers. "Perhaps. But it also helped me get this."

"The location of the new operation?" Maya asked, reaching out to take the chip.

At the last second, the Nuvian pulled his hand away with a flourish, shaking his head at her with a knowing look.

"Nuh huh. Payment first. Then you get your information. I had to take a hell of a detour to get here, you know? Very inconvenient."

"It's all here," she replied casually, holding out a padd in her other hand, "Just check the amount and confirm the transfer—"

"Heh. The last time I did that, you cancelled the transfer five minutes after I left."

Jirel glanced at Maya, who maintained a superficially superior look. But the Trill could see the tiniest of flinches in her eyes.

"Oh," she replied, "Did I? Butterfingers."

"Well," the Nuvian continued, "Just to make sure there are no more...unfortunate mistakes, I'd prefer cash this time. And I know you'll have it with you."

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because,” the brawny stranger replied, holding up the data chip to emphasise his point, “You really need this information.”

“Maya,” Jirel sighed, “Just give him the damn latinum.”

Maya rolled her eyes and reluctantly reached for a small purse on her belt, handing it and the jangling contents inside to the Nuvian. He took a second to check inside, indicating that even now he was keenly aware that Maya Ortega was capable of an extra layer of deception when she had to, then eventually handed the data chip over to her.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” the Nuvian grinned, “As always.”

Jirel tried not to allow his entirely comfortable expression shift from his face as the Nuvian cast a final eye over Maya, and she gladly returned the favour.

Just as both parties began a second pass of each other, Sunek’s voice filled the air over the comms link. Jirel didn’t think he’d ever been happier to hear the voice of the often-irritating Vulcan.

“Um, guys. I don’t wanna alarm anyone, but we’ve got a blip on sensors the size of a Borg Sphere, heading right for us.”

“A trap!” Klath snapped, his entire body tensing up.

To the Klingon’s side, Jirel shot a particularly stern look at Maya. She merely raised an eyebrow at the Nuvian.

“Not exactly. They’ll be after me,” he replied.

With that, he took a step towards Maya and kissed her again before hopping back up onto the transporter pad. She smiled and stepped over to the controls.

“I’ll call you,” she smiled.

“I’m sure you will,” he replied, “And good luck getting away. You’ll need it.”

“I thought you said they were after you?” Jirel jumped in urgently.

“They are,” the Nuvian offered, “But I’m the one with the cloak.”

Before Jirel could offer a further response, the transporter effect kicked in and the Nuvian disappeared. As soon as he was gone, Klath snapped into business mode.

“We should prepare for battle.”

“Feels like that’s happening a lot all of a sudden,” Jirel sighed, as he nodded back.

As the three of them made for the door, Jirel’s ego couldn’t help but glance across at Maya in a way that she clearly picked up on.

“Don’t be like that, Jirel,” she tutted, “Jealousy is such a bad look on you.”

His previously entirely comfortable demeanour that he had been carefully preserving ever since the woman he had accidentally fallen in love with yet again had started to passionately embrace a muscular Nuvian in a clearly uncomfortable top began to sag slightly. Despite his better judgement from years of experience, he couldn’t help but retort.

“Ok, firstly, let’s focus on not dying out here, maybe? Second, I’m not jealous. And thirdly, why should I be? What did that guy have that I haven’t got?”

As they walked through the door and into the Bounty’s main corridor, she cast an amused glance back at him.

“Twelve fingers. On each hand.”

Jirel found that he didn’t really have a response to that.

To his side, Klath looked over and offered a sympathetic shrug.

* * * * *

By the time they reached the cockpit, there was no trace of the Nuvian, or the Romulan ship he had acquired. But there was definitely a trace on whoever had been after him.

Klath wasted no time in taking his position at the weapons controls, while Jirel felt Maya shadowing him all the way over to the centre seat.

“Who are they?” Jirel asked as he slipped into his chair.

“Not sure yet,” Natasha admitted from behind her console, “But—”

Before she got any further, a booming voice sounded out over the Bounty's comms link.

"This is the Nuvian Security Barge Ressik-Vol. You are to be detained for your recent contact with the vessel of a known Nuvian criminal, wanted for a number of separate offences. Maintain your position and prepare to be boarded."

To Jirel's side, Natasha sheepishly completed her report with a little more certainty.

"...It's the Nuvian Security Barge Ressik-Vol."

Jirel didn't take any amusement from her comment, and gritted his teeth with frustration at the latest complication in their mission. "We really don't have time for this," he sighed, turning to Klath, "What are we looking at?"

The Klingon's scowl deepened as he looked over the readings in front of him. "It is a significantly larger vessel. I am reading multiple disruptor-type weapons, fore and aft. It will be a...challenging battle."

Klath's words were tinged with his usual level of anticipation for an upcoming battle, regardless of how challenging it might be. But Jirel wasn't in the mood to let him indulge himself.

"Too challenging for us right now," the Trill sighed, suddenly realising how tired he felt, "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Always happy to do that," Sunek piped up.

The Vulcan moved the Bounty out of orbit of P373-Kappa with a swift tap of his controls, even as Denella began to state the obvious from the rear of the cockpit.

"I'm going to assume that the Ressik-Vol also has us at a disadvantage, speed-wise," the Orion engineer pointed out.

"I'm sure they do," Jirel sighed, "Sunek, any chance we can lose them?"

The Bounty's pilot assessed the situation. They were in the middle of an entirely unremarkable sector of space, nowhere near any planetary system or stellar phenomenon, with only a lumbering ice-covered rogue planet for company.

It took him 4.23 seconds to come up with his plan.

"Hey," he grinned as he tapped his controls again, "I can do anything."

"The Nuvian vessel is coming within weapons range," Klath reported with some urgency.

"Shields up," Jirel ordered, "Sunek, whenever you're ready."

"Ok then," the Vulcan replied, cracking his knuckles for effect as he prepared himself, "Best hold onto all your favourite bits. This is gonna get a bit bumpy..."

Before anyone could ask him to clarify what he meant by that, the Bounty suddenly lurched forwards and made a sharp banked turn to the right, just as the Ressik-Vol's first warning shot sailed past their bow.

"Unidentified vessel," the booming voice returned over the comms link, "Your attempt to evade us has been noted. In such matters, Nuvian Security is authorised to use deadly force."

"Well," Natasha managed to fire off as she gripped onto her console for dear life, "That definitely feels like a step backwards."

"Meh. They've gotta catch us first," Sunek smiled, as the Bounty turned into a sharp climb, looping over the top of their larger pursuers. The Ressik-Vol fired off another burst of disruptor fire from its aft cannons, but Sunek evaded them with ease.

He brought the Bounty level, with the view ahead now dominated by P373-Kappa itself.

"They are turning and following," Klath reported urgently, "I am preparing to return fire."

"Won't need to do that," Sunek shot back, "Like I said, just hang on."

With that and nothing more, he instantly dipped the nose of the ship downwards, directly towards the planet's surface. Jirel gripped tightly to the armrests of his chair as he watched the barren surface of P373-Kappa looming large in front of them. Behind him, he sensed Maya gripping onto the back of his chair as well, and he tried to focus more on his faith in Sunek's piloting ability than he was on the view through the cockpit window.

As the rest of the Bounty's crew went through similar feelings, Sunek kept his focus on the task at hand, the contradictory Vulcan his usual haphazard mixture of logical calculation and precision and entirely illogical excitement and emotion. Both figuring out the complex details of the manoeuvres he was attempting at breakneck speed, while enjoying the surge of adrenaline that came with the anticipation of quite how much he was about to show off.

The ship got closer and closer to the planet, with Sunek taking a split second to glance across his panel of readings to confirm that their pursuers were gamely following. He then maintained his focus on his original target. A plot of P373-Kappa's thin residual atmosphere, made mostly of water vapour rising from the frozen surface.

Just as the Bounty approached the edge of the troposphere, with the Ressik-Vol still in hot pursuit, he pulled the Ju'Day-type raider's nose up, to a sufficient angle to allow the whole ship to bounce off the edge of the atmosphere and away from the Nuvian ship.

Behind them, the pilot of the Ressik-Vol wasn't taken by surprise by the Bounty's sudden course change, and they went to match their manoeuvre. But the larger vessel didn't quite have the reaction time of the more nimble Bounty, and its pilot apparently didn't have Sunek's speed of calculation.

The Ressik-Vol made significantly more heavy contact with the atmospheric layer, at an awkward angle, causing their shields to glow white-hot and collapse in an instant. With that protection gone, the underside of the ship glowed red as the pilot struggled to get it back into orbit, with several small explosions dotting across the surface of the hull from the stress.

Sunek couldn't help but grin in satisfaction as he swung the Bounty up and away from P373-Kappa's frozen wastes, and confirmed that the Ressik-Vol was no longer in pursuit.

"And that," the Vulcan beamed, as he swung around in his seat to the rest of the Bounty's crew, "Is how you do that."

There were a few slightly worried faces looking back at him from around the rest of the cockpit, none of whom seemed as delighted with his atmospheric manoeuvre as he had been. On the right side of the room, Klath merely folded his burly arms in front of him behind his console.

"Acceptable," he grunted.

"Sunek," Jirel added, unclenching himself from within his chair, "Continue to get us the hell out of here."

Sunek rolled his eyes at the predictable lack of adulation for his talents as he turned back to his controls and took the Bounty to warp. As the cockpit was briefly illuminated by the burst of light that accompanied their progression to warp speed, Maya casually walked up to the Vulcan and set the data chip that her Nuvian contact had supplied her with onto the top of his console.

"For your next trick, you should find the coordinates we need on there," she said, "And please, don't spare the horses. I've got a husband to save."

Sunek reluctantly picked up the tiny chip and slipped it into the relevant slot on the side of his console, not even bothering to look over and check with Jirel as to whether he should be following her requests at this point. He knew that they were well beyond the Trill reconsidering his choices.

"Yes, your majesty," he fired off, in lieu of any more practical retort.

Maya merely nodded, then spun around on her heels and walked off towards the rear steps of the cockpit, ignoring the other stares she was getting from around the room.

She paused as she reached Jirel and glanced back at the Vulcan in the pilot's seat with a knowing twinkle in her eyes.

"I told you I knew how to pick 'em."

Jirel didn't respond, even as she continued on down the steps.

It was only when he was sure that she was gone that he allowed himself the luxury of letting out a long, tired sigh.

* * * * *

Maya walked smartly back into the Bounty's guest cabin and allowed the doors to gently close behind her.

She let out a sigh of relief of her own, allowing her otherwise impervious exterior to weaken slightly now she was alone.

It was a trick that she had honed to perfection very early in her life, back on Turkana IV. Back there it quickly became second nature not to allow any weaknesses to show. The weak didn't tend to last long on Turkana IV. But now she was alone, she allowed a few weaknesses to creep out.

She walked over to the small desk in the corner of the room and slumped down into the tattered chair in front of it, allowing her shoulders to slump slightly. She reached up and did her best to massage the tightness out of her muscles.

She knew what she needed to do now, if she was to get what she needed. But that didn't mean that she was overly eager to do it.

Still, hiding your weaknesses wasn't the only thing that she had learned to do on Turkana IV. She had also learned all about the concept of survival of the fittest. Or at least, of doing whatever needed to be done in order to survive. So, while she didn't want to do what she had to do, she was also entirely unflinching in the knowledge that she had to do it.

If she was going to survive.

After a moment, she stood up from the desk, adjusted her hair in the mirror, then opened the drawer of the desk and retrieved a small communication device. One that she had brought on with her when she had beamed aboard the Bounty from Golos III.

She took a moment to steady herself, then silently tapped out a coded transmission.

Exactly as she had been told to.

End of Part Three

Part 4A

Part Four

*Hexis Spaceport
Stardate 50398.3*

Denella hadn't been onboard the Bounty for long, and she was still getting used to plenty of aspects of life onboard this particular ship. More than that, she was still getting used to the entire concept of her new-found freedom, having been rescued from Rilen Dar and the Syndicate by Jirel, Klath and Sunek some months ago.

One thing she was struggling to shake was an innate distrust for people. During her time with the Syndicate, she had developed that side of herself as a vital defence mechanism. But during her time on the Bounty so far, it had proved to be more of a hindrance, holding her back from developing a level of trust with her new crewmates.

But right now, she was actually glad that she still had such a keen sense of distrust. It definitely seemed fitting when dealing with the woman standing next to her at the Bounty's transporter controls.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Maya Ortega glanced over at the meek green-skinned woman next to her as she passed her idle comment. Denella's silence rather answered her question for her. It was the first time that Denella had met her since she had joined up with the Bounty, and the other woman hadn't exactly made a brilliant first impression.

Not that Denella had mentioned anything to her about that. After all, she didn't talk much.

Maya had arrived out of the blue while the Bounty had been dealing with some running repairs with the promise of an easy payday for the crew. And since then, Denella's carefully honed sense of distrust had grown and grown.

She had repeatedly insisted to them that the job itself had rightly been hers anyway, and she had been working with a team of Idanian freelancers to move some cargo to a Benzite colony from Hexis spaceport. Except they had cut her out of the deal, for reasons she remained a little unclear on, and left her behind.

But she explained that she had all the necessary details of the pickup, and she was the face of the operation as far as the Benzites were concerned. So, provided the Bounty could get there before the Idanians showed up, the job was theirs.

None of it seemed strictly above board as far as Denella was concerned. But Jirel had quickly signed up to the plan. It had been a lean few months for the Bounty, after all. And with Denella's own list of repairs growing by the day as she explored more of the ship's overworked and under-maintained systems, they needed to find some extra funds from somewhere.

Still, Denella hadn't trusted the plan from the start. And she again cursed the fact that she hadn't been more vocal about her concerns before things had progressed this far. But her time in the Syndicate had worn down her confidence as much as it had honed her levels of distrust.

So, instead, she stood next to Maya at the transporter controls, waiting for a signal from Jirel and Klath down on the spaceport. A signal that they had finalised the details with the Benzites and were ready to beam back up. And a signal that, had everything been going according to plan, they should have received at least ten minutes ago.

Denella's worries were rising. And even though the woman next to her was projecting a calm enough exterior, the Orion could tell that, behind her facade, she was getting concerned as well.

"Huh," Maya tutted, breaking the silence again as she drummed her fingers impatiently on top of the console, "Just like Jirel to be wasting time. I bet he found a bar."

Her tone was casual enough, but the silent Denella could detect a tell-tale edge in her words. They had to move fast at this part of the transaction, securing the cargo from the Benzites before the Idanians showed up in orbit. Even Jirel knew that there was no time to waste.

Just as Denella was getting close to plucking up the courage to say as much to Maya, the comms link on the console flared into life.

"Hey!" Jirel called out, the line flecked with static, "We've got problems down here! You wanna use that transporter any time soon?"

Denella still didn't respond, not verbally at least. But her hands began to dance across the controls, far faster than Maya could react.

But as soon as she started to work, it became clear to both women that something was wrong.

"We're working on it," Maya reported back to the Trill, eyeing up the readings as she did so, "Looks like there's a lot of interference down there."

"Yeah, I know!" the sharp reply came back, sounding out of breath, "They took us down to one of their reactor cores to show us what we were supposed to be transporting!"

Denella continued to work on breaking through the interference, but she sensed Maya tense up a little more next to her. "Oh," she managed, after a telling pause, "I thought you were just going to agree on the payment before we—"

“Trilithium resin? That was your precious cargo?!”

Denella didn't stop working, but she did manage a curt glance at the other woman, for long enough to see that the details about the Benzite cargo wasn't news to her.

“Jirel,” Maya began in a placating tone, “You have to understand that—”

“Save it, Maya! We'll talk about this later. Just get us back onboard now, cos these guys did not react well when we told them we weren't interested!”

There was the sound of a commotion in the background, and a noise that Denella recognised as being the one made when Klath's bat'leth struck something solid.

“They did not react well at all!”

Denella was still working on cutting through the persistent interference wherever Jirel and Klath were when a second comms line flared up, this one delivering Sunek's voice into the small transporter room from up in the cockpit.

“Um, guys, an Idanian Interceptor just entered the system, and they're heading right here. And I'm no body language expert, but they're still thirty seconds from entering weapons range, and their disruptors are already fully charged.”

Maya's frustrations boiled over, for the first time since Denella had met her. She slammed her hand down on the console with anger, making the Orion woman jump slightly. “Goddamn it,” she growled, “We don't have time.”

“For what?” Sunek's voice returned.

“Sunek, my dear, listen to me very clearly. Those Idanians aren't messing around, trust me. So get us out of here, now!”

The immediacy of the order shocked Denella even further. As did the way that Maya began to reach across where she was working at the controls, her hand reaching out to cut off the comms link down to the spaceport below.

“Survival of the fittest, darling,” Maya offered in her direction by way of explanation, “I'm sure they'd understand.”

It was all enough for Denella to forget where she was for a second. Before she even realised what she was doing, her hand shot out and grabbed Maya's wrist. The strength with which she gripped onto her caused the human woman to fall silent.

At the same time, Denella called out in the direction of the Bounty's pilot.

“No! Sunek! Jirel and Klath are still down there! I need two minutes!”

Maya glared at her, but the Orion stared right back, finding some reserves of courage from deep inside in the middle of a crisis.

“Well, why didn't you say so?” the Vulcan called back, “I'll find two minutes. But, full disclosure, things might start getting a bit explode-y around here.”

With that, Denella released Maya's arm and returned her attention to the interference. The other woman rubbed her sore wrist as she stared back at the previously mute engineer. “Huh,” she said eventually, with a slightly rueful grin, “Found your voice, I see.”

Denella's fingers continued to dance over the controls as she worked her fingers to the bone to try and rescue two of the people who had rescued her not long ago. She didn't look up.

“We always have time,” she replied.

Two minutes later, the Bounty arced away from Hexis spaceport, evading a disruptor blast from the Idanian Interceptor as it jumped to warp.

With Jirel and Klath safely aboard.

* * * * *

Some years after the incident at Hexis spaceport, an altogether stronger and more confident Denella walked up the steps to the Bounty's cockpit, shortly after waking up.

She could already tell that the Bounty was at warp from the hum of the deck plates. The information on the data chip that Maya's contact had handed over to them had confirmed that the target for their rescue was a particularly mineral-rich Class-L planet in Sector 374, adjacent to the considerably less interesting Sector 373.

She was surprised to see that, unlike usual, she was far from the first member of the crew to be up and working this early in the day. Both Klath and Sunek, neither known to be especially early risers, were busy at their controls.

“You're up early,” she offered to neither of them specifically.

Klath didn't look up from his controls, but he did offer a nod of acknowledgement. “We are heading to a heavily fortified location on the instructions of Maya Ortega. I am making sure that our weapons systems are correctly aligned.”

“Paranoia?” the Orion asked with a slightly cocked eyebrow.

The Klingon looked up from his work and met her look.

“Thoroughness.”

“But you’ve seen all the rest of her plans for this rescue, right?” Denella persisted, “You don’t think this is gonna work?”

“If the information is correct, then the plan seems reasonable.”

Klath paused for a second, then repeated himself for emphasis.

“If the information is correct.”

Denella nodded in unhappy understanding at this, as Sunek swung around to them in his seat. “Ugh. Ignore him. He’s been antsy ever since we crossed into this sector. Kinda wacky, if you ask me.”

Denella stepped up to the pilot’s console and glanced over the controls. “Huh,” she mused, “Looks like you’re in the middle of recalibrating the primary and secondary attitude controls.”

She gave the somewhat sheepish Vulcan a knowing glare, backed up by a similar look from the Klingon behind her.

“Well,” Sunek shrugged eventually, “This is Maya Ortega, right?”

With that, he turned back to his console and worked on finishing up his work on the attitude controls quickly enough to give him a chance to give the thruster systems a quick once over. For a second time this morning.

Denella regarded the two furtive workers on either side of her and shook her head patiently. Then she turned back and walked to her own engineering console, slipping into the seat and tapping the controls.

She had a sudden urge to run a quick check of the Bounty’s warp and impulse drives, to make sure everything was operating as efficiently as possible. Just in case.

This was Maya Ortega, after all.

Part 4B

Part Four (Cont'd)

Down in the Bounty's dining area, the rudimentary strike team was also making preparations.

If Klath had his way, he would have been part of this group, instead of being back up in the cockpit checking over his weapons calibrations. But for this phase of the rescue, Jirel wanted his best sharpshooter onboard the Bounty. It wasn't a decision that the Klingon had accepted without a stern argument.

With the surface team having been whittled down to three, Jirel and Natasha stared down at the detailed information on a padd on the table, as Maya finished her run down of what they would have to do once they got to their target.

"So," she continued, "As you can see, once we use the information we have to get past the automated security systems, the rest should be easy."

"Sure, easy," Natasha sighed, "We just need to trick the automated sentries into thinking we're a regular transport, beam through a dampening field, walk into a duridium mine slash illegal penal colony through a transport inhibitor, find your husband, sneak him away from the guards and get the hell out of there before anyone notices."

Jirel's jaw clenched slightly, but Maya still seemed entirely at ease as she glanced at the Trill and nodded in Natasha's direction. "Maybe I was wrong about her. She might be fun after all."

"Sorry, why did you think I wasn't going to be fun—?"

"Ok," Jirel sighed, gesturing to the padd, "Can we focus? You're sure this is all accurate, and this is where Toren is?"

"Definitely," Maya nodded, "And based on this information, Synergy's owner is operating their usual cost-cutting approach with this new mine. Once we're safely past the automated security procedures, there's minimal physical security down in the mine itself. Half a dozen guards per shift, three shift rotation."

"Still seems a little too lackadaisical from them," Jirel mused.

"Call it overconfidence, coupled with a lack of hope. Think of how the Klingons managed to run Rura Penthe for so long with fifty guards and no shielding. Nobody can beam out, no ship can approach without authorisation, and no humanoid is surviving on the surface of a Class-L planet for long without supplementary oxygen. Who needs extra guards when there's no point in escaping?"

Natasha considered the logic of what the other woman was saying, and couldn't help but agree with it. Although there was still something off about the whole plan that she couldn't quite put her finger on right now.

"So," Maya continued, "Any more questions?"

Jirel remained silent, but Natasha did think of something, her analytical brain honed by years of Starfleet training grinding into gear. "One thing I've been wondering," she mused, "If this company really is as paranoid and secretive as it seems to be based on all of these security arrangements, how come they just left their old mining operation back in the Badlands abandoned, for any passing group of bandits to raid? With a data link still running?"

This question was enough to raise Jirel's defences, as he looked at Maya for a response. She merely offered a casual shrug of her shoulders. "Like I said, overconfidence. Which is good news for my husband. And for me, given how much latinum this has cost me. Not that you seem to be complaining about that aspect of our adventure, I've noticed."

Jirel was reminded of the healthy payment she had made, and looked down at the details on the padd again. He had to admit that, when it was all laid out like Maya was presenting it, it almost seemed straightforward compared to some of her usual plans.

"Well," he said eventually, offering a tentative shrug to Natasha, "Let's go rescue a Trill, I guess."

Natasha nodded, as Maya's face creased into a relieved smile. "One final thing," she said, reaching for something on a chair behind the dining table, "I thought it might be an idea for us to get changed."

She retrieved three sets of black tops and trousers from the chair and handed two of them over, as Jirel and Natasha regarded the clothing with a little confusion.

"Replicated them just now. They'll make it easier to blend in," Maya offered to Jirel, "Besides, darling. You always liked pretending to be a captain. Now you get to pretend to be special ops."

Jirel's scowl returned to his face as he grabbed the clothing and walked off towards his cabin.

Automated Sentry Point Gamma whirred into life as it detected the approaching vessel.

The sensor scans it was constantly performing on the surrounding space had detected the vessel a few minutes ago, but the sentry point had remained dormant until it had concluded that the ship's trajectory was indeed an intercept course.

Once that had been ascertained, the small ovoid probe orbiting the nondescript planet below gently turned on its axis, and a small hatch opening in its smooth silvery surface, from which a small phaser array emerged.

At the same time, Automated Sentry Point Gamma sent a message to the other five sentry points in orbit of the moon at strategic geocentric points. Automated Sentry Points Alpha, Delta and Zeta took no immediate action, after calculating that they would not be in firing range of the potentially hostile vessel based on its probable orbital insertion point. But Automated Sentry Points Beta and Epsilon both followed Gamma's lead in arming and extending their phaser arrays.

And then they patiently waited for the unidentified ship to get closer.

As the vessel entered weapons range, Beta, Gamma and Epsilon all obediently targeted their phaser arrays at the threat, while Alpha, Delta and Zeta all set their own defensive systems to be ready to deploy at a moment's notice, should their quarry attempt a last second course change.

And then, all of the sentries received a transmission from the approaching ship. A simple subspace handshake that contained a sequence of recognised codes.

The codes themselves were not the most up to date versions of the accepted protocols, but they were still within the accepted list stored within each sentry's database. And it indicated that, far from being a hostile craft bearing down on them, the approaching vessel was a recognised ore carrier belonging to Synergy Mining Enterprises.

Granted, there was no scheduled ore pickup for this precise time on this exact day. But each sentry had a tolerance built in for that as well, given the sometimes unpredictable journey times the carriers had to take to avoid being tracked. Such an unscheduled arrival wasn't unprecedented.

And so, with the code checking out and the arrival time within tolerances, each sentry point deemed that no action was necessary. The phaser arrays disappeared back inside Automated Sentry Points Beta, Gamma and Epsilon, and all six orbiting sentries returned to passive scan mode.

Moments later, the Bounty swung into orbit of the planet.

* * * * *

"Am I good, or am I good?"

Maya posed the question to nobody in particular as she, Jirel and Natasha stood in the middle of the Bounty's cockpit, now all clad in their all-black gear.

For the sake of his own concerns, Klath couldn't help but double check the situation from his own tactical console. "All automated sentries have powered down," he confirmed with a slightly surprised grunt.

Maya couldn't help but glance over and flash the Klingon a satisfied smile. "You know, you seemed a lot more trusting when we first met."

"I was," Klath responded, with no trace of mirth.

Jirel tore himself away from the view of the planet below them, and nodded at both Maya and Natasha, before setting off for the transporter room.

"Still a few more of your little tricks that need to work before we're home and dry on this one," he pointed out as he walked past Maya.

"They will," she affirmed.

"Sunek," Jirel continued as he reached the rear steps of the cockpit, "Move us to a geostationary orbit over the location of the duridium mine. And keep a close eye on those sentries."

"Wasn't planning on doing anything else," the Vulcan responded, with only a fraction of his usual humour.

"And Denella," Jirel continued, nodding at the Orion engineer, "Time for you to work your magic with that transporter. Get us through that dampening field."

Denella nodded and stood from her own console. With that, Jirel started down the steps, only for Klath to call out.

"I still feel I should go down there with you."

Jirel stopped himself and turned back to the Klingon, the glower on his face as dark as ever. "I know," he replied with a slight smile, "But we've been over this. This isn't a battle. It's subterfuge. And the less people we have down there, the better. Plus, who's gonna shoot us out of trouble up here when things go south."

Klath's glower didn't lift one iota. "I do not like that plan."

"I know you don't. But still, it's what we're doing. And I need you up here. If anything moves while we're gone, shoot it."

"Unless it's me," Sunek chimed in from the pilot's seat.

Jirel mustered a half-smile at Klath and shrugged his shoulders, nodding in the direction of the ever-talkative Vulcan.

"Weapons chief's discretion."

Despite his continued concerns about the content of Jirel and Maya's plan, the corners of the Klingon's mouth did curl up slightly at this comment. Instead of arguing further, an action he knew would be futile, he merely nodded back at his long-time colleague.

"Qapla'."

Jirel nodded as well, then led the others down the steps and made their way to the transporter room, with Natasha alongside him. "You know," he sighed, "You don't need to come down there either."

"Neither do you," she retorted immediately, "Pretty sure Maya said that she'd be happy to do this part of the plan alone."

Jirel conceded that point, as she continued.

"Besides, unlike Klath, I'm not going to be doing anything all that useful up here. So, given that you always need backup whenever you do something this stupid, I may as well make myself useful down on the planet."

Jirel couldn't find a way to do anything other than concede that point as well. Secretly, he was very glad for the backup.

The group walked into the Bounty's small transporter room and Jirel, Natasha and Maya stepped onto the pads, as Denella worked the controls. "Ok," the Orion nodded, "I'm matching the transporter harmonics to the dampening field. Gonna set you down as close to the range of the transport inhibitors as I can."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to set us down further away?" Maya queried, "Less chance of being seen when we arrive."

"Given the range of the inhibitors, you'll still have half a mile or so to get to the mining site," Denella replied, "And given the atmospheric conditions, I'm gonna say you'll want as short a hike as possible."

Maya took those points on the chin and smiled at the Orion. "You know, it really is nice to see you talking so much these days."

Denella didn't respond to that, and merely focused on completing her work. Realising that she wasn't getting anything from the engineer, Maya looked over at her fellow black-clad team members instead.

"Well," she offered with a knowing smile, "Let's get this threesome started, shall we?"

Jirel's latest grimace was only visible for a second, as the transporter effect began.

* * * * *

When Automated Sentry Point Gamma had first detected the unknown vessel approaching, it had run through all the usual defensive steps before the appropriate handshake had been received and it, along with the other orbital sentries, had powered down.

Each task had been carried out exactly as Automated Sentry Point Gamma's programming had been designed to do, by a particularly keen weapons trader in the Kassik sector, where Synergy Mining Enterprises had acquired them.

But along with the litany of scheduled tasks to identify and assess a potential threat, Automated Sentry Point Gamma had also carried out an additional job, one that had not been covered by the original design specifications. The additional piece of coding had been inserted long after the weapons trader had sold the sentries, and was designed to be hidden from the self-cleaning diagnostic tools contained within the original programming. And it was designed to do one single thing.

It transmitted a simple subspace message out to a predetermined reception point in close orbit around the fifth planet of the system.

A message that was hidden inside Automated Sentry Point Gamma's regular series of programmed subspace pings, operating on a repeating cycle to keep it in near-constant contact with the other sentries in orbit. A message that, unless a seasoned subspace communications specialist knew what to look for, was entirely undetectable.

It was delivered to a vessel in orbit on the far side of the fifth planet, one that was using the vast magnetic and gravitational fields of the enormous gas giant to help render it equally undetectable to the Bounty's sensors. And the message had been received loud and clear.

"You're certain?"

The two figures standing in front of the vessel's luxurious command chair nodded their heads in perfectly synchronised unison.

In truth, they were a little offended that he needed to ask the question. They had been sitting in orbit of the gas giant for several days now, waiting for this exact message from the only other device in the entire galaxy that knew where they were. The idea that they could have made a mistake was faintly ridiculous.

Still, it wasn't the first time their competence had been questioned by their taskmaster of a commander. And it surely wouldn't be the last.

Their commander seemed a little more satisfied with their affirmation, reclining in his seat as his face creased into an ugly grin. "Excellent," he sneered, "They're precisely on schedule. Prepare our course. It's time for us to send our...reply."

The two subordinates nodded again, then stepped over to the front of the ship's bridge, slotting into the two forward consoles in perfect unison.

As they both got to work carrying out his latest orders, their fingers dancing across the controls in front of them, the man in the centre chair steepled his own fingers in front of him and allowed his smile to grow even wider.

The hunt was nearly over.

Part 4C

Part Four (Cont'd)

The trio of back-clad figures walked in close formation across the dusty surface of the planet. At least for the time being, there was nothing in sight apart from an endless landscape of dirty brown and rusty red rocks. There was no sign of plant or animal life anywhere.

Natasha held one of the Bounty's ageing stash of tricorders in her hand, doing her best to try and make sense of the short-range readings through the cacophony of interference in place around their target. Alongside her, Jirel clutched a stout disruptor pistol, while Maya was visibly unarmed, keeping her focus on the ground beneath her feet.

They were halfway up the side of the barren hillside that stood between them and the apparent location of the duridium mine in the next valley. And all three were breathing heavily from their ongoing exertions.

Denella had been right about wanting to keep the hike as short as possible. Although the incline of the hillside was relatively gentle, the Class-L conditions were turning it into a punishing ascent.

Technically, such a celestial body was habitable for most humanoids. But barely so. Living conditions on a Class-L planet teetered on the edge of what was possible to survive.

They were not necessarily in any immediate danger. Although Natasha had noted that the atmosphere contained potentially toxic levels of carbon dioxide for both humans and Trills, it would only become an issue with long-term exposure.

Still, despite that fact, and the healthy shot of stimulants Natasha had given each of them back on the Bounty to help with the lower oxygen levels, they were all definitely feeling the effects, and progress was proving to be slow. To Jirel, climbing this incline felt like trying to run a marathon after smoking a crate of Yridian cigars.

They pressed on, taking tired breaths as they did so, as Natasha checked their progress on her tricorder. "We're inside the range of the transport inhibitors now," she reported.

Jirel tried not to focus on the knot in his stomach that developed on hearing that. Knowing that, from this point on until they get safely back outside the invisible field in question, they were completely on their own.

Natasha continued her report as she tapped the device in her hand. "It definitely looks like there's a valley up ahead," she panted, "I'm also scanning heavy deposits of duridium all around. So I guess this is our mine."

"Lifesigns?" Jirel coughed.

"Those as well. But there's too much interference to be any clearer on who."

"As soon as you spot a Trill, let us know," Maya replied from Jirel's other side, "Hopefully Toren will be somewhere we can easily get to."

Jirel paused for a second and looked up at the rest of the ascent ahead of them. Although the slope remained gentle all the way to the top, they were still barely halfway up.

"Nice place," he coughed sarcastically as he started moving again.

Natasha silently agreed with him as they pressed on, while Maya glanced over at the Trill. "Reminds me of that time we wound up on that planetoid in the Landos system. We were meeting with those Tzenkethi traders to exchange our cargo of duranium alloy for...ugh, what was it?"

Jirel stifled a grunt of exertion and sucked in another lungful of thin air before he reluctantly answered her query. "Plasma regulators."

"Ah yes," Maya nodded with a wry smile, "A bunch of filthy plasma regulators. A fine treasure, indeed."

"Yeah, well, seemed like a good deal at the time. Especially when you told me you knew a group of Ferengi salvage merchants in the next system who paid good money for reusable spare parts."

Maya nodded at this, and despite himself Jirel found it was easy to fall back into familiar conversation. At the very least, it was distracting him from the punishing climb.

"We didn't bring any breathing equipment with us then, either," Maya offered in Natasha's direction by way of explanation, "And the Tzenkethi were late. We almost ended up suffocating down there, because someone was too stubborn to give up and leave, and thought that he could brave it out."

She nodded in Jirel's direction. The Trill offered a slightly embarrassed shrug. "I was young back then."

"And you're old now," she replied with a faint cutting edge, "But you still haven't invested in any breathing equipment."

He couldn't help but allow his face to crease into a full smile as he shook his head, as the two old friends, lovers, colleagues and adversaries settled further into their old back-and-forth ways. "Well, whenever I get the latinum together to afford it, I have to pay off another instalment of my debt to you, don't I?"

“Huh. I guess you never did have a way with finances, did you?”

“Hey, I put in my share when we bought the Bounty. Fifty-fifty.”

“More like eighty-twenty, darling.”

Natasha remained silent and listened as the pair continued to bicker like an old married couple as the ascent continued. She wasn't entirely amused by their banter. In fact, she found that she was more concerned.

She was embarrassed to admit that part of her concern stemmed from a sliver of Jirel-esque jealousy she was beginning to cultivate as the Trill grew closer to the other woman, something that she was determined she would deal with later as soon as she located an affordable therapist.

But the major part of her concern was around the untrustworthiness of the woman he was growing closer to. A woman that had already led them into danger twice since she had arrived onboard.

And one that was leading them deeper into danger with every step.

* * * * *

The silence of the Bounty's cockpit was suddenly filled by a new sound.

Sunek impatiently drummed his fingers on the surface of his pilot's controls, causing Klath to grimace slightly in frustration. Once again, the Vulcan seemed to be finding the most efficient means to irritate him as he was trying to remain focused on his sensor readings.

Not that Sunek was doing it on purpose. He just hated silence.

“So,” he said eventually, “If something goes wrong down there, and we can't beam them out through the inhibitors, do we—?”

“We wait,” Klath replied immediately. There was no other answer.

“And if something goes wrong up here?”

“We fight.”

Sunek drummed his fingers a little faster. Not that he hadn't been expecting those responses, but the frankness of the Klingon's replies did little to ease his inner tension. He stared out the window at the dirty rock below them, though his eye was inevitably drawn to the silver twinkling sentry, just about visible some distance off their bow.

A slight shiver passed down the Vulcan's spine at the sight of Automated Sentry Point Epsilon. Not that he knew that was the name of it.

“For how long?” he found himself asking Klath as a follow-up query.

This time, there was a slight pause. The Klingon looked up from his weapons controls to glare at the back of the Vulcan's tousle-haired head. There was no uncertainty when his answer came.

“For as long as it takes.”

“Yeah,” Sunek muttered, not turning back around, “That was what I was afraid of.”

Klath grunted and returned his attention to his controls, as Sunek kept his focus on the twinkling form of the sentry.

Another silence descended. One that felt even more excruciating than the last as far as the Bounty's pilot was concerned.

“Can we at least put the shields up?” he asked eventually.

Klath suppressed his latest frustrated growl at the latest of the Vulcan's persistent interruptions and looked up again. “No,” he growled, “There are no immediate threats in our present position, and we must be ready to beam Jirel and the others back aboard as soon as they emerge from the transport inhibitors down on the surface.”

“No immediate threats? I'm staring at one right now.”

Sunek backed up his comment by gesturing at Automated Sentry Point Epsilon in the distance. Klath shook his head.

“Based on what we saw during our approach, it takes the sentries some 6.7 seconds to activate and secure a weapons lock. That will be enough time for us to respond, provided we remain alert.”

Sunek muttered something unintelligible under his breath, before he mustered a proper reply to the Klingon. “Yeah, ok, fine,” he sighed, “I get it. It's just...that thing's really starting to creep me out.”

“Then perhaps you should focus on assisting me. You will be able to access the ship's sensor readings from your console.”

Sunek was confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, he definitely needed something to distract him from the unnerving sight of the sentry. But on the other hand, he wasn't sure if he wanted that distraction to actually involve work.

Eventually, he succumbed to the inevitable, and called up the sensor readings. And for a moment, silence returned. For a moment.

“Just feels like it’s watching us—”

“It is not watching you, Sunek,” Klath grunted with obvious frustration.

The Vulcan glanced back up from his console and caught sight of the sentry again.

It definitely felt like it was watching them.

* * * * *

Denella stood behind the transporter controls, not wanting to risk leaving her post for a second.

It was entirely likely that she had time to leave for a few seconds. Or even to route transporter controls up to her console in the cockpit. At least that way, she could keep an eye on the rest of the Bounty’s systems if necessary. But something about the elevated stakes of their current situation meant that it didn’t feel right for her to walk away from her post.

She kept her attention on the readouts in front of her, scanning the boundary of the transport inhibitor zone for the first signs of the others emerging safely. There was no way of knowing how long that would take, but she still wasn’t moving.

It had been an hour since they had disappeared inside the last line of defence that Synergy Mining Enterprises had installed. But it felt like twice that. And even though she had no idea exactly what they were having to do to find Toren, it definitely felt like it was talking too long.

Still, no matter how long it was going to take, she was prepared to wait. Just as she had done back at Hexis Spaceport all those years ago, on another of Maya’s wild goose chases, she knew that there was always time.

There had to be.

She chewed her lip with worry and considered calling up to the cockpit to check in with Klath and Sunek. But she knew they would both be focused on their own jobs.

Then, she saw something flare up on the readouts.

But it wasn’t what she had been expecting. In fact, it was something that caused an instant rush of panic inside her.

The details were clear. The frequencies of the dampening field that they had been able to beam through thanks to Maya’s information had changed. The parameters that she had used to beam Jirel, Natasha and Maya down to the surface were now useless.

She knew it would take her days, possibly weeks to try and isolate the new frequencies. And until then, they were trapped down there.

But despite the plight of the others, that wasn’t her most immediate concern. It was obvious that what just happened wasn’t any sort of scheduled change. Someone had altered the frequencies manually.

Which meant that someone knew they were here.

She reached out for the controls to open a comms link up to the cockpit, but her hand never made it to the button.

Because then the first shot slammed into the Bounty’s exposed hull.

Part 4D

Part Four (Cont'd)

“Remind me to leave a bad review for this place when we get back.”

Jirel’s quip was delivered through wheezing breaths, without any of his usual pep. At his side, Natasha could tell the Class-L conditions were affecting the Trill more than the two humans in the group, despite the shot of stims.

Though the good news was that they were nearly at the top of the hill.

Jirel had holstered his disruptor back on his belt for the time being, as he was being forced to occasionally use his hands to scramble up the rocks ahead of them. But he was still gamely keeping pace.

Eventually, they reached the top and stepped across the peak to gaze down into the expanse of the valley below.

“Well,” Maya observed, “I’d say this is the place.”

Some distance below them, they saw the mining site itself. The valley was dominated by a vast dome-shaped building constructed from a silvery metal, presumably housing habitation and processing facilities for the whole area. Dotted around the rest of the valley were dozens of figures, some clearly working on the various rock faces with lasers and cutting equipment, some hauling anti-grav units filled with duridium ore back to the dome, and others keeping watch over them.

It was clear, even from this distance, which were the miners and which were the guards.

Jirel grabbed a small set of binoculars from his belt and held them up to his eyes, scanning around the figures from afar.

“We should hold back for now,” Maya offered, “Try and sneak a little closer using the rocks as cover and try to locate Toren. Then we just need to wait for a shift change to distract the guards and keep them away from the miners.”

“They look more like prisoners,” Natasha muttered as she tapped her tricorder.

“Same difference,” Maya responded with a shrug, “As far as the good people at Synergy are concerned.”

Natasha suppressed the immediate chill that passed down her spine at that, and kept her focus on scanning the valley’s population as best she could through all the inhibitors.

Jirel completed another quick scan through the binoculars. There was something wrong about the scene, even from this range, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. “You sure we’ll have time at the shift change?” he asked Maya, dropping the binoculars and turning back to her.

“Pretty sure. They’ll leave the miners to themselves for that. After all, where exactly are they going to run to?”

She gestured around at their grim surroundings, and Jirel nodded. “Ok,” he sighed after another lungful of thin air that didn’t come close to dealing with his increasing feeling of breathlessness, “I guess in the meantime, we need to—”

“Jirel,” Natasha cut in, with some urgency, “This isn’t right.”

He whirled around to her, as she gestured to the tricorder. The look of concern that was etched onto her face was enough for him to instantly tense up.

“I’m not scanning any Trill lifesigns down there,” she confirmed.

“The interference?”

“No,” she shook her head, “Not at this short range. I’m picking up every lifeform in the valley, and none of them are even part-Trill.”

Jirel’s expression hardened in an instant. Without even stopping to think, he grabbed the communicator from his belt and barked into it.

“Denella! Get us the hell out of here!”

There was no response, aside from a burst of static.

“Denella!” he called out again. Still nothing.

In anger, he whirled back around to the other woman in the group.

“Goddamnit, Maya. What have you—?”

He stopped immediately when he saw the familiar sight of the antique type-1 phaser being pointed directly at him and Natasha.

“Never leave home without it,” Maya said, her face a picture of serenity despite the sudden change in circumstances.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jirel spat out.

“Come on, darling,” she offered back, “I’m sorry it had to be this way, but you know that things were never going to be quite what they seemed with me, hmm? Now, drop the communicator. And drop your tricorder as well please, my dear.”

She gestured to Natasha’s tricorder. Jirel grimaced further, feeling entirely helpless, but nodded back at his crewmate as he dropped the communicator to the ground. Natasha’s tricorder followed with a clattering sound.

“What’s going on?” Natasha managed to ask.

“Jirel’s probably figured it out by now,” Maya shrugged, “Even he tends to get there eventually.”

The Trill ignored the latest casual insult and spat out his response. “This whole thing was a goddamn setup. Again. Another of Maya Ortega’s traps. There never was a husband to rescue, was there?”

“Jirel, please,” Maya sighed, “You have to understand that—”

“Who are you working for now? What the hell have you gotten us into this time?”

“This was all business. I’m just doing what I had to do. The husband might have been made up, but the debt I owed Synergy Mining Enterprises was real.”

“You,” Jirel muttered with a shake of his head, “You were trying to screw the company over, all by yourself.”

“And it very nearly worked. But, even when things went wrong, I was fortunate enough to be able to come to an agreement. You see, it turned out the new owner knew somebody that owed him considerably more than I did...”

Jirel felt a cold rush of dread inside as she spoke. And something that he’d seen down in the valley suddenly twigged with him.

That was what had been wrong. All of the guards had been Miradorn.

Feeling a sinking feeling growing inside, he looked back at a shocked and confused Natasha. And he realised how stupid he had been. Once again, he had been suckered in by Maya Ortega. He had allowed her to spin him a tall tale, and seduce him into bed. And he had allowed her to take him in entirely with the promise of a heroic adventure for the wannabe swashbuckling captain.

And not only had he fallen for it again, but he had brought the rest of the Bounty’s crew down with him. Including Natasha.

“I’m sorry,” he managed.

“For what—?”

She didn’t get any further before the transporter effect sounded out. The three figures turned to see three new forms coalescing a short distance away.

Natasha didn’t recognise any of them. But Jirel already knew who it would be before the familiar leer from the shorter of the three figures finished forming, and he opened his mouth.

“Hello, Jirel.”

“No hard feelings, darling,” Maya offered from behind him, “But, then again, you did promise to help me...”

* * * * *

Denella staggered up the steps to the Bounty’s cockpit even as the ship was pitched into another sickening angle by the impact of another hit.

The cockpit was in chaos. The air was thick with smoke from dozens of failing systems. All hell had broken loose.

In the pilot’s seat, Sunek grappled with the controls, trying to keep the Bounty away from the volley of fire that was raining down on them.

The surprise nature of the attack meant that he was only being partly successful. The ship was already crippled badly, with several ugly gouges and scorch marks peppering the Bounty’s long-suffering hull. The venerable Ju’Day-type raider, veteran of a thousand firefights, was bleeding from multiple wounds.

Klath, bleeding from a wound of his own across his forehead, was wrestling with his own console helplessly, trying to return fire as best he could.

The whole cockpit was dimmed, with dark red emergency lighting the only thing that was illuminating the scene. Smoke was pouring from a ruptured power conduit in the ceiling, while the Bounty’s fire suppression systems were struggling to cope with an inferno that had broken out across Natasha’s unmanned station.

Denella dragged herself to her own console, fighting against the ship’s erratic pitching and turning, as she tried to understand what was going on.

“The orbital sentries?” she called out through the choking smoke.

“No,” Klath called back, “Another ship. It dropped out of warp, already launching micro-torpedoes. They must have disguised their approach somehow.”

“First hit knocked out our warp drive!” Sunek cried out, “I’m doing my best, but we’re sitting ducks here!”

Denella caught a brief glimpse of the ship through the cockpit window as Sunek swivelled the Bounty away from a disruptor blast. It was an ovoid design, not much larger than the Bounty, with stubby warp nacelles branching off from either side towards the rear of the body of the vessel. Not a ship type that she had ever seen before, but it almost looked like a private yacht. Albeit a very heavily armoured one, with twin pincer-like prongs at the front containing deadly disruptors.

A fresh alarm blared out amidst the cacophony, as Denella did her best to check on the damage they had already picked up.

The ship rocked from another impact. Sunek’s efforts at the pilot’s controls were becoming less and less useful. The expert pilot was hamstrung by the crippling damage to the ship. There was a desperation to his movements, and a sluggishness to the ship’s responses.

“Weapons are offline!” Klath called out, “We must reroute power!”

“I’m working on it,” Denella shouted back, though she could already see that there was little power left to reroute.

Another burst of green disruptor fire flared out at them. Sunek managed to avoid the first one, but the second hit home on the bow of the ship, cutting into the exposed hull and pitching them into an unnatural dive.

Denella was thrown to the ground. Klath clung onto his console for dear life. Several more alarms and alerts flared up.

“Warning,” the Bounty’s computer chimed out, “Hull breach in cargo bay.”

Tasting blood in her mouth, Denella forced herself back into her seat and checked the latest damage reports, even as Sunek wrestled for control of the ship. “We’re venting atmosphere!” she cried out, “Hull integrity is going critical and the shield emitters are fried! I’m sending everything we’ve got left to the impulse drive and thruster control!”

“I need weapons,” Klath bellowed, “We must disable them!”

“I can give you a couple of phaser blasts. Wouldn’t make a dent in their shields.”

“Who the hell are they?” Sunek griped, as he feverishly spun the ship away from the ovoid yacht’s latest attack.

Nobody had an answer for that.

The noxious air became even more toxic as a relay exploded above Klath’s console, showering him with fiery sparks and causing half of his console to blink out.

“I’ve lost navigational sensors!” Sunek shouted out, “Can’t get her stable!”

The Bounty pitched and groaned around them, like a mortally wounded animal straining against the spears in its side. Smoke billowed forth from the ugly hole in the rear of the ship where the cargo bay was now exposed to the harsh vacuum outside.

Just as Sunek tried to get the ship back under some sort of control, a further disruptor blast coursed out from one of the pincer-like prongs at the front of the unidentified ship. There was nothing anyone could do to avoid it.

It impacted on the underside of the crippled vessel’s hull, ripping a hole clean through the protective metal. In an instant, half the remaining systems onboard collapsed under the latest wave of punishment. The entire ship convulsed from the ferocity of the impact, the superstructure itself sounding like it was whining in agony.

The Bounty tumbled away, mortally crippled.

Sunek was thrown clear of the pilot’s seat, just as the entire right side of his console exploded.

Denella cried out as she was slammed to the ground. A sickening crunch sounded out above the rest of the carnage as she hit the deck and fell silent.

Klath was flung from behind his console, flying across the cockpit and onto the ground, narrowly avoiding landing on the vacant centre chair as he did so. He took the full force of the landing on his right shoulder, but he forced himself to bear the pain and remain conscious.

Emergency power breathed its last as the ship’s own lifesigns ebbed away, and the cockpit was plunged into darkness, acrid smoke still filling the air from dozens of fried components.

The Bounty was dead.

The Klingon growled with agony as he crawled across the deck, past Sunek’s unmoving form, to the wrecked pilot’s controls. He had no idea where their enemy was, or how long it would take them to finish them off, but he knew he wasn’t about to die on the deck of his ship.

Through the window, he could see the planet below them looming ever larger. Out of control, they were now spiralling into the atmosphere.

He fought against the forces that were pushing him down and clambered into the pilot’s seat, grasping desperately at the controls in front of them. He wrestled with the console to try and extract any remaining battery power out of the shattered ship to arrest their uncontrolled descent. Even though it might have been useless, he knew he had to at least try.

Behind him, his two colleagues lay prone and unmoving amongst the carnage.

In front of him, the solid ground of the Class-L planet loomed larger.

Klath gritted his teeth, and couldn't help but wonder one thing.

Whether today was going to be a good day to die.

End of Part Four

Part 5 (Epilogue)

Part Five

*Sector 394, Five Hours out of the Tyran Scrapyards
Stardate 47123.2*

Jirel lay in bed with a satisfied smile on his face.

He listened to the comforting background sound of the ship at warp, as it raced away from his life at the Tyran Scrapyards on autopilot.

Not just the sound of a ship at warp. But the sound of his ship at warp.

They had well and truly left the scrapyards, Crax Traxanar and his whole unhappy life back there well and truly behind.

Granted, the Ju'Day-type raider that they had purchased had been well worth its place in the scrapyards. It was worn and tattered, and everything smelt oddly musty, like the whole ship had been in a state of decay for some time.

But importantly, as Jirel had immediately ascertained when this particular ship had first arrived for processing several weeks ago, it was generally intact and spaceworthy. The warp core still functioned, the power grid was generally intact, the flight controls and computer systems were operational. While it might look like it belonged in a scrapyard from an aesthetic perspective, he knew that could all be fixed. And it would be fixed.

And even if it wasn't, none of that mattered all that much. Because five years after finally leaving his adoptive family behind, having entirely failed to get anywhere in Starfleet Academy, or impress his high-flying father a single iota, he had made it. He was a captain. Sort of.

Next to him in bed, Maya lazily rolled over and draped herself over him, noting the look on his face with a wry smile. "You know," she purred, "I'm not calling you Captain Jirel."

Jirel did his best to disguise the fact that she had again successfully guessed exactly what he was thinking about, with only partial success. "I just...can't believe we did it," he replied eventually.

This elicited a more flirtatious and knowing look from her, as she idly traced a finger across the spots down the side of his chest.

"I rather hoped you were used to it by now—"

"Not that," he sighed patiently, "I mean...I actually got it. My own ship."

"Careful, darling," she chided him, "I seem to recall that I'm the majority owner of the...what are we calling it?"

"The Bounty."

Her amused expression was complimented by a more curious raised eyebrow.

"Cute."

"You got a better idea?"

"Plenty, as always. But a little something tells me that you're not going to be all that interested in hearing them."

He didn't bother to respond to that. Because he knew she was right, on both counts. And, slightly more troublingly, she was also right about her majority ownership. For now.

"You know I'm gonna pay you back, right?"

"Jirel, you know I don't care about all that. Do you really think I sank that much latinum into this specific ship so that I could play at being captain, hmm?"

He tried to ignore the implication of that comment. After all, he wasn't playing at being captain. He was captain. This was his ship, and he was the captain.

"The truth is," she continued, as she traced her finger back up the chain of spots to his neck, "That, as ever, I can see the bigger picture in this little partnership of ours."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"You named the ship. I'll name this."

He sat up a little straighter in bed, and gestured for her to continue. "So?" he added, "What is the bigger picture?"

"It's fairly simple. While you see the ship as the end product, I see it as the gateway to plenty more profit. We've got the means to make so much more latinum out of all this that the meagre...deposit I just paid for it will seem like pocket change."

She smiled wider as she considered the possibilities.

“The galaxy is our oyster, Jirel.”

He thought about this for a second. He hadn't actually given much thought to what they were going to do now. He knew he had wanted a ship, to get away from the scrapyards. And when he had seen the Bounty being towed in, he knew he had found it. But he had to reluctantly admit that was pretty much as far as his plan had gone. And he did like the sound of what she was proposing.

“Ok,” Jirel nodded back, “I'm in.”

“I know you are,” she smiled, “Besides, I wouldn't worry about what the ship cost. As soon as we left sensor range of the scrapyards, I sent a subspace message to cancel the latinum transfer.”

In the midst of another tingle of pleasure as she gently stroked his spots, Jirel's entire face sagged in shock.

“What?”

She chuckled and rolled away to the other side of the bed, as Jirel entered a state of mild panic.

“You didn't think I was actually going to pay him, did you? For this ship? But relax, by the time that idiotic Reegrunion figures out what's happened, we'll be long gone, won't we? And it's a big galaxy, Jirel. He'll never find us.”

That didn't calm him at all. He leapt out of bed and started to pull on his clothes as he babbled back at her. “B—But he knows who I am! He's got my name, my details! And now you're saying I just stole a ship from him?!”

She reclined in bed as he finished dressing and rushed for the door of his cabin, still in a panic.

“Ok, we'll just turn around. Go back there, explain what happened, and then we can...”

He tailed off as he reached the doorway, turning back to Maya where she lay, apparently without a care in the world.

“...And you're winding me up.”

“Maybe,” she smiled impishly, “But I really didn't mean to. It's just that you make it so very easy to do.”

With a defeated slump of his shoulders and a wry smile, he walked back over to the bed and sat down, looking back at her all the while.

“Am I ever going to be able to trust you?”

She beamed wider and leaned forward to kiss him.

“Not if you know what's good for you.”

* * * * *

“Grenk.”

Jirel managed to cough out the name, as the Ferengi leered back at him on the rocky, barren surface of the Class-L planet. It had been nearly a year since he had last seen him. But there was no mistaking him for any other Ferengi. Especially when he arrived flanked by his most trusted Miradorn bodyguards.

Either side of Grenk, Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan pointed disruptors in Jirel's direction.

“Yes, Jirel,” the Ferengi cackled through a toothy grin, “It's me.”

Grenk.

The Ferengi who Jirel and the Bounty's crew had crossed more times than he could remember. A ruthless businessman forever searching for new ways to acquire latinum. Not to mention screw over any potential business partners.

They had most recently run into each other on a planet that had contained the Jewel of Soraxx, shortly after they had rescued Natasha from her involuntary exile, and while she and the crew of the Bounty were trying to track down said mythical treasure. Back then, Jirel had stolen the last known coordinates of the late USS Navajo from Grenk, and after he had tracked them down, the rest of the Bounty's crew had gone on to disable his shuttle and leave him stranded on the planet's surface.

But that was nowhere near the first time Jirel had crossed paths with Grenk. And it certainly wasn't the first time they had gotten the better of the wily Ferengi during their encounter.

But now, the sinking feeling in Jirel's stomach confirmed that the tables were very much turned.

“Welcome to my latest acquisition,” Grenk postured, gesturing down into the valley below, “I'm so glad you found the time to pay me a visit.”

“You're the owner of Synergy Mining Enterprises?” Jirel grimaced.

“Didn’t you get it?” Grenk beamed, gesturing at the Miradorn twins either side of him, two brothers who shared an innate telepathic bond between each other, “I do like a certain...synergy in my work, after all.”

As Grenk gloated, Maya made her way over to join the Ferengi and his goons, keeping her own weapon pointed at Jirel and Natasha.

“You make a cute couple,” the Trill observed, keeping his bravado levels as high as possible despite the situation.

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be, darling,” Maya replied, before looking over at the still-leering Grenk, “I assume this means my debts are paid off.”

“Oh yes,” Grenk nodded greedily, “Very much so.”

Jirel struggled to fight off the feelings swirling inside him at being so completely abandoned by Maya Ortega once again. And the anger he felt with himself for allowing it to happen. “So,” he grimaced with a shake of his head as he saw the situation for what it was, “This was never a rescue. It was an exchange.”

“Jirel,” Natasha urged, having not had the pleasure of actually meeting Grenk during their misadventures with the Jewel of Soraxx, “Who the hell is this—?”

“I am a businessman, my dear,” Grenk replied on the Trill’s behalf, “One that your colleague here has robbed from, stolen from, double-crossed and nearly ruined over the years.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Jirel grunted at Natasha.

“Am I really? The last time we met, you and your crew left me marooned on that awful, desolate planet.”

“You wanna tell her the full story—?”

“Oh, Jirel, you’ll have plenty of time to tell her that story. And all the others. Because ever since you left me behind there, I swore that was the last straw. That I would have my revenge. And then one day, I caught someone else trying to steal from my company. And just as I was about to send her to my duridium mine to work off her debt...I discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance.”

Jirel flashed another angry look at Maya, as the Ferengi took a step closer to the Trill, confident in the backup from his bodyguards.

“You belong to me now, Jirel. You’re trapped here, and there’s no escape.”

“Oh, really?” Jirel worked on maintaining some of his confidence, “You don’t think the others—”

“The others have been dealt with,” Grenk interjected darkly, revelling in his victory, “That little ship of yours is burning in space.”

The rest of Jirel’s bravado collapsed. Natasha gasped in horror.

To Grenk’s side, Maya suddenly looked a little unsettled. “What did you do?” she cut in, “That wasn’t part of our deal—!”

“Our deal was for you to deliver Jirel and his friends to me. You didn’t seem all that interested in what would happen to them after that.”

Despite having secured her own freedom, no matter what the cost, just as she had since her days back on Turkana IV, Maya suddenly looked ashen. Grenk didn’t seem to care. He kept his focus entirely on his captives.

“What the hell have you done to them?” Jirel growled.

“Assuming my crew have followed my instructions, exactly what you did to me. Disabled their ship and left them to die...”

The sneer on Grenk’s face grew even wider. With a sudden rush of anger, Jirel went to grab him. Natasha held him back just in time, as Shel-Lan fired a warning shot over the Trill’s head.

“And now,” the Ferengi continued, “You and your colleague here are going to work down there, in the duridium mine. In the middle of an empty sector of space, inside all of my carefully curated security procedures. Entirely untraceable, where nobody even knows you are...”

Jirel felt a stab of pain inside as Grenk’s words sank in. He wondered what had happened to the Bounty. To his friends. He wondered what was about to happen to him and Natasha. And he wrestled with the fact that this was all his fault.

All the while, Grenk’s gloating continued.

“And you’re going to work there until you’ve paid off your debt to me. Which, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate, is going to take you a very, very long time indeed.”

He punctuated his gloating with a victorious cackle that seemed to resonate out across the barren landscape.

The two armed Miradorn, with no discernible expressions on their own faces, stepped over to the two helpless Bounty crew members and grabbed their arms, ready to march them away. Neither Jirel nor Natasha offered any resistance, seeing how futile such a gesture would clearly be.

As they were marched off down into the valley, towards the looming dome and the rest of the duridium mine, Jirel fired off a glare at the still-ashen Maya. A glare filled with rage. Not only at her, for the scale of this latest and deepest of betrayals. But also at himself, for allowing himself to trust her again. For allowing himself to fall for her again.

Because the person that had given him his ship, and the freedom of the entire galaxy, had come back to take it all away from him. As they were dragged away, all Jirel could hear, echoing all around him, was the sound of Grenk's victorious cackling.

To be continued...

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