

Star Trek: Bounty - 113 - "Something Bad Happened Today"

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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandom:	Expanded Universes (General)
Character:	Original Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Action/Adventure
Language:	English
Series:	Part 13 of Star Trek: Bounty
Stats:	Published: 2024-09-23 Updated: 2024-10-07 Words: 28,252 Chapters: 13/18

Star Trek: Bounty - 113 - "Something Bad Happened Today"

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Summary

(2 of 2) Maya's latest act of treachery leaves the Bounty's bruised and beaten crew separated and fighting for survival on a barely habitable planet, as an old adversary prepares to exact his revenge on Jirel and the others. (Season Finale)

Prologue

Prologue

*Nyara City, Turkana IV Colony
Stardate 28578.9*

The two figures sprinted along the dirty alleyway.

All the while, they could hear the sets of heavy footfalls behind them getting louder. However quickly they tried to go, their adversaries could always move faster.

Night had fallen across Nyara City, which added to the fears that both of them were keenly feeling. The crumbling buildings and unfriendly surroundings of the settlement seemed even more terrifying in the darkness, as if danger could come from anywhere.

Which, in truth, it usually did on Turkana IV.

They raced on, keeping pace with each other as their scrawny, underdeveloped legs propelled them forwards through a simple survival instinct, if nothing else. All around them was the smell of decay. It was inescapable here. As long as either of the pair of fleeing forms could remember, that stench had hung in the air. But by now, they were used to it. It didn't distract them from their desperate attempt to flee.

They turned and scampered down the next alley. Both of them knew that if they could get themselves far enough ahead of their pursuers through the filthy maze of backstreets, they could give them the slip. At least for long enough to find an old service tunnel or sewage pipe. Once they were underground, despite the further stench and misery they knew they would find down there, then they could get away entirely.

And they could take their treasure with them.

One of the two fleeing children, a scrawny girl with lank, greasy hair, took a second to glance down at the prize in her hand. The reason that she and her friend were now running for their lives. She felt her undernourished stomach rumble at the mere sight of such a delicious bounty, but there was no time to think about anything other than escaping right now.

The boy by her side suddenly grabbed her bony arm and pulled her down another alley to their right, forcing her to switch her focus back to their getaway.

"Leggit here now, friend Maya," he called out breathlessly to her in the broken language of the Turkana IV youth.

Maya Ortega didn't stop to think, allowing herself to be pulled along even as her spindly legs cried out for rest. She glanced at the boy at her side. And despite the peril they were in, she felt a little reassured.

Niki Kolak, the equally scrawny youth with a shock of dirty brown hair, was her friend. Her only friend. Among all the despair that Turkana IV had provided them with, the two of them had formed a rudimentary alliance in order to survive. They looked out for each other, night and day. Because in the depths of Nyara City, nobody else would.

So, as he guided her along, Maya felt a crumb of comfort. They would get through this.

And then they both came to a skittering halt, stopping on the spot in horror.

Ahead of them, the entire route down the alley was obstructed by a pile of twisted metal and rubble. One of the buildings on the left side of the street had finally succumbed to the decay that had been festering inside, and collapsed. And their escape route was well and truly blocked.

They both whirled around to backtrack and find another path to safety. But it was too late. At the end of the alley behind them stood half a dozen bigger children.

Like Maya and Niki, their pursuers were dressed in little more than dirty rags. Most of Turkana IV's street children had never so much as heard of a sonic shower, let alone seen one. And clean clothing was a farcical luxury.

But unlike the two of them, their pursuers were armed.

Their weapons were simplistic. Little more than improvised clubs or cudgels. But they were brutally effective, and the sight of them being wielded by the older children was enough to make Maya and Niki's eyes widen like saucers.

Maya felt her entire body shaking. It wasn't an unfamiliar sensation, especially when the cold winter nights settled in across Nyara City. But this time, it wasn't the temperature that was causing her to shiver. It was fear.

To her side, Niki grasped her hand a little tighter. She glanced over at him and saw the sad look of resignation on his face.

"No way now, friend Maya," he whispered, "No 'scape."

She fought back a tear and kept hold of his hand as the leader of the rabble stepped forwards. He was a tall, pale-skinned teenager with an ugly scar running down his left cheek.

For the time being, the other teenagers held back, gently beating their clubs into their open palms in a show of force. The leader himself was

unarmed, but he cracked his knuckles as he approached in a manner that suggested he didn't need one. The disconcerting sound of his joints cracking and popping sent a fresh shiver down Maya's spine.

As the boy reached where Maya and Niki stood holding hands, he shot out a tendril-like arm and grabbed her other arm by the wrist. She squealed in pain, as he twisted her arm and increased the pressure, until she was forced to unclasp her hand and relinquish her treasure.

It revealed a squashed, expired ration bar. The wrapper had split open before anyone had happened upon it, and there was visible mould growing on the exposed corner of the dirty brown substance inside.

Just about anywhere else in the galaxy, it was disease-riddled garbage. But for the hungry children on the streets of Nyara City, it was a priceless banquet.

"That ours," the scarred leader of the gang grunted at Maya, "Innit our chow-chow."

He punctuated his broken speech by pointing to his mouth with his other hand, in an oddly child-like way for his teenage years.

She tried to formulate a response, but none was forthcoming. He was right, after all. The food, such that it was, belonged to the older gang. But neither Maya nor Niki had eaten for days, and when they saw their chance to grab the bar and make a run for it, they had taken it.

But unfortunately for them, they had quite literally run down a blind alley. And now the consequences of their actions loomed large in front of them. Angry and armed to the teeth.

The leader of the gang grabbed the rotten snack from her, shoving it roughly into the pocket of his tattered shorts. Then, he glared at her more intently and cracked his knuckles again, inducing a fresh wince in her terrified features. They clearly wanted more than just their morsel of food back. They wanted to teach them a lesson.

"You took chow-chow?" he asked her.

Maya's mind raced. She had taken the snack. In fact, the whole thing had been her idea. And now she was going to be beaten, and possibly killed, for it.

Then, something inside her was triggered. The survival instincts that she had honed in her time growing up amongst the ruins of the Turkana IV colony morphed into something new. A ruthless streak she never realised she had suddenly blossomed. She saw that she might have a way out of all of this. And this new part of her didn't waste any time in taking it.

She and Niki Kolak had promised to always stick together. To face the horrors of the failed colony as one. And they had both stuck to that solemn promise.

Until now.

Before she fully comprehended what she was doing, Maya let go of Niki's hand. Then, she looked up at the angry teenager and shook her head, before pointing at the boy next to her.

"He took," she whispered, the lie nearly getting caught in her throat, "Then gave me."

The older boy turned his attention to Niki. Maya glanced over as well, and felt her heart break as she saw the look of terrified betrayal on his face. To add to her shame, Niki made no attempt to argue back. To try and save himself from the beating she had just sentenced him to, or try to take her down with him. Instead, he remained loyal to their promise, even as she tore it up in front of him.

The gang's leader pushed her to one side. She stumbled on the debris under her feet and fell to the floor. The leader advanced on Niki, as the other gang members closed in, clubs and cudgels at the ready.

Maya scrambled to her feet and looked away, even as the first blows began to ring out in the alley, accompanied by squeals of pain from Niki.

As the beating continued, she ran back the way they had come. Nobody bothered to chase her. They were all busy having their fun.

So she ran. Even as Niki's wails echoed behind her and tears stung her eyes, she ran on through the back streets.

She was sure the bigger boys wouldn't go as far as killing him. At least, not deliberately. But she knew that whatever happened, she would never see Niki Kolak again. She would have to leave Nyara City and strike out alone into the wilderness beyond the ruined city's walls to search for another settlement.

But as she ran on, and the sounds from the merciless beating grew quieter, she found that she could live with all of that. Suddenly, none of that seemed to matter. What mattered was that she had done what she needed to do to survive. And although Maya Ortega had no way of knowing it, that would be the most important lesson she would ever learn.

So she ran on through the decaying streets, leaving Niki behind.

And she never looked back.

Maya Ortega watched as the armed Miradorn goons grabbed the two figures.

She had done it again. Done what she needed to do in order to survive.

But it wasn't supposed to play out like this.

Her plan to skim some latinum off the profits of her new employers at Synergy Mining Enterprises had been foolproof, using her access to their financial systems to patiently accumulate a modest sum of capital. Utilising skills she had perfected over a lifetime lived on the edge of legality.

And it worked. For a while. But unfortunately, she had underestimated the new owner of Synergy Mining Enterprises. The Ferengi called Grenk had nurtured his lack of trust over his own lifetime spent jumping from one shady business deal to the next. And he had noticed her profit-skimming scam immediately.

Like everyone who crossed him, Grenk demanded that she work off what she took from him as punishment. Back-breaking slave labour in his mines until the ruthless Ferengi considered the debt settled. Whenever that may have been.

But then, as she had done so many times, all the way back to Nyara City, Maya found a way to survive. She found a deal to strike with Grenk that had been equally beneficial to the Ferengi. A way to get his hands on a group of people who had wronged him far more than she had. And she delivered them right to him. The crew of the Bounty.

She had survived. And yet, this time, she felt no sense of satisfaction.

She watched as Jirel Vincent, the unjoined Trill captain of the Bounty, her former business partner and lover, was hauled past her towards the duridium mine in the valley below. Along with him, Natasha Kinsen, the human doctor of the Bounty, was dragged along by the other Miradorn.

In orbit, Grenk had claimed that the Bounty itself, and the rest of her crew, had been destroyed. An act that had not been part of the deal.

As Jirel was dragged past her, he locked eyes with her. And she saw the same look of betrayal that she had seen on the face of Niki Kolak. A look that she had seen on countless faces over the years as she had lied and scammed her way through the galaxy. She had never forgotten the look on Niki's face. And she was sure now that she would never forget the look on Jirel's.

As she and Grenk turned to follow the prisoners down into the valley, she forced her to remind herself what this had all been for. She had survived. And that was all that mattered.

Wasn't it?

Part 1A

Part One

The heavy doors to the airlock opened with a low clunking sound.

Jirel found himself being forcefully shoved through them, but part of him was relieved to get inside. Especially when the doors closed behind them and the sound of instant repressurisation fired up with a hiss of air. The Class-L conditions on the surface had taken its toll on his Trill physiology more than he had been expecting, despite the shot of stims Natasha had given him before they beamed down.

His usual misplaced bravado had led to him dismissing any concerns. He could tolerate it. Besides, they weren't supposed to be down here for this long. But it had been painful.

As he took a deep lungful of the stale, but oxygen-rich air that was being pumped into the airlock, his mind began to refocus on his more general plight.

He and his crew had been in the middle of another adventure, racing across the quadrant to rescue a Trill from a mysterious mining operation. A Trill who was apparently married to Jirel's former business partner, and lover. And in an instant, everything had unravelled.

Before he had even had a chance to act, their entire quest had been revealed to be a trick, designed to make him the property of Grenk.

Grenk was someone that the Bounty's crew had crossed paths with countless times. The sort of individual who had a habit of finding himself in the middle of the more nefarious aspects of the galaxy. And one that Jirel and the Bounty had managed to outwit and escape every time they had been unfortunate enough to run into him.

Until now. When, nearly a year after the Bounty had last beaten the wily Ferengi and left him marooned on a planet during an unsuccessful attempt to recover the ancient Jewel of Soraxx, Grenk had found a way to have his revenge.

Down on the surface of the planet, the security processes they had previously managed to override had suddenly come back to life and Jirel and Natasha had been captured. Up in orbit, the Bounty had apparently been attacked.

Now, he and Natasha were being taken to Grenk's fortified mining operation, far away from any other inhabited worlds. To be put to work until the considerable debt that the Ferengi believed he owed him had been paid off. And nobody was aware that they were even here.

And all of this was his fault. Specifically, it was his fault for trusting Maya Ortega. Once again.

He couldn't bring himself to look over at her as they silently stood in the airlock, opting instead to look straight ahead at the dirty metal inner door. The only sound from any of them was Grenk's slightly wheezy breathing from his own exertions in the Class-L conditions.

Eventually, the pressure equalised, and the inner door opened. Jirel was now shoved through into the habitation area alongside Natasha by the two Miradorn, Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan, who had long served as Grenk's most trusted bodyguards. And since their boss had taken ownership of Synergy Mining Enterprises, they were also serving as head wardens for each new mining facility.

They were confronted by a long corridor and a distinctly musty, unwashed smell. Maya found herself having to repress a flashback to the decay of Nyara City that the scent dredged up inside her.

As Jirel and Natasha were roughly led down the corridor, the freshly-oxygenated Grenk burst out in a fresh mocking cackle, as he allowed himself to gloat further over his victory.

"I do hope you like the place," the Ferengi mocked, gesturing at the walls of the corridor, "You're going to be here for a while, after all."

Jirel didn't respond. Natasha looked over at the silent Trill, and felt deeply worried by what she saw. One way or another, she had become very familiar with Jirel over the last year. And she had never seen him like this.

The wannabe space adventurer could be brash and cocky, or irritatingly casual and blasé, or insanely jealous, or surprisingly sympathetic, or any combination of the above, as he and his crew flew from one misadventure to the next. But through all of that, he remained a man of positivity. For all of the dangerous situations that the Bounty and her crew had gotten into since Natasha had joined them, he had never looked like he was giving up, or accepting that there was no way out.

Until now, it seemed. Because now, she couldn't see a trace of the happy-go-lucky adventurer anywhere. All she saw was a broken man. Which meant that, this time, Jirel didn't see the way out.

As they were marched around a corner, the corridor opened up into a cavernous room in front of them. And Natasha began to feel that she didn't see a way out either.

The room was dominated by a fenced-off area in the middle of the vast open space. Thick metal bars that extended all the way up to the roof of the habitation dome separated them from whatever, or whoever was inside. Natasha silently theorised that this represented the accommodation for the mine's workers. And it looked far more like a prison than a barracks.

A shiver passed down her spine as she recalled what Maya had said about the operations that were run by this particular company on their journey here. How it used its workers like slaves. And looking at the heavy bars as they approached, it definitely felt more like incarceration than employment.

They were marched right up to a set of imposing doors by Grenk's bodyguards. One of the Miradorn, either Shel-Lan or Gel-Lan, tapped the controls, and seconds later the doors parted with a low hiss. Neither Natasha nor Jirel moved until they were shoved inside by the two armed Miradorn.

Natasha looked around the dank interior of their new accommodation. It was hard to make out details, with the lighting throughout the expanse of this area being kept low.

The interior of the caged area was a filthy expanse of metal flooring, covered in layers of dust and dirt from the boots of returning duridium miners. In the middle of the roughly circular space was a collection of small prefab rectangular cabins, which she surmised contained whatever passed for sleeping and recreation areas for the workers.

She could already see various grizzled forms peering out from the cabins, or standing elsewhere inside the caged-off area, checking out their new arrivals.

Through the meagre lighting, Natasha made out some of the faces of the other enslaved miners that must have fallen foul of Grenk at one point or another. And none of them filled her with any sense of confidence about their long-term survival. There were several threatening Nausicaans, a couple of Breen in heavy refrigeration suits, at least one seven foot-tall Reman, a number of armour-plated individuals she couldn't recognise, and even what looked like a Gorn, with its compound eyes glinting in the half-light.

Only one thing seemed consistent across the sea of differing faces inside the cage. None of them looked impressed by the two newcomers.

She forced herself to turn back, where Jirel was already staring back at Grenk, Maya and the two Miradorn. All four remained resolutely on the other side of the door.

"I'm sure your fellow employees will be over to introduce themselves very soon," the Ferengi cackled again, "But try not to get too many of those spots knocked off, Jirel. After all, your first shift starts soon, and Synergy Mining Enterprises expects its employees to work hard."

Jirel's fists clenched at his sides as he stared back at Grenk, but for the time being he remained silent, leaving the response to Natasha.

"This is how you treat your workers?" she said, gesturing around the confines of the cage, "This is slavery!"

"This is repayment," the Ferengi countered, "As I've told you, everyone here owes me a significant personal debt. And if you want to know how significant, I suggest you ask your friendly captain here to tell you how much latinum he's screwed me out of down the years."

He paused to shoot Jirel an especially pointed glare before he continued.

"But this is still a business arrangement, designed to ensure that everyone works hard enough until I'm satisfied that we're back on equal terms. If you stick to your shift rotation and make your quotas, there'll be no further punishment, and your free time will be your own."

Natasha scoffed, wondering if the Ferengi actually believed any of what he was saying himself.

"Still," Grenk added with a darker tone, "I should remind you that there is nowhere for you to run, even if you wanted to. You're all alone, with no hope of rescue, on a heavily-guarded planet in the middle of the galactic hinterlands. So try to behave. I'd hate for something to happen to you, Jirel..."

His mouth curved into a satisfied leer, displaying rows of sharp, spiky teeth, as he spelled out the depths of their incarceration.

As Grenk reached the end of his speech, Jirel finally spoke. But the tone of his voice was unlike anything that Natasha had heard before. The Trill's voice came out of his mouth laced with venom, directed squarely at the gloating Ferengi.

"Listen to me, Grenk," he hissed with naked anger, "You can stand there and gloat all you want, but you need to know this: I'm gonna get out of here, somehow. And when I do, I'm gonna find you. Wherever you are. And if what you're saying is true, and you've really hurt the others, or worse, then I'm gonna kill you. Both of you."

A fresh chill passed down Natasha's spine as the furious Jirel shot a glare from Grenk over to Maya, who met his gaze with a look of resigned understanding. She knew, as much as Natasha knew, that Jirel was being entirely serious. Which was a very rare occurrence indeed.

Despite the ferocity of his words, Grenk still looked comfortable. The two disruptors being trained on Jirel by the Miradorn bodyguards on either side of him seemed to be helping with that. Still, Natasha noted something in their captor's eyes after the Trill's outburst. A flicker behind the confidence that suggested he was as perturbed by Jirel's uncharacteristic attack as the other witnesses to it were.

"Please, Jirel," the Ferengi replied, "Don't be like that. After all, I do intend to release you...one day."

With a final cackle, Grenk nodded at Shel-Lan (or possibly Gel-Lan), and the Miradorn tapped the controls again. As the heavy metal doors slowly closed, trapping them inside their new accommodation, Jirel kept his focus on Grenk and Maya. Staring them down with a look of rage.

As the doors locked in place, a fresh shiver passed down Natasha's spine.

Behind them, the welcoming committee was already massing.

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

The wooden deck rose and fell almost imperceptibly as the water gently lapped against the side of the hull. A gentle breeze wafted into the sails, keeping the vessel moving serenely across the sea, slowly but surely navigating towards its destination.

Sunek had no idea where he was.

Technically, he knew exactly where he was. He was on an ancient Vulcan sailing ship, crossing the vast expanse of the Voroth Sea. He'd been here many times before. But more accurately, he'd also never been here. And wherever he was, which was still something he had been unable to determine, he knew he definitely wasn't here right now.

This was a scene he pictured when meditating, a simple calming vista taught to Vulcan children when they were being introduced to the craft. Sunek had never been much for meditation, but recently he had taken to the practice more earnestly, to help quell some unsettling emotional episodes he had been having.

But he was pretty sure that, wherever he was, he wasn't meditating.

Everything he could see, as best as he had been able to surmise, must just be a dream, or a hallucination, or some other randomly accessed memory that his subconscious brain was using to protect him from reality. Which didn't exactly fill him with a great deal of comfort.

The last thing he remembered, the Bounty had been under attack. The ship was crippled. The battle was lost. Then something had exploded nearby. He had been thrown from his pilot's seat and had tumbled to the ground. His head had impacted on something heavy.

And then he was here. As much as he could be here without actually being here.

As he stood on the deck of the sailing ship and stared out across the gentle surface of the sea, he felt oddly serene. It wasn't a feeling he experienced very often. He began to idly wonder whether this was his mind's way of preparing him for death. Or even if he was already dead, and now he was here.

He quickly dismissed that idea. He'd never paid much attention during his studies back on Vulcan when matters had turned to existential discussions about the eternal nature of a Vulcan's katra, but he felt it was definitely a stretch to imagine that what awaited beyond one's corporeal existence just happened to be exactly the same as a meditation exercise for the under-fives.

"Sunek."

The voice caused him to refocus on the here and now. Or, at least, the vision of a here and now that was all around him. He couldn't tell exactly where it had come from. It was as if it had drifted past him on the breeze. Or floated up from the still waters of the sea. But wherever it had come from, it unsettled him. Because he recognised the voice.

It was his voice.

"You can't ignore me forever, Sunek," his voice continued.

It was his voice, but it wasn't him. At least, that was how Sunek saw it. The voice belonged to someone he had become many months ago, during a run-in with his old friend Sokar and a group of former V'tosh ka'tur members. The Vulcans without logic.

Sokar, driven mad with a need for vengeance against the Vulcan society that had ostracised him, used violent mind melds to control his followers, and had done the same to Sunek, showing him upsetting scenes of his childhood, and turning him into something else. Something darker.

At the time, Sunek had referred to this new part of him as New Sunek. While New Sunek, who had just thought of himself as Sunek, had called him Old Sunek. Either way, New Sunek had been in control of him, to the point that he almost ended up killing Jirel and assisting in a surprise attack on the Vulcan homeworld in a looted Romulan Warbird. But he had fought back in the nick of time, and New Sunek had been banished to the fringes of his memory. Where he had been doing his best to ignore him ever since.

But for some reason, given that he was here, and at the same time had no idea where here was, Sunek found that he was compelled to acknowledge him. He turned to the port side of the sailing ship, and looked at the storm on the horizon.

"There," his voice said, "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Sunek licked his lips, for once a little unsure of himself. After all, he was about to have a conversation with a storm cloud. The manifestation of whatever rage Sokar had left inside him.

"This is really dumb," he sighed eventually, "What am I even supposed to call you?"

"Sunek."

"Nah," he said with a shake of his head, "Can't be that. I'm Sunek."

"So am I."

“Nuh huh. You’re...well, I’m not really sure who you are. But you suck, I know that much.”

“I’ve got as much of a right to be Sunek as you have,” the storm cloud argued with an insistent rumble of thunder.

“Nope. I was here first. You’re just some...weird mind meld thing Sokar gave me.”

“Think that if you like, but I’ve always been here.”

Despite the pleasant ambient conditions around the boat, Sunek felt a shiver pass through him. “Ok, I was right, this is really dumb,” he grimaced, turning his back on the storm, “I’m gonna go back to ignoring you.”

“Suit yourself. But I can tell you’re gonna need me. Very, very soon...”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

No answer.

“What?” Sunek persisted, keeping his back to the storm, “Now you’re ignoring me?”

Still no answer. He stepped over to the rail around the edge of the boat and looked down at the clear water below. The fresh silence, which had seemed so peaceable to him before, now just seemed to irritate him. He now knew he wasn’t alone, wherever he was. He had a talking cloud for company. A talking cloud that was ignoring him.

“Am I dead?” he asked eventually, breaking the silence.

“Psh,” his own voice replied, “You think anything this boring happens when you’re dead?”

“How would you know?”

A pause, accompanied by a low, enigmatic rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Well, no,” the reply came eventually, “You’re not dead. At least, not yet.”

Sunek sighed and rested his chin on the rail in front of him. “So...what do I do now?”

“Well, I’d say the first thing you should do is...wake up.”

The Vulcan lifted his head back up with a start, suddenly feeling something new as a result of that comment.

“What?”

“Wake up. Wake up, Sunek.”

It was no longer his voice talking. It was someone else’s. And all of a sudden, he remembered where he was.

The Vorothe Sea faded from view. The storm still rumbling on the horizon.

* * * * *

“Sunek, wake up!”

Sunek’s vision resolved into a twisted version of a very different, but still familiar location.

He was lying in a painful heap on the deck of the Bounty’s cockpit. At least, what was left of it. The whole room was in darkness, aside from the remnants of a plasma fire smouldering in the far corner. All around lay the devastation caused by the orbital fight they had been entirely unprepared for. Consoles damaged, panels destroyed and the scent of burnt components tainted the air.

Just before he had been thrown clear of his pilot’s console, the entire ship was in a death spiral towards the planet below, bereft of power and propulsion. But somehow, they were still here.

“Sunek!”

With some effort, he forced himself to sit up, wiping a patch of green blood from his forehead, and looked in the direction of the familiar voice.

Standing above him, his face smeared with blood as well, Klath’s features contorted into a rare approximation of relief. “You are alive,” the Bounty’s weapons chief grunted.

“Yeah, apparently,” the Vulcan managed to cough, “Where the hell are we?”

Klath didn’t immediately answer the question. Mainly because he wasn’t sure himself.

With his Klingon reserves of strength, and a final sliver of battery power from the Bounty’s failing systems that he had routed to the thrusters, he had managed to affect something approaching an emergency landing. It hadn’t been graceful. But he had kept the ailing ship gliding for

long enough to reach a relatively flat section of dusty grey rock below them, on the opposite side of the planet to Synergy Mining Enterprises and their operation.

Then, without the ability to even extend the dead vessel's landing struts, he had performed the mother of all bellyflops, the Bounty hitting the surface of the planet and skidding along for some time, gouging a path through the dust and dirt.

Klath had no idea how much further damage had been caused to the hull with the manoeuvre, but given the circumstances, the important thing was that they had landed.

Today had not been a good day to die.

Klath had then begun trying to revive the others, starting with Sunek. And in the interests of keeping the Vulcan as calm as possible, he elected not to tell him how close the sliding Bounty had gotten to a sheer vertical drop into a ravine. One that would have certainly destroyed the remains of the ship and them along with it.

So instead, satisfied that Sunek was alive, he turned and limped over to his more pressing concern at the rear of the cockpit.

"We have landed," he offered as an eventual answer to the Vulcan's question.

Sunek pushed himself up further, leaning back on the wall of the Bounty's cockpit next to an ugly tear in the metal caused by an exploded power line and checking himself for signs of injury.

He was immediately interrupted by a roar of exertion from Klath. Sweat mixed with the blood on his forehead as he put all of his remaining strength into lifting a piece of shattered metal up from the deck of the ship. Gritting his teeth, he was just about able to manoeuvre the heavy slab up and away, before throwing it to one side with a clatter.

He turned back to see where he had revealed Denella's prone and twisted form where she had fallen during the final attack. The Orion engineer wasn't moving, her eyes were closed.

She seemed to have taken the force of one of the exploding conduits behind her station during the one-sided battle in orbit of the moon. Not only was she unconscious, but her right arm was twisted unnaturally around, and Klath could see that her oversized grey overalls were coated in blood on the same side, indicating significantly more severe injuries.

While his Klingon side felt instinctive pride at the possibility that his colleague may have died in battle, this was overridden by different feelings that had developed since he had left the Empire.

She was his friend. And, quite simply, he didn't want his friend to die.

"How is she?" Sunek coughed from behind him, with distinctly un-Sunekian concern.

Klath found himself holding his breath as he reached a heavy hand down to check for a pulse. "She is alive," he reported with relief, "But badly injured."

He grabbed a battered tricorder from the debris and made an attempt to scan Denella's body for her most pressing internal injuries. After a moment, he grunted in frustration.

"The tricorder is not functioning correctly," he reported, "There is radiation around from damage to the ship's warp core, interfering with the scans."

"Neat," Sunek muttered.

Klath tossed the tricorder away and reached down to lift Denella up from the wreckage. "We must get her to the medical bay and treat her as best as we can."

"Think we could all do with that," Sunek nodded with a grimace as he forced himself back to his feet with some effort, "But then what the hell do we do?"

Klath lifted Denella's body in his arms, and wasted no time in replying. He had been cultivating a battle plan, even as he had been ascertaining the status of the others. And nothing he had seen since then had given him cause to reconsider it.

"As soon as we get Denella stable, we must take whatever weapons and supplies that we can find and abandon ship."

As he stepped towards the cockpit's rear steps with Denella's unconscious form, Sunek stared at the back of the Klingon's head with incredulity.

"We abandon—? And what exactly do we do then, huh? What, you wanna go check into one of the local hotels? Spend some time sightseeing? Hey, maybe we can flag down a passing shuttle and see if they'll take us on a bar crawl?"

Klath suppressed a surge of irritation at the return of Sunek's sarcastic side, and began to descend the steps with Denella. "I am well aware of our lack of options. But while I am still unsure who attacked us, they clearly meant to kill us. Which means that it will not be long before they come to finish us off."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because," the former member of the Klingon Defence Force grunted, "That is what I would do."

That was enough to convince Suneek that Klath was sincere about his plan, even if the Vulcan still had plenty of issues with it.

“And what about the Bounty?” he called after him as he disappeared from view down the steps.

“We may need to find...alternative transportation.”

With no further sarcastic comments forthcoming from the pilot for the time being, the Klingon continued down the Bounty’s darkened main corridor towards whatever remained of the ship’s small medical bay.

But he didn’t get very far.

As he got within sight of his destination, he suddenly heard the telltale sound of incoming transporter beams. And with Denella’s prone form in his arms, he was completely powerless to do anything about it.

He impotently watched on as the boarding party coalesced around him in the mangled remains of the Bounty’s corridor. He had been right. Their enemy had come to finish off the job.

Klath grunted unhappily as he saw the disruptors.

He hated being right all the time.

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

High in orbit above the Class-L planet, the Boundless Profit cut a serene form.

It was Grenk's pride and joy. His personal, and heavily armed, yacht. The armaments having been recently demonstrated to devastating effect on the Bounty.

It was a bespoke design, one that Grenk had ordered in a rare moment of indulgence. The hull was ovoid, roughly twice the length of the downed Ju'Day-type raider, and made of orange-tinged metal. Two stubby warp nacelles branched off from the rear, while the front section featured twin pincer-like prongs that housed the main disruptors.

And right now, it was the setting for an argument.

"This wasn't the deal!"

"You're in no position to tell me what the deal was."

Maya Ortega paced around Grenk's private quarters on the Boundless Profit, her face a picture of helpless anger. Grenk himself luxuriated on a cushioned sofa on one side of the room, idly popping tube grubs into his mouth from a bowl on a side table.

The rest of the room was extravagantly decorated. Most of the interior of the Boundless Profit was utilitarian, but Grenk had allowed himself further indulgence when it came to his own cabin. Priceless art from all across the quadrant hung from the walls, a huge king-size bed was draped in soft Tholian silk sheets, and the outer wall of the room was dominated by a huge panoramic window, giving a view of the planet below.

Maya paused in her pacing and stared down towards the featureless rock below. She found herself searching for a sight of the domed buildings that made up the mining operation, even though she knew they were too high for that to be visible.

And she also found herself thinking about Niki Kolak again. The face of the boy that she had known, and then betrayed, back on Turkana IV. She hadn't thought about him for years. But something had caused all of that emotional baggage to surge forth from the depths of her memory.

It wasn't entirely clear to her why these feelings would have returned now. There was nothing truly remarkable about her latest piece of treachery against Jirel and the others. It had been, as it always was for her, a practical decision in order for her to survive. She had been caught out. And she had reacted on instinct. To save herself.

But still, Niki Kolak's look of betrayal refused to disappear.

Forcing those thoughts away as best she could, she turned back to Grenk with renewed anger. "You told me you wanted Jirel to repay you. That was all. Nothing about taking any of his crew, or attacking his ship!"

Grenk swallowed a mouthful of tube grubs and smacked his lips with satisfaction, before fixing her with an amused leer. "Come now, my dear," he replied, "There's no way the same person who very nearly got away with the trick you tried to pull on me can also be this naive?"

Maya bristled at this, feeling it as a slight against her own skills. Time and again, from rumbling her profit-skimming trick in record time, to renegeing on their original deal regarding Jirel, the astute Ferengi was bettering her.

He had even used her to plan out their strategy. She had meticulously worked to fake the details of her marriage, and of her equally fictitious husband and his employment with Synergy Mining Enterprises.

She had even come up with the overly elaborate means that she and the Bounty's crew would have to piece together the information they needed to reach this planet, putting them in just enough jeopardy for her to demonstrate her fictitious loyalty to them, and build Jirel's trust in her back up, only to betray him all over again.

She wasn't proud of it, but it was all second nature to her now. And she did what had to be done.

Except now, it seemed that Grenk's elaborate revenge on the Trill extended a lot further than she had anticipated. He had bettered her again.

"You could at least let Natasha go," she offered back at the grub-filled Ferengi, "The human woman he was with?"

Grenk tilted his head to one side, eyeing her up with new-found curiosity. "You're also not in a position to ask for anything, And I must say, this is a very strange time for you to develop a conscience, my dear. You didn't seem to have a problem with any of this earlier."

"You didn't leave me with much choice," she reminded him, "And you told me that all you wanted was Jirel. Not the others."

"I had a...change of heart."

With that, the Ferengi cackled victoriously and shovelled another handful of tube grubs into his mouth, but Maya didn't flinch. When Grenk saw her reaction, he paused with slight irritation, realising that she wasn't going to stop bringing the mood down any time soon.

"Ugh," he tutted, "If you must know, I've decided to stick around for a while and send some of my men to...salvage that little ship of Jirel's. Whatever there is left to salvage."

“Why?”

“I thought it might make a pleasing trophy. I might even put it back into service, transporting the very ore that Jirel mines down there back to the processing plant. Just for a little extra humiliation. And, if the rest of his little crew have survived, we’ll pick them up.”

“And what then?” she pressed instead, suppressing a fresh and unexpected pang of guilt.

“Then, I’ll put them to work as well. They can work off the debt to me together.”

“And then you’ll release them?”

Grenk’s face creased back into an evil smile at this, sending a further wave of guilt through her body. “Ah, still so naive,” he chided her, “See, here’s the funny thing. I always intend to release those that have wronged me after they pay off their debt. It’s only fair, after all. But... somehow none of them ever make it that far. Such a shame.”

Maya’s expression hardened as Grenk’s leer widened.

“Some of them work too hard in those harsh conditions. Some try to overpower the guards and need...disciplining. And sometimes they just start killing each other. Either way, it’s a very happy coincidence. After all, there’s a lot of people down there who are annoyed with me. Far safer that none of them get out.”

Maya’s left arm tensed and began to straighten as the sense of anger inside her grew. It was a move that Grenk instantly recognised.

“And before you think about pulling that little phaser out from up your sleeve, might I remind you that all Synergy Mining Enterprises facilities, including the Boundless Profit, are covered by a very strict weapon dampening field. Only SME-approved weapons will function.”

Finding herself outflanked by the Ferengi yet again, she relaxed her arm and kept the antique type-1 phaser where it was. All of a sudden, she felt just as trapped as the miners down on the planet were. Literally in the middle of nowhere, with only Grenk and the Boundless Profit to transport her away from here.

She didn’t like the sensation of not being in control.

“Now,” he continued, pushing the bowl of tube grubs away and reclining a little more on the sofa with a toothy leer, “I called you in here for a reason, didn’t I?”

She stifled another grimace as she slowly paced over to the sofa and sat down, allowing him to nestle his head in her lap.

As Grenk got comfortable, he found himself giving serious consideration to having her killed. To tie up another potential loose end. But then, he was going to be stuck in orbit for a while as his men secured the wreckage of the Bounty. And she did have some other uses while he waited.

After all, she was very gifted at oo-mox.

As Maya began to reluctantly massage the Ferengi’s bulbous ears, a victorious Grenk drifted off on a wave of pleasure.

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

Why was it always Nausicaans?

It was a question that had crossed Jirel's mind plenty of times in the past. Somehow, whenever it seemed like a situation couldn't get any worse, a Nausicaan arrived to undermine that belief. This time, the question had crossed his mind moments before a hefty Nausicaan fist slammed into his stomach, doubling him over in pain and causing him to drop to the dirty ground in a miserable heap.

The welcoming committee wasn't proving especially welcoming.

As Jirel tried to recover from the latest punch to his bruised body, his burly opponent stepped closer, his armoured features contorting into the closest his species could get to a smile of satisfaction. Just as the Trill braced himself for another painful blow, a roar came from behind the Nausicaan.

Out of the shadows, Natasha raced up and put all of her strength into landing a two-handed punch to the back of the creature looming over Jirel. She felt a sharp flare of pain rushing up both arms as she made solid contact with the even more solid back of her opponent.

The Nausicaan barely flinched. But he was at least distracted enough to turn around to glare at her, giving Jirel enough of a respite to awkwardly clamber back to his feet.

As he caught his breath, he caught sight through the gloom of the baying audience that had gathered around the open part of the cage to watch the entertainment.

He and Natasha had only just turned away from Grenk's gloating before several of the other captive miners had approached them. All of them had taken an immediate dislike to them. None more so than the tallest of the Nausicaans. And, as his species so often did, he chose to express that dislike as physically as possible.

It had become immediately obvious that none of the handful of twin Miradorn guards patrolling around the other side of the cage had any interest in breaking things up. Though the one positive was that, so far, none of the other equally terrifying miners had elected to make their little scuffle a tag team match. They were happy to form their audience.

As Jirel recovered, Natasha became the focus of the Nausicaan's dislike once again. She channelled the depths of her Academy combat training into evading two clumsy swings of the Nausicaan's burly arms, and then ducked and charged into her opponent's midriff with all her strength.

This tactic proved as pointless as the punches had. The Nausicaan didn't move an inch, and looked down at her as she wrapped her arms around his torso and grunted in vain with a trace of amusement, before grabbing her and tossing her aside like a rag doll.

As she struggled to get back to her feet and the Nausicaan stepped up with menace, Jirel pounced, slamming two ineffectual but distracting punches of his own into the hulking monster's back. The Nausicaan, now growing more irritated, whirled around and grabbed the Trill around the neck with his hefty right hand, before lifting him clean off the ground and choking him.

As Jirel's eyes bulged and he gasped helplessly for air, Natasha forced herself to her feet and flung herself at the Nausicaan once again, trying in vain to do enough to cause him to release his grip on her ailing friend.

Just as Jirel's vision began to blur, another arm shot out from nowhere and grabbed the Nausicaan's wrist that was wrapped around Jirel's throat. From his vantage point, Jirel couldn't see who the arm belonged to, but they were strong enough for the Nausicaan to stop what he was doing.

With an unhappy grunt, the Nausicaan released Jirel. He dropped to the ground, gasping for air, and Natasha stumbled to his side to check on him.

"I'm ok," he managed to cough, only partly in truth, before they looked up at their saviour.

They saw the Nausicaan was now squaring off against a new opponent. For a moment, the two huge creatures sized each other up, apparently contemplating the merits of continuing the day's entertainment, but eventually the Nausicaan skulked back into the shadows, and the disappointed crowd dissipated.

Jirel and Natasha stared up at the unblinking face of the Gorn. The unlikely of rescuers stared back at them.

"Thanks," Natasha managed as she helped Jirel to his feet, "Glad someone's on our side in here."

The Gorn tilted his head curiously at them, his compound eyes looking them over. "I am not on your side," he hissed, before nodding his head in the direction of the retreating Nausicaan, "I am simply not on his side. The more newcomers he kills, the more work that is left for the rest of us."

Any sense of reassurance the Gorn's intervention had cultivated vanished in an instant.

"I am tired of everyone fighting each other," he continued, "I have tried to tell them to save their strength for the real enemy, but some are too angry, or too stupid, to listen."

Jirel nodded, not needing any more details as to who the real enemy was in this instance. Then, he found himself stumbling slightly, wincing at a flare of pain from where one of the Nausicaan's fists had impacted on his stomach.

"You are damaged," the Gorn noted dispassionately.

"You have no idea," the Trill replied without a trace of mirth.

The Gorn didn't react to that comment, but he did gesture towards the meagre collection of prefab cabins in the middle of the cage, where most of the other miners had disappeared into. "They provide us with medical supplies to treat any injuries we sustain," he hissed, "We are of no use to them if we cannot mine their duridium. You should repair yourselves. Before your first shift."

"Thanks," Natasha nodded, "I guess I'll get us both patched up. And I can check your...damage as well, if you want?"

She immediately saw the Gorn tense up at this. Her keen medical eye had spotted the telltale sign of injury to his right shoulder almost immediately. It was an old injury, but one that she would be more than capable of treating, as a way of thanking the Gorn for his intervention.

"I am not damaged," he replied.

As the lizard-like creature drew himself up to his full seven feet of height in response to her off-hand comment, she could now see that, in this sort of environment, it probably wasn't safe for someone like him to make any weakness apparent.

"My mistake," she corrected herself with a slight smile, before she leaned closer and muttered under her breath into the Gorn's right tympanum, "You have an old wound on your shoulder. Some of the damaged scales look to be infected. I can treat it later, if you want. Subtly. Nobody else would need to know anything."

The Gorn didn't react. Or at least, he didn't appear to. But she hoped that she had done enough to foster some sort of rudimentary understanding. She pulled away and steadied Jirel's weakened form as they prepared to walk off to find whatever passed for a medical bay in their current accommodation.

"You should know," the Gorn hissed, causing them to pause and look back, "You may face several more fights in here. Someone has...placed a price on your head."

Jirel and Natasha glanced at each other. She suppressed a shudder.

"Who would have done that?" she forced herself to ask.

"Knowing Grenk," Jirel muttered angrily, "Probably him. If someone kills us in here, he doesn't need to worry about me killing him when we get out of here."

Not for the first time, Natasha found herself troubled by the fact that Jirel seemed entirely serious about that.

"It is a substantial amount of latinum," the Gorn offered, "Whoever it is, they are quite eager to see that someone does the job."

Natasha now found herself troubled by a second thing in quick succession. "What should we do?" she asked.

The Gorn considered this question for a long, thoughtful moment.

"You should hope that I never require the latinum."

With this, Natasha decided to stop counting the number of things that were troubling her.

* * * * *

Grenk had barely had time to fully immerse himself in an impromptu second round of oo-mox before he had been called away by one of his Miradorn guards.

As a result, he was in a particularly foul mood when he and Maya walked into the Boundless Profit's brig area. But, it had to be said, not in anywhere near as foul a mood as the individual in the main holding cell.

Klath stood proudly inside the cell, his teeth bared in the direction of the guards on the other side of the forcefield. Both had their disruptors raised, despite the forcefield, and one held their other arm at a contorted angle next to their body, clearly indicating a recent scuffle that he had come off the worse from.

As the doors opened, Klath switched his attention to the Ferengi and the human, but his aggressive stance didn't alter.

To Grenk's side, with the memory of the oo-mox session fresh in her mind, Maya absently wondered whether it was possible to have a lower opinion of herself than she did right now. That question was answered when she was hit by the full force of Klath's glower from the other side of the forcefield.

"You."

"Yes," Grenk cackled as he saw the familiar face, "Me."

But Klath's focus hadn't been on the Ferengi that had crossed paths with the Bounty many times before, as much of a surprise as his appearance might have been to him. His focus had been on the woman that had crossed their path even more often.

He had been a ball of unfocused rage ever since he had been surrounded down in the shattered corridor of the Bounty. Aside from the Miradorn guard's arm, his frustrations were yet to find a focal point.

Until Maya Ortega had walked in alongside Grenk.

For her part, Maya met Klath's gaze for a moment, then almost instantly looked down to the ground, even as the seemingly oblivious Grenk began to gloat.

"You know, I had rather assumed that my ship would have finished you off, my Klingon friend. But never mind. Perhaps your survival might make this little venture even more profitable for Synergy Mining Enterprises."

He rubbed his hands together with glee at this and let out a cackle.

"I won't use you in this operation," he continued, "I don't trust putting too many of you Bounty lot in one place together. But, there are more than enough opportunities for some hard labour out there in the galaxy for that burly Klingon frame of yours."

As Grenk cackled again, Klath just continued to stare at Maya. But he did take in the Ferengi's words, and the cogs of his brain began to turn over. Clearly this was the mastermind behind what had befallen them. Synergy Mining Enterprises was Grenk's company. His vessel had attacked the Bounty. And by the sound of it, he was holding Jirel and Natasha prisoner elsewhere.

And they had been led right into a trap. By Maya Ortega.

Given this new information, and his fired-up anger, Klath wanted to do a lot of things. Tearing through the forcefield and ripping Maya and Grenk limb from limb was top of his to-do list right now. But, with more than a little reluctance, he knew there was a more pressing, and more practical concern.

"If you wish to...maximise your profit," he grunted, turning his attention to Grenk for the first time and gesturing to the bed of the holding cell behind him, "You must treat her."

Grenk and Maya both looked over to where the Klingon was pointing, and saw Denella's prone form for the first time. She lay on the bed, still unconscious and bloodied, after Klath had carried her all the way here from the transporter room.

"He's right," Maya urged the indifferent Ferengi, "She looks badly hurt."

Klath snapped another glare at the human woman from behind the forcefield. "You pretend that you care?"

She took that latest blow to her battered conscience without a flinch, and pressed her case with Grenk, appealing to his dominant business side in lieu of his absent compassionate side. "She's almost as strong as a Klingon, you know that. If you really want to maximise your profits from all of this, she'll be no good to you if she's dead."

Grenk mulled this over for a moment, eyeing up Klath with distrust. "Psh," he replied eventually, "And as soon as my men lower the forcefield, that Klingon brute will charge right out of there. I'm not falling for that."

Again, that plan had been near the top of Klath's to-do list. But he looked back at the unmoving form of the Orion woman, and reluctantly shook his head. "She needs urgent care. I will not intervene. You...have my word."

With that, Klath internalised his instinctive rage as best he could and stepped back to the far corner of the cell. Leaving a theoretically clear path for the Miradorn to recover Denella.

"Besides," he couldn't help but add, "Your men are armed. Do you not trust them to subdue me if I were to try and escape?"

This particular comment seemed to rile Grenk a little, and the Ferengi immediately pointed a stubby finger at the two guards. "Get her out of the cell and patch her up. And if the Klingon takes one step out of line, kill him."

The two Miradorn nodded, while simultaneously sharing a telepathic moment of frustration at the way that their boss constantly barked his orders at them. With that, Grenk left them to do the dirty work, as he always did, and made for the door.

He stopped just as he reached it and looked back into the cell. "By the way, what happened to that irritating Vulcan of yours?"

In truth, Klath had no idea. He hadn't seen Sunek since he had walked out of the broken cockpit of the Bounty and been surrounded by Grenk's boarding party. But at least he now knew that, whatever had become of the Bounty's pilot, he wasn't another of the Ferengi's prisoners. He was still at large somewhere.

So he mustered his best poker face as he looked back at Grenk through the forcefield, not missing a beat with his reply.

"He died in battle. It was glorious."

Next to Grenk, Maya looked shocked. But the Ferengi was unfazed.

"Huh," he grunted, "I bet it was."

Seemingly satisfied with that, the Ferengi completed his exit. Maya went to follow him, but at the last second turned back to the still-glowering Klingon.

“I am sorry,” she offered, the words sounding hollow even to her, “For all of this. But you have to understand that I had to—”

“No,” Klath cut in icily, “You did not.”

She went to fire back a retort, but she found that she was out of ammunition. Because all she could think was that he was right. So, instead, she turned away and followed Grenk out of the room.

And as she walked, she felt Niki Kolak’s face following her.

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

Natasha took another ragged breath and tried to focus on the task in front of her.

She couldn't say precisely how long it had been since their shift had started, but she knew it couldn't have been much more than an hour ago. And she already felt weak enough to keel over.

In theory, duridium mining was a straightforward task. The shining veins of metal in the rock face of the quarry were clearly visible against the dull rockface, and the laser cutting tools they had been provided with made short work of the extraction process. They simply had to cut out the ore and carry the pieces to the set of anti-grav collection crates behind them. Once they were full, the automated units whisked themselves away to the far side of the habitation dome where they were prepared for shipping.

Aside from the labour involved in carrying the extracted chunks of ore, which could be as big or as small as you elected to laser them, there was very little serious legwork to be done.

But the seemingly straightforward task was being significantly complicated by the atmospheric conditions on the Class-L planet. The thin, barely-breathable air was turning the entire process into punishing, back-breaking labour. They had learned that the mining rota was split into short four-hour shifts due to the conditions. Still, barely an hour into their first mining experience, that seemed far too long.

Natasha paused for a second to wipe the sweat from her brow, gulping in as deep a lungful of air as she could. She knew she was struggling. And she also knew Jirel was struggling more.

"How're you doing?" she managed as she glanced over at the tired-looking Trill where he worked next to her.

Some distance away, a pair of armed Miradorn guards watched on, but did little to break up the nascent conversation. They didn't seem to care much about anything when it came to who worked where, or who spoke to who. And Natasha and Jirel had found it easy to ensure they were working close together in the line of miners now spread across the rock face.

Provided the duridium ore kept coming, nothing else really mattered.

And as Grenk had so gleefully pointed out, there wasn't even a requirement for a significant number of guards. The harsh conditions of the planet's surface, coupled with the elaborate security systems that surrounded the whole mining complex both on the surface and in orbit, meant that there was little risk of a jailbreak.

Even if someone did manage to get away, nobody was surviving for long out here. And that was what kept everyone in line.

"I've been better," Jirel breathlessly responded as he paused in his lasering.

He tried a smile, but the pain on his features was clear. Natasha knew that the shot of stims she had given him before they had beamed down would have now worn off. He was definitely struggling.

And she also knew that there was a deeper level to the pain he was experiencing.

With a supportive nod, she returned to her work. They lasered away at the rock face in silence for a few moments, save for occasional pauses to try in vain to catch their breath.

After a time, they both set their lasers down and strained to grab the duridium they had liberated from the rock. With some effort, they carried the shiny lumps of metal the short distance down to the waiting anti-grav units.

Natasha chanced a look further down the line of the rock face, and saw the Gorn from earlier, staggering to his own anti-grav cart with a huge hunk of metal raised above his head. Despite his injured shoulder, he seemed keen to give his fellow miners a show of strength.

"Listen," Jirel gasped as they walked, "I really am sorry. About getting you into this. All of this. I guess this isn't what you had in mind when you signed up with us."

Natasha took a moment before replying, as they dropped their payload into the carts and turned back to the rock face.

"You have to stop saying that," she sighed eventually, "I'm not gonna lie and tell you I knew exactly what I was getting myself into when I joined the Bounty. But I'm also not gonna lie and say that I never thought it might end up somewhere like this."

She repressed the sudden memory of the dying ensign in the corridor of the USS Navajo. The one she had left behind. And tried not to wonder too much about whether she was dealing with their predicament relatively well because, deep down, she felt she deserved this sort of punishment.

"Besides," she continued, having dismissed those thoughts, "I could have walked away at any point, right? After the run-in with the murderous Vulcan cult. Or after the time I ended up in the hands of an Orion slave trader. Or after we were nearly executed by a member of the Klingon High Council. But I didn't. So...this is on me."

She mustered a smile as the Trill fired up his laser cutter again. It was the same warm smile that he had been infatuated with ever since he had first met her. But this time it had no effect, the look of pain on his face remained.

“No,” he said firmly, “It’s on me. For getting involved with Maya Ortega again.”

He started to chip away at the next seam of rock, even as his mind wallowed firmly in a pool of self-pity.

“It’s on me for believing her. For listening to her stupid story about her husband. For being stupid enough to actually think that she was doing something selfless. For...everything.”

“You thought you were helping—”

“I should have known I wasn’t doing that!”

He spat the words out with such force that he was forced to pause for a ragged breath of the scant atmosphere around him, setting his free hand against the rock face to steady himself.

“Maybe we should just get through our shift,” Natasha offered with clear concern, “We can talk more when you’ve got your breath back inside.”

Jirel reluctantly nodded, and they fell back into silence for a short while, the sound of their laser cutters the only thing filling the thin air.

It didn’t take long for the silence to become constricting.

“I get it, you know,” Natasha said eventually, opting to take the lead in the conversation to save Jirel’s breath, “Why you kept going back to Maya.”

Jirel kept working, but managed a slight glance in her direction, and a hint of gallows humour in his response. “Wanna clue me in?”

“I had the exact same thing with Cameron.”

Jirel set his laser cutter down for a second and gave her his full attention. The name of Natasha’s ex-husband, whom he had fleetingly met nearly a year ago back on Starbase 236, piqued his curiosity despite their situation.

“I know what it’s like,” she continued with a hint of sadness, “To have that one person in your life that you can’t help but keep going back to. Even when every single rational part of you is screaming at you that you’re just gonna end up getting hurt again. I knew he wasn’t good for me, that he was controlling, and manipulative, and I knew how toxic the whole relationship was. But...I’d always end up going back.”

“At least he never tricked you into a lifetime of slavery in a duridium mine.”

Natasha looked over to the Trill, and was relieved to see the sliver of a familiar smile behind the self-pitying exterior of his comment. She mustered a nod. “Touché.”

They worked on for a few seconds, then she felt a cathartic need to continue.

“When I finally got that evidence that he’d been cheating on me with Lieutenant Ramirez, you know what I felt?”

Jirel shook his head. Natasha sighed again and looked up at the shining tracks of duridium in the rock face above her.

“It was the weirdest thing. I mean, I felt hurt, and betrayed, and all the rest of it. But...most of all, I actually felt happy. Because I knew that I finally had something that he couldn’t lie, or twist, or deny, or turn around against me. I finally had a reason to leave.”

She fought back a sudden rush of emotion and steadied herself.

“So, yeah,” she managed, “I get it.”

Another silence descended. Jirel’s shoulders sagged slightly.

“Still,” he muttered with a pained cough, “This time, it wasn’t just about me getting hurt. It’s you, and...if what Grenk said was true about the Bounty—”

“We’re gonna get out of this, Jirel.”

She stared at him with a determined glare, causing him to look a little confused at the certainty in her tone.

“What makes you so sure?”

She summoned up as much confidence as she could muster, then shrugged. “I’ve been onboard the Bounty for a year now. At the start, I genuinely didn’t see how the hell you’d all made it this far. I mean, you had no command structure, no organisation, no plan, or schedule, or any idea where your next paycheck was gonna come from. And you couldn’t seem to go five minutes without getting into a shooting match with someone.”

Jirel took each of these points with a reluctant nod of his head.

“But,” she concluded, “I’ve come to see that, however crazy and chaotic it seems on the surface, underneath there’s something far more solid. There’s a togetherness as strong as any starship crew I’ve been a part of, and a determination that works as well as any directive I’ve ever followed. And you never know when to give up.”

Jirel was reminded of something very similar that Maya Ortega had told him, just a few days ago. But coming from Natasha, it seemed far more positive.

“So we just need to survive, because I know that, somehow, the others will have survived. And I also know that, somehow, we’re gonna get out of this.”

She kept her determined gaze aimed at Jirel for long enough to make sure she had burned away the Trill’s doubt and self-pity, just like they were burning the rock from the duridium. And she was sure she could see the shining glimmer of hope inside him.

He nodded back at her.

With her pep talk complete, they returned to their work, under the watchful glare of the guards. And while Natasha was glad that she had given Jirel the strength to keep going, she couldn’t help but wonder what really had happened to the others.

And above all, she couldn’t help but wonder how the hell they were going to get out of this.

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

“I hate this.”

Sunek forced the words out of his mouth in an uncharacteristic whisper, as he forced up as much of his depleted reserves of Vulcan stoicism to try and stave off the pain and discomfort he was feeling in the scrunched-up position he found himself in.

All around him, the Bounty was abuzz with life.

Not the sort of life it was used to. Instead, the interior of the downed vessel was now the home of several pairs of Miradorn twins. All working to salvage Grenk's trophy. In strict teams of two, they were busy sealing up various interior hull breaches with sheets of cheap sheet metal in order to get the ship in a state to be tractored back into orbit and towed away.

One thing they hadn't gotten around to working on was the warp drive itself, which was still damaged and apparently leaking a steady amount of radiation. Not a dangerous level, at least not yet. But enough to continue to cause continued disruption to tricorder scans. Which was good news for Sunek, where he lay squeezed into one of the narrow access conduits in the Bounty's tiny engine room, temporarily invisible to all of the Bounty's new passengers.

Not that it felt much like good news right now.

“I hate this,” he whispered again.

As soon as he had heard the tell-tale sound of the incoming transports down in the Bounty's main corridor, and as Klath found himself surrounded, the Vulcan had made a break for the only hiding place he could think of. Across from the Bounty's cockpit, into the rarely-manned engine room, and into the tight confines of the access conduits.

The narrow crawl spaces weren't the same as the much wider and more extensive Jeffries Tubes on a starship. They didn't snake around the entirety of the ship, merely criss-crossing the engine room itself to give access to the ship's critical systems. Elsewhere on the Bounty, the ship was small enough that any other repair could be conducted through hatches in the walls of the vessel, rather than requiring engineers to crawl on their hands and knees for deck after deck, looking for the right junction.

All of which meant that, while Sunek had found somewhere to hide, he hadn't really managed to do much else. Because there was nowhere for him to go.

The gangly Vulcan had been trapped where he had secreted himself ever since the boarding party had arrived. He could occasionally make out the shapes of two passing Miradorn through a grate in the hatch he had crawled through, and it was apparent that there were too many for him to deal with on his own. He had no weapons, and no plan.

So he was waiting. For a miracle. Hating every minute as he did so.

The radiation, coupled with his proximity to the core itself and the narrowness of the space, was causing the temperature to rise all the time. And while Vulcans were more impervious to heat than most, the addition of Sunek's stress-based emotional turmoil was causing him distinct discomfort. He had already awkwardly discarded his bloodied, garish Hawaiian shirt, and was now stripped down to a distinctly dirty white vest top.

Just as he was about to whisper another curse, his ears pricked up as he heard voices approaching his position. Staying as silent as possible, he adjusted himself to bring his eyes back to the grate and peered through the gaps in the metal.

“...I want this ship in a fit enough state to be towed by the end of the day, you hear me?”

Sunek recognised the owner of the eerily familiar voice a split-second before he walked into the engine room, flanked by two of the Miradorn.

Grenk.

“We need to leave orbit tomorrow to make our rendezvous with that Syndicate supply vessel,” the stout Ferengi grumbled in the direction of the tired pair.

He paused in his pacing, and Sunek just about made out a greedy leer spreading on his face.

“Ah, that's an idea. Perhaps I can offload Jirel's slave girl and that stupid Klingon onto them. For a very healthy profit...”

Sunek internalised a rush of anger as Grenk punctuated his musing with a gleeful cackle. But he took comfort from the news that Klath and Denella were still alive, wherever they had been taken.

Entirely oblivious to the extra pair of ears hidden in the walls, Grenk started pacing around again, continuing to bark at the Miradorn duo.

“What about the warp core? How bad is the damage?”

Grenk tutted with impatience as the two Miradorn, engineering specialists from his coterie called Mon-Bal and Ton-Bal, shared a moment of silent telepathic communication.

While the Ferengi had a penchant for recruiting Miradorn for their expert abilities to identify and deal with trouble as telepathic double acts,

not to mention their pathetically cheap pay rates and complete lack of experience when it came to unionising, he often found their preference for sharing thoughts between each other telepathically to be a serious drag.

Mainly because he had come to recognise that they only did that when they were trying to figure out the best way to deliver bad news.

“Don’t do that!” he snapped, “Just give me an answer!”

Ton-Bal reluctantly stepped forward, having lost the telepathic battle with his brother to be the one to lead the conversation. “The core is structurally safe. But several subsidiary components suffered damage during the craft’s landing. There are radiation leaks to deal with before we can bring the core back online, which will require additional resources to be brought down from orbit.”

Even though he had anticipated bad news, Grenk failed to keep a lid on his frustration. “More resources? How much is this going to end up costing me?”

Mon-Bal and Ton-Bal shared another telepathic moment, but offered no verbal answer. They were engineers, not accountants.

“Besides,” Grenk continued to rant, “I don’t need the warp drive if we’re just towing it back, you pair of idiots!”

The two Miradorn took particular affront to this latest slight, and made each other aware in their own minds. After all, they were the experts.

“We are aware of that,” Ton-Bal replied in a conciliatory tone, “But even towing the vessel at warp in this condition would risk a core breach. Under tractor beam, such an explosion would cause serious damage to the Boundless Profit as well.”

Grenk’s scowl deepened. He glanced from one twin to the other, looking for any sign that they were trying to trick him out of a profit. But he saw nothing.

“Fine! Get the extra supplies. But not a single stem bolt more than you need, am I making myself clear?”

Ton-Bal nodded, while at the same time sending a particularly cutting comment about their boss to his twin telepathically, forcing Mon-Bal to quickly stifle a smirk.

As oblivious to the comment as he was to the extra set of ears in the engine room, Grenk turned and stormed off. And after silently exchanging a few more choice comments about their employer, the pair of Miradorn followed suit to continue their repairs.

For the first time in a while, Sunek breathed out.

Now he knew who was behind everything that was happening, at least. And, in terms of his hopes of making some sort of escape, the news that Grenk was repairing the Bounty wasn’t the worst news that he could have heard.

But as a counterpoint to that positive news, it was clear that Grenk had Klath and Denella, to say nothing of whatever he had done with Jirel and the others. Which meant that Sunek could only see one possible way that they were ever going to get out of this.

He was going to have to save the day.

He peered back out of the grate, wondering just how many Miradorn were now swarming throughout the Bounty.

Throughout his ship.

That thought caused him to pause for a moment. He would never admit it to Jirel and the others in a million years, but right now as he hid from a hoard of Miradorn in a tiny engineering crawlspace, dressed in a filthy vest top, apparently he could at least admit it to himself. Somehow, at some point between him first joining up with Jirel back on Kressari Starbase 34, the battered and broken ship around him had become more than just another stopping off point on his meandering and directionless journey through life.

It had become his home. And the crew had become his friends.

And so, even though he really didn’t want to, he knew he had to fight his way out of this. And if he was going to do that, he was going to need weapons. And he was going to need help.

As the Vulcan pondered how exactly he was going to sneak from his current hiding place to Klath’s cabin, where he was reasonably sure he’d be able to find some weapons, he did his best to ignore the distant sound he heard in the back of his mind.

A low rumble of thunder.

Instead, he peered back out of the grate and muttered to himself.

“I hate this...”

* * * * *

The blurry view in front of her slowly coalesced into focus. But she was in no way reassured by what she saw.

Faced with an unfamiliar antiseptic white ceiling, Denella instinctively tried to sit up straight, only to find herself unable to move. She was shackled down by her wrists and ankles.

“Hey!” she snarled, feeling a sudden rush of panic inside, “Where the hell am I? What are you—?”

She stopped mid-rant when she saw two faces loom over her. Both identical Miradorn faces. They looked down at her, then glanced at each other. She could only guess, but she assumed they were sharing some thoughts telepathically.

She struggled to crane her neck and figure out where she was. The last thing she remembered, she had been struggling to hold the Bounty together in a pitched battle with a mystery foe. Then she had felt a searing pain in her side, and everything had gone dark.

And now she was here. Wherever here was.

It was clearly a medical facility onboard a vessel. She could hear the telltale hum of the warp drive. But it was also a medical facility that felt the need to keep its patients restrained. Which told her it probably wasn't the sort of medical facility she wanted to be in for very long.

She winced as she shifted her weight on the bed under her, feeling a tender spot on her back where her injuries had only partly healed.

And then something twiggged inside her.

Miradorn twins.

She had only crossed paths with that species once before. And something told her that wasn't a coincidence.

“Grenk?” she asked the twins looming over her.

They didn't say anything, but the Miradorn on the right offered an affirming nod.

Grenk.

One of the medics moved off to one side, out of her range of vision, while the other waved a small scanning device over her head in a gentle orbit.

“What are you doing?” she managed, “Where's Klath? Where's Sune? Where's the Bounty?”

She struggled against her bonds once again as she spoke, but while the Miradorn scanning her head glanced over at his twin, sharing another telepathic moment, they worked on in silence. No answers to her questions were forthcoming. After a while, she had to stop struggling, still weakened from her injuries. For reasons she couldn't yet discern, it seemed as though Grenk's medics had treated the worst of them, but she was still feeling the effects of what she had been through.

The twins switched places. The one that had been scanning her walked over to a console and clipped the device into a small housing on top of the screen to analyse the results, while the other returned to her bedside with a hypospray in his hand. Her eyes widened in renewed concern at the sight of the mystery drug, and the Miradorn seemed to note the change in his demeanour. And felt the need to speak.

“Analgesic. For the residual pain.”

He grunted the comment without anything in the way of a bedside manner, but with enough sincerity to settle Denella's worries. Besides, she sensed that she'd need everything she could get if she was going to get her strength back for whatever was to come.

As the hypospray was pressed to her neck, she glanced around the confines of the sickbay again, and spotted a small collection of medical tools on a side table near her bed.

And a plan began to form in her head.

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

Maya had no idea where she was going.

She had been walking down the corridors of the Boundless Profit for several minutes now, having been left to her own devices while Grenk was down on the surface, surveying the Bounty. Grenk's yacht wasn't an especially large ship, three times the size of the modestly-proportioned Bounty, and she was already on her fourth lap of the deck.

But she barely noticed that. She was lost in her thoughts. Her mind had been a swirling conflict of worries and questions ever since her brief conversation with Klath in the brig. And there was nobody but herself to talk them through with, as she waited impotently to leave orbit and get back to civilisation.

Which was why she had embarked on her rigorously repetitive tour of the vessel's main deck. She needed to think.

And then, as she unknowingly reached the end of her fourth lap, she stopped in front of one particular doorway. One that she had been drawn to each time she had passed it. With a stifled sigh, she walked in.

Klath was midway through his own 247th lap of the holding cell when the door to the brig unexpectedly opened. The Klingon, boiling over with frustration at his continued incarceration, snapped his head in the direction of the doorway, hoping to see Denella returning with the guards, to give him a chance to strike. Instead, he was surprised and not especially happy to see Maya enter.

She barely acknowledged him as she paced across the deck of the brig, partly lost in thought. She wasn't entirely sure why she had elected to walk in this time, nor what she wanted to say to her former crewmate. She wasn't really sure of anything right now. Her mind was still dominated by unshakable thoughts about Turkana IV.

She finally stopped and looked up at the brooding, silent Klingon on the other side of the shimmering forcefield, and she shrugged in defeat.

"You wanna know why I did it?"

Klath remained stoically silent, staring daggers at the woman in front of him.

"No," he replied eventually, "I do not."

Despite herself, Maya stifled a frustrated smile and shook her head. Klath, for his part, was being entirely truthful. He despised small talk at the best of times, with people he genuinely considered to be his friends, never mind Maya Ortega. But, as he so often found when he attempted to avoid small talk, his silent indifference towards the instigator of the conversation was entirely ineffective.

"I did what I had to do to survive," Maya explained, to herself as much as to her unwilling audience, "This is a cruel and unforgiving universe we're in, you know. And you have to be ruthless, all the time, otherwise it'll destroy you. Just like it destroyed..."

She tailed off, her expression shifting a little sadder as she remembered Niki Kolak.

Klath paid no attention to the subtleties of her mood. Glancing up at the still-present scowl on the Klingon's face, Maya switched to a different tangent.

"Is Sunek really dead?"

"Yes. He died in battle. It was glorious."

She studied his face as he delivered the same obituary as before, this time seeing just enough behind his eyes to see through his lie. Though, instead of calling him out, she elected to continue in defence of her actions. "Look, I genuinely had no idea that Grenk would go this far. I knew he wanted Jirel. He never told me he would attack the ship, and take the rest of you."

"Those are the actions of the sort of dishonourable person you have chosen to work with," Klath noted, "You should not be surprised."

"I didn't choose to work with him, Klath! I—"

"You betrayed your colleagues," he countered with a growl, "And you worked hard to do it. The fake marriage, the false documents, the lengths that you went to in order to disguise your treachery."

She took an unconscious half-step back under this barrage, but still mustered up a counter. "Only because I had to! How the hell can I prove that to you?"

"You could lower the forcefield."

Klath's impassive expression seemed entirely serious. Maya signed and shook her head. "You know I can't do that."

"Then leave," he retorted.

She didn't move, and instead doubled down on her argument, electing to throw a line of attack into her flagging defence. "Ok, fine. I betrayed you. But, come on, Jirel and the rest of you had already crossed Grenk plenty of times in the past. He wouldn't have wanted Jirel so badly if

you hadn't. How is that any different to what I do?"

Klath reluctantly considered this question for a moment, finding himself once again being drawn into a conversation he really didn't want to have.

"Whenever we have encountered the Ferengi," he responded eventually, "We are usually preventing him from doing some kind of illegal activity. With you, we were the ones attempting the activity."

Maya kept her eyes locked on his, even as he delivered his definitive response. "You know, Klath, legality is a very fluid term. There are very few universal laws out here in space. There were definitely none back on Turkana IV."

"True," the Klingon conceded, folding his huge arms across his chest defiantly, "But there is always honour."

She tutted and shook her head, mustering another trace of a smile. "A very Klingon response," she noted, "I suppose I picked the wrong room to try and find some measure of compassion."

"Klingons have compassion. When it is deserved."

This latest remark was delivered without a trace of warmth. It cut through her with enough force to remind Maya that whatever rudimentary comradeship there might have once been between them, that was now long gone.

"Huh," she nodded sadly, "You know, I'm not even sure why I came in here."

At this, Klath stepped towards the forcefield. He may have been trapped, both literally inside Grenk's brig and metaphorically inside an unwanted conversation. But he now saw a chance to work off some of his frustrations with some home truths.

"I do," he boomed, "You have come here to justify your actions to me. Perhaps out of guilt, perhaps out of pride, or perhaps to seek some kind of sympathy for your plight, which I will not offer. Either way, I do not wish to hear your excuses. So, if you are not going to lower the forcefield, then leave."

He delivered the suggestion like an order, stepping close enough to the shimmering forcefield to cause a spark of energy across its surface. Maya remained silent.

"Ever since we first met, I have changed my opinion about you many times," the Klingon hissed, "But now I know for a fact that you are nothing more than a coward."

For a Klingon, there was no greater insult. Maya felt her cheeks redden with shame.

Having said what he felt needed to be said, Klath simply turned away from her and began his 248th lap of the cell with renewed earnest. Maya remained where she was for a moment, standing in silence. She worked on putting together the rest of the justification for her actions, to counter Klath's judgement. But the words didn't come. And the silence merely grew in length. Niki Kolak's face loomed larger in her mind. And instead of responding, she simply turned and walked out of the room.

Klath didn't even acknowledge her departure as he began lap number 250.

* * * * *

"Seriously, I'm fine."

Natasha sighed. There were few things more irritating to a medical professional than a patient that resolutely refused to be honest with them. Back in a starship sickbay, or even the Bounty's significantly less well equipped medical bay, she could have cut through the lies with a quick tricorder scan. But in their current predicament, she couldn't avail herself of such a tool. She was forced to turn to her trusty old intuition.

She checked Jirel's glazed eyes and took his pulse for the third time since they had returned to the caged-off habitation area at the end of their first mining shift.

"You're not fine," she countered patiently, "I know you too well to listen to that sort of thing. So please drop the space adventurer act and just focus on eating that."

Jirel reluctantly picked up a musty grey nutrient bar and took a bite. The ration packs were all that seemed to pass for sustenance for the hungry miners in Synergy Mining Enterprise's venture. As the Trill's bravado was briefly silenced with a mouthful of tasteless chewy mush, Natasha continued her improvised diagnosis.

"You're definitely suffering from oxygen deprivation."

"Huh," Jirel offered, "Can't think why."

"I'm serious," she persisted, "Your reactions are down, and we've been back inside for more than an hour now, but your pulse is still abnormal. It's not your fault that your metabolism is even less suited to all this than mine is."

"I'm fine—"

Jirel stopped as he saw her knowing glare. He conceded to himself that he couldn't lie to her.

"I'm not fine," he sighed as he swallowed the bite of nutrient bar, "My head's pounding, I feel weak as hell, and towards the end of our time out there, my vision went seriously blurry. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought we were back on the tequila."

She raised an eyebrow at this mention of their recent liaison after more than a few shots of that particular liquor, but kept her demeanour professional. Her concern for her patient was overriding any desire she might have had for some reassuring back-and-forth banter. Almost.

"Well," she sighed as she took a step back, "Just like my last encounter with tequila, there's gonna be some pretty terrible consequences if this carries on."

She noted the slightly wry look cross Jirel's tired face at this comment, and looked quizzically down at him.

"Sorry," he sighed, "That just reminded me of something Maya said to me. Back when we were in my cabin—"

He stopped himself, awkwardly remembering how Natasha had walked into the scene the morning after his and Maya's little tryst. Natasha, for her part, mustered a smile.

"Getting reacquainted?"

"Let's go with that," Jirel nodded with a weak grimace, "She said...that was why I kept ending up going along with whatever her new scheme was. I wanted the thrill, the excitement, and I wanted the lack of consequences. I guess there's definitely been some consequences this time."

"That's one way of putting it," she offered, as he took another bite from the nutrient bar, "So, I'm guessing all that talk from this Grenk character back there was true? You really do owe him this much latinum?"

"Grenk exaggerates," Jirel countered defensively.

"But you did leave him marooned on the planet of the Soraxx?"

The Trill chewed the mouthful for a moment or two as he mulled over his answer. "He exaggerates most of the time," he went with eventually, "I guess the truth is...for all the work you've done over the last year building up our consciences, we didn't always have so much of that before you came along."

"I didn't realise that was what I was doing."

"No need to be modest," the Trill smiled, "You're good at it."

They were suddenly interrupted by approaching footsteps towards the corner bunk in a secluded area of the rudimentary barracks where they had hobbled over to after their shift. They both felt their defences rise, then immediately relax when they saw an unerringly familiar face approaching them.

The Gorn stopped in front of Natasha and held out a small metal box in his hand.

"Further medical supplies," he hissed by way of explanation, "As I said, it is important you are able to keep mining."

"Thank you," Natasha replied with genuine warmth as she took the box, before gesturing to the spot next to Jirel on the bottom bunk, "If you wanna take a seat, I can take a look at that...damage now. While we're alone."

For a moment, the Gorn froze, his unblinking eyes taking some time to process this offer. Then, after a quick check to verify that they were indeed alone, he awkwardly sat down.

Natasha opened the kit and grabbed a small scanner and a hypospray, before starting to triage the extent of the Gorn's injury.

"So, what are you in for, anyway?" Jirel asked as casually as he could to the huge lizard creature.

He received back little more than a curious and slightly disconcerting stare, as Natasha deftly waved the scanner across the damaged shoulder of the Gorn.

"Or," the Trill continued after a long pause, "We could...talk about something else?"

The Gorn remained mute, even as Natasha reached back into the kit for a packet of medical sealant. "Personally," she offered as she worked in her best medical bedside manner voice, "I find that treating damage goes easier when I know my patient's name, at least?"

To both her and Jirel's surprise, this was the thing that got their new acquaintance to talk to them.

"Struss," the Gorn hissed, "My name is Struss."

"Well, Struss," Natasha replied, as she finished off with the sealant and grabbed the hypospray and a vial of analgesic medicine, "I'm gonna give you something for the pain, but I've cleaned the infection, and that sealant should hold for long enough for the scales underneath to fully harden."

She pressed the hypospray to the Gorn's neck and stepped back with a satisfied nod. Struss slowly rotated his shoulder a few times to test it out, and seemed happy enough with the result. He stood up and silently began to walk away. Natasha shrugged at Jirel with a knowing look as it seemed there was no note of thanks coming her way.

She paused mid-shrug as the Gorn stopped and turned back.

“My brother.”

Natasha and Jirel both turned back to where Struss was standing, both looking a little confused. It was now their turn to offer silence back to their companion.

“You asked why I was here,” the Gorn continued, “I am here because of my brother.”

“I...don’t understand,” Natasha managed eventually.

“He became...indebted to the Ferengi who owns this place. After trying to set up a transport firm in the Medulla cluster with a substantial loan he was unable to repay, after the Ferengi changed the conditions at short notice. When it came time for his punishment, I took his place.”

“Why? Jirel opted to ask the obvious question.

“I am the strongest hatchling from my nest. He would not have survived here. Taking his place was the honourable thing to do.”

Despite everything, Jirel couldn’t help but give Natasha a wry smile. “Remind you of anyone?”

He suppressed the rush of angst that followed his comment, at the reminder that they still had no idea what had become of Klath. Or Denella or Sunek. Aside from Grenk’s chilling suggestion that the Bounty had been shot out of the sky. Natasha clocked the slight flinch from the Trill, and suppressed her own worries as she forced as friendly a smile as she could in the direction of the Gorn.

“Well,” she managed, “It’s nice to meet someone honourable in here.”

Struss nodded, then rotated his repaired shoulder again. “Likewise,” he hissed back.

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving them alone again. Natasha watched him leave, then turned back to continue triaging her other patient. And she felt a modicum of hope inside her.

At the very least, they had made a friend.

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

“Completely unacceptable!”

Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan stood patiently next to each other inside Grenk's private dining area on the Boundless Profit, and took the latest tirade from their boss on their collective chin.

The Ferengi paced around in fuming annoyance, ignoring the first course of his evening repast, a Ferengi crab cake with a side of spiced lokar beans that was slowly going cold on the dining table. His focus was entirely on his head bodyguards.

“I told your men to disable Jirel's ship, that was all! It would have been so much easier to retrieve once it was merely drifting in space!”

On the opposite side of the table, Grenk's reluctant dining companion for the evening picked at her own appetiser with a silver fork. Maya Ortega's focus was elsewhere.

“And now this whole salvage operation is taking five times as long! And costing me ten times as much! Well, I tell you one thing, this is going to come out of your paycheques, you hear?”

Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan were Grenk's most trusted and longest-serving bodyguards. They had been dealing with the irritable Ferengi for longer than any of their fellow Miradorn. So they were used to getting this sort of humiliation from their boss. But they were also starting to get sick of it.

The two Miradorn kept their attention on Grenk, but internally, they used their sibling telepathy to share their more candid thoughts about this latest rant.

Shel-Lan was quick to remind Gel-Lan how much worse things had gotten recently. Ever since the Bounty had disabled their shuttle and left them marooned on a deserted planet earlier in the year, life in Grenk's employ had taken a turn for the worse.

They had painstakingly repaired the crashed shuttle, while Grenk had barked orders and eaten his way through most of the emergency rations. They had thanklessly protected him from myriad spacefaring dangers as the tiny shuttle had limped back to port, and had then tirelessly worked to prepare and fit out the Boundless Profit, Grenk's newest mode of transport.

And on top of all of that, Shel-Lan added, since Grenk had acquired Synergy Mining Enterprises, they had been working double duty. They were now both Grenk's personal bodyguards, and also head supervisors for the mining projects themselves. And Grenk had never considered appropriately remunerating them for their extra workload.

“...I don't care how long it takes for you to work this off, you're paying me back!...”

Gel-Lan silently agreed with his brother's points, but suggested that there was little they could do about it. He was their boss. And while the pay wasn't generous, they still needed the latinum.

“...I pay you too much as it is! And your performance these last few weeks has been especially sub-par, don't think I haven't noticed!...”

Shel-Lan chided his brother for being too faithful, and told him what he had read in the unauthorised biography of Grand Nagus Rom. About the time that Rom, as a younger man, had formed the Guild of Restaurant and Casino Owners, and unionised his fellow employees to fight for better working conditions against his own thankless boss.

“...And your men are getting too sloppy! This isn't the first time they've screwed up lately!...”

Gel-Lan countered that there was no Miradorn word for 'union'. And even if there were, their loyalty to their boss should override such selfishness. It was the Miradorn way, after all. Loyalty to one's brother, or to one's job.

“...Am I making myself clear?”

The silent and somewhat circular debate was brought to an abrupt pause when both Miradorn realised that Grenk was addressing them, and that neither of them had been following what the Ferengi had been saying. After a few seconds of staring at their silent, blank expressions, Grenk snapped again.

“I said: I expect you both down on the planet within the hour to oversee the next mining shift. Am I making myself clear?”

This time, he had made himself clear. And even though they were supposed to be off-duty until tomorrow, they both merely nodded their affirmation at this latest humbling order and exited the dining room. As they walked out, Shel-Lan silently promised Gel-Lan that he would read the relevant passages from Rom's biography to him later this evening.

With an angry sigh, Grenk turned back to the table and took his seat opposite Maya, trying to allow himself to focus on the more pleasurable aspects of the evening he'd planned. While he had been ranting on, Maya had barely touched her own food. She had only loosely been following along with the details of the rant. Instead, she had found that, once again, her mind had been filled with thoughts of Niki Kolak.

“You should ease off on them, you know,” she idly noted as Grenk sat down, “It might backfire on you one of these days...”

“I don't need business advice from you,” he scowled back, as he pushed away his crab cake in frustration, “What I require is for you to fetch

me a hot meal!”

Maya maintained her proud position on the other side of the table and raised a wryly amused eyebrow at this suggestion. “I don’t think I’ll be doing that. And I’ve been thinking. Once we leave here, there’s a small colony two sectors away. I think you can drop me there.”

Grenk’s eyes narrowed a tad at this, but she kept her back straight. She was determined that she wanted to get away from him and his personal yacht as soon as possible.

“My dear,” the Ferengi said slowly, “I will drop you off where I say I will drop you off. So, I think I’ll stick to the original plan. You can come with me while we tow Jirel’s little ship back to port. And while you’re here, you should do your best to keep me happy. So…”

He pushed his cold plate further towards her with a knowing look. She still didn’t move from her seat, grimly clinging onto her pride.

“Also,” Grenk continued, “I’ve been thinking that I might use your…powers of persuasion to help round up another one of my debtors. I saw how easily you were able to sucker in Jirel and his crew. We could make quite the team, you know…”

“No, thank you,” she responded with a thin smile.

“Who said you had the option to decline?”

At this, her proud demeanour dropped for just a second. She suddenly felt very alone, and again realised she had lost control over her own destiny. Out here, with dozens of guards at his disposal, there was nothing stopping Grenk from enslaving her just as he had done with the others.

Satisfied that he had made his point, Grenk’s face creased into a cackling grin. “A little joke,” he explained, with only a partial amount of trustworthiness, “But please think about the offer. I can take in this new debtor the old fashioned way, of course. But your way was so much more fun…”

With a sigh, she pushed her own plate away and stood up. “You know, I’m actually not all that hungry. I might have an early night.”

Grenk’s eyes narrowed a little as he watched her leave. “Don’t start getting a conscience on me now,” he muttered idly, “Before you start feeling guilty about Jirel and the others, remember that they left me behind on that planet.”

“At least you survived,” Maya muttered back as she reached the door, “And what did this new debtor do to you, anyway?”

“He stole from me. Just like everyone else.”

In Maya’s head, she pictured the scrap of mouldy food in her hand, back on Turkana IV. The one that she and her friend had risked their lives to steal. She felt a fresh stab of guilt.

“Maybe they were hungry…”

Grenk, mouth now full of cold crab cake with spiced lokar beans, looked up at her with a look of slight confusion.

Maya glanced back at this latest bully that had found their way into her life, and then walked out of the door. Suddenly a little more clear about what she had to do.

* * * * *

“He needs to rest!”

“He needs to work.”

That appeared to be the extent of the debate. The two armed Miradorn brandished their disruptors at them and gestured down the corridor.

Natasha grimaced and looked back at Jirel where he stood alongside her. They had barely had enough time to fall asleep after her round of triage before the guards had indicated that it was time for their next shift.

While the shifts out on the harsh surface of the planet weren’t all that long, it seemed their downtime in between was even shorter. She had no idea whether that was standard practice, or a special part of Grenk’s punishment specifically for Jirel. Either way, despite the attempt at a brave face that the Trill was pulling, she knew this had been nowhere near enough time to get his strength back.

“Don’t worry,” he managed, “I’ll be fine.”

She went to counter this with her most authoritative medical voice, but before she could get anything out, they were being roughly shoved in the direction their guards wanted them to move.

It was a short journey to the airlock through the corridors of the habitation dome. And soon they would be back out on the Class L surface. Natasha was sure that Jirel would indeed be able to make it through another shift. But if this was the sort of treatment they could expect, she also knew he wouldn’t make it through too many more.

“Seriously,” she tried again to appeal to the guards as they turned a corner, “You need to give him more time to—”

She stopped in her tracks, along with the rest of the four-person convoy, as they rounded the corner and were confronted by an unexpected sight.

In the middle of the corridor, just ahead of the doors to the airlock, stood Maya Ortega. Looking as effortlessly regal as if she had taken a wrong turn on the way to a Federation ambassador's reception being inexplicably held elsewhere in the drab mining facility.

"Hello, boys," she smiled demurely at the Miradorn twins.

Jirel's face quickly turned into a scowl, while Natasha looked more than a little concerned. Their guards exchanged words of confusion. First silently, with each other, and then out loud, with the surprising interloper.

"What do you want?" the Miradorn on the right asked her.

"Tsk," she tutted, "One of your delightful boss's little jokes. He thought it might do me good to put in a shift or two down here to earn my passage back to civilisation. Can you believe the nerve?"

Both Miradorn remained silent, but they both telepathically admitted to each other that her story definitely sounded like the sort of thing their boss would do.

"So," she continued, idly gesturing at Jirel and Natasha, "I'm to escort these two to their next shift."

Jirel's glare darkened even further. He couldn't help but offer a retort. "Like hell you are."

"Calm yourself, darling," she replied, suppressing the pang of unexpected sadness that his glare caused to flare up inside her.

The guards, for their part, still looked unconvinced.

"We weren't informed of any such plan," the twin on the left grunted.

Maya theatrically rolled her eyes and gestured to a comms panel on the wall next to her. "Fine," she sighed, "Feel free to call up to the yacht and double check. But this is cutting into some perfectly good duridium mining time."

The Miradorn shared a glance, and the twin on the right then nodded and walked over to the comms panel to verify this unlikely order.

All the while, Jirel kept his glare laser focused on Maya. The woman that he had spent so much of his life conflicted over. Either madly in love with her, or wishing that he had never met her. Or sometimes both. He kept glaring at her, even as the twin reached the comms panel, and she sprang her trap.

In an instant, she grabbed the Miradorn's arm. The telepathic bond between the twins came into play immediately. As one twin found themselves in danger, the second twin reacted, instinctively bringing his disruptor to bear.

But Maya had already anticipated that action, and deftly manoeuvred herself behind the first twin, meaning that the second twin's disruptor blast merely impacted with devastating force on his own brother's exposed back.

The sickening pain of the impact registered on the second twin as well, aghast at his actions. Which left him wide open for attack. Maya pivoted the limp arm of the first twin in her grasp around and fired the disruptor in his hand, hitting the second Miradorn square in the chest.

The whole thing took a split-second to play out, but seemed to unfold in slow-motion. Still, before Jirel and Natasha realised what was happening, they were standing in the corridor, with unmoving Miradorn twins on both sides of them on the ground.

And Maya Ortega, standing impatiently in front of them.

"Well?" she motioned to them, gesturing at the two bodies, "I'd take their disruptors if I were you. You're probably going to need them."

Jirel went for the nearest disruptor. And to Natasha's shock, the Trill immediately brought it to bear on Maya herself. Anger still burning in his eyes. Maya, for her part, remained passively standing in front of the pointed weapon. She nodded her head in acceptance.

"You probably should do that," she sighed, "I deserve it. But then, I'm also the best chance you've got of getting out of here. And getting back to the others."

Jirel didn't lower the weapon, but Natasha stepped forward.

"They're alive?"

"Klath and Denella are on Grenk's ship. And if I can read Klingon facial expressions like I think I can, I'm pretty sure Sunek is alive somewhere. I know you don't really have any reason to trust me, but for what it's worth, that's the truth."

Natasha felt a rush of relief inside. But Jirel kept the disruptor raised, staring back at the woman that had lied to him far too many times for him to remember. "Is this another trick?" he hissed eventually.

She stared back with complete sincerity. A look that Jirel was painfully aware she was an expert in faking entirely.

"No. This is me...finally doing the right thing. But, if you'd rather just shoot me, then I can't really stop you."

She found a moment of serenity, picturing Niki Kolak's face even as she looked back into the eyes of her former occasional lover and business partner.

Jirel gripped the disruptor a little more tightly, feeling his trigger finger starting to twitch. Then, he felt a hand on his shoulder. And his conscience reactivated inside him.

“Jirel,” Natasha whispered, “That’s not who you are.”

The Trill’s face flashed into a frustrated snarl, before he eventually admitted defeat. He lowered the disruptor and mustered a calmer look in Natasha’s direction. She smiled back at him sadly.

“Ok,” he nodded, “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Natasha grabbed the disruptor from the other guard, and they took off down the corridor, with Maya leading the way.

As they dashed on, Jirel regarded Maya’s now-exposed back, and still felt the weight of the disruptor in his hand. But Natasha had been right. That wasn’t who he was.

At least, not yet.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

“I told you you were gonna need me.”

Sunek had never heard so much smugness in someone’s voice before. He’d always found smugness to be one of the more irritating emotional states in other people, regardless of how often he dabbled in it himself.

And it was doubly irritating when he was hearing it in his own voice.

He stood on the deck of the ancient sailing ship, leaning on the wooden rail around the outer edge of the vessel, and tried to use the gentle sound of the waters of the Voroth Sea lapping against the side of the ship to calm him. In front of him, off in the distance, the storm on the horizon emitted a pompous crackle of thunder.

“I don’t need you,” Sunek insisted, his words sounding hollow even to himself.

“Of course you do. You need me. Or, should I say, you need you—”

“Don’t start that,” Sunek griped, trying to avoid the metaphysical aspects of the conversation for as long as possible.

“Whatever,” the familiar voice of the storm replied, “But I’m right. Otherwise, why are you here?”

“I’m not here. I’m—”

“I know. You’re in Klath’s cabin. Standing in front of every weapon that dumb Klingon has in his possession. Wondering how the hell you’re gonna use them to fend off a couple of dozen Miradorn by yourself.”

Sunek went to fire back a retort, then paused. It was an irritatingly accurate summation of where he was.

He had been able to sneak out of his hiding place inside the Bounty’s engine room while Grenk’s men were busy affecting repairs elsewhere, and with the residual radiation still apparently masking his lifesigns, he had managed to sneak as far as Klath’s cabin. There, he had predictably discovered an arsenal of weaponry far greater than anything stored elsewhere on the ship. And then he had done nothing but stood and stared at the array of daggers, blades and the like. For a very long time.

He had no idea where to start.

Partly because he wasn’t especially adept with bladed weapons. But also because, while he was capable of defending himself when necessary, he wasn’t exactly an offensive sort of fighter. And, reluctantly, he had come to realise that he needed help.

Not that he was about to admit that to a talking storm cloud.

“So,” the cloud persisted as Sunek’s gaze drifted down into the clear waters below, “You’ve realised that you can’t do this without me.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sunek lied, “I’ll just...y’know, give ‘em the old neck pinch. Easy.”

The storm flared brightly with a streak of lightning, apparently a display of amusement at his comment.

“You know you suck at that. No point lying to yourself.”

Sunek looked down at his blurry reflection on the surface of the Voroth Sea and tried to brush aside that comment.

A moment of silence descended. One that was interrupted by another peal of thunder.

“I’ve helped you before, you know. And you didn’t even realise it...”

Sunek remained silent, even as his own voice continued on, drifting over the sea from the distant raging tumult.

“Remember Nimbus III?”

The Vulcan’s head shot up instantly, leaving his reflection behind. Another amused flash of lightning suggested a level of satisfaction in now having his full attention.

“You saw that Nimbosian outlaw, gun raised, about to kill Zesh. And what did you do? You charged at him, in a rage. You tackled him to the ground. You punched him, again and again, until his face was broken and bloodied. And then, if Zesh hadn’t stopped you...”

Sunek remembered the whole thing. How could he forget?

And he remembered how it had only been the intervention of his former crewmate Zesh that had stopped him from following up his battering of the outlaw by stabbing him with the small whittling knife he had in his possession at the time.

Coming so soon after his run-in with Sokar, that incident had been enough to convince him that he needed help to settle his emotions back down. And he had taken Denella up on her offer for joint meditation sessions in the Bounty’s cargo bay from then on. But he still couldn’t quite believe this was the full explanation for what had overtaken him in that moment.

“That wasn’t you,” he managed to scoff.

“Remember how you felt? All that anger? All that violence and fury? How powerful it made you? That Nimbusian must’ve been twice your size, and you took him down like he was nothing. And that was thanks to me. That was what I made you. And that’s what you’re going to need to get through this one, and save yourself and your friends.”

The storm punctuated its claim with a triumphant roll of thunder. Sunek felt a shiver pass down his spine. The gentle breeze that blew across the Voroth Sea as part of the meditative scene seemed to pick up, just a whisker.

He considered his other options. Or rather, the lack of them. He was alone in the downed Bounty, surrounded by enemies, on a planet with an atmosphere that would slowly poison him, and all his friends and colleagues were being held somewhere by a vengeful Ferengi backed up with an army of telepathic Miradorn guards.

All things considered, it wasn’t turning out to be a great start to his week.

But he didn’t exactly want to become the uncontrollable psychopath he had briefly become on Nimbus III as a result of accepting this rather unconventional help.

Fortunately for Sunek, he had a new weapon in his arsenal now.

He had always hated meditation, ever since he was a child. But all of the time he had been taking to practise his craft with Denella, since that incident with the outlaw, meant that he was now more in control of the situation than he was before. His hours of meditation now gave him a level of control over the burning anger that whipped up in the distance.

He was sure he could control it now. At least, he was pretty sure. Almost entirely sure. If his Vulcan mind had to put a figure on it, he’d say roughly 98.32% sure. Which was pretty sure, however you looked at it.

He was in control.

“Actually, I do remember that,” he said eventually, “And I’m not in the mood to go full psycho again.”

“But that’s what so fun about it—”

“So, here’s the deal,” Sunek continued, cutting off the voice from the storm, “This time, I’m gonna be in charge…”

With that, he focused his usually-chaotic and illogical mind as best he could. He focused on the raging storm in front of him.

“If you say so,” his own voice whispered back in the breeze.

Sunek dismissed that comment, and maintained his focus. Slowly, but surely, he allowed the leading edge of the storm to encroach towards the sailing vessel.

“Just a teensy bit of rage,” he muttered to himself, “Just a teensy, tiny bit of rage…”

The sails began to flutter as the wind picked up. The first harsh flecks of rain began to spit down from above. The latest crackle of thunder seemed just a little nearer.

But Sunek kept his focus. He didn’t flinch. He closed his eyes, and allowed the storm to encroach on him, but kept the worst of it at bay.

The ancient sailing vessel bobbed up and down on the newly-fractious surface of the sea.

* * * * *

Sunek opened his eyes. And grinned.

“Heh,” he muttered to nobody in particular, “That was easy.”

He was back in the shattered interior of Klath’s cabin on the Bounty. The harshness of the crash landing had turned this place upside down just as throughout the rest of the ship.

In front of him lay all the weapons he had been able to find. All manner of knives, daggers, swords and blades that Klath had carefully curated over his lifetime. Each one meticulously sharpened and polished with craft and care.

Before his moment of meditation, he hadn’t had a clue where to start. But now, he had a teensy, tiny bit of rage inside him. And everything was becoming clear.

The Vulcan in the dirty vest top went to work. He slipped a small dagger inside its leather sheath in one of his boots. He clipped a small set of what appeared to be throwing knives to his belt. He began to heft an array of larger blades in his hands, looking for the best tool for the job.

He was ready for what he had to do. He was ready for action.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard a slight rumble of thunder. But he ignored it.

He was in control.

Part 3B

Part Three (Cont'd)

“So, why are you doing this?”

It was a pointed question, and one that Maya had been expecting. But she didn't allow herself to look up from her work, even as Jirel asked it.

The jailbreak had gotten off to a slow start. As soon as Maya had led Jirel and Natasha away from where she had killed their guards, she had ducked into a small, empty side office off from the next stretch of corridor. Since then, she had been working on a computer terminal, while Jirel and Natasha kept their disruptors trained at the door.

“Tsk,” she sighed as she tapped the controls, “Denella always makes this look so easy.”

“I asked you a question.”

She glanced up from her work to see Jirel's cold features remaining defiantly stern. After everything that had happened, he was evidently in no mood for her usual games. Still, she wasn't quite ready for complete honesty just yet.

“I suppose,” she shrugged, “I fancied a change of scenery—”

“Nope.”

Natasha kept her attention on the door to the room, but kept more than half an ear on the ongoing tense conversation to her side. Like Maya, she could tell without looking that Jirel was, in a very rare occurrence, entirely serious. And while she was glad to see his oxygen-starved condition continuing to improve the longer they spent inside, she was also still a little wary about what possible action he might take against their unlikely rescuer.

Maya sighed again, then returned her attention to the controls in front of her, declining to look the Trill in the eye as she dutifully offered a more serious explanation. “Fine. Truth is, I realised something back on Grenk's ship just now. All my life, from Turkana IV, through everything we did together, and the rest, I've always felt that I've been fighting to survive. Fighting against the bullies. Even if I've had to let other people down in order to do it.”

She paused for a moment, picturing that look of betrayal on her friend's face as the bigger boys had closed in on him back in the alleyway on Turkana IV.

“But,” she said, with clear sadness, “I guess I realised that, whether I meant to or not, at some point along the line...I wasn't fighting the bullies any more. I'd joined them. And if that was what it took to survive these days, then maybe it wasn't worth it.”

Jirel's expression didn't soften, but his grip on the weapon he was pointing at her did relax slightly as he fought his own internal conflict on how to handle this latest heel turn from Maya Ortega. “Maya,” he muttered, “If this is just another—”

“The second you think it is, you're still more than welcome to pull that trigger,” she said, looking back up at him with more apparent sincerity. “I know I can't make this one up to you. I'm not even sure I can make it up to myself. But either way, I'm ready to fight this bully. Starting with...”

She tapped a final command sequence in. The console chirped an affirmation.

“Shutting down internal sensors for this place. That'll make it easier for us to get around.”

At this, Natasha glanced back, and Jirel nodded for her to check the panel, turning his own weapon back towards the door as cover. She rushed over to the panel and checked the readouts, before nodding.

“She's right, Jirel. Not sure how, but she's taken the whole internal grid down.”

“I've still got a few tricks available to me in those old Synergy codes. It won't take them long to get everything back online, but we've got some cover for the moment while we get going.”

“Going where?” Natasha queried.

“To a transporter room, I'd suggest,” Maya replied, “The only way out of here is going to be Grenk's ship. And that's where Klath and Denella are. And the guard transporters here are set up to cut through the dampening fields in place around the mining facility.”

“And how many guards between us and there?”

“Enough,” she conceded.

Jirel reluctantly nodded along. It wasn't exactly a sane plan, but it was the only one they had. “Hope you've got a few more tricks where that came from,” he offered, gesturing at the panel.

Maya stepped away as they prepared to leave, and despite the animosity she was still feeling from the Trill, she couldn't help but muster a half smile. “You'd better believe I do.”

As they turned back to the door, Jirel remained as grim-faced as ever. Still offering nothing friendly towards the woman who had betrayed him so often.

But he hated himself for the fact that, somewhere deep inside, he had felt the urge to smile back.

* * * * *

The forcefield was only lowered long enough for Denella to be bundled into the confines of the cell. True to his word, Klath stood back from the front of the cell for that short duration, to ensure they returned her unharmed.

Still, he had given serious thought to charging through the momentary gap and taking on the quartet of Miradorn that had dragged her back to the brig. Only a knowing look from the now-conscious Orion engineer had convinced him to stand down.

“Your injuries have been treated,” one of the Miradorn noted, as the forcefield shimmered back into place.

“You will remain here. You will be fed. We are scheduled to leave orbit soon,” his twin added.

“Thanks for the update,” Denella managed sarcastically.

With that, the four Miradorn turned and walked out of the brig area, leaving the two imprisoned friends alone. With the coast now clear, Denella winced as she let her guard down and felt her residual injuries through her overalls. While she did feel better than when she had first regained consciousness, she was clearly well short of being completely healed.

“You are still injured?” Klath asked as he stepped over to support her.

“I’m fine,” she lied, “But I think they just did enough to make sure I’d live. Nothing more.”

With Klath’s assistance, she shuffled over to the bare single bed in the cell and sat down to regain her strength, taking several deep breaths into her bruised lungs.

“I could have charged them,” Klath pointed out, turning his attention back to the forcefield.

Denella shook her head, glad that she had been cogent enough to catch the look of determination in her friend’s eyes when she had been marched back into the brig, and equally glad that he had noted the firm look she had given him in return. Not for the first time in their lives, their days spent sparring with each other back on the Bounty were paying off. Each of them were usually on the other’s wavelength, combat-wise.

“I know you could,” she replied, “And if you had, I’d still be stuck in this cell. Except now, I’d be watching those guards scraping what was left of you off the walls. I’ve told you before, you really need to stop charging people holding disruptors.”

Klath turned his nose up slightly. He didn’t necessarily believe his charge into the inevitable flurry of disruptor fire would have proved to be quite so futile. And even if it had been, perhaps this was simply a good day to die. But he also appreciated his friend watching out for him. So he nodded back at her with reluctant acceptance.

Still, as far as he could see, they were still in a tactically disadvantageous position. He needed her to provide more of a justification as to why she had warned him off. And, given their shared wavelength, he suspected that she wasn’t going to disappoint him.

“You have a better plan?” he grunted, already knowing the answer.

At this, Denella’s pained expression lit up, and she carefully reached into the pocket of her dirty and blood-streaked overalls. She withdrew the small medical tool that she had been able to swipe when the attention of the Miradorn medics had been elsewhere, and held the tiny metal device up to the Klingon, who greeted this grand reveal with a slightly confused look.

“What is it?”

It was a fair question. Denella turned the tiny object over in her hand and shrugged. “Honestly? Not sure. I think it’s some sort of tooth scraper.”

Klath’s confused look gave way to an unimpressed glare.

“Still,” she continued with a shrug, “Whatever it is, with a bit of tweaking, it’s basically a miniature laser cutter.”

She summoned up some residual strength and stood up from the bed, stepping over to the forcefield in front of the cell.

“Which means?” Klath grunted after her.

“Which means,” she offered back with a knowing grin, “That I can improvise.”

The ever-resourceful engineer carefully crouched down next to the forcefield, and began to work on the tiny medical tool in her hands.

Behind her, Klath watched on in silent satisfaction.

Now he could sense that battle was near.

The self-appointed commander of the Boundless Profit was busy getting his evening of indulgence back on track after his somewhat fractious dinner.

Irritated by the failings of Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan, the attitude of Maya Ortega and the temperature of the crab cakes, Grenk had instead turned to another of his favourite means of spending his downtime, as he impatiently waited for his men to finish salvaging the Bounty so that he could get back to the trappings of civilised space.

The Ferengi had retreated to his private holosuite onboard his yacht, where he now lay face down on a cushioned massage table, as two eager, and entirely nude, Ferengi women gently worked a comfortingly-scented blend of oil into his wrinkled shoulders with their gifted hands. Gentle Vulcan lute music wafted out from speakers high up in the ceiling of the room, while a third naked Ferengi woman sat patiently next to the end of the table, occasionally proffering holographic hors d'oeuvres into Grenk's waiting mouth.

It had taken two dozen hors d'oeuvres, six separate lute ballads and four different scents of oil, but he was finally starting to relax. Free from the trappings of reality, and all the overpriced salvage efforts, impudent hew-mon women and useless Miradorn contained within it.

"I can't believe what a clever businessman you are," the Ferengi woman seated by his head purred, as she delivered a small piece of toasted bread topped with pureed slug liver into his waiting mouth, "Tell me more about your financial performance last quarter."

Grenk didn't care that it was a hollow complement, delivered by a fictional woman feeding him imaginary slug liver. He had been using holosuites for long enough to have developed the ability to entirely succumb to the fantasy. "Oh, my dear," he cackled in response, opening one eye and casting a leering look up and down her exposed form, "The profit margins I could show you..."

It was a lame line, even by Ferengi standards. But the facade that Grenk had designed around himself held true, and all three of the permissive figures around him giggled flirtatiously back, just as they had been programmed to.

Just as the two masseuses began to inch their eager fingers away from his shoulders and towards his waiting lobes, the fantasy was interrupted by the holosuite door opening.

Grenk, his lower half strategically covered with a thick towel, grimaced in frustration, but didn't bother to look up. The three nude Ferengi merely glanced over at the newcomers with entirely blank expressions. None of them appearing the least bit concerned about their own dignity. Again, just as Grenk had programmed them.

Indeed, the only individuals present who were in any way flustered by the situation were the two rather more puritanically-raised Miradorn who had just walked in. Neither Shel-Lan nor Gel-Lan had ever fully come to terms with some of their boss's proclivities. Nor his open door holosuite policy.

"Forgive the interruption," Shel-Lan managed eventually, as he and his brother belatedly turned their backs on the lurid scene in front of them in embarrassment.

"I'll forgive you idiots nothing," Grenk spat back, "What do you want?"

After a brief telepathic exchange of some more choice views on their boss, Gel-Lan opted to reply. "There is an issue down on the surface. In the mine."

This caused Grenk to spit his latest slug-topped toasted snack across the computer-generated carpet of the massage room. He snapped his head back in the direction of the Miradorn. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Another telepathic exchange took place. But both Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan knew there was little point in trying to cover anything up.

"Internal sensors have gone down throughout the habitation dome," Shel-Lan reluctantly reported, "It is being dealt with. But there is a...slight possibility that the fault was not an accident."

The report was met with an enraged grunt from Grenk. He awkwardly struggled off the massage table, keeping the towel around his waist in place with one hand in a display of modesty that was being ill-afforded to the other Ferengi in the simulation as he stalked over to where his clothing had been meticulously hung up by the ever-attentive masseuses.

"Jirel!" he barked immediately.

It only took a moment of telepathic affirmation for the two Miradorn to agree that this single word was to be the extent of Grenk's statement on the matter.

"He could not have—" Gel-Lan began.

"I don't want to hear it!" the Ferengi snapped back, "I told you two fools that we needed more guards down there!"

This provoked the fiercest telepathic debate so far. Gel-Lan pointed out to his brother that, not only had they suggested to Grenk that more personnel were needed to look after the miners, but he had expressly forbidden them from spending any more latinum on recruitment, ordering them to make do with existing staffing levels.

In response, Shel-Lan suggested that he was well aware of all of that. And reminded his brother that this was precisely the sort of thing that

had made him so eager to pursue his unionisation plan, which Gel-Lan had been so uninterested in.

Gel-Lan unhappily countered this by telling Shel-Lan that he had promised to read the information he had sent him as soon as he had a chance. But they had been on duty ever since.

The prolonged internal debate not only allowed Grenk to finish dressing in silence, but also allowed him to continue barking out orders uninterrupted.

“What are you idiots waiting for? Tell your men down there to break out those disruptors of theirs and visually account for every last one of the miners! Especially Jirel!”

Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan both promised to pick up their conversation later, as they paced back over to the holosuite door in symbiotic lockstep, disappearing through the exit to carry out their boss’s latest orders rather than elect to rest for the first time in seventeen hours.

Entirely oblivious to the hints of union-based treachery fomenting in his head bodyguards, Grenk stormed off after them, leaving the three Ferengi women watching on with passive indifference.

“Computer, end program!” he barked as he reached the door.

The women, and the massage room, disappeared with a shimmer. Grenk’s evening of indulgence now well and truly curtailed.

But he had more important things on his mind now, given the latest report from the surface.

He wanted to talk to Maya Ortega.

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

Maya was used to displaying a look of complete confidence. Especially when the situation she was in didn't warrant anything of the sort. When you spent as much of your life as she did lying and cheating your way out of whatever sticky situation you had gotten into, that veneer of false confidence became second nature. After all, if you didn't believe the lie yourself, what hope did you have of convincing anyone else?

Jirel had an altogether less confident expression on his face. Because, not for the first time in the last few hours, he had a disruptor pointed at his back.

Maya led him and Natasha down the corridor towards the two Miradorn twins pacing towards the next intersection, both of whom were eyeing the motley trio with suspicion.

Not that Maya flinched under such scrutiny. She maintained an outward expression entirely in keeping with a guard leading her two prisoners along. Because that was exactly who she was, and what she was doing.

"Who are you? And what are you doing?"

The trio came to an abrupt halt under the line of questioning from the left-side twin in front of them, as the two groups merged at the intersection itself. Jirel and Natasha remained silent, playing their own roles of downtrodden labourers to perfection. Maya didn't miss a beat.

"I'm escorting these two to medical for another shot. Turns out they can't hack the conditions out on the surface."

The two Miradorn eyed up the confident looking human woman. They knew she was working with Grenk on this particular enterprise. But she wasn't supposed to be down in the mine. This was all overseen by the guards.

"That's not your job," the right-hand Miradorn pointed out.

"Tell me about it," Maya sighed without missing a beat, "Except, it turns out that your esteemed boss thinks I need to put in a bit more legwork if I want to earn my passage back to civilisation. So, here I am. Getting my hands dirty."

The Miradorn shared a moment of telepathic debate.

They hadn't heard anything about Maya being reassigned to the mine. But then, they didn't get told a lot of things. And the idea that Grenk was greedily getting extra hard labour out of her in return for safe passage certainly tracked with their boss's usual approach to helping others. Plus, they were running late for their own work detail, shadowing the next group of miners out on the surface. And if they wasted any more time, then Grenk would likely dock their meagre wage packet even further.

So, despite their suspicions still being somewhat raised, they eventually nodded at her and walked on down the corridor, distracted by their own thankless tasks.

Maya silently breathed out in relief, though her outward demeanour didn't change, in keeping with the role she was playing. "Right then," she offered, "Come on, you two."

Maintaining the theatre of the scene, she prodded Jirel in the back with her weapon, causing a fresh angry scowl to cross the Trill's face.

He wasn't pleased with the deception that they had gone for in order to most efficiently move around the facility. Especially given that it involved him and Natasha surrendering the weapons they had secured from the two guards that Maya had dispatched. And he was doubly uncomfortable that the plan now involved the woman who had betrayed him in order for him to end up here now pointing a very real and very deadly disruptor pistol at his back.

But mostly, he was uncomfortable with the ease with which he had allowed himself to go along with the plan in the first place. How, despite Maya's latest treachery, he was allowing himself to be swept up in yet another of her schemes. Even if this one was ostensibly designed to help them escape.

He and Natasha walked on down the corridor, with their fake guard in their shadows. All three tried to maintain a steady pace, but couldn't help but move with a slight spring in their collective steps to try and distance themselves from the guards they had just crossed paths with.

"Told you this would be easy," Maya muttered to her prisoners.

Jirel didn't respond, doing his best to avoid slipping back into his old bantering ways with the woman he was sure he was never going to fall in love with again.

"How much further to the transporter room?" Natasha asked instead.

Maya offered a casual shrug behind their backs, keeping the disruptor raised. "Half a dozen more intersections. With any luck, we'll—"

She didn't get any further before the tell-tale whine of an alarm filled the air, accompanied with a succession of flashing red lights along the bare metal walls of the corridor.

"Huh," Maya continued through the shrill noise, "So much for luck."

"I take it that's not telling everyone that dinner's served in the canteen," Natasha added with clear concern.

"Nope. Grenk must've raised the alarm as soon as he saw that the internal sensors were down. Come on."

Maya dashed ahead of them, rushing further down the corridor. Jirel and Natasha followed in her wake as she raced around a corner. Almost immediately, she gestured to a door to their right.

They found themselves in another small office-type room, empty save from a small computer desk and chair. It didn't exactly look like it was filled with ways out. In fact, apart from the door they had raced through to get in, there didn't appear to be another exit. Still, Maya seemed unaffected by these minor issues, and made a beeline for the controls of the computer.

"Keep an eye on the door," she ordered to the others, handing the disruptor in her hand to Jirel and passing the second one on her belt to Natasha, "This won't take long."

Natasha glanced at Jirel, who didn't seem impressed with being given more orders by his former lover. A supposition he confirmed as he retorted to her over the continued blaring of the alarm.

"What now? This escape plan of yours got another level to it? Cos it's going really well so far."

"Calm down, Jirel," Maya sighed patiently as she worked, "I'm working on it."

Jirel felt his grip on the disruptor in his hand tighten a little on the weapon that was back within his grasp, and he found himself giving another moment of consideration to the offer Maya had made earlier, for him to just shoot her right here and now. But ultimately, he regained control of his own conscience once again, and dutifully turned his weapon towards the door, as instructed.

"What sort of work?" Natasha asked, in lieu of any further griping from the Trill.

"That depends on how many of my old access codes still work. Of course, Grenk really should have changed them all the second that he caught me trying to cheat him. And definitely should have changed them now. But then...Grenk's an idiot."

"Managed to catch you," Jirel muttered pointedly.

"Yes, well," Maya shrugged, "I suppose I've been hanging around with you too long. Must've rubbed off on me."

Despite himself, Jirel almost fired back an increasingly playful retort, once again forgetting how he had gotten into this mess in the first place. But before he had the chance to, Natasha replied with an altogether different comment.

"You need some help with those controls?"

Maya offered a half-smile and gestured back towards the door. "Just make sure you stop anyone getting in here. If my codes are still good for anything, we'll know soon enough."

Natasha nodded in understanding, then felt the need to add more.

"Thank you. For this."

"Don't thank her, Nat," Jirel butted in, "Don't forget why we're here. And what happened to the Bounty, and the others. That's what we've got to thank Maya Ortega for right now."

If he was expecting the human woman at the computer desk to offer a contrary quip at that, he was surprised to find none was forthcoming.

"He's got a point," Maya managed instead, with a distinctly sad tone.

Even as he found himself feeling a modicum of satisfaction for the guilt evident in Maya's face, Jirel caught Natasha's eye, and saw something different in her expression. A look that Jirel had seen aimed in his direction plenty of times since he and the Bounty's crew had first run into the former Starfleet officer.

A frustrating look, one that had clearly been honed from an early life spent within the confines of the Federation's web of unshakable values. A look that seemed designed to silently implore him to be a better person.

Ruefully, he found himself softening inside. And instead of continuing to twist the knife into Maya, an action which part of him felt he was entirely justified in doing given what had happened, he elected for a more equivocal path.

"I'd still like to know more about why you're doing this."

The comment caused Maya to glance up. Having not seen the look from Natasha, she had been expecting the barbs to continue as well.

She stared back at Jirel for a moment. Their eyes became locked together, as they so often had been throughout their lives together, with a mixture of longing and resentment. She pictured Niki Kolak, and wondered whether they had the time for her to explain that part of her past.

But eventually, she merely returned her attention to the computer.

"Like I said, I sold you out to survive. To escape. But, with Grenk, I was still going to be trapped. It just...took me a while to realise it."

Jirel listened attentively. A flicker of something passed across his face, as he tried to decide whether or not he finally believed her. Or whether it all still sounded like a rehearsed speech from a woman that continued to double cross everyone she came into contact with.

Before he could make a final decision, Maya's face lit up with a smile of satisfaction.

"Ok, I've been able to disrupt a few more of the security protocols. I can't shut down the alarms, but I have isolated transporter control from the lockdown process. We shouldn't have a problem using the transporter once we get there."

"One slight problem," Jirel offered back, gesturing around at the alarm sound, "How are we going to get there? The guards'll be locking the whole place down outside that door."

At this, Maya paused for a moment, looking unsure of herself for the first time in a while. Her plan hadn't quite extended that far, clearly.

This time, it was Natasha who provided the answer. "Um, maybe we use that?"

She gestured to the rear wall of the small room. And, specifically, to the maintenance vent built in at ground level.

"First rule of escaping from any situation back at the Academy. There's always a Jefferies Tube. Or whatever an illegal Ferengi/Miradorn mining operation calls them."

The trio made their way to the wall and Natasha carefully moved the panel away, revealing the crawl space behind. She looked back at Maya.

"Half a dozen intersections you said. Can you find the way to the transporter room this way?"

"I can try," she nodded, before looking back at Jirel, "If you trust me."

Still thinking about what his decision was on that matter, Jirel took a long pause before answering. And he did so by simply waving the disruptor in his hand at her. "No, I don't," he replied honestly, "But at least I've got this back."

Maya nodded in understanding, then crouched down and led the fleeing trio into the vents of the habitation dome.

* * * * *

You hear that?

The question entered Ret-Gon's head immediately, having been telepathically sent there by his brother Ket-Gon.

The two Miradorn were crouched down in the Bounty's cargo bay, finishing the task of sealing up the last of the breaches in the hull.

Technically, the breach was on the underside of the vessel, an ugly gash on the external hull itself from where the crippled ship had plunged into the rocks during its emergency landing. But it was too much of a technical challenge to access that section right now, so they were applying an internal patch inside the bay itself to at least allow for repressurisation. If Grenk wanted more permanent repairs to be completed, they would have to wait until the Bounty was tractored back into orbit.

The temporary patch represented the final item on Ret-Gon and Ket-Gon's schedule. Elsewhere, a dozen other Miradorn were finishing off repairs to the warp core and power relays, and then they could contact the Boundless Profit and get off this godforsaken planet. So far, the repairs had mostly gone according to plan. Which was why Ret-Gon was slightly irritated by Ket-Gon's nervous question.

Hear what?

He sent the thought back as calmly as he could, but his brother had been telepathically linked to him since birth, and he could tell when he was annoyed.

For a moment, Ket-Gon didn't reply. He pricked his ears up instead, listening out for whatever he thought he just heard.

The Bounty was eerily silent. With the warp core still offline, the usual hum of energy flowing through any spacefaring vessel was absent. And with Miradorn everywhere communicating telepathically, there wasn't even a hum of conversation. Which was what had made the noise that Ket-Gon was sure he had heard stand out even more.

Except now, as he listened more intently, he wondered if he really had heard something. Or if it had merely been the absence of sound that had been playing tricks on him.

Eventually, he admitted defeat, and both Miradorn returned their attention to the final patch of welding under their feet.

Must have been nothing, he thought to Ret-Gon.

You're getting paranoid, his brother chided. Too much time in this atmosphere.

Ket-Gon conceded this point. The Class-L atmosphere from outside had now well and truly leaked into the Bounty. Even after main power was back online, it would take a while for the environmental systems to purge that. It was just one of the reasons that both brothers had become especially miserable with the latest task handed to them by Grenk. Long hours doing back-breaking work to get the Ju'Day-type raider ready for towing. For reasons neither of them really understood.

And to cap it all off, they knew there was no chance of any sort of bonus pay from their boss for all of this extra labour.

Not for the first time, and not between the first pair of Miradorn twins, there were some silent rumblings of discontent about their current

employer.

Still, there wasn't much they could do about it right now. So instead, they diligently finished off their final piece of welding.

And then they both heard a noise.

Neither had to ask whether the other had heard it, even telepathically. The fact that they both snapped their heads up at the same time was all the confirmation required.

What the hell is it? Ket-Gon asked.

Must be to do with the warp drive, Ret-Gon replied as confidently as he could, The team over there are getting ready to bring it back online. It'll be a tertiary system failing somewhere.

Ket-Gon doubted that. It hadn't sounded like a system failure to him.

Both brothers listened silently as the sound started up again. It seemed to be coming from all around them in the mostly-empty expanse of the cargo bay.

Slowly, but surely, they recognised what it was. Without a doubt needing to be expressed between them.

Footsteps. Getting closer.

They stood and turned in unison towards the door of the cargo bay, back towards the Bounty's main corridor, as a brief telepathic argument broke out. As far as Ret-Gon was concerned, it had to be one of the other teams, approaching their position for some reason. But Ket-Gon was convinced it must be Grenk, on a surprise inspection, here to punish them for falling behind with their repair work. Either way, they seemed to be the only two options.

Certainly, neither of them would have guessed where the footsteps were actually coming from. They stared, open-mouthed, as a single figure burst into the cargo bay.

A tousle-haired Vulcan, clad in a dirty vest, racing across the deck towards them, growling with anger as he raised a Klingon bat'leth above his head.

The Miradorn twins didn't need to look at each other. They both communicated their thoughts on this curious turn in their fortunes telepathically, and entirely succinctly.

Oh crap.

* * * * *

Sunek roared with fury, adrenaline coursing through him as he began the task of reclaiming the Bounty from the Miradorn invaders.

And he was in control. He could feel that.

Despite all the chaos around him, he could still hear the calm lapping of the Vorothe Sea against the side of the sailing ship. He was definitely in control.

He raised the deadly blade above his head, and charged onwards.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

"I'll admit, I've had better plans."

Maya whispered the comment back to Jirel and Natasha with a calmness that didn't entirely befit their predicament. They had negotiated several hundred metres of crawl space, following Maya's vague directions towards the transporter room. But the access vents had only led so far. And now they were stuck.

The three of them were crouched in an intersection, too narrow to stand up in but just about large enough for them to manoeuvre around each other. In the middle of them on the floor was a hatch which dropped down back into the corridors of the habitation dome.

The wail of the alarms continued all around them. And, through the gaps in the grating of the hatch, they could see four Miradorn standing guard below. Directly in their path.

"Yeah," Jirel whispered back with a nod, "You've definitely had better plans."

Maya tossed an unamused look at the Trill, as Natasha kept her focus on the scene below, keeping her voice low despite the alarm sound bleeding through. "How far are we from the transporter room?"

"If I've led us the right way," Maya replied, "Another three or four intersections."

"And there's no other way around?"

"Not unless we wanna retrace our steps. And there's no guarantee that won't lead to another dead end."

"Great," Jirel chimed in with a tired sigh, "Well, amazing work on coming up with two-thirds of an escape plan."

"That's two-thirds more than you did."

Natasha ignored the bickering between Jirel and Maya, and especially ignored the increasingly flirtatious angle to their words. Instead, she rifled through her Starfleet training for a way out of their predicament. And when that failed to give her any solution as to what to do when trapped in the maintenance vents of an illegal mining facility with four Miradorn guards blocking your path to the only transporter room that can get you onboard a ruthless Ferengi businessman's private yacht, she turned to what she had learned with the Bounty's crew this past year.

And then she realised that she did have a plan.

"Ok," she muttered, "You two need to get back down the vent. As safe a distance as possible."

Jirel and Maya looked at her curiously, then at each other, then back to her.

"As safe a distance as possible from what?" Jirel managed eventually.

Natasha began to work on the disruptor in her hand, accessing the power controls in the same way that she had many months ago, when she and Klath had been fighting their way through a gang of marauding emotional Vulcan terrorists on a stolen Romulan Warbird. In the interests of expediency, she decided it was best to show her plan, rather than tell it.

The disruptor in her hands began to whine. Jirel's eyes widened in shock, while Maya just mustered an understanding smile.

"Clever girl," she replied with a shake of her head.

"Wait," Jirel added, pointing at the disruptor with palpable concern, "Did you just—?"

"Yep," Natasha nodded back, "So, go!"

Without any further questions, Maya and Jirel scurried back up the vent, while Natasha opened the hatch and dropped the overloading disruptor into the corridor below, before rushing off after them. As she turned her back on the increasingly high-pitched whine, she prayed she'd got the timing a bit better this time, recalling the injuries to her back she had suffered back on the Warbird.

Down in the corridor, the four Miradorn turned their weapons in the direction of the sound of the hatch as it clunked open, only to see a small disruptor drop through.

A split-second later, via instinctive telepathic warnings, all four realised what they were looking at. As one, they turned and ran. At the same time that Natasha desperately crawled after Maya and Jirel in the vents above.

The four Miradorn sprinted, then dived for the cover of the next intersection. All of them had already accepted that they would probably be too late.

A second later, the whining disruptor exploded. The power cell was partially depleted, but the explosion was still enough to cause chaos.

Natasha felt the shock from the explosion shove her forwards down the vent, where she collided with Jirel and Maya, where they had sought refuge at the next intersection. It was enough to knock the air out of her, but she felt no more serious injuries. The shockwave was followed by

a choking burst of smoke, and the sound of the corridor below them partially collapsing, as a new alarm sounded out to join the cacophony.

Maya looked down at where Natasha had landed, and smiled again. “Clever, clever girl.”

Natasha coughed through the acrid smoke and blinked at Jirel, who mustered a smile of his own as he waved his disruptor at her. “Just so you know, these things can also be used as guns.”

“Still,” Natasha offered back with a shrug, “Pretty good distraction, right?”

Inside, she hoped that the explosion had been enough to just incapacitate the guards, rather than kill them. Despite everything, she was still uneasy about the idea of causing any more bloodshed down here. But before she had a chance to think about that, Maya gestured them back into the smoking vent ahead of them.

“It’s only a good distraction if we get moving. Come on.”

With that, she took off. Jirel helped Natasha back into a crouch and the two of them locked eyes together. And Jirel felt compelled to say something.

“Nat, listen, I—”

“I was meaning to ask you something,” Natasha jumped in.

She had seen the look on his face and had quickly decided that, whatever serious statement he suddenly felt the need to make, now really wasn’t the time.

“So,” she continued, “All that talk about you being a swashbuckling space adventurer. And you didn’t even own your own ship?”

She punctuated the question with a knowing smile, and got a slightly sheepish one back from Jirel.

“I mean,” he offered as they began to scamper after Maya, “I tried to pay her back...”

* * * * *

The bridge of the Boundless Profit was in something close to organised chaos.

Not for the first time since they had arrived in orbit, Grenk himself was causing the lion’s share of the chaos. And also not for the first time, Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan found themselves the target of their boss’s rage.

“So, you’re telling me that not only are Jirel and his friend missing down there, but that Maya Ortega beamed down there without any sort of supervision, and she’s missing too?!”

Neither Shel-Lan nor Gel-Lan responded immediately. For the time being, they kept their comments between each other.

“And now,” Grenk continued to rant, “They’ve taken down internal sensors, somehow. And they could be anywhere!”

The spittle-flecked rant continued unabated as the stout Ferengi paced around the room. All the time, the Miradorn twins passed their thoughts internally. Chief among those thoughts were, even though they were being squarely blamed for the unfolding crisis, none of this was actually their fault. In fact, they had feared something like this might happen for some time.

They had, Shel-Lan pointed out, warned Grenk about the relatively unskilled Miradorn he had been hiring as guards. Not to mention the limited numbers that he provided them with to try and make a full three-shift pattern work.

They had also, Gel-Lan added, cautioned against the Ferengi’s over-reliance on automated systems and security software to cover for his understaffed facilities. Which left them open to exploitation from anyone with enough know-how to do so.

“And by the sounds of things, your men are seemingly incapable of finding them!”

Shel-Lan mentioned how it had been Grenk’s idea to allow Maya Ortega unsupervised access to the common areas of the Boundless Profit once she had delivered Jirel and the Bounty to him. In his usual way of attempting to ingratiate himself to someone who the ever-libidinous Ferengi saw as a potential short-term sexual partner.

Gel-Lan backed that up by offering that it had also been Grenk’s decision to allow Maya to keep a level of access to Synergy’s computer network. Seeing as how she could use that in her earlier attempts to convince Jirel and his crew that she was acting in good faith.

“Honestly,” Grenk screamed, “What am I even paying you two for anyway?!”

This comment drew particular ire. Neither twin needed to remind the other, telepathically or otherwise, that they had been pulling triple duty, overseeing the mining site, looking after the salvage work on the Bounty, along with their usual tasks as Grenk’s bodyguards.

They had also, Gel-Lan added, not slept for nineteen hours and counting.

Shel-Lan jumped in with a reminder of a passage from Grand Nagus Rom’s unauthorised biography that he had read to his brother during their last furtive meal break. Not only about unionisation, but about Rom’s firm belief in a fair wage for a fair job. And right now they were getting

one unfair wage for three unfair jobs.

“So,” Grenk concluded, pointing a stubby finger at the twins and oblivious to the telepathic debate he was interrupting, “What the hell are you going to do about all of this?”

For the first time since the rant had started, the Miradorn were allowed to respond.

“We have sent every man on the surface to find them that we can afford,” Shel-Lan said, “The other guards are needed to keep the miners secure.”

“Every man on the surface I can afford, you mean,” the Ferengi griped, either accidentally or deliberately misinterpreting Shel-Lan’s use of the word ‘afford’, “And that’s not good enough, the security systems should be able to handle the other miners—!”

“Some security systems have been compromised,” Gel-Lan pointed out, “We cannot be sure that the escapees won’t turn more of the systems off.”

Grenk fixed the right-hand Miradorn twin with a particularly unhappy glare. He wasn’t used to being interrupted like that. Especially by one of his subordinates.

Gel-Lan realised his error as well, even as Shel-Lan telepathically chided him for jumping in.

But just as Grenk was about to unload another bucket of frustration onto the sagging shoulders of the twins, their debate was interrupted by one of the other two Miradorn on the bridge, manning the forward stations.

“I am getting reports of an explosion from inside the mining complex.”

Grenk spun around on his heels with a growl of anguish and bounded over to the console to verify the details. A split second later, he whirled back to Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan and pointed an angry finger at them. “I want every available resource left on this ship ready to beam down there in five minutes! We are going to go down there, we are going to find Jirel’s little jailbreak, and we are going to deal with it! Do I make myself clear?”

Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan both agreed that this was yet another tactical blunder. Overcommitting more of Grenk’s scant physical resources to the mining complex ran a serious risk of leaving the Boundless Profit unprotected as well. With Gel-Lan already having risked their boss’s ire, Shel-Lan opted to vocalise their concerns this time. Though he didn’t get very far.

“If I may, we should leave more men behind to—”

“I said,” Grenk spat, “Do I make myself clear? Or am I going to have to dock both of you even more pay to make up for what this is costing me?!”

Another brief telepathic conference later, the two long-suffering bodyguards slash prison wardens slash mining administrators slash salvage specialists decided that it was futile to argue the case even more. And nodded back in unison.

“Assemble the men,” Grenk snapped again, “And prepare to beam down. I have a feeling I know exactly where Jirel and his little band of irritants are heading...”

As the Miradorn twins rushed off to carry out his orders, Grenk allowed himself a slight smile as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

This time, he decided, he was going to make a proper example of Jirel.

End of Part Three

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