

Star Trek: Bounty - 101 - "Where Neither Moth Nor Rust Destroys"

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Star Trek: Bounty - 101 - "Where Neither Moth Nor Rust Destroys"

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Summary

When the ragtag crew of the Bounty rescue the sole survivor of a lost Federation starship, they are plunged into a race for the galaxy's most mystical treasure, pursued by a wronged Ferengi and a gang of rogue Jem'Hadar.

Prologue

Prologue

*Kesmet Sector, near Cardassian space
Stardate 52749.3*

The deck shook wildly beneath her feet as another wave of firepower struck the crippled vessel. She couldn't help but stumble as the ship lurched around, her head slamming into the cold metal wall to her side.

Acrid smoke filled the air, turning her once familiar surroundings into an eerie and unfamiliar environment. As she struggled back to her feet, she choked back a ragged breath of the toxic atmosphere that was blinding her senses.

She fought off a rush of nausea resulting from the noxious cocktail now in her lungs and forced herself onwards, through the disorientating smog and the wailing alarms.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard a scream of agony. Part of her desperately wanted to stop, to render even the most palliative of aid. But a greater part of her knew that it was already too late for whoever had cried out. And so she forced herself to overcome her instincts and remain focused on her own vanishing hopes of survival.

"Move," she whispered to herself through gritted teeth, urging her own legs to keep going.

She blindly felt her way along the inner wall, inching forwards and ignoring the panicked shouts of two figures staggering through the haze in the opposite direction. Like just about everyone else she had seen since the attack began, there was no logic in their movements, no destination in mind. Despite all of their combat training and drills, and all of their recent experiences in battle, a state of blind panic had descended on the crew at the shock of the sudden attack.

From her compromised location inside the saucer section of the Excelsior-class USS Navajo, she had no way of knowing how many Jem'Hadar ships they were dealing with. The only thing that was certain was that the battle was going badly.

"This is the bridge," the voice of Captain D'Vora sounded out, still calm and measured despite the tumult, but heavily flecked with static over the dying shipwide comlink, "I repeat: Abandon ship. All hands to the escape pods."

The battle was going very badly indeed.

She forced herself on to the next intersection. Peering through the smoke and the flare of the emergency lighting, she was sure she was getting close. Another volley of weapons fire smashed into the ship, pitching the deck from under her once again. She hit the ground with a thud, instantly picking up on the tell-tale sound of snapping bone that told her at least one of her ribs was now broken.

Fighting against the stabbing pain that pulsed through her body, she got back to her feet and dragged herself around the next corner. There, she was greeted by the sight of a row of escape pods, doors open, ready for boarding.

Her breathing was getting even more ragged now, her displaced rib digging into her lungs and sending a fresh spasm of pain through her body with every forced intake of air. Summoning up her final reserves of energy, she staggered to the nearest pod and slumped onto the floor inside, allowing herself a few seconds of relief.

"Warning, structural integrity failure in progress," the curiously calm voice of the ship's computer intoned over the carnage.

Hell of a pep talk, she thought grimly.

With a pained grimace, she pulled herself to her feet and moved over to the pod's door controls.

"Help me!"

The cry came out of nowhere, but it stopped her in her tracks, her fingers hesitating over the sleek black panel to the left of the pod's door. She peered back out into the smoke-filled corridor.

She saw him immediately.

The ashen features of the young ensign stared up at her from where it lay on the deck, a few metres further down from her pod. One side of his face was covered in plasma burns, while blood seeped out from a wound under his torso. He was lamely trying to drag himself along with his right arm, his left arm trailing uselessly behind him. He was moments from death, weakening by the second. There was almost certainly nothing that she could do for the unfortunate young man. Still, her first duty was to at least try.

But she didn't move.

He reached out with his arm, his bloodied face a canvas of fear.

"Doctor, help me!"

She wouldn't quite have described it as an out of body experience. But in the moment, as it was happening, it felt as though part of her wasn't there. As though she wasn't really doing it. Her index finger moved imperceptibly down, gently making contact with the cold surface of the panel. She tapped the controls.

The pod door began to close.

The young ensign stared up at her.

She stared back.

Slowly, but surely, the door slammed shut.

* * * * *

Escape Pod NC-12c separated from the underside of the saucer section of the USS Navajo. The manoeuvring jets fired up automatically, propelling the tiny lifeboat away from the shattered hull of the mothership.

The three Jem'Hadar fighters circling their quarry paid no attention to the insignificant speck, focusing on finishing off the crippled starship. The pod zipped away, partially shrouded by the debris from the battle.

She slumped into one of the seats at the front of the pod and accessed the barely functioning computer systems of the Navajo, downloading a single file from her personal database. As the computer chirped out confirmation of the download, she leaned back and closed her eyes, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Lieutenant Natasha Kinsen, junior medical officer for gamma shift onboard the USS Navajo, had escaped. She had survived.

All of a sudden, a bright flash of light illuminated the interior of the pod. Although she couldn't see from her vantage point, the pod's sensors dispassionately informed her that the Navajo was no more. Some four hundred lives extinguished. She let out a stifled sob into the empty pod, and fought back the urge to vomit.

The sensors also registered the shockwave from the explosion. A shockwave that immediately enveloped the pod and its prone occupant.

Her world lurched violently all over again as the wave hit, the controls in front of her shorting out in a shower of sparks as the pod began a rollercoaster journey, riding the final surge of energy from the Navajo's destruction. As it bucked and rolled, she was flung to the ground. She heard another bone snap, but had no time to figure out which one or localise the new surge of pain before she was thrown to the back of the out of control craft.

As she was tossed about like a rag doll in a spin cycle, she caught a glimpse of a new warning light flashing wildly on the pod's barely functioning control panel. Even from her less than optimal vantage point, she could see that it was a proximity warning.

She clawed her way back into the seat and frantically checked the cause of the alarm. She needed to know whether it was the Jem'Hadar fighters approaching, ready to finish her off. Or whether this was something else. A fate perhaps worse than the immediacy of death from a Jem'Hadar disruptor blast.

When the Navajo had been attacked, it was leaving a barely-habitable planetary system on the fringes of Cardassian space, on its way to rendezvous with the fifth fleet. But it hadn't cleared the system before the attack began.

The readouts in front of her confirmed that the Jem'Hadar were not the source of the alarm. Escape Pod NC-12c had been caught in a gravitational field after the shockwave had knocked it off course.

"Warning, impact in 45 seconds," the computer soberly confirmed.

She was heading for a planet.

Part 1A

Part One

*Planet Hestina, Kesmet Sector
Three months later*

“You can’t bring that in here.”

The owner of the booming voice pointed a meaty finger at the faded brown satchel on the shoulder of the scruffy Trill in front of him. Jirel Vincent looked up at the menacing Nausicaan bouncer standing between him and the entrance to The Targ and Lion, a bar that was affectionately known across the Kesmet Sector as being the least disreputable bar on all of Hestina.

For his part, the towering bouncer looked at Jirel’s dishevelled figure, clad in a dusty grey tunic top and dark trousers. He didn’t look especially impressed with what he saw.

Jirel ran a hand through his cropped dark hair and suppressed a sigh. Why was it always Nausicaans?

“You literally just let a guy through with a sword on his back,” Jirel sighed, gesturing to where a stocky and clearly armed Reegrunion had been standing moments before.

The Nausicaan shrugged his wide shoulders dismissively. “Doorman’s discretion.”

Jirel forced a patient smile onto his face and reached into his pocket. “Fine. What if I told you I had the cover charge? Five slips of latinum, right?”

He deposited the tiny pieces of metal into the Nausicaan’s stubby hand. The imposing hulk of a creature stared dumbly at them for so long that Jirel could almost see the cogs in his head whirring as he processed what was happening. He had found that there were few species in the galaxy that were as tough to bribe as Nausicaans. Not because of any innate sense of loyalty or moral strength, more because they were usually too stupid to realise what was going on.

Eventually, just as Jirel was wondering what exactly his Plan B was, the burly bouncer stepped to one side.

“In,” he said simply.

“Glad we could sort that out,” Jirel replied, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his tone and his sense of relief disguised.

He only got to take one further step towards the entrance before the Nausicaan grabbed him by the arm, easily holding him in place. He turned back to see the bouncer gesturing at his satchel with a small scanning device.

“Peace of mind,” the seven-foot Nausicaan offered by way of explanation.

Even though it was an unseasonably mild day on Hestina, Jirel felt a bead of sweat trickle down his neck as he held the bag out. He absently itched at his spots, an unconscious reaction he tended to have when he got nervous.

At least the merchandise was getting an early challenge, he told himself.

After a couple of passes across the bag, the Nausicaan checked the results on the scanner and grunted, before finally nodding in satisfaction and gesturing towards the door. Jirel couldn’t help but allow himself a small sigh of relief as he turned and walked into the bowels of the establishment itself.

So far, so good.

* * * * *

The Targ and Lion’s reputation may have been as one of the less inhospitable hangouts on Hestina, but that really wasn’t saying much.

As soon as Jirel entered, he was hit by the stench of dozens of exotic tobacco blends from every corner of the quadrant, the minor assault on his senses backed up with the dank smell of stale alcohol and sweat of the kind that permeated your nostrils for hours after you had left. The lighting was dim, most of the room illuminated almost exclusively by a row of lurid entertainment machines along one of the walls, offering patrons the chance to gamble their latinum away on just about any game they desired. All around the place, gathered at stout wooden tables, freighter crews and grizzled merchants busily ate, drank and smoked a not inconsiderable chunk of their lives away.

With The Targ and Lion as its bright spot, it was safe to say that Hestina wasn’t a planet you visited if you could at all avoid it.

Jirel moved on, glancing around the room as he walked while trying not to draw too much attention to himself. He briefly made eye contact with a particularly surly Klingon sitting on his own in the corner of the room, but quickly looked away again as he approached the bar.

“Andorian brandy, no ice,” he told the wrinkled Ferengi bartender standing on the other side.

As his drink was prepared, he cast another look around. He spied a couple of Gorn traders, a group of Tellarites, the sword-carrying Reegrunion from earlier, and even a lone incongruous Gallamite sat sipping a luminous drink through a straw as the dusty neon sign behind him reflected off his transparent skull. But he still couldn't see his quarry.

As the world-weary bartender placed the drink in front of him, Jirel leaned over to mutter into his lobe.

"Any other Ferengi in tonight?" he asked, slipping the payment for the drink, plus a little extra, into the bartender's outstretched hand.

The Ferengi nodded imperceptibly and subtly gestured towards one of the far corners of the bar, where Jirel could just about make out a table off to one side, nestled away in an alcove. Thanking the bartender, and tipping him again for good measure, he picked up his drink and approached the table. He couldn't help but notice that he was being watched by the same Klingon he had made eye contact with before.

As he neared the table, he could immediately recognise the three figures gathered around it.

At the head of the table was Grenk, a wily and untrustworthy Ferengi trader currently employed in the process of greedily scooping handfuls of wriggling tube grubs from a bowl and into his pock-marked mouth. Either side of him sat his personal guards, glaring at anybody who got within ten feet of the table with suspicious contempt. Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan were a pair of Miradorn twins, Grenk's favoured choice of bodyguard. They, like the rest of their species, possessed a symbiotic telepathic bond between them. Among other things, that gift ensured that they could spot danger a sector away.

As Jirel approached the table, they both stood in unison and drew a pair of ugly blades from their belts.

"Shel and Gel, have I missed you guys," he grinned, holding his hands up peaceably, "Still sticking together, I see?"

The twins didn't exactly look happy to see him, but they reluctantly holstered their weapons and maintained a silent vigil either side of Grenk. The Ferengi, for his part, barely looked up from the writhing meal in front of him as Jirel slid into the seat opposite him.

"You're late!", he squealed suddenly, noisily swallowing another mouthful of grubs.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Couldn't find anywhere to park."

Keeping his bravado levels turned up, Jirel leaned across the table and dabbed his finger into the mass of grubs, licking his sticky finger with a smack of his lips.

"I just love the sauce they do here," he continued, "I think I get a hint of kanar in there, but you just try and get the chef to share his secret—"

Grenk slammed a chubby hand down on the table. Jirel decided that might be enough bravado for the time being.

"I'm a busy man, Jirel," he barked, "We've been waiting here for four hours!"

"You're right, I'm sorry. Just wanted to make sure we perfected the stitching."

He reached into his satchel, noting two Miradorn hands instinctively moving back towards their weapons from the corner of his eye, and removed a simple pair of trousers. Grenk studied the garment with a mixture of intrigue and distrust as Jirel handed them over.

"You really managed it?" the Ferengi cackled, running his sticky fingers down the seam of the trousers, and feeling the cold touch of the metal from the stitching.

Jirel leaned back in his seat and sipped his drink as the inspection of the clothing continued. "Grenk, come on, have I ever let you down?"

The Ferengi paused in his inspection and stared back at the Trill with a prolonged icy glare.

"Fair point," Jirel conceded, "But it worked, just like I said it would. Exactly the same process we used to help you get five kilos of Hupyrian beetle snuff onto Risa without paying a single slip of import duty."

Grenk smiled broadly, allowing himself a moment to reminisce about one of his more profitable schemes of late.

"Took my engineer a while to compensate for the extra weight and nail down the matter parameters, but you stick that pair of trousers on any transporter pad and isolate the signature of the latinum molecules, and you'll beam out three bars worth of the stuff."

"Three?" Grenk queried with disgust, "We agreed on eight!"

Jirel's mask of bravado slipped a notch or two again, but he switched effortlessly into negotiation mode.

"We've had some...minor cash flow issues recently," he shrugged, "But, you hold up your end of the bargain, and you get those three, plus some very detailed instructions on how it all works."

Grenk considered this for a moment, allowing Jirel to push for the harder sell.

"Think about it, Grenk. You'll be able to smuggle a fortune halfway across the galaxy, and all anyone'll see is an oversized wardrobe. Tweak the polarity of the fabric to mask the latinum's molecular signature and it's virtually undetectable to any scanner unless they know exactly what they're looking for. Just ask the guy on the door at this place."

He watched as Grenk's face creased back into a greedy leer, showing off two rows of dirty teeth.

"I have to admit, I was sceptical," he cackled as he grabbed another mouthful of grubs, "But you've really done it this time, Jirel."

“So,” Jirel grinned back, eager to conclude their business, “I held up my side, now it’s your turn.”

“Of course,” Grenk replied, digging underneath the table and producing a small bronze padd, “I have what you want right here.”

He held it out across the table, and for a moment Jirel allowed himself to think that maybe it really would be that easy. As soon as he reached out for the padd, however, Grenk took clear delight in theatrically pulling his hand back with a flourish.

“But,” the Ferengi continued, “You can appreciate that I wish to test the quality of your engineer’s work before we complete our little transaction here. Always inspect the merchandise before making a deal, Rule of Acquisition number 272.”

“Really is one of those for every occasion, isn’t there?”

Grenk ignored him, instead passing the trousers over to Shel-Lan. “Take these back to the shuttle and…verify the tailoring.”

The Miradorn nodded and walked away towards the rear door of The Targ and Lion. Jirel felt his spots start to feel itchy all of a sudden.

“Grenk, your levels of trust really do flatter me,” he said as casually as he could manage, “But maybe while Tweedledum gets on with that, I can get on with…going?”

He gestured to the padd that the Ferengi had set down on the table. Grenk shook his head and smiled thinly, steepling his fingers in front of him. “You made me wait, Jirel. Now it’s my turn.”

Jirel stifled a grimace and sat back in his chair. Unable to see any other realistic alternative, he took a sip from his drink and quietly waited for his plan to go horribly wrong. He absently wondered what Admiral Jenner would make of his efforts on this mission so far.

After a few moments of silence, Shel-Lan returned from Grenk’s shuttle, an inevitably angry look written across his face.

“Attempting to transport the latinum from the trousers shorted out the shuttle’s entire transporter system!” he bellowed at Grenk, whose eyes narrowed in anger.

As Jirel contemplated whether he had ever heard a more inadvertently amusing sentence, he glanced back at the fuming Ferengi.

“Oops,” he offered simply.

He dived for the padd.

From a seated start, he only managed to land awkwardly on the table, but the benefit of surprise allowed him to grab the device from the table before Grenk’s sauce-covered hand could get there. As he rolled from the table back onto the floor, he mentally congratulated himself for catching the Ferengi off guard. But that good feeling didn’t last long.

He felt a Miradorn-sized fist slam into the side of his head. It wasn’t a completely clean contact, but it was enough to knock him off his feet and send him to the floor. He rolled away from any follow-up punches and forced himself back to his feet, only to find himself confronted by Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan, both clutching their blades.

“Kill him!” he heard Grenk scream from behind the table.

The twins charged him.

Jirel dashed forward to meet them, dropping to his knees at the last moment to slide under the swing of their weapons and take out their legs from underneath them. The sound of them landing awkwardly behind him and their knives skittering away across the floor was enough to cause several of the other patrons in The Targ and Lion to show some interest in the fracas that was developing for the first time.

Jirel made a break for the exit, but immediately found his legs taken away again by a swing of Gel-Lan’s foot. As he fell to the floor, he ducked into another roll and jumped back to his feet, facing the Miradorn. He parried a couple of blows before his stronger opponent was able to grapple and slam him down onto a nearby table. Jirel crashed through the wooden frame and landed on the floor with a painful thump. He spun away from an incoming fist and sprung back to his feet, trying to ignore the pang of pain now emanating from his left leg.

On the periphery of his vision, he noted that a baying audience had now accumulated, their morose time on Hestina being broken up by the chance to see some blood spilled.

He kept his focus on Gel-Lan, avoiding a few more swings before landing a punch of his own to the side of the Miradorn’s head. Inwardly, he cursed his decision not to bring a weapon. But then he’d been sure that an energy weapon would have been confiscated at the door, and unlike a certain Reegrunion, he was no good with blades.

As he busily avoided Gel-Lan’s punches, he became increasingly aware that he had lost sight of the other twin. Fearing that the second Miradorn was now behind him, he aimed a sharp kick at Gel-Lan’s right leg, hearing the sound of a bone snapping with a sickening crunch, and immediately spun away from the expected attack from the rear.

Shel-Lan was indeed behind him. But he had also anticipated Jirel’s evasive move, and tracked his movement before knocking him to the floor with a swift kick to the ribs. As Jirel lay prone and panting for breath on the floor, he looked up to see Shel-Lan grab a sturdy piece of wood from the remains of the table and raise it above his head. Exhausted, defeated, and with nothing more to give, Jirel prepared himself for the killer blow.

Suddenly, he heard something heavy slam squarely into the Miradorn’s exposed back. His attacker’s face transformed from a look of impending victory to one of intense pain. He slumped to the floor at Jirel’s feet.

Jirel looked up to where Shel-Lan had been standing, and saw the Klingon from earlier, holding the blunt edge of his bat'leth up where it had made contact with Shel-Lan's head. He couldn't help but smile as he saw the satisfied grin on the Klingon's face.

"It looked like you required assistance," he said gruffly, reaching down with a burly arm to help Jirel back to his feet.

The Klingon was dressed in similar attire to Jirel, a grey tunic with matching trousers. Neither had any other identifying markings or insignia on them. They worked for themselves.

Jirel tentatively dusted himself down and looked around. Grenk appeared to have made himself scarce, while Gel-Lan, his leg now twisted at an unnatural angle, helped his dazed twin back to his feet. The Miradorn pair, both bruised and battered, took one look at the imposing Klingon and the bat'leth in his hands, and took off after their boss as fast as they could hobble away. The audience that had gathered to watch the unfolding brawl skulked back to their respective tables, muttering unhappily.

Jirel turned back to the Klingon and patted him on the shoulder. "See, Klath? Told you it was a good idea for me to bring backup."

"That is not how I remember it," Klath retorted, as he returned his weapon to the sheath behind his back.

Jirel shrugged and waved the Ferengi padd in his friend's direction. "Agree to disagree. The important thing is we got this. So let's get moving ___"

He paused as they turned to leave only to find their path back to the exit blocked by the Nausicaan doorman and the Ferengi bartender who, if the disruptor pistol in his left hand was anything to go by, didn't have any issues getting energy weapons onto the premises. Neither of them looked happy about the state of this particular area of their bar.

"Gentlemen," the Ferengi hissed, gesturing at the scene of broken glass, furniture and general destruction they had left in their wake, "You seem to have caused an awful lot of damage to this honourable establishment."

"Technically, a lot of this was caused by those other guys," Jirel offered with a friendly smile.

"You were the one that broke the table," Klath pointed out, not exactly helpfully.

"Ah, but it was one of the other guys that dropped me through it."

The Nausicaan and the Ferengi took a step forward, their expressions suggesting that they didn't appreciate the banter.

"I'm afraid," the bartender said, "That all damages must be fully paid for."

The Nausicaan's hands clenched into fists. The Ferengi's eyes narrowed. Jirel glanced at Klath, whose focus was now entirely on assessing the strength of the Nausicaan, preparing for battle. Feeling a twinge in his injured leg, Jirel knew that the last thing his aching body could handle right now was another bar brawl.

Keeping his eyes on their two adversaries, he surreptitiously tapped a button on the small communicator attached to his belt.

"Ok," Jirel replied, more seriously, "I'd love to sort all this out with you fellas. But the truth is...I left my latinum in my other trousers."

Klath rolled his eyes. The Ferengi and the Nausicaan didn't get it.

"So, if you'll excuse us, I'll just go get it."

The bartender realised what was happening a moment too late, as the two figures in front of him began to dematerialise. He fired the disruptor, but the blast only succeeded in passing through the space where Jirel had been standing, shattering another innocent wooden table into a million tiny pieces.

His squeal of frustration was drowned out by the whine of the transporter.

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

Jirel and Klath materialised in the cramped transporter room of their ship. At the controls was a green-skinned woman, wearing a set of dirt-streaked overalls tied off at the waist and a grubby sleeveless top.

“You rang?” she said simply, raising an amused eyebrow and gesturing at Jirel’s communicator.

“Denella, has anyone ever told you that you have great timing?” Jirel sighed in relief as he gingerly stepped off the transporter pad and gave her a warm hug.

“I could have beaten that Nausicaan,” Klath muttered bitterly, following Jirel off the pad and appearing as close as a Klingon could get to being in a sulk.

Denella, the Orion engineer of the ship, broke the hug and started to reach across for the transporter controls. “You wanna go back down there?”

Jirel gently patted her hand away and handed her the bronze padd. “Klath will get over himself,” he replied, “We, meanwhile, have what we need.”

Denella nodded as she took the padd and tapped the screen. “The coordinates of the Navajo debris?”

“Exactly as promised,” he grinned, before faltering slightly, “I mean, I’ve only really got Grenk’s word for that at the moment, but…”

Not entirely sure how to finish that sentence in a positive way, Jirel instead turned and led them out the door.

“Great,” Denella sighed, as she and Klath followed.

They walked down the short main corridor of the ship, towards the steps up to the cockpit. Jirel noticed that the lights were still dimmed, a result of the damage they had suffered on their trip to Hestina.

“What’s our status?”

“I’ve got partial main power back online,” Denella replied with just a glimmer of smugness, “Just as I said I would. We’re good for warp speed.”

“Never doubted you for a moment,” he said, before glancing over at Klath, “I owe you three slips of latinum.”

She shook her head and smiled patiently as they ascended into the cockpit, and despite the pain still coming from his leg, and the aches coming from half a dozen other places all over his body, Jirel found himself struck with a reassuring sense of calm and familiarity.

He had been a sickly orphan on a Trill colony, adopted by a human Starfleet officer and his family and brought up on Earth. After leaving home, he had tried his hand at almost everything, from joining a private venture terraforming a Tellarite moon to several long months serving onboard a Denobulan freighter. But only the Bounty had ever felt like home. Their mostly hand-to-mouth existence may have been a long way from ideal, but of all the parts of the galaxy he had ended up at one point or another, this was where he felt like he belonged.

The ship, such that it was, was a small Ju’Day-type raider, picked up by Jirel from a scrapyards many years ago and named after one of the old stories his father told him during his childhood. And from there, he had managed to assemble a motley, but loyal crew. Klath was his trusted friend, tactical chief and hired muscle, depending on what the situation called for. Denella was his skilled and dedicated engineer, responsible for keeping the ageing, battered Bounty in one piece. And then there was his Vulcan pilot, Sunek. Who, as the three of them entered the cockpit and took their usual positions, was already sitting at the helm, looking back at them.

And grinning.

“Cause enough trouble down there?” the wiry Vulcan joked.

Jirel gingerly lowered himself into the centre chair in the middle of the cockpit, as Denella took her post at the aft engineering console and Klath manned the tactical console on the left side of the room.

“No more than we needed to,” he smiled back, “As always.”

“Psh. You really need to stop getting us barred from all my favourite places,” Sunek grouched, before gesturing back to the helm console, “So, where now?”

Jirel swivelled around to check on Denella, who was still tapping away at Grenk’s padd.

“One sec, this stupid thing’s completely locked down. Almost like Grenk was expecting us to steal it.”

“Hey,” Jirel said, wagging a finger at her, “It was a fair trade. Ish.”

She tutted loudly as she continued to work. “I told you I needed more time to figure that latinum trick out,” she grouched, “Just because it worked on a few tins of beetle snuff, you expected me to make it work with latinum—?”

“The point is,” Jirel interrupted her, “We got the padd.”

“The point is: He now thinks I’m a bad engineer.”

Jirel couldn’t help but smile. Despite everything, Denella was most concerned with the idea that somewhere in the quadrant, her engineering prowess was being besmirched.

Before he was able to reply, however, Klath’s console sounded out an alert. The Klingon checked his readouts and growled unhappily.

“There is a shuttle approaching our position from the planet’s surface.”

“Scan for lifesigns.”

“One Ferengi,” Klath reported as he tapped his controls, “And two Miradorn.”

“Persistent fella, isn’t he?” Sunek quipped from over Jirel’s shoulder.

“Persistent, and prepared,” Klath noted, “The shuttle has been heavily modified. Upgraded warp core and shielding, micro-torpedo launcher —”

Klath’s report was interrupted as the entire ship suddenly shook from a nearby explosion. Sunek swivelled back to his own console.

“Well,” the Bounty’s pilot observed, “At least nobody needs to ask where that micro-torpedo came from.”

“Shields up!” Jirel barked, only to receive a glare from Klath.

“Our shields are still inoperative.”

“Damn it. Sunek, get us out of here!”

“On it,” the Vulcan said as he quickly tapped his helm controls, “Any idea where we’re getting out of here to yet?”

“I’m working on it,” Denella fired back, still frantically wrestling with the padd.

“Looks like we’re going this way then.”

As the ship shook from a second nearby detonation, the cockpit was abruptly bathed in a flash of light, indicating their progression to warp speed.

“Grenk has gone to warp as well,” Klath reported, “And he is gaining.”

The ship shook as another torpedo exploded nearby. Sunek deftly altered their course, moving to port as he tried to shake the Ferengi.

“Just so you know,” he grimaced, “Not enjoying this.”

Feeling impotent in the centre chair, Jirel swung around to Klath again. “Long shot, I know, but have we got anything to fire back with?”

“We exhausted our complement of torpedoes on that Orion scout ship last week,” the Klingon reminded him, “So, not unless Denella was able to repair our phaser cannons.”

“Hey, I got the warp drive back, didn’t I?” Denella retorted, “What am I? A miracle worker?”

“Apparently not,” Sunek chimed in.

“Thin ice, Sunek.”

Jirel ignored the bickering and racked his brain for ideas, as Sunek pitched the Bounty into another warp turn, avoiding another micro-torpedo blast as he did so.

“There’s gotta be something we can use.”

“Still got a cargo bay full from that comet mining job we got suckered into,” Denella quipped, “We could literally throw rocks at them?”

Jirel went to retort, then his face lit up. “No, but that does remind me what else is left behind from that job.”

Klath nodded in understanding. “The gravitic charges.”

“They’ll have to do,” he said, tapping the control panel on the arm of his chair to bring up a tactical view of their immediate surroundings, “Sunek, there’s an asteroid bearing 212 mark 140. Can you get us there?”

“If I can’t, there’s not gonna be much of you left to complain about it.”

The Bounty turned and took off in a dizzying new direction, as another explosion rocked them, slightly more firmly this time.

“That one actually hit us,” Klath announced.

“Nobody’s perfect!” Sunek shot back.

“Glancing blow,” Denella reported, “Minor damage to the starboard wing, structural integrity still holding.”

“Coming up on your asteroid now,” Sunek shouted, “Dropping out of warp.”

Jirel watched the starry landscape in front of them coalesce back into a more static pattern as the ship returned to sublight speeds. In front of them, gently tumbling over end-on-end, was a small brownish rock.

“Klath, ready with one of those charges.”

The Klingon nodded, working his controls while keeping another eye on his readouts. “Grenk has dropped to impulse,” he noted, “He is closing.”

“Good. Get as close as you can, Sunek.”

“Close enough to write our names in the dust,” the Vulcan replied.

Another explosion rocked the cockpit, but Sunek kept the ship’s bearing true. Slowly but surely, the dirty ball of rock in front of them grew larger and larger. Jirel gripped the arms of his chair, waiting for the right moment.

“Ready...ready...and...now, Klath!”

On the underside of the Bounty’s hull, a small panel opened up and spat out a tiny metallic disc. The gravitic charge, primarily used to mine small planetoids and moons, automatically activated, and was immediately attracted towards the highest gravity field in the vicinity. In this instance, the small asteroid directly in its path.

As the mine neared the rock, the explosive yield of the device armed itself. It detonated the millisecond the sensors on the bottom of the disc made contact with the solid surface of the asteroid. The ancient remnant of a planet that never formed exploded into a billion pieces, all flying out from the centre of the explosion with devastating energy. If the Bounty hadn’t still been heading straight for it, Jirel would have said it was almost beautiful.

“Pull up, Sunek!” he bellowed instead.

“Yep. Don’t need the reminder,” the Vulcan shot back, his fingers already dancing across the helm controls.

The Bounty eased nose-up, and took off away from the remains of the asteroid with seconds to spare.

The Ferengi shuttle following close behind didn’t have the luxury of preparing for such an evasive manoeuvre, and instead was forced to slam its engines into reverse as a hailstorm of rock and debris enveloped it. The shields of the tiny vessel flared green as dozens of impacts registered on them, before collapsing altogether. The remaining debris impacted directly onto the shuttle’s exposed hull, causing a series of tiny explosions across the dirty orange vessel. Eventually, Grenk’s ship was left drifting in space. The chase was over.

“Yeah!” Sunek whooped, punching the air with delight for good measure, “How d’ya like them tulaberries?”

Jirel’s face creased into a relieved smile of his own. He turned and winked at Klath. “Nice shooting.”

“I would not say that constituted ‘shooting’,” the Klingon growled, before the corners of his mouth turned upwards into a sliver of a smile, “But...it was enjoyable.”

“Got some more good news for you,” Denella piped up, waving the padd in the air, “Cracked the code on this, and I’ve got us some coordinates.”

“Great,” Jirel nodded, “Pass them over to Sunek and let’s get going.”

“And once we’ve got going,” Sunek said, giving the Orion woman a trademark cheeky grin, “Maybe our engineer can finally get round to fixing our weapons?”

The Vulcan continued grinning, even as he was ducking out of the way of a Ferengi padd that had been aimed squarely at his head.

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

Beep, beep, beep...

She paused midway through the thirty-ninth push-up of her routine, and listened.

It took her a while to recognise the origin of the noise, accustomed as she was to silence this far into the dank cave she had been forced to call home.

She had initially set up camp nearer the entrance to the caverns, to try and take in at least some of what passed for natural light outside. But after a week, the relentless noise of the fierce sandstorms that whipped around on the surface outside had started to drive her crazy. Once it became abundantly clear that the storms weren't a passing weather feature and were in fact the default conditions on her new home, she had retreated deeper into the cave structure, craving the silence.

Except now, the silence was being interrupted.

...beep, beep, beep...

She soon realised that the shrill, piercing sound permeating through the cave was coming from a small metal box, coated in layers of sand and dust from weeks of neglect, which sat propped up against a rock towards the rear of the cave. The rhythm of the beeping was slow at first, but quickly began to gain in tempo.

She forced herself back to her feet, her daily exercise routine now forgotten about, and scurried over to the box, opening it up to reveal a small control panel and readout display. She called up the information which was triggering the alert.

...beep, beep, beep...

Natasha Kinsen had lost count of exactly how long she had been on Kesmet IV, but she knew that it was now being counted in weeks or months, rather than days. Her tattered uniform was now just a degraded memory of what she once was.

The planet that Escape Pod NC-12c had delivered her to was not the most hospitable of environments to say the least. Barely hitting the minimum requirements for Class M, the arid desert conditions and howling storms meant that there was barely anything in the way of plant or animal life to keep her alive. Over the time that she had been there, she had gotten by on the rations she had been able to salvage from the wreckage of the escape pod, which had soft landed a kilometre or so away from the caves she was now using for shelter.

The exercises themselves had quickly become part of her regime. Not necessarily something that she wanted to do, in fact physical training had been by far her least favourite aspect of life in Starfleet, dating back to her Academy days. But with precious little else to do on Kesmet IV, they at least served to keep her healthy, and give her days some semblance of structure.

...beep, beep, beep...

Landing near to these caves had proven to be a godsend not just from a shelter point of view, given the heat and the storms outside, but from a survival point of view as well. She had found a subterranean stream of water which had supplemented her rations. Helped to keep her alive. All in the vain hope that she might one day hear a sound from the metal box sitting in front of her. The emergency comms unit that she had dragged all the way from the pod.

She absently chewed on one of her remaining ration packs as she checked the details that the unit was providing her.

As the results came through, she let out a yelp of delight. A ship, positively identified, had entered the system. Just barely registering on the degraded sensors of the emergency unit, but a ship nonetheless.

...beep, beep, beep...

But the sensors could tell her nothing else. And she quickly discovered that the damage from the crash had rendered the unit unable to send or receive any transmission, meaning that she couldn't even make contact.

She was at the mercy of the sensors of the approaching ship. And she had no idea who they were.

...beep, beep, beep...

It could be a Federation ship on a rescue mission.

...beep, beep, beep...

It could be a cruiser from the Orion Syndicate.

...beep, beep, beep...

It could even be a Borg Cube, on its way to assimilate the Alpha Quadrant.

...beep, beep, beep...

After so long alone on Kesmet IV, she admitted to herself that anything might be better than nothing. But just in case, she reached into her meagre stash of supplies from the escape pod, and retrieved a phaser.

* * * * *

“Well, it’s got to be here somewhere!”

Denella sighed and forced herself to bite her tongue. She tried to keep her attention on the sensor readouts in front of her, and ignore the singularly annoying figure that was looming over her.

Sunek evidently wasn’t going to take her pointed silence as an acceptable response. The Bounty’s pilot continued to lean over his console, sticking his nose in where it didn’t belong.

“Seriously, we’ve come all this way, and it’s just vanished?” he continued, drumming his fingers on the top of her panel, exacerbating her annoyance.

Jirel walked over to the engineering console, noting Denella’s irritated demeanour and turning to the seemingly oblivious Vulcan.

“Sunek, what are you doing?”

“Helping.”

“Define that word for me.”

Sunek sighed and held his hands up. “Fine. How about I go back over there and use this incredible intellect to keep the ship at station-keeping, hmm?”

“If you would,” Denella muttered.

Sunek went to fire back another quip, but Jirel stopped him with a firm glare. Instead, the Vulcan simply tutted and returned to the helm console, as Denella looked up at Jirel.

“I hate to say this, but he’s kinda got a point,” she sighed, “Starship black boxes don’t just disappear.”

“First time for everything,” Jirel shrugged, “Are we definitely looking in the right place?”

“The debris field is definitely from a Federation vessel,” Klath’s voice boomed out from the tactical console on the other side of the cockpit, “Metallic composition and the size of the field suggests a ship of the Navajo’s size.”

“And yet, no black box,” Denella reiterated, wringing her hands in frustration, “And we don’t get that, we don’t have anything useful for the redoubtable Admiral Jenner. And we don’t get our repairs.”

Jirel gave her a resigned nod. He didn’t need reminding about that aspect of their situation.

The job had seemed straightforward when they had first taken it on, to recover the black box from one of the many Starfleet ships that had disappeared during the Dominion War. It wasn’t the first time they’d taken on this sort of salvage mission. It was usually easy enough to find out about any fresh wreckage from the galaxy’s underbelly. And Jirel and his crew had plenty of contacts down there. And while such wrecks were often pillaged by opportunists before the Bounty got near them, he’d never heard of anyone stealing a black box before.

Yet, despite the Bounty having scanned the debris field they had been led to ten times over, they couldn’t find a trace of it. He was aware that all eyes in the cockpit were on him for their next move. But right now, Jirel wasn’t sure what they were supposed to do.

The worried silence that had descended was broken by an alert from Klath’s console. He looked down at his panel with clear confusion.

“That the black box?” Jirel asked hopefully.

“No,” Klath replied, “A lifesign.”

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

The two figures awkwardly stumbled and slipped their way towards the entrance to the caves, leaving the battered and weathered remains of Escape Pod NC-12c behind them. All around them, a fierce wind kicked up sand from beneath their feet, assaulting their faces with a flurry of grit and dust.

“Nice place,” Jirel shouted through the wind, holding his hands up to his face to try and offer some protection against the relentless sandstorm, “Remind me again why we didn’t just beam down inside the caves?”

They struggled on. There was no reply from his companion. Jirel winced slightly from the pain from his still-tender leg. Which did little to help his mood.

“And don’t give me a load more engineering crap about the ionic signature of the rocks or something. I’m sure you make half that stuff up.”

Denella sighed and checked the readings on the bulky tricorder she was carrying, ignoring the stinging in her eyes from the sandstorm.

“We needed to check the pod,” she reminded him, spitting out the inevitable mouthful of sand she got for her troubles, “Now shut up and keep moving. We’re nearly there.”

She was right about that. They staggered up the rocky incline in front of them as fast as they could and soon found themselves inside the altogether less hazardous surroundings of the caverns they had been aiming for. Now out of the worst of the storm, they patted themselves down, coughing up lungfuls of sand. As they took in their new surroundings, Denella scanned around the sinister interior.

“Ok,” Jirel eventually managed between coughing spasms, “Where’s our lifeform?”

“Can’t get an exact fix,” she reported, gesturing to the rocks with her tricorder, “Must be the mineral composition of the rock strata, throwing the scans off.”

Jirel’s coughing subsided, and he managed to fix her with an angry glare. “Seriously, do you do that on purpose?”

She maintained a plausible air of innocence as she tapped at the tricorder. Eventually, Jirel sighed. “Fine. I guess we’ll do this the old fashioned way.”

They walked on into the cave. Jirel pulled out a flashlight and shone it in front of them as they made their way deeper into the structure.

“But just so you know,” he continued, “I’m absolutely certain there’s an easier way to—”

The leg seemed to come out of nowhere, swinging out as Jirel was passing a particularly large rock on the ground, and connecting solidly with his leg. It wasn’t the cleanest of kicks, but coupled with the existing injury, it was more than enough to knock him off balance. With a yelp of pain, the Trill tumbled to the ground in an awkward heap.

“Goddammit!” Jirel screamed, with a mixture of anger and pain.

Denella watched on in shock as the rogue leg’s owner jumped out into the open. She found herself confronted by a filthy red-headed human woman, wearing a tattered Starfleet uniform and brandishing a small type-1 phaser.

For a split second, the woman looked confused as she stared back at an Orion woman in dirty overalls, armed with a thirty year old Cardassian tricorder. The unexpected sight caused her trigger finger to falter for a moment, which was just enough of a delay to allow Denella to hold her hands up in a show of peace.

“Woah, woah, woah, calm down!” she said as quickly as she could, “This is the weirdest reaction to a rescue party I’ve ever seen.”

Natasha Kinsen paused, struggling to make sense of the situation. Of all the things she had been expecting from the sensor trace on her emergency unit, it hadn’t been the two dishevelled figures that had actually shown up. She couldn’t tell if they were traders, pirates, scavengers, or even some sort of practical joke being played on her for reasons her brain couldn’t figure out at this exact moment. But as she looked at the kind smile on the face of the Orion woman, oddly streaked with what looked like dirt or grease from somewhere, she felt herself relax slightly.

“Who are you?” she eventually managed, keeping the phaser raised.

“I’m Denella. And the guy you just kicked is Jirel. We’re here to help.”

“Yeah,” Jirel coughed sarcastically, still lying prone on the floor, “It’s so nice to meet you.”

Natasha looked around, realising for the first time how ragged her breathing was. Even with her strict exercise routine, the weeks spent on a scant diet of emergency rations had weakened her. But she kept her weapon raised.

“Starfleet sent us,” Denella added, gesturing to the ragged uniform Natasha was wearing, “Don’t worry. We’re taking you home.”

Natasha glanced from the Orion woman to the Trill and back again. Absolutely nothing about them seemed to corroborate that story. But equally, she knew that she couldn’t stay on this planet any longer. Regardless of who her rescuers really were working for.

"I'm sorry," she said eventually, holstering her phaser and moving to help Jirel back up, "I just—My comms unit picked up your ship, but didn't tell me who you were."

Jirel gingerly got back to his feet, and she supported him as he hobbled over to a nearby rock. He leaned on it and winced, rubbing his leg. "So, is this how all Starfleet officers greet anyone in the wrong uniform?"

She looked down at his injury, and then scurried off deeper into the cave.

"Don't worry," she called back, "Just let me check you out."

"Hmm," Jirel said as he gave Denella an impish grin, "Never hurts to have a girl say that to you—"

"She means medically," the Orion woman replied with a patient smile and a roll of her eyes, as she scanned around the rest of the area with her tricorder.

Natasha returned from the depths of the cave moments later, holding a Starfleet-issue medical tricorder and medkit. She quickly assessed his leg with well-drilled ease, raising an eyebrow when she saw the results of her scans.

"Wow. I really am sorry," she said as she worked, "There's a hairline fracture of the anterior bone in your lower leg."

She grabbed a bone knitter from her medkit and ran it across the area.

"To be completely honest," Jirel replied, "That might have been the Miradorn."

She paused and looked up at the Trill, quizzically.

"Long story."

Natasha returned to her work, her unspoken questions not really answered. Denella walked over to join them, her attention on the other woman. "And you are?"

"Lieutenant Natasha Kinsen," she replied, "Junior medical officer for gamma shift, USS Navajo."

She saw her two guests glance at each other, but she kept her focus on her patient, reaching into the medkit for a hypospray and gently pressing it into his skin.

"That'll deal with any residual pain," she continued, "And the bone's back in one piece. Whoever was responsible."

Jirel rubbed his leg again, feeling the pain gently subside. "Well, no doubting your qualifications at least, doc," he grinned, "Thanks."

"We didn't realise there were any survivors from the Navajo," Denella said, trying to keep focus on the bigger picture.

"There aren't," Natasha replied in a quiet voice, "Not apart from me."

Her gaze drifted for a moment, remembering those final moments onboard the Navajo. Specifically, remembering that one doomed ensign's face. She had to force herself back to the present, distracting herself by packing away the medkit.

"I'm sorry," Denella said gently, the words doing little to lighten Natasha's mood.

"We should get moving," Jirel nodded, standing and testing out his leg, "Our ship's in orbit, we can get you back to Federation space in a couple of days."

Natasha nodded. Although, for some reason, somewhere inside her, hearing that seemed more unsettling than anything else. She was glad to be leaving Kesmet IV, that much was certain. But there was something deeper that she was struggling with.

Returning to Starfleet.

She had become increasingly uncertain as to whether that was even what she wanted to do. In fact, she was pretty sure that it wasn't.

"Thank you," she said eventually, before gesturing further back into the cave, "There's just a couple of things I need to get."

Jirel nodded and let her go. He and Denella watched as she disappeared into the gloom, both a little surprised that the woman they were rescuing didn't sound more elated to be returning home.

"Well," Jirel offered to his companion with a casual shrug, "Pretty sure this'll make up for not finding that black box."

* * * * *

The two figures studied the remains of the USS Navajo's black box, now merely a haphazard collection of tiny metal fragments on the floor.

They had found the device several days ago, drifting in the vast debris field they had located near the fourth planet in the system, and had studied it as much as they could. But the details that they were looking for had eluded them. This mounting frustration was the main reason that, seconds earlier, the smaller of the two figures had wrenched the device out of the computer port it had been plugged into and hurled it at

the deck of the ship, smashing it into pieces.

The secondary reason for the outburst was more subtle, but the larger figure knew enough to see the signs in his colleague's demeanour.

Withdrawal.

"I apologise," the smaller figure muttered, deferring to his senior comrade.

"It was worthless to us now anyway," the larger figure replied, "And we all feel the same frustrations. I suggest you allow yourself another dose from your rations."

The smaller figure considered this, blinking rapidly to try and maintain focus.

"I do not have much of my own ration left," he admitted.

"Nevertheless, it would appear that you need it."

The pair of them looked down again at the shattered remains of the Navajo's black box. The smaller figure had to concede that his colleague had a point. He nodded in deference and hurriedly exited the room, just as another subordinate entered and hastily approached his senior.

"This had better be good news," the larger figure snapped, feeling his own irritation rising and contemplating whether he should follow his own advice.

The newcomer took a second to glance at the debris on the ground, but knew better than to ask any questions.

"Forgive me for the intrusion," he replied, "But our scans have indicated that the vessel we detected is departing the system. With one additional lifeform onboard."

The larger figure considered this in silence. The newcomer, himself appearing only slightly skittish, continued. "It...is possible that this lifeform has the information we require."

His superior looked over at him, causing the smaller figure to shrink back slightly.

"That is possible," he said eventually, "Follow that ship, but make sure we remain undetected on their sensors. For now."

The newcomer nodded, and affirmed the order with a familiar saying from their past.

"Obedience brings victory."

First Clora'gerax shot him a bitterly annoyed look.

"Just do it," he replied icily.

From its concealed location, nestled inside the corona of the Kesmet System's star, the Jem'Hadar fighter continued its secret vigil.

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

One of the most fiercely debated subjects across the more refined residents of the 24th century was the identity of the single most delicious meal in the entire Alpha Quadrant.

Throughout the decades, a myriad of differing foods, cuisine and preparation techniques had been put forward for the unofficial title. From a full seventeen course Ktarian tasting menu with paired beverages offered by the foremost beach resort on Risa, to the unique pipius claw dumplings prepared by the quadrant's foremost Klingon-Terran fusion restaurant on Torvel Prime, there was no shortage of candidates.

In recent years, the title holder had generally been agreed to be the lanola bush salad from the planet Goval IV. When prepared in just the right way by one of the planet's most skilled chefs, and eaten during a total solar eclipse, the bio-luminescent properties of the salad leaves were said to be the most beautiful light show in the galaxy. Not to mention the tastiest. The rave reviews, and the exclusivity offered by the unique requirements for the salad's light show, went some way to explaining why every restaurant on the planet was booked solid for the next twelve solar eclipses.

But for all of that, as far as Natasha Kinsen was concerned, the most delicious meal in the Alpha Quadrant was a double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings) prepared by the ancient food replicator of the Bounty.

Without hot food for the last six months, surviving on her meagre diet of ration packs, the vision of one day being able to eat a double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings) again had been one of the only things that had kept her going. And so she sat in the tiny dining area onboard the ship that had rescued her hungrily devouring her third straight double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings).

After accepting Denella's welcome offer of a sonic shower and a change of clothes, this was the first thing she had done upon beaming aboard with her unlikely rescuers. And although the tatty brown overalls the Orion woman had offered her didn't entirely fit, and didn't even smell like they had been freshly replicated, she didn't really care. Thanks to the feast she had treated herself to.

So complete was her focus on her meal, it took her several seconds to realise that the door to the Bounty's dining area had opened. She looked up, mid-mouthful, to see four figures staring back at her in the doorway. She recognised the amused faces of Jirel and Denella, but they had been joined by a scowling Klingon, and the single scruffiest Vulcan she had ever set eyes on.

Who appeared to be stifling a giggling fit.

Not for the first time since she had arrived on the battered vessel, she was forced to wonder if she had beamed aboard a madhouse.

"I hope you saved some replicator power for the rest of us," the Vulcan grinned as he gestured to what was left of her display of gluttony.

She awkwardly swallowed her mouthful and managed an embarrassed smile.

"First hot food I've had in three months," she managed.

"Good answer," Jirel replied, looking at the others, "Ok, let's eat."

Denella and Sunek ambled over to the replicator to order their food. Jirel went to follow when he noticed that Klath was still staring at their guest. And still scowling.

"A human," the Klingon stated flatly.

It wasn't the sort of reaction that settled Natasha's nerves, even as Jirel turned back and offered her an amiable shrug.

"See? Told you this was a good crew. He did all that without a tricorder."

After a few more awkward seconds, as the disgruntled Klingon and the visibly worried human continued to stare at each other, Jirel decided to try a different tack.

"Fine, we can do this the formal way," he sighed, "Klath, I'd like you to meet Dr Natasha Kinsen. Junior medical officer for gamma shift, USS Navajo. Dr Kinsen, meet Klath, the Bounty's resident people person."

"Now that's funny," Sunek quipped as he and Denella returned to the table with their food.

Natasha managed a slightly nervous wave in Klath's direction. For his part, the hulking Klingon did nothing more than shoot Jirel an annoyed glance, before walking over to the replicator.

"This was not part of the deal, Jirel," Klath muttered as the Trull joined him, "What are we supposed to do with this...human?"

"Hey, you're the one that found the lifesign."

Jirel tried a grin. Klath didn't reciprocate. He punched his order into the replicator with enough force to clearly underline his current mood.

"Look, it's fine," Jirel persisted, "Admiral Jenner wanted a black box, and he's gonna get an actual survivor. If anything, he owes us double."

"We are not in the business of transporting passengers," Klath shot back.

“Let’s be honest, Klath,” Jirel retorted, “We’re in pretty much any business.”

He collected his own food and they joined the others at the table, Klath still muttering to himself as he did so. Natasha watched on, a million questions running through her head.

“Admiral Jenner?” she asked as the others ate, “So you do work for Starfleet?”

“We kinda work for anyone,” Denella replied with a friendly shrug.

“It’s just,” she paused, looking for the right way to phrase it, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t really see—”

“Starfleet employing the likes of us?” Denella said, completing her sentence, “You’re probably right, but Jirel here happens to have an understanding with the admiral.”

“Got a hololmage of him in bed with a Horta,” Jirel winked.

This was enough for Sunek to emit an amused snort. Natasha looked back at the Trill, not looking anywhere near as amused.

“Ok, serious answer. Your guys have kinda had some issues since the war. I mean, you won and all, can’t take that away from them, but they’re seriously low on starships right now, not to mention manpower. Especially out here on the frontier. Hence our...understanding.”

She saw an uncomfortable flicker of something play across his face at that, a reaction that she couldn’t quite place, but he quickly brushed it aside.

“So they’re sending you on rescue missions?”

“Nah,” Sunek chimed in between mouthfuls of plomeek soup, “They still handle all the important stuff themselves. But sometimes, if we’re lucky, we get thrown a bone every now and again.”

“As far as anyone was aware, the Navajo was lost with all hands,” Jirel added, “We were just here to find the black box and return it.”

“Yeah,” Sunek smirked, gesturing at her, “You were a...I wanna say ‘bonus’. Is that rude?”

Natasha’s head was reeling, but she tried to focus, looking back down at what was left of her third double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings).

“So,” she managed eventually, “What now?”

Jirel shrugged. “We’ll drop you off at Starbase 216 in a couple of days.”

“And hopefully get rewarded with some serious repairs to the ship,” Denella added, suppressing a shudder as she contemplated the extent of the to-do list the poor Bounty had racked up recently.

Natasha nodded, idly pushing the remains of her feast around her plate. Once again, despite everything that had happened, she found that the idea of returning to Starfleet didn’t exactly fill her with joy. In fact, if she had to approximate the feeling she got whenever she thought about it, she had to admit that it was something closer to dread. And secretly she knew why.

“Well,” she said, forcing those thoughts to the back of her mind, “I should get some rest. Thanks for the food.”

She stood up, feeling the eyes of the Klingon in particular still following her, and exited the small dining area. As the door closed, Klath folded his arms and growled.

“I do not like this,” he stated flatly.

“Yep,” Jirel sighed, “You’ve made that painfully clear, Klath.”

This did little aside from provoking another, deeper growl from the Klingon. For her part, Denella sighed uncertainly and looked over at Jirel, who mustered a smirk.

“Let’s all just calm down, ok?,” he offered to the whole table, regardless of who needed to hear it, “It’s just one passenger for a couple of days. What’s the worst that can—”

“Don’t,” Denella interrupted him quickly, “Don’t say that.”

An uncomfortable silence descended on the Bounty’s crew. After a moment, Sunek gestured to the remains of Natasha’s third double cheeseburger (with all the trimmings).

“Anyone gonna eat that?”

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

The empty cockpit of the Bounty was silent, save for the gentle hum of the ship's warp engines as it pushed on to its destination.

With dinner over, most of the crew were resting. But Jirel sat hunched over the tactical console, staring at the screen in front of him and re-reading his message back to Admiral Jenner for the tenth time. It wasn't that it was a particularly long or complicated message. And if he was being completely honest, he didn't strictly need to send it at all. After all, they'd be arriving at the starbase in less than 48 hours either way. But given what they had found, or more specifically who they had found, he felt that he should probably forewarn the admiral.

Except, as ever, he was finding sending the message more difficult than writing it. Jirel's bravado had a tendency to fluctuate over long distance communications as much as it did in person.

As he set about reading through it for the eleventh time, and definitively decided that the line about the admiral's waistline and the gas giant planet they'd passed a few days ago had to go, he was glad to hear the sound of footsteps on the metal stairs leading up to the cockpit. He was surprised to look up and see Natasha walk in.

"Hi," she said, as she walked over to Jirel's usual centre chair and flopped into it, figuring that there wasn't much time spent standing on ceremony on a ship like this.

"Trouble sleeping?" he offered with a smile, "Sorry, I know the Bounty's spare cabin isn't exactly the sort of comfort that you're used to, but it's the best we've got."

"I've spent the last three months sleeping on a rock," she reminded him, "Trust me, it feels like the honeymoon suite on Risa in there."

It was true that the small cabin she'd been assigned wasn't all that impressive. A small room with nothing more than a bed, a tiny metal desk and a bathroom, all spartan and unfriendly. And she wasn't exactly sure how, given that they were on a spaceship flying through the Alpha Quadrant, but as she'd been lying in bed, she had been sure that there was a draft coming from somewhere.

But equally, she knew for certain that none of that had been the reason she had been unable to get to sleep. The face of the crewman she had left behind had been the reason for that. Every time she had closed her eyes, all she pictured was that young ensign, lying in the corridor of the Navajo. Just as it had been every night on Kesmet IV. And so, instead, her mind had wandered to the one thing that had survived the destruction of the Navajo along with her. The single data file she had managed to download.

Her Plan B.

"Can I ask you something?" she continued eventually.

Jirel closed the message on the screen in front of him, happy for the distraction. He nodded.

"Why does your Vulcan pilot laugh so much?"

He couldn't help but stifle a laugh himself.

"You know, that's always everyone's first question," he replied, as he leaned back in his chair, "I take it you've never heard of the V'tosh ka'tur?"

Natasha shook her head.

"Makes sense. The Vulcans tend not to draw too much attention to them. Guess they think it'll ruin their street cred. Couple of centuries ago they splintered off from the Vulcan homeworld, deciding to pursue their emotional side and reject the logical."

"Sounds...interesting," she was forced to agree.

"I guess. Apparently, back when it all started, it was more of a serious movement. Their intentions were to try to convert the whole of Vulcan to their kooky ways. These days, well, let's just say it didn't exactly catch on."

"I guess I can see why."

She smiled, and Jirel found himself smiling back without even meaning to. He was finding that she had a smile that seemed to do that to him.

"Yeah, well, my reaction was basically the same when I first met Sunek. But you get used to him. Eventually."

She considered this and nodded, idly swinging from side to side in the chair. Usually, Jirel found himself feeling quite protective of his centre chair, even though he hadn't done much to earn it. But as Natasha sat there, he only found it cute.

"What about you then?" she continued, gesturing to his spots, "How come someone with that many lifetimes ended up here?"

"Ah, I'm not joined," he said, patting his stomach for effect, "One hundred percent belly slug free."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't apologise. It's not your fault."

He paused, not used to opening up about his past quite this quickly with someone new. But there was something disarming about the woman in front of him and the ease of their conversation that compelled him to continue.

"I was an orphan," he explained, "Actually ended up being adopted by a Starfleet officer who took me back to Earth, and that's where I grew up. Turns out there's not all that many opportunities for wannabe Trill initiates in Colorado."

"So instead you became a swashbuckling space captain?"

"It's been a while since we swashbuckled anything," he shrugged, "But I left Earth a long time ago, travelled around here and there for a while, before I found my home."

He gestured around the Bounty for effect.

"She was a wreck when she got towed into the scrapyard. But, I dunno, there was definitely potential there. So I did some repairs, found myself a crew, and here I am."

Natasha failed to stifle a snort. "Your crew. A Klingon warrior, a slave girl and a laughing Vulcan."

Jirel's friendly demeanour disappeared instantly.

"Hey," he grunted, "I know we're not Starfleet spec. But Klath's saved my life more times than I want to remember, Denella's the best damn engineer I've ever met, and Sunek..."

He tailed off for a moment, before gamely trying to rescue his point. "Well, like I say, you get used to him. So don't go judging us, ok?"

Natasha nodded contritely, feeling embarrassed to have stepped over the line.

"I'm sorry," she offered, shuffling uncomfortably in her seat, "I guess so long alone out here made me forget a few things about polite conversation."

"Well, don't worry, we'll have you back with Starfleet in no time."

She suppressed the involuntary flinch, but not quickly enough for Jirel not to pick up on it.

"See," he continued, gesturing to her, "What is that?"

"What is what?"

"Ever since we met, whenever anyone mentions the S word, you look like a Boslic merchant that just spotted a tax collector."

She sighed and rubbed her hands together awkwardly. She didn't exactly want to have this conversation with a man she barely knew. But she needed to have it with someone.

"I don't know if I'll be going back. To Starfleet," she admitted. It felt odd to say it out loud.

This was enough to pique Jirel's interest. He leaned forwards.

"Well, that's something you don't hear every day," he admitted, "Usually it's all 'the fleet is mother, the fleet is father' with you guys."

"I mean, it's not like I was a standout officer," she began, "I doubt they'd miss me."

Jirel stayed silent. After a thoughtful pause, she continued.

"But more than that...I signed up to explore. To discover. And all we seem to have done recently is fight. Fighting the Klingons, then the Borg, then the Dominion, the Breen..."

She tailed off, her gaze drifting off into the distance. "I'm just not sure how much longer I can keep triaging my shipmates."

"I guess it's been a tough few years for you guys."

"I mean, I became a doctor to help people. But treating injuries is one thing. Patching up dozens of your colleagues, your friends, just to get them healthy enough to charge right back out the door and into another disruptor blast? It hurt. Every day. Even before what happened to the Navajo."

She resisted the urge to flinch again, and forced the ensign's face to the back of her mind. Jirel studied her face, feeling himself drawn to her plight.

"Well," he said eventually, only half-jokingly, "If you're on the market for a new job, the Bounty could always use a doctor."

She looked back at him. He grinned and gestured down to his patched-up leg. "We meet a lot of Miradorn."

She smiled back, and considered her options, wondering whether she could really trust this Trill and his band of merry men and women. In the end, the thought of returning to the starbase, and the image of the injured ensign, made her mind up for her.

"Thanks for the generous offer," she replied, with a sliver of sarcasm, "But I've actually got my own retirement plan, of sorts. And it might be something you can help me with."

Jirel looked confused. So she began to explain. About her plan, and about the contents of the data file she had rescued from the Navajo.

And it didn't take long for Jirel to realise that his message to Admiral Jenner could wait.

* * * * *

Less than ten minutes later, Jirel had excitedly assembled his crew back in the dining area, now doubling as an impromptu meeting room. The timing of the meeting had irritated all of them, not least Klath, who was the last one to enter. He walked over and slouched into an empty chair.

"This had better be important," he grunted, stifling a loud Klingon yawn.

He looked around the table, seeing that all eyes were on him.

"Wow," Denella said simply, gesturing to the wildly unkempt and knotted jumble of hair that tumbled haphazardly from the Klingon's head.

The others at the table silently agreed with that assessment. It was the worst case of bed hair any of them had ever seen. Klath shuffled uncomfortably in his seat.

"My hair usually requires attention when I wake," he offered as an explanation, backing it up with a pointed look to the gathered crowd that warned them to drop the subject.

"Mine too," Natasha offered with a friendly smile.

For a moment, she hoped this might be an unlikely bonding moment for her with the least welcoming of the Bounty's crew, but the Klingon's scowl merely grew deeper.

"Anyway," Denella sighed, stifling a yawn of her own, "We're all here, we're all exhausted, so what's this big important news?"

"This," Jirel said excitedly, dropping a small padd onto the table with a flourish.

"A padd? That's amazing," Sunek chimed in with a deeply sarcastic tone, "You should take a look at the shelves in my cabin one of these days, you'll have a heart attack."

Jirel ignored his pilot's comment and leaned towards his confused shipmates, an excited glint visible in his eye. "How much do you guys know about the Jewel of Soraxx?"

A wave of confusion rippled around the table, leaving it to Sunek to break the silence again. "The strip club on Farius Prime, or the stupid fairytale?"

"It's not a stupid fairytale!" Natasha snapped, surprising even herself with her tone.

"But it's a hell of a strip club," Sunek grinned, unperturbed.

"Ok, I'm gonna go ahead and de-escalate this right now," Denella said, raising her hand like a child in a classroom, "I don't know anything about the Jewel of Soraxx. Please explain."

Jirel looked over to Natasha, who needed no encouragement to tell the story.

"The Jewel of Soraxx is said to be the purest crystal in the entire galaxy. A source of great wealth and prestige throughout history, and the last surviving remnant of a long-dead civilisation. There are references to the Soraxx race and the jewel itself in the writings of dozens of other extinct civilisations that travelled the stars long before we got here."

"Yeah," Sunek snorted, "Great big magic diamond. Except, when a story sounds too good to be true, it usually is."

"Not this one," she persisted, "This isn't a myth. Pretty much every other artefact, settlement, everything else mentioned in those same writings has been located by archaeologists, or verified by other sources."

She noted the continued looks of confusion and distrust, from everyone apart from Jirel.

"Even Starfleet's science division believes the tale of the Jewel of Soraxx has credibility. Captain Picard himself has taken part in three separate digs looking for it!"

"Only problem is, nobody's sure where exactly it's supposed to be," Jirel added, before pointing at their guest, "Until now, apparently."

Natasha smiled and gestured to the padd on the table. Denella picked it up and she and the others scanned over the details on it.

"My father was an archaeologist," Natasha explained, "And before he died, he devoted his final years searching for the jewel. Spent most of his time convinced that this was the one big find that was going to finally secure his place in the history books."

She paused to compose herself, remembering the kindly face of her father and her childhood back on Earth.

"When he died, I kept up his work. It was a...I dunno, a passion project, I guess. And a few weeks before the Navajo was attacked, I finally figured out the meaning behind the code on a set of runes discovered on a planetoid near the outer edge of where the Soraxx empire was

believed to have spanned. They're coordinates! Actual coordinates!"

"So, let me get this straight," Denella said, pointing at the padd, "You're saying this is a treasure map?"

"See?" Sunek added, "Stupid fairytale."

"Come on guys!" Jirel urged, "These coordinates aren't that far off our course back to Starbase 216. We can easily shoot over there. Plus, when was the last time you got a chance to go on an actual, real life treasure hunt?"

"Two months ago," Sunek replied immediately.

Natasha assumed this was another joke she didn't quite get, until she saw that Jirel's face had sagged slightly.

"Oh. Yeah. Forgot about that."

"Yeah," Denella continued, "Believed some crackpot Benzite trader's story about the lost medal of Klinga being buried on a rogue planet in the Denevan sector, got Klath all riled up about the chance to find the Klingon Empire's biggest lost relic, then spent three weeks digging empty potholes in the dark."

"A fool's errand," Klath nodded, "As I am sure this would be."

Jirel looked back at Natasha with a guilty shrug. "Honestly, I completely forgot we did that. Kinda undermined my main argument there."

Natasha sighed and snatched the padd back from across the table. "Fine. Don't believe me. Let's just get back to Starbase 216, you guys can get off searching for whatever other black boxes need your attention, and I'll find a crew who are actually interested in finding the most prized relic in all the galaxy."

The three more stubborn members of the crew glanced at each other, suddenly looking less sure of themselves.

"Think about it," Jirel persisted, "What is there to lose? We go there, we check it out, worst case scenario, it's a bust and we get right back to Admiral Jenner for those repairs. Easy."

"Best case scenario," Natasha added, "You'll be rich enough to buy a brand new ship. Each."

"Well, I'm in," Sunek shrugged, caving at the first scent of profit and drawing an irritated look from Klath, "I'm gonna buy one of those fancy new runabouts."

Jirel smiled and looked over at the remaining two holdouts.

"I still have a question," Denella said to Natasha, "Why are you getting us involved in all this? Isn't there gonna be a starbase full of scientists wanting to study all this?"

Natasha looked down at the table for a moment.

"If you must know," she replied eventually, "I'll be leaving Starfleet when I get back. Resigning my commission. And frankly, I'm not about to hand over my father's defining life's work for someone else to find."

She looked back up at the green-skinned woman and offered a smile. "Plus, I dunno, call it a thank you for rescuing me."

"So, if we do find it, what happens then? You're not just gonna hand it over to a Federation museum somewhere?"

"When we find it," Natasha replied with determination, "We'll make sure we get paid handsomely for it. If I'm leaving Starfleet, I'm gonna need the money."

Denella studied the other woman's face intently, before turning to Klath. "What're you thinking?"

"I still believe this is an act of folly," the Klingon scowled.

"Oh, it's definitely one of those," Sunek nodded.

Denella considered this and nodded in agreement, gently tapping the tabletop with one of her fingernails.

"Yep, can't argue with that," she admitted, before a smile flickered across her face, "Sounds like what we do all the time."

Jirel broke into a smile of his own, as Natasha sighed in satisfaction. Along with Sunek and Denella, they all turned to Klath. The burly Klingon exhaled in clear annoyance and folded his arms in front of him. He stared back from underneath his unkempt hair at the four expectant faces around the table.

"Fine," he muttered.

* * * * *

As it raced through space at warp speed, the Bounty banked away to the right, indicating the change of heading to the coordinates provided by

Natasha's map.

Had Sunek been paying any sort of attention to his sensors as he made the course change, before heading back to bed, he might have noticed a small Rigellian freighter, on the very outer limits of the Bounty's detection grid, matching their course precisely. But Sunek never really paid close attention to his sensors unless he had to. And who cared about a small Rigellian freighter anyway?

On the bridge of the Jem'Hadar fighter, First Clora'gerax watched his pilot complete their course change and smiled in satisfaction. He flicked his headset viewer up and turned to his second in command, who now appeared to have calmed down following his earlier outburst thanks to a hit from his ration of ketracel white.

"A perfect manoeuvre, Second Panar'atan," he said, his voice thundering around the room, "They still do not detect us."

"No, First," his subordinate replied, a flicker of emotion still playing across his voice, "The projection is holding. They will only see us as a meaningless freighter, if they see us at all."

Clora'gerax allowed himself a moment of satisfaction, which was almost immediately interrupted when he saw his Second's face twitch again. Signs of withdrawal were still apparent.

"You still require white," he stated flatly. A statement, rather than a question.

"No, First," Panar'atan lied, "The additional dose was sufficient."

The smaller Jem'Hadar clumsily steadied a shaking hand, failing in his efforts not to further undermine his lie. Clora'gerax studied him, concerned with the battle readiness of his most trusted subordinate, even though he knew there was little else he could do for him. The whole crew were dealing with their meagre ration as best they could.

"Be ready," he replied, in an attempt at reassurance, "Soon our troubles will be over."

"Then they are leading us to the jewel?"

"I believe they are," he replied, "And once we have it in our possession, this great source of power will finally allow us to return to the Dominion, and we will have all the white we require."

Second Panar'atan nodded back and returned his attention to his workstation. Focusing his efforts on doing a better job of hiding his inner turmoil. Clora'gerax flipped his headset viewer back down and continued to monitor their course. Allowing himself to feel that they were as close as they had ever been to returning to the Gamma Quadrant after so long.

In the aftermath of the war, during the Dominion's humiliating withdrawal from the Alpha Quadrant, they had been one of several Jem'Hadar ships left behind. Ships that had been separated from their fleets, too damaged to keep up, or otherwise abandoned in the chaos of the retreat.

Most of the remaining scattered stragglers had either been rounded up by Starfleet patrols or destroyed in a final few suicidal skirmishes, under the command of rogue Vorta unable to deal with the sudden evidence of the fallibility of the Founders. But First Clora'gerax, who had personally killed his own Vorta at the first sign of trouble, had made sure he and his troops had remained alive, out of harm's way. He and his crew had spent their time scavenging, picking off any smaller vessel that got in their way, searching for some way back to the Gamma Quadrant.

A way that he was sure he had finally found after analysing the personal files stored within the Navajo's black box.

The Jewel of Soraxx.

An object of enormous power, enough to ensure that nobody would stand in their way as they returned to the Dominion. And perhaps even enough to enable them to return to the Alpha Quadrant, this time as an unstoppable force. But he knew that he was running out of time. That his crew's paltry remaining rations of ketracel white were close to being exhausted. In many ways, it was a miracle that they had managed to make them last this long.

And that, he mused, as he continued to track the vessel ahead of them on his viewer, makes us very dangerous indeed.

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

Natasha downed the drink in one go, feeling the burning sensation of the alcohol as it slid down her throat. It was enough to make her impulsively wince and stifle a cough.

But it felt good.

"I'd say you needed that," Jirel grinned from the other side of the table, as he leaned over and topped up her glass from the bottle of Antarean brandy he was holding.

Without pausing, she took another generous gulp. Jirel followed suit. They had returned to his cabin for a celebratory drink after the crew had agreed to go in search of the Jewel of Soraxx, on her suggestion. A suggestion that Jirel had been perfectly happy to go along with.

Part of her had wanted to retire to the solitude of her own cabin and try once again to get some sleep. But she knew what was waiting for her if she did that, the unwanted memories that would come racing through her head. Plus, she had spent the last three months in complete solitude, and part of her was craving some sort of company.

In fact, when she thought about her final few months onboard the Navajo, she had to admit that she'd spent a lot more than just her time on Kesmet IV in one form of solitude or another. And she realised that she didn't much care for the idea of extending that experience. On the contrary, as the warming sensation of the alcohol filled her body and she eyed up the Trill opposite her, she felt like she'd been alone for so long that she needed something a little more than a drinking buddy.

"I definitely needed this," she smiled back.

It was a slightly apologetic smile, if it was any sort of smile. But on the other side of the table, Jirel was starting to realise that he didn't care what sort of smile it was. He liked it when she smiled.

"I guess I'm just excited," she continued, "We might be this close to finding the jewel. I doubt I'd be able to sleep right now even with a big old hypospray of sedatives."

Jirel picked the bottle back up and wiggled it, before topping both their glasses up. "Well, in my experience, this works better than sedatives anyway."

They both took another slug.

"This jewel thing really means that much to you, huh?" Jirel mused, genuinely intrigued, "Feel kinda bad that I'm just hoping for a decent payday for once."

She swirled the dark liquid around in her glass as she considered her answer.

"I guess it's more like what it represents," she said eventually, "Like I said, I didn't like what I was having to do with Starfleet these last few years. Continuing my father's work on the side always felt like an escape from all that."

"You're not worried you're gonna be out of things to do if we really do find it?"

"Plenty more jewels in the galaxy," she shrugged. She smiled again. This one was warmer, more playful. Jirel liked that one even more.

"Thank you," she added suddenly, knocking him off balance for a moment.

"For what?"

She smirked, and considered the itch she was looking to scratch again. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the anticipation of finding the jewel, but she felt reassured that she'd chosen the right cabin.

"Really?" she replied, "For rescuing me? For believing my story about the jewel? For keeping a well-stocked liquor cabinet?"

She drained her glass and gestured for a refill to emphasise her point.

"Oh, right," he nodded, his bravado levels returning to the fore, "Well, you're more than welcome. Especially for the liquor."

He puffed his chest out slightly and topped her glass up.

"It's just," she began, "You can't imagine what it was like, down on that planet for so long."

"Didn't seem like the sort of place for a vacation," he offered, trying to keep some levity in the conversation.

Her gaze drifted off into the middle distance as she reluctantly reminisced. For a moment, she forgot all about her itch. "It was tough. Especially the first couple of weeks. Before I found proper shelter. My only sanctuary was what was left of the escape pod. I was just lucky that there was a break in the storms, and I was able to spy the caves in the distance. I crawled over there with the comms unit strapped to my back and any supplies I could salvage, and..."

She paused, forcing any number of unwelcome memories from her mind.

“Still,” she managed, “That’s all in the past.”

Jirel had listened with rapt attention. As her story tailed off, he felt that he had to offer something. If only to see her smile again.

“Must have been lonely,” he eventually settled on, before immediately cursing himself internally. Nobody’s going to smile at that.

She drained her glass to steady herself. The itch now back at the forefront of her mind.

“It was,” she admitted, “But then, everyone gets lonely in space, right?”

She had no way of realising that those particular words had cut as deeply as they did into Jirel, but he quickly downed his own drink to disguise his reaction.

“Right,” he replied simply. But he remained sitting where he was.

Suppressing the urge to roll her eyes, and wondering how thick she was going to need to lay it on, if her itch was ever going to get scratched, she stood up and walked over to him.

“Still,” she continued, “Neither of us are alone right now...”

Jirel nodded. But either because of his lack of sleep, his own brandy consumption, or the fact that sometimes he could be as slow as a Nausicaan doorman, he still failed to pick up on what she really meant.

He couldn’t be entirely sure what finally did it. It may have been him seeing the lustful twinkle in her eyes as she reached him. It might have been the new smile that was added to the collection, a wide and lascivious one that caused his stomach to do a backflip. But in all truth, it was probably the way she ran her hand down his chest, towards the belt of his trousers.

Even Jirel, brandy and all, couldn’t fail to pick up on that sign.

* * * * *

Klath considered himself a seasoned warrior. An unflappably stoic man who had once served in the ranks of the Klingon Defence Force itself. But the sound was enough to test even a man of Klath’s resolve. With an annoyed growl, he looked up from his tactical console to see Sunek lazily leaning back in his pilot’s chair, putting the finishing touches to the loudest, longest yawn the Klingon had ever heard.

“Sleep well?” Denella grinned as she strode into the cockpit, clutching a replicated cup of tea.

Sunek ran a hand through his scraggly shock of hair and stretched, appearing to exaggerate even this process for effect. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” he said eventually.

“Do you have any idea how irritating you are?” Klath growled back.

Sunek looked innocently confused by this comment, before breaking into another record-breaking yawn.

“Go easy on him Klath,” Denella winked, “You know how much he needs his beauty sleep.”

“Hey!” the Vulcan shot back, “I’m gorgeous.”

“Anyway, we were always scheduled to get here this early.”

“Didn’t realise it’d be this early.”

“All that Vulcan intelligence he keeps going on about,” she mused as she slid into the seat behind her engineering console, “And he can’t even manage a simple course calculation.”

Sunek shook his head and stretched again, this one even more elaborate and pronounced than the first one. “See? This is how tired I am. That’s two free shots you’ve got in now, and I can’t even bring myself to formulate a comeback.”

Denella sipped her tea and looked out of the cockpit window at the planet they were slowly but surely approaching at impulse speeds. The planet that their passenger’s mysterious coordinates had led them to. On the face of it, there didn’t look to be much to write home about. A standard Class-M planet with a vast blue-tinged ocean in the southern hemisphere and green land masses to the north. The sort of ten-a-penny planet they’d usually fly past without a second thought.

“Anything going on down there?” she asked offhandedly.

“No intelligent lifeforms,” Klath reported as he studied his console, “The coordinates we were provided with suggest a location approximately 100 kilometres from the equator on the main northern continent.”

He paused, noting something else registering on his scans. Intrigued, Denella stood and idled over.

“Anything important?”

“It is something I noticed when I first got here,” he reported, “A Rigellian freighter on the edge of our sensor range.”

“That might be the least interesting thing I’ve ever heard,” Sunek quipped from the front of the cockpit, as he stifled another yawn.

His comment served merely to darken Klath’s mood. Denella offered him an understanding shrug. “Ok, I’ll bite. What’s so strange about this freighter?”

“We are nowhere near any of the standard shipping lanes or freighter paths in this sector,” Klath persisted with a note of caution.

“So? They’re probably just lost,” Sunek persisted, refusing to be ignored, “You know how stupid Rigellians can be.”

“I mean, I suppose it’s a bit strange,” Denella conceded, “But are you really worried about some random freighter?”

“Klingons do not get worried,” he replied, with a hint of irritation, “But given the current battle readiness of our vessel, I do not wish to be caught by surprise.”

“Think it might be Grenk?”

“If we managed to damage his shuttle severely, I would not put it past that Ferengi to have already secured alternative means of transportation.”

“Still, it’s a freighter,” Sunek sighed, “What’s he gonna do? Deliver us to death?”

Denella looked at the still-scowling Klingon and shrugged. He had a point.

“Anyway,” the Vulcan continued, “More importantly, how come we all had to get up this early and Jirel gets a lie in?”

Denella glanced around the cockpit, absently noticing that two people were still missing.

“Huh,” she replied, “Guess his alarm’s on the fritz again. I’ll go get him.”

She drained the last of her tea, then turned and paced down the steps of the cockpit, leaving Klath to return his full attention to the mystery of the Rigellian freighter.

Moments later, his attention was ruined by Sunek’s latest record-setting yawn.

* * * * *

The door to the cabin opened and Jirel carefully carried the two steaming plates of freshly-replicated eggs over to the table.

One of the things he had learned from his time growing up on Earth was how to make breakfast fit for any human. He’d even developed a serious taste for himself. Meanwhile, one of the things he had learned from living on a small ship with three crewmates was how to sneak said breakfast from the ship’s main replicator to his cabin without attracting attention. He was combining both skills right now to devastating effect, even if he did say so himself.

The scrambled eggs represented the final part of the morning repast for two he’d prepared, backed up by communal plates of lightly grilled toast and crispy bacon, fluffy hash browns and two enormous glasses of orange juice. As he set the eggs down, he stepped back and surveyed the feast with satisfaction.

He was in a good mood.

“What the hell’s all that?”

He whirled around to see Natasha, now awake and sitting up in bed. Unlike he had been hoping, there was no appreciation in her face as she surveyed the groaning table of food. Instead, her face was a mixture of shock and amusement.

“Oh, um, you’re awake! This is—”

He started to gesture to the elaborate meal, but Natasha cut him off as she swung her legs out of his bed and quickly started to dress in a flurry of excited anticipation.

“Have we arrived?” she asked as she zipped up her borrowed overalls.

“Um, where?”

“At the coordinates?” she said, more urgently, “We should be in orbit of the planet by now.”

“Oh, right,” Jirel floundered, still processing her dismissive reaction to his feast, “Um, yeah. Yep. I think so.”

She pulled on her boots and stood up, giving the Trill an amused grin. “Is that your full report, captain?”

“I mean, yes. Definitely. We are there. Here. Probably.”

“Perfect,” she nodded, walking towards the door of the cabin, “I’m gonna freshen up, then we need to get moving. Right?”

“Um...”

She paused and turned back, noting the slightly lost look on Jirel’s face. Maybe this hadn’t been the best way to scratch that particular itch after all, she thought to herself. Even if she had finally been able to get some sleep.

“Listen,” she said eventually, “Last night was a one-off thing. Yeah? Like I said, I’d been alone for a long time. That’s all. So...thanks?”

Jirel suddenly found himself wishing that he’d gone with a couple of bowls of oatmeal, flushing deeply as he pictured the extent of the morning after breakfast sitting over his shoulder. He racked his brain for the best way to at least save some face.

“Oh, yeah,” he managed to blurt out, swimming against a tidal wave of humiliation to try and reach the shores of his misplaced dignity, “Of course it was a one-off thing!”

She couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow as she gestured to the table. “Really? You put this much effort into all your one night stands?”

“Psh, that? That’s just some breakfast—My breakfast! A totally, completely normal amount of breakfast for one person.”

Probably not saving as much face as I’d like here, he admitted to himself, as she surveyed the mountain of food.

“Right...”

Just as Jirel switched all of his mental capacity into willing the ground to swallow him up, she turned and exited, leaving him mercifully alone. Still embarrassed, but relieved that things couldn’t get any more awkward. Seconds later, the door to his cabin opened again and Denella strode in, stopping when she saw the table of food, the messy bed and the sheepish Jirel.

“Oh,” she said simply, “Well, I guess that’s one mystery solved.”

“What?”

“I just bumped into our guest in the corridor and thought it was kinda weird that she wasn’t wearing a bra.”

She gestured down to where the item of clothing in question lay discarded next to his bed, and her face creased into an amused grin. Jirel looked down to where she was pointing, then over to the table, and eventually back to his engineer. All the while the ground refused to follow his pleas and swallow him.

Eventually, he simply sighed and shrugged in defeated acceptance, gesturing over to where the plates of eggs were getting cold.

“Breakfast?”

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

The Bounty glided gracefully down through the wispy reddish clouds of the planet and came to rest on the outskirts of a dense forest area, the green leaves of the monstrosly large trees swaying and shaking as the craft approached. After a few seconds, the cargo ramp at the rear of the craft opened and five figures strode out.

One of them was distinctly less happy than the others.

“But this happens all the time!” Sunek shouted after the others, “You guys get to go off and do something fun, and I’m stuck here watching the ship!”

“It’s a job that basically involves doing nothing,” Denella quipped as she reached the bottom of the ramp, “You’re perfect for it.”

“Come on,” the Vulcan persisted, gesturing around the deserted planet’s surface, “Who the hell’s gonna try and steal the Bounty down here? Lemme come!”

Jirel turned back to Sunek. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear he was about to start stomping his feet like a toddler.

“Sunek, stay,” he replied forcefully, pointing back at the ship to underline his order.

The Vulcan’s eyes narrowed.

“Fine,” he grouched, turning and starting back up the ramp, “Might as well have stayed in bed...”

Jirel turned back to the others and gestured for them to proceed. As they started to walk towards the forest line and the Bounty’s ramp began to retract, he heard Sunek fire off one final comeback.

“By the way, Jirel, way to get your end away!”

Jirel didn’t need to be a telepath to feel three sets of eyes all focus on him, all for subtly different reasons. He managed to muster a glance at Natasha, who had fixed him with a withering glare.

“Small ship,” he offered with an apologetic shrug, “News travels fast.”

She shook her head and walked on. Not for the first time since he had woken up that morning, Jirel absently found himself praying for the ground to swallow him up.

* * * * *

Wherever they were, it was a lush and verdant planet.

As the four figures walked through the dense forest, they were surrounded on all sides by incredibly tall trees in rude health, multi-coloured mosses and plant life underfoot, and the distant calls of any number of examples of the local wildlife.

Natasha idly gazed up at the tree canopy as they walked, a dizzying distance above their heads. The trees must have easily been five to six hundred feet tall, and her scientific instinct wondered how much of that was down to the slightly lower than Earth-type gravity they were experiencing. She didn’t allow her mind to wander far, though. Her focus remained on their destination. After so long feeling like she was alone and purposeless, she ignored the simple beauty around her and kept her attention on the possible wonder that lay ahead.

The team from the Bounty walked in a two-by-two formation, with Klath and Jirel leading the way and Natasha alongside Denella behind. Klath, his ever-present bat’leth still slung behind his back, scanned the path ahead with a bulky tricorder as they walked.

“Nice place,” Jirel offered, breaking the silence that had descended, idly brushing his hand across a particularly striking orange flower as he passed by.

“Hard to think any civilisation died out while living here,” Denella nodded.

“A lot can change in five thousand years,” Natasha reminded them, “According to the legends, the Soraxx died out from a devastating empire-wide plague.”

“Plague?” Jirel asked, glancing with concern at the hand he’d just used to touch the flower.

“Calm down. This isn’t my first away mission,” she replied with a patient smile, “Scanned the planet before we landed. No pathogens detected.”

“Agreed,” Klath grunted as he tapped the tricorder.

Natasha allowed herself an inward smile at that. The first time that the Klingon had been on her side since they had met. They walked on, as the undergrowth started to get thicker.

“That wasn’t what I was worried about anyway,” Denella admitted as the foliage started to close in around her.

Natasha looked curiously at the green-skinned woman next to her, who was now eyeing the undergrowth more warily than before. “What’s the problem?”

“I hate forests,” Denella grimaced, “The ones back on the Orion colony I grew up on were filled with all sorts of creepy-crawlies. There was this one type of snake that’d grow to thirty feet long or more, known as the Spinesnapper. Know how it got that name?”

“It really liked to read?” Jirel offered from ahead of them.

Denella fixed the back of the Trill’s head with an unimpressed glare.

“Point is, we’re not on some Orion colony,” he continued, “And if there was any sort of freaky bone-snapping snake out here, we’d be picking it up.”

“Jirel is right,” Klath nodded, gesturing to the tricorder, “I detect no reptilian creatures anywhere in the forest.”

Denella emitted an audible sigh of relief, before Klath continued.

“I am, however, detecting several species of arachnid in the local area. Based on their size, I suspect most will be capable of piercing humanoid flesh with their fangs.”

The colour drained from Denella’s face. Klath glanced back at her, with a deadly serious scowl on his face.

“Be careful where you step.”

The now paler Orion woman shot him a look that could kill, then immediately redoubled her efforts to keep an eye on the ground around her feet.

“I really hate forests,” she muttered miserably.

* * * * *

After twenty or so further minutes of walking, delicate steps in Denella’s case, they reached the edge of a clearing.

“There,” Klath pointed beyond the undergrowth ahead of them, “These are the exact coordinates.”

He had barely finished his sentence before Natasha stepped forward and brushed the branches out of the way. She gasped.

In front of them, in the middle of a vast clearing, was the remains of a vast structure. Roughly pyramidal in shape, made from rusted and decayed stone and metal and covered in moss and creeping vines, it stood around thirty feet tall, rising out of the soft grassland around it. It was clearly old. Very old. But to Natasha, it was beautiful. She felt a swell of pride and turned to the others with a satisfied smile.

“This is the place—!”

She stopped immediately, confronted by the fact that the focus of the others was not on the structure itself, but on something else. Klath gestured with a stocky arm. She followed where he was pointing.

And saw five Jem’Hadar soldiers, weapons slung in their arms, walking purposefully through the clearing. Directly towards the structure.

“Crap,” she whispered.

The others silently accepted that they couldn’t have put it better if they had tried.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

Klath led the motley group as they crept through the fringes of the deep cover of the forest, his bat'leth now drawn.

He had passed the tricorder to Jirel, who was keeping an eye on the readings and doing his best to make sure that they weren't about to be ambushed by any other Jem'Hadar teams lurking in the undergrowth. Klath's tactical mind had kicked in immediately. He had taken the lead as they picked their way around the edge of the clearing, keeping under cover for as long as possible and aiming to approach the structure from the rear.

Several minutes had passed since they had watched the five soldiers disappear inside the mysterious pyramid, and since Denella had made her feelings on the matter known for the first time. But not for the last time.

"Jirel, come on, this is insane!" she persisted as they walked on, making sure to keep her voice down despite her obvious despair.

"It's not insane, it's common sense," he replied, deliberately misinterpreting her comment, "Klath's right, we swing around behind the main entrance, keep under cover for as long as we can—"

"Not the—You saw them, right? The five heavily armed Jem'Hadar? The ones that just walked right inside that thing? I mean, that wasn't an optical illusion, or a hallucination or something? You all saw them as well?"

"Yes!" Jirel snapped, his voice raising slightly, "We all saw them."

"And you still wanna go in there?"

It was Natasha, rather than the Trill, that replied this time.

"We still want to go in there."

There was a clear sense of determination in her voice, her attention still entirely focused on the imposing structure ahead of them in the clearing. The one that she was certain contained the Jewel of Soraxx, her father's legacy.

"Whoever said a treasure hunt would be easy, hmm?" Jirel added with a grin.

"You did! Yesterday! Specifically about this treasure hunt!"

"Yeah, I've really got to start thinking my arguments through more..."

Denella sighed and looked over at Klath, who was ignoring the bickering and instead assessing their surroundings with a keen warrior's eye.

"Seriously? You as well? You didn't even want to come here in the first place!"

The Klingon tightened his grip on his bat'leth between his hands and crept onwards through the branches.

"It has been a long time since our last proper battle," he grunted, a tinge of blood lust clear in his voice, "Five of them should provide a fair fight."

"Well, I don't know why I thought I'd get any support over there," the Orion woman admitted, "But, just so everyone's completely clear, we don't have to go into the weird pyramid filled with Jem'Hadar if we don't want to. Nobody's making us do that."

"The jewel's in there," Natasha replied firmly, "I know it."

Klath indicated for them to stop. They had arrived at the closest point that there was to the rear of the structure without leaving the treeline. He scanned the far side of the clearing for signs of trouble and nodded.

"Here," he said simply, gesturing to the stone wall a short distance away, "This is our best option. We can follow the outer wall around to the entrance."

"No," Denella persisted, "Our best option is to turn around, go back to the ship, and pretend we never heard of the Jewel of Soraxx."

"Can't do that," Natasha muttered.

"Hey, Denella, we've taken on worse odds than these before," Jirel smiled, taking a moment to shoot Natasha his most practised of brave space captain-esque looks, "Remember the time we took on a whole battalion of armed guards when we made that food drop on Pylus IV. I got us through that, didn't I?"

"That was completely different," Denella argued back, "Pylusians are five inch tall bipedal amphibians! We took them on by climbing onto a particularly large rock and waiting for three hours until Klath could beam us out of there!"

On hearing these details, Natasha looked back over at Jirel, whose bravado level was struggling to maintain altitude all over again. She couldn't help but muster a brief flicker of amusement before her attention returned to their target.

"Technicality," Jirel managed with a shrug, "Now, are we doing this or what?"

Natasha nodded with determination. Klath gripped his bat'leth even tighter in his hands. Denella rolled her eyes to the heavens and sighed.

"Fine," she said eventually, "I guess I can't have you all going off and getting killed without me. If you do, it's just me and Sunek for the rest of my life."

"A fate worse than death," Klath nodded.

With the Klingon leading the way, the four of them crept out of the cover of the forest and up to the rear of the ancient structure, slowly inching their way around towards the entrance while hugging the crumbling wall. Klath wielded his bat'leth with practised precision, Jirel and Denella both unholstered stubby disruptor pistols of a type Natasha hadn't seen before, while she herself unclipped her type-1 phaser and checked its power levels.

Jirel scanned the structure with the tricorder in his other hand as they neared the entrance.

"Hard to pin down, these Jem'Hadar," he offered with grim frustration, "They're definitely in there. Somewhere."

"Joy," Denella muttered to herself.

They cautiously approached the entrance, Natasha taking a moment to reach out and touch the walls of the pyramid, feeling the moss-encrusted stone at her fingertips. Despite the risks ahead of them, something about the feeling comforted her. She was close.

Klath led them inside, through the crumbling entrance. Natasha followed behind him, with Jirel and Denella bringing up the rear. The interior was similarly decayed. A vast dank passageway of eroded stonework that extended into the darkness ahead of them, huge pillars flanking either side, supporting whatever remained of the ceiling above their heads. Natasha pulled out a flashlight and shone it over the walls, illuminating lettering and runes etched into the stonework, faded after so many years and partially obscured by dirt and vines, but still visible. She recognised the type of writing immediately from her father's work.

This was definitely the right place.

"Amazing," she whispered to herself.

"Ok," Jirel said before she could ruminate any further, "Everyone stay on your toes. First sign of trouble, just stay calm and make sure to—"

They all heard the sound at the same time. A footstep landing on the stone floor behind them. They whirled around in unison, in time to see two Jem'Hadar emerging from their hiding places either side of the entrance they had just walked through, their weapons raised.

"Yep, I'd call that the first sign of trouble," Jirel managed to add.

Before he realised what was happening, he felt himself being pulled back behind the nearest of the stone pillars. He stole a glance to see Natasha grasping onto his arm. Unlike them, Klath and Denella had no time to find cover. The Jem'Hadar soldiers pulled their triggers in unison.

And nothing happened.

Denella seized her chance and tried firing her own pistol. But it also failed to discharge.

"What the hell?" she muttered, a reaction silently shared by the Jem'Hadar as well, given their pair of bemused looks.

The Jem'Hadar, their weapons now seemingly useless in the conventional sense, swung their rifles around and gripped them like clubs, before charging at the Klingon and the Orion. Denella dived out the way of one of them, while Klath predictably stood his ground, meeting his own adversary's weapon with a swing of his bat'leth and severing it in two, before slamming the other end of his weapon into the soldier's midriff. As Denella rolled back onto her feet, she grabbed her Orion dagger from her belt, mirroring the others in switching to a more old fashioned form of combat.

Still safe behind their cover, Jirel wrenched his arm from Natasha's grip. "We've got to help them. Come on!"

She nodded. He took one step away from behind the pillar, mentally preparing himself for another brawl.

And then he heard a click.

He paused in confusion. Something felt wrong. Natasha stopped behind him. He looked down at his foot to see it resting on one particular stone tile on the floor of the passageway. A tile that was now blinking intently with a flashing red light.

"So," he said absently, gesturing down to his foot, "That's probably not a good thing, right?"

Before she had time to say anything, both of them suddenly experienced the odd sensation of the whole floor disappearing from under their feet. In that one small section of the passageway, they were, for a split second, floating above nothingness.

Jirel barely had time to contemplate the irony of how, after he had wished for it repeatedly just a few hours earlier, the ground was now indeed about to swallow him up.

Back at the entrance, Denella parried an attack from the Jem'Hadar in front of her, before she was knocked off her feet by a follow-up blow. She just managed to roll away before her opponent's rifle, now an improvised club, came crashing down where she had been lying. A short distance away, Klath continued to grapple tightly with the other Jem'Hadar, his bat'leth trapped between their two bodies, as he tried to gain the advantage via brute strength, rather than fighting tactics.

None of the four of them, each immersed in fighting their own battle, noticed as the other two figures suddenly dropped and disappeared underground, emitting a pair of terrified yelps.

Nor did they notice as the floor sealed up behind them, leaving no evidence behind that either of them had ever even been there in the first place.

* * * * *

Sunek sat alone in the cockpit of the Bounty, blithely tapping at the controls. He was immersed in an attempt to try and pick up some sort of local newscast. He already knew that he had absolutely no interest in anything that a local newscast would possibly have to say to him, but he was still setting about his task like the very future of the galaxy depended on it.

Because Sunek was bored.

He had long considered boredom to be one of the main drawbacks of his decision to fully embrace his emotional side.

Sunek hadn't been born into the V'tosh ka'tur. Far from it. He'd had the most banal and ordinary of upbringings on the Vulcan homeworld, even getting several stages through the Kolinahr ceremony at one point. But he'd always felt different from his peers, always found his emotions harder to control, and he discovered with the V'tosh ka'tur that this particular trait of his didn't need to be an affliction, or a flaw. It could be an incredible, rewarding asset.

Except, Sunek mused to himself, they never tell you about the boredom.

If he was a more traditional Vulcan, he assumed he could be spending this time meditating, or studying any number of metaphysical conundrums, or even playing the lute. But Sunek hated meditation. He had no interest in metaphysical conundrums. And even after months of patient lessons during his childhood, he couldn't play the lute to save his life.

And so, here he was. Bored, lonely, and desperately searching for a local newscast just for something to do.

Eventually, he found one. But after thirty seconds watching a documentary focusing on recent work to improve irrigation facilities in Bajor's Dakhur Province, he realised it wasn't exactly helping to alleviate his boredom. After thirty more seconds spent idly retuning the Bounty's dorsal receiver array to try and pick up something more interesting from a culture with a looser concept of the documentary format, he was bored of that as well. Thirty seconds later, he was even bored of his new plan, which admittedly just involved him spinning aimlessly around in his seat.

He looked around the empty cockpit and sighed.

"Screw this," he muttered to the empty room.

He stood up and started towards the exit. His latest new plan involved him ignoring his instructions and following the others, wherever they had gone. After all, whatever they were up to couldn't be any more boring than this. He was stopped in his tracks by the sound of the ship's proximity alarm sounding out.

Something, or someone, was approaching his position.

He bounded back over to his seat to check the sensors. He hadn't been expecting the others to get back so soon, but given how his time alone was going, he had to admit to being pretty happy that they were. That sense of happiness didn't last long.

"Crap," Sunek said to nobody in particular.

The sensor reading showed that the proximity alert wasn't coming from the ground, but from the air. Specifically, from an eerily-familiar Ferengi shuttle.

Grenk had found them.

"Crap, crap, crap, crap," he chanted in tantric repetition, as he quickly powered the Bounty up, skipping half a dozen safety checks as he did so, and began to lift off.

He didn't have time to consider the others, or where they might be. He had to get moving. The micro-torpedo that slammed into the ground where the Bounty had been stood, seconds after it lifted off, rather underlined that point.

He threw the ship into a sharp, tight bank to the left, just as another alarm sounded out from the panel in front of him.

"Hull stress at critical levels," the mechanical voice of the computer rang out.

"Shut up!" Sunek snapped back, pulling the ship's nose up vertically to avoid another torpedo as it zipped past.

The ship veered across the top of the forest, pursued shortly afterwards by the stocky orange shape of Grenk's shuttle, still carrying signs of its encounter with several fragments of asteroid. The Bounty wasn't as manoeuvrable in atmospheric flight as in the vacuum of space, the controls slightly more sluggish and less responsive, not helped by the thoroughly bashed-up state the ship was currently in. Nevertheless, in a weird way, Sunek was enjoying himself.

At least he wasn't bored any more.

Plus, he'd been piloting the Bounty for so long now that he knew the whole ship like an extension of his own body. And he knew how far he could push it. With a grin on his face, he threw the ship into an even sharper bank to the right, determined to shake off his relentless pursuer.

"Hull stress limits exceeded," the computer reported, "Hull breach in progress."

"Huh," Sunek managed over the whine of the latest alarm.

Maybe he didn't know how far he could push it after all.

Part 3B

Part Three

Klath was in heaven.

He roared in delight as he slammed his elbow back into the Jem'Hadar's stomach, sending the larger man flying back into the wall behind him. He felt the familiar blood lust surge through his body as he followed up that attack with a couple of swift punches to the Jem'Hadar's already dazed face. His enemy recovered enough to parry the third punch, however, and countered with a blow of his own to Klath's side, knocking the Klingon backwards.

As the Jem'Hadar charged again, Klath spotted his bat'leth on the ground where it had fallen earlier in the fight. He sidestepped the charge and made a break for his weapon, grabbing it and swivelling around to face his quarry in one smooth motion.

The Jem'Hadar charged at him once again, but this time Klath was armed. He met the attack with the blunt side of the bat'leth, slamming it into his adversary's stomach and felling him with a single blow. He swung the weapon around in a graceful arc over his head, and brought the end down onto the prone Jem'Hadar's head, knocking him out.

Without allowing himself a moment to rest, he spun around again, aware that there was another Jem'Hadar to deal with.

He found himself staring at that second Jem'Hadar on the other side of the passageway, spinning around on the spot wildly, trying to dislodge Denella from where she clung onto his back with the grim determination of a Klingon child riding a wild targ.

"It's possible I didn't think this plan through!" she shouted at Klath, the sound of her voice distorting oddly in the air as she was spun around.

The Jem'Hadar, growing tired of trying to dislodge his opponent this way, suddenly reversed into the far wall, slamming into it with all his strength and knocking the wind clean out of her.

"Yep," she managed to croak, gasping for air, "Definitely didn't think this through."

Klath's eyes narrowed as the Jem'Hadar lurched towards him, leaving Denella to drop to the ground in a pained heap. He waited for the enemy to commit first, and as soon as the Jem'Hadar moved to strike, he pivoted to one side, grabbing the arm of the soldier and using his own momentum to propel him towards the other wall of the passageway. The Jem'Hadar slammed into it with sickening force, but like the rest of his species, he was made of stern stuff. As Klath raced in to finish him off, bat'leth raised, he turned and ducked the swing of the Klingon's weapon. Klath was momentarily disoriented and his opponent pounced, slamming into him and causing them both to tumble to the ground, Klath's weapon skidding away down the passage.

They grappled with each other, but Klath was tiring, and the Jem'Hadar managed to get the upper hand, straddling the Klingon and grappling him around the throat. Klath grabbed the scaly hands around his neck and tried to force them apart with all of his remaining strength, but the Jem'Hadar's grip was like a vice. He began to sense the darkness closing in. Sto-vo-kor was getting close.

Then, he heard something smash into the Jem'Hadar's side, with enough force to cause his grip to momentarily falter. Klath seized his chance and wrenched the hands from his throat, before finishing off his foe with a firm headbutt.

Still panting deeply from exertion, he extricated himself from underneath the dead weight of the Jem'Hadar and clambered back to his feet, to see an equally breathless Denella clutching his bat'leth, which she had just slammed into the fallen soldier.

"You are becoming a fearsome warrior," Klath said with genuine pride, as he continued to pant breathlessly.

Denella tossed him the bat'leth and smiled, before retrieving her own dagger from where it had fallen on the stone ground. "Guess I'm learning from the best."

She moved over to the wall and slouched against it, feeling the fatigue in her body now the rush of adrenaline from the fight was easing off. Klath returned his bat'leth to its sheath and joined her. For a moment, they stood next to each other in silence, catching their breath.

"Why didn't the disruptors work?" Denella asked eventually, to herself as much to anyone.

Klath slowly looked around the confines of the interior of the structure, his breathing now more controlled.

"Perhaps a dampening field," he offered, "Of a type we could not detect?"

Denella considered this option and sighed.

"Maybe," she replied, "I guess I might be able to adjust the tricorder to—"

She paused, still taking somewhat ragged breaths, and looked further down the passageway, beyond the unmoving bodies of the two Jem'Hadar.

"Um, one other question," she continued, "Where the hell are the others?"

Klath looked around, dumbfounded.

He had no idea.

The sensation of falling had only lasted for a few seconds, as the pair of them had plummeted through the hole that had opened up out of nowhere, but it seemed to last a lifetime.

In truth, they had barely dropped through the floor before they had stopped falling. Except, it didn't feel like they had landed on anything. They had simply stopped falling.

Natasha scrambled around in the darkness and shone her flashlight around, trying to orientate herself to her new surroundings. They had dropped into a wide cylindrical chamber, the walls wrapped around them covered in similar markings to those in the passageway above. Except, she noticed immediately, the walls here were cleaner, no moss or weeds adorning them. Almost as if they were freshly scrubbed. But that quirk was far from the most interesting part of this new room. The most interesting part was the floor.

Or rather, the lack of it.

"What the hell?" Jirel half-whispered from somewhere next to her in the gloom.

She was now looking directly at what had made him react like that. Directly below them, her flashlight showed that the chamber just continued downwards, extending so far that the light couldn't penetrate all the way to the bottom. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like it went on forever. And yet they weren't falling. Instead, they were somehow suspended in mid air. As if they had landed on some sort of invisible sheet stretched out across the chasm to catch them.

Natasha got to her feet uncertainly. She felt her legs wobble slightly at the bizarre sensation of standing in mid air. She tore her attention away from the view downwards for long enough to shine her flashlight back around the chamber itself and locate Jirel, who was looking equally uncertain as he stood back up a short distance from her.

"Ok, so, this is weird," Jirel offered, internally acknowledging the scale of his understatement.

"The tricorder," she said, motioning towards the device clipped to his belt.

He grabbed the device and scanned the area, as she focused all of her attention on the symbols and markings on the walls. Mainly because she didn't want to look down again. But also in part because she was fascinated by them, recognising some of the marks from her and her father's research.

Despite her recent misgivings about Starfleet, she found herself wishing that she had a dedicated away team with her right now, rather than a wannabe space adventurer with a single out of date tricorder.

The previously undiscovered details about the Soraxx contained within the symbols in front of her must have been incredible, enough to keep a dedicated archaeological team busy for years. And, despite having only just met them, she suspected the Bounty's crew might not exactly be up for that sort of job.

"From what I can tell, we're standing on some kind of...weird energy field," Jirel reported uncertainly, underlining her point without realising it.

"Is that your professional opinion?"

"Sorry doc," he shrugged, waving the tricorder at her, "I usually just use these things to check cargo."

She sighed and tentatively walked over to join him, suppressing the queasy feeling she got from the sensation of stepping on thin air. He handed her the tricorder and she began to work. She didn't recognise the origin of this particular design, but it didn't take her long to realise that it wasn't up to Starfleet specs. Still, needs must, she told herself as she pressed on.

As she worked, it was Jirel's turn to look around. But his attention wasn't on the walls, but on the solid ground above their heads, which had inexplicably returned to being composed of solid rock after their fall. And he wasn't so much in awe of it, as he was slightly annoyed.

She kept her attention on the tricorder readings as he continued to grouch.

"Nice of you to warn us about the booby traps, by the way," he muttered, gesturing upwards, "Very nice."

"I'm not sure that's what it was."

"What was it then, the doorbell?"

She didn't look up, her focus still on her current mystery, but she managed a patient smile.

"There's still so much we don't know about the Soraxx," she explained, "That might have been a completely natural entrance for them. It's fascinating, really."

Jirel considered this for a moment.

"Well," he said eventually with a shrug, "I'm not surprised these guys are all dead if that's what passed for a door around here."

He returned his attention to the tricorder. “Any guesses as to where we are yet?”

“Looks like we’re suspended on some sort of low-level chromodynamic energy pattern,” she said as she gestured down to the invisible floor beneath their feet, “Though it has a transient fluctuation in the upper bands that I’ve never seen before.”

“So, in summary, weird energy field.”

She looked up at the Trill, whose annoyance had dissipated and been replaced by a slightly self-satisfied grin.

“If you like,” she replied with a slight smile of her own.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, weird or not, I’m glad it’s here,” he continued, looking down at the bottomless drop below them, “But…why is it here?”

She smirked and checked the readings again, swinging the tricorder around the confines of their surroundings. Spotting something in the data, she swept her flashlight up past Jirel and gestured behind him.

“Probably because of that.”

The beam of light illuminated the way to a clear opening in the stone wall, level with the invisible floor beneath them.

“See, now that’s a door,” Jirel replied, starting off towards it.

“Wait!”

He paused, his right foot dangling awkwardly in front of him.

“I told you the chromodynamic—The ‘weird energy field’ has a transient fluctuation, remember?”

“You think I’d forget something like that?” Jirel sarcastically offered, even as he struggled to maintain his balance on one leg.

She rolled her eyes and sighed, scanning the invisible floor in front of them again.

“It’s not uniform,” she explained patiently, “I can’t tell if it’s deliberate or if it’s just malfunctioning after five thousand years, but there are, for want of a better word, gaps. So I wouldn’t put your foot down there if I were you.”

Jirel remained awkwardly on one foot, wobbling slightly. “Care to tell me where I can put it?”

She ignored the half-dozen retorts that immediately jumped into her head upon hearing his question and focused on the scans, which showed a constantly changing patchwork of invisible holes that dotted the ground like swiss cheese.

“Might be easier if you just follow me,” she admitted.

She stepped carefully on a slow, meandering path towards the doorway and Jirel fell in line behind, all the time the pair of them hovered in mid air on the invisible ground beneath them. Eventually, they reached the doorway and found with some relief upon stepping through that there was solid stone ground to walk on again. It was only when they got that far that Natasha realised she’d been holding her breath.

“Ok,” Jirel said, breathing a sigh of relief and gesturing to the tricorder, “What’s that thing say about a way out of here.”

“A way out of—? What are you talking about? What about the jewel?” she snapped.

“What about it? You’ve brought us all the way to some crazy labyrinth full of trapdoors and invisible floors and crap knows what else? This is, by some considerable distance, not what I signed up for on this one.”

Natasha shook her head in frustration, refusing to believe that he was going to be this stubborn. “But don’t you see? We’re here. We’re inside. All my father’s research was right! We’re this close to the Jewel of Soraxx—!”

“We were just this close to falling into a bottomless pit!” Jirel shot back, gesturing back the way they had come from, “Not to mention the fact that Klath and Denella are back up there with a couple of Jem’Hadar! We need to find the exit. Now.”

He fixed her with a deadly serious gaze. She stared back at him. Neither willing to back down. In the end, Natasha gestured to their current surroundings.

“Ok, we can argue as much as we want, but the way I see it, we don’t have much of a choice. We can’t get out the way we got in. So, we’re going that way.”

Jirel turned and looked down the foreboding stone-walled corridor they were now in. At their only way forward.

“I guess you’re right,” he grimaced, “But we’re looking for the way out. Ok?”

“Ok,” she lied.

They walked on down the corridor, not taking any time to examine the further etchings and marks that were scattered across these walls. As they turned a corner, they found the passageway ahead now branched off in two different directions.

“Well, easy choice,” Natasha shrugged, “Left, or right? I say right—”

“Left,” Jirel shot back.

“Why?”

“Dunno. I just like left. Do I need a reason? I wanna go left.”

She studied the Trill’s face, wondering whether his anger at their plight was actually making him act as petty as she suspected he was being. “Are you...just saying that to disagree with me?”

“Psh. No. Now, are we doing this or not?” Jirel grouched, starting to walk down the left-hand passageway.

She followed behind, checking the tricorder readings as they went. And immediately seeing the problem they were walking into. She barely had time to glance forward and see Jirel’s right foot coming down onto the solid stone floor, which immediately lit up with a red flash, just like the pressure pad he had triggered in the entrance.

She had no time to warn him of what was about to happen.

Fortunately, she did have just enough time to roughly grab hold of the back of his jacket and tug him backwards.

“Hey—!”

Before his angry growl progressed any further, and milliseconds after he collapsed backwards onto the ground as a result of her unexpected action, a flare of bright green energy pulsed out of the walls either side of where he had just been standing in a ferocious crackle of deadly power. The way forwards down the passageway was completely blocked by the searing crackling light show.

Jirel looked up at Natasha from where he sat in a crumpled, but relieved, heap.

“I mean, right’s good too...”

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

“This is impossible!”

Klath’s bellow of frustration echoed eerily through the entrance to the pyramid, bouncing off the surrounding walls. It was accompanied by the sound of his fist impacting the stone wall of the passageway.

Denella sighed. She was forced to agree with the sentiment. They had walked up and down the wide expanse of the entrance corridor a dozen times, and could find no trace of Jirel or Natasha. More than that, the corridor itself came to a dead end less than fifty metres from the entrance. Not only were their colleagues missing, there was nowhere else for them to search.

“Ok,” she said eventually, keeping her own frustrations under control, “Let’s get back to the Bounty. Maybe we can use the sensors to give us a better idea where we’re supposed to be looking.”

Klath muttered something that Denella was pretty sure was a particularly coarse Klingon expletive, but eventually nodded in agreement. They stepped out of the pyramid, leaving the still-unconscious Jem’Hadar soldiers inside where they had shackled them together, and walked into the clearing. Denella grabbed a communicator from the belt around her waist.

“Sunek, you there?”

She paused for his reply. There was none.

“Knowing our pilot, he is probably asleep,” Klath grouched, causing Denella to smirk despite their situation.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to hike back over there and—”

She was interrupted by a sudden roaring sound from over the horizon. Seconds later, the Bounty shot into view and flew over their heads, the whine from the engines and the blast of air as it passed by momentarily causing them both to duck for cover.

“Sorry guys,” Sunek’s voice came chirping from the communicator, “Little bit busy right now.”

“What on Qo’noS is he—?”

Before Klath could finish his question, a second roar filled the air, and a familiar Ferengi shuttle whizzed past overhead, more dust and dirt being kicked up in their faces by the backdraft from the thrusters.

“That Ferengi petaQ!” Klath shouted above the chaos.

Denella, her green hair swirling like crazy in the maelstrom, gripped the communicator tightly and roared over the deafening sound. “You need some help up there?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” the reply came, dripping with sarcasm, “One sec, I’ll just beam you up.”

It took a couple of moments for that comment to sink in.

“How will he be able to activate the transporter when he is flying the ship?” Klath asked once it had.

Denella considered this for a moment, then shrugged. “Probably best not to think about that.”

Given Klath’s attempts to freak her out earlier with his talk of giant fanged spiders in the forest, she couldn’t help but take some satisfaction from the look of concern that spread across the Klingon’s face, just as she felt the transporter take effect.

* * * * *

They rematerialised moments later, safe and sound in the Bounty’s transporter room, staring back at Sunek’s grinning face behind the controls.

“Hey, there you are!” he smirked, as the ship rocked slightly from a nearby explosion.

The two figures on the transporter pad stared back at him for a few moments, trying to piece together the wider implications of what they were seeing.

“Sunek,” Klath stated flatly.

“The one and only.”

“Sorry, small question, but I’ve got to ask it,” Denella offered eventually, “If you’re here, who the hell’s flying the ship right now?”

The Vulcan’s face creased into a proud beaming smile. “Glad you asked. Just before I came down here to beam you up, I input a random number generator into the navigation computer and left it to it. Voila, I just invented the self-replicating evasive manoeuvre. What have you

done so far today?"

They all braced as the Bounty, now entirely under the control of an algorithm, swerved violently to the right. Denella didn't look reassured.

"But...couldn't a series of completely random coordinates just as easily fly us straight into the ground as it could anywhere else?"

"No. Probably not. Maybe. A bit?" Sunek offered in quick succession, looking slightly less sure of his masterful plan all of a sudden.

He remained where he was for a second, before turning and sprinting out of the transporter room in the direction of the cockpit, even as the entire ship lurched over to the left. He paused only long enough before the door closed behind him to impart a further morsel of vital information to his shipmates.

"Oh, also, there's a couple of tiny hull breaches in the cargo bay that you're gonna want to fix if we wanna get off this rock. Mostly not my fault. Ok, bye!"

As the doors snapped shut, Denella and Klath exchanged a look.

"Well," she sighed, "If Grenk doesn't kill him, I reckon I might have to give it a go."

Klath nodded firmly, as the pair of them rushed off to aid in the fight.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

“There’s two of them.”

“One step to the left, now. And no, there’s three.”

Jirel and Natasha stepped onto a dull grey square on the floor, off to the left of the one that they’d been standing on before.

The squares were merely a small part of an elaborate chequerboard layout across the entire room in front of them, the one that they had arrived in after retracing their steps and taking the right-hand fork in the crossroads they had come across.

Seconds after they stepped onto the new square on the floor, the one that they had previously been standing on was struck by a short but deadly burst of bright green energy, similar to the one that had nearly vaporised Jirel earlier. The energy discharge, like the others that had struck the previous squares they had stepped on, came from somewhere high above their heads. This cavern, like the one with the invisible floor, was large enough that the ceiling was invisible in the darkness.

The first time they had nearly been struck by one of the energy bolts had terrified both of them. But now that Natasha had figured out the path to follow from the tricorder scans, they were becoming little more than a passing annoyance to the duo’s progress.

“Two,” Jirel sighed, waiting for the next instruction, “We saw four in the clearing, and we met two of them back at the entrance, so there’s two Jem’Hadar left in here somewhere.”

Natasha concentrated on the readouts from the tricorder, looking for the signs from above as to when the next energy discharge was coming.

“Next two squares, straight forward, now,” she pointed, “And, for the last time, no. There were five of them in the clearing. How can you not remember?”

“How can you not remember that there were four of them?”

They arrived on their target square still bickering, as another bolt of green energy flared out behind them.

So far, they had made it roughly two thirds of the way across their latest challenge. It was slow going, but it would have been a lot worse had Natasha’s Starfleet training not caused her to insist on scanning the room first before they had walked in. Without further study, she couldn’t tell whether this was another booby trap, or merely some sort of security measure left behind by the Soraxx, but her scans revealed that there was only one correct path across the squares. Hit the wrong one, an energy discharge activated immediately. Equally, just for good measure, stay too long on an individual square, and an identical energy bolt would activate.

Only though scanning ahead just before each of those scheduled discharges was she able to detect the slight field variance that belied the correct next step.

She surmised that it was possibly some sort of elaborate password system for anyone wanting to access the rest of the structure, designed for those crossing it to input a set code in a certain space of time in order to pass. A code that she was glad she had taken the time to work out how to crack.

Although, given the ongoing argument they were in the middle of, part of her was starting to wish that she’d just let her Trill companion charge in.

“One left, one forward, now,” she reported as Jirel started moving, “And I don’t know how else to explain it to you, but trust me, if we run into them, it’s gonna be three-on-two.”

“It’ll be two-on-two,” Jirel persisted, riling her further, “Plus, if we do run into them, we won’t have weapons, remember?”

“That’ll be the least of your problems given that you can’t even count them properly,” she shot back, before quickly pointing ahead, “Two right, one forwards.”

Jirel complied, but his body language suggested that their latest argument was far from over. “And to think I thought going on a treasure hunt with you would be fun. How wrong I was.”

Another burst of energy landed behind them. She gestured again, hurriedly. “Two forward, now. And clearly being wrong is something you like to make a habit of.”

They reached the short-term respite of the next square, now within touching distance of the safety of the other side.

“You know, I am so looking forward to dropping you off with Admiral Jenner.”

“Psh,” she scoffed, “Didn’t seem to think that last night. Or this morning.”

He turned around and shot her a particularly icy look. She decided not to push that particular button any more and focused back on the tricorder.

“Sorry,” she muttered, “Let’s just—”

She stared at the tricorder in shock, her eyes widening in fear. The screen was completely blank.

“Let’s just what?” Jirel pressed, “Come on, where next?”

She gave the device a smack with her palm. Then another one. Then, just for good measure, she shook it with frustrated desperation.

“Stupid piece of—!”

“Hey!” Jirel yelled, grabbing it from her, “Don’t do that, that’s my best tricorder!”

“It’s broken, Jirel!” she shot back, gesturing at the dead screen, “Out of power!”

Jirel did a full double take at his best tricorder. After a brief pause, he shook it with twice the violence that Natasha had.

“Stupid piece of—!”

He was interrupted by an energy burst flaring on the square they had just vacated. They looked at each other, then looked up above their heads.

“Ok, we’re just gonna have to make a run for it,” Jirel said, turning back to the squares.

“If we do that, and we step on the wrong square, we get fried,” Natasha reminded him.

They looked at the remaining four rows of squares, identical save for their slight chequerboard hues. Not a single identifying mark or clue as to which path was the right one to choose.

“Ok, so we hopscotch it,” Jirel shrugged, “One square to the next, four hops, and we’re there.”

The pair of them braced themselves, preparing to make their move. Natasha’s arm shot out to stop Jirel before he could take a step.

“But… I don’t wanna be morbid here,” she babbled, filled with nervous energy, “But is it best we go the same way, the same squares, or should we go different ways?”

Jirel stared back at her in confusion.

“Cos, I mean, if we go the same way, and we get it wrong, we both die, right?” she continued.

“Right,” he nodded.

“Ok, so if we go different ways, we double our chances of one of us getting it right, right?”

“Right.”

“But then, by definition, that means one of us will definitely get it wrong. So—Oh crap, is one of us definitely dying better than both of us maybe dying? Are we being Kobayashi Maru-ed? I hate being Kobayashi Maru-ed—!”

As Natasha’s level of panic threatened to rise even higher, Jirel stepped up to her and grabbed her hand, rediscovering his bravado and fixing her with the most heroic gaze that he could muster. The one he saved for really dire emergencies.

“Hey, Natasha Kinsen, do you trust me?”

Natasha looked back at him, still panicking.

“No,” she replied with complete honesty, “Not even a little bit.”

Jirel’s heroic air slipped a tad. “I—Really? I mean, after all we’ve—?”

“I met you yesterday!” she said with exasperation, “I have no idea who you really are! So, I’m sorry, but no, I really don’t—”

“Fine, whatever, screw it.”

He jumped forwards onto one of the adjacent squares, pulling Natasha with him before she had a chance to realise what was happening. Just as they left the previous square, it erupted in a burst of energy. But the one they landed on remained mercifully unscorched. For the moment.

“Jirel, what the hell are you—?”

“Ok, so now you pick one,” he said urgently, gesturing to the next row of squares, “Don’t think about it, cos there’s nothing to think about. We start trying to think about it, we’ll never move. Just trust your instincts, and pick one.”

“This is stupid!” Natasha said with a sigh.

“Completely agree,” Jirel replied, “And if you’ve got a better idea in that big old Starfleet brain of yours, then I wanna hear it. Otherwise, let’s jump!”

She sighed again, realising that he was probably right. She grabbed his hand and stared down at the next row of squares, desperately trying to clear her mind of any attempt to rationalise what she was about to do. Square to the right, she thought. And she jumped, pulling Jirel with her.

As she did so, she closed her eyes involuntarily, expecting the immediate hit of the energy bolt. But nothing happened. She opened her eyes and looked around, failing to suppress an involuntary squeal of joy.

“Oh my god, it actually worked!” she squeaked in delight, clapping her hands for good measure and gesturing to Jirel, “Ok, your turn, come on!”

Jirel looked down at the squares, then looked up at the safety that lay two rows away. “Seriously? You’re really gonna go with my stupid plan to get us three in a row? I thought you didn’t trust me? Not even a little bit?”

“Well, I—I mean,” Natasha managed, confused at this sudden turn, “It’s like you said, we don’t have another option!”

“We do now,” Jirel nodded at the remaining two rows, “I reckon we can make that.”

“What do you—?”

He quickly positioned himself at the back of the square they were on, maximising his run up, then bolted forwards, jumping across the final two rows and landing in a heap on the other side.

“Perfect, see?” he grinned as he picked himself up and dusted himself off, “Come on, doc. Just make the jump from there.”

She grimaced and stepped to the back of the square, trying to put memories of her disqualification in the long jump during athletics trials back at the Academy out of her mind.

“Come on,” Jirel urged, holding his arms out to catch her, “Quickly!”

The square they had previously been standing on erupted in a burst of energy. Natasha sighed, closed her eyes, tried to control her heart rate. And went for it.

She opened her eyes just as she pushed off from the very edge of the square, leaping up with all her strength. For a moment, she felt sure that she wasn’t going to make it, that she was going to land right in the middle of the final row of squares. But, by inches, she cleared it, and landed in the waiting arms of Jirel with enough force to push him backwards to the floor.

For a few seconds, they awkwardly lay on top of each other in a heap, both panting deeply from their exertions.

“Nice jump,” Jirel said eventually with a grin.

Natasha lifted herself up and fixed him with an unimpressed look. “Seriously, it was a one time thing.”

Jirel looked confused for a moment, then realised what she was referring to. “Oh, no. That’s just the tricorder.”

She looked down to tricorder on his belt and sighed, then clambered off him. They both got back to their feet and looked down the new passage that now stood in front of them.

“We’ve got to be nearly there,” she offered, “Regardless of how well the Soraxx wanted to guard their treasure.”

“We’re still looking for the exit, right?” Jirel replied, causing her to flinch slightly.

Instead of responding, she shone her flashlight down the corridor. Like the previous ones, it was overgrown with plant life, but this one seemed to be made of rusted metal.

“Well, wherever we’re going,” Jirel continued, taking a step forward, “There’d better not be any more—”

He paused as a whirring sound filled the passageway. Instinctively, he checked the floor under his feet. “I swear, I didn’t press anything that time.”

The whirring sound grew louder. They glanced at each other, bracing themselves for whatever was about to happen. Suddenly, they felt the entire floor move, tilting them downwards. They didn’t even have time to grab anything, or to even consider running. They lost their footing immediately.

All they had time to do was scream, as they slid down, into the darkness.

* * * * *

The slide deposited them in an ungainly heap at the bottom. Coughing from the dust they had kicked up on their impromptu journey, they slowly untangled themselves and stood up.

“I am really starting to hate this place,” Jirel spluttered, wincing and holding his back in pain at the site of his latest injury.

Natasha shone her flashlight around their new surroundings. Wherever they were, it was a much larger room than the others that they had been through, on a scale more like an amphitheatre than anything else, with rising stone steps all around the outside and a central raised stage area, a square section of much lighter stonework. Again, she noted that more runes and symbols adorned the sides of the stage, and a set of steps ran from the ground up to the top.

Like the original cylindrical area they had first dropped into, she also saw that the central area was untouched by the dirt and vines they had seen elsewhere. It was astonishingly well preserved, almost too clean.

“Incredible,” she muttered, causing Jirel to give up on dusting himself off and look around himself.

“What’s this?” he said, appearing less impressed than she was, “Another trap?”

“I have no idea,” she admitted, taking in the full extent of the huge structure, “But it looks like we’ve reached the centre.”

“The centre of what?”

“Not sure,” she admitted, “Maybe if we had a functioning tricorder, I could—”

“Hey, don’t blame any of this on my tricorder, ok?” he snapped back, slightly absurdly, “Now let’s just—”

He took a single step forward. They both heard the clicking sound that followed. Jirel sighed deeply and looked down, seeing another familiar pressure pad glowing red underneath his right boot.

“Oh, come on!” he exclaimed in defeated frustration.

They stood their ground together, waiting for the next challenge, or puzzle, or deadly energy discharge to confront them.

But none of that happened. Instead, the vast expanse in front of them was suddenly bathed in light, bright enough for them to have to shield their eyes from the sudden change in conditions. Slowly, the light gradually focused down onto the raised stage itself, out of which now rose a stocky metal podium.

On top of which stood an enormous deep red crystalline sphere, which appeared to be glowing with an energy all of its own.

“Oh my god,” Natasha whispered.

“Holy crap,” Jirel added simply, “Is that—?”

His view of the podium, and the treasure on top of it, was suddenly obscured. Firstly by a bulky plasma rifle, and then by an even bulkier torso. The three Jem’Hadar positioned themselves in front of them, their leader smiling darkly.

“The Jewel of Soraxx?” First Clora’gerax said, “I believe it is. And we shall be taking it.”

Jirel looked over at Natasha, seeing the fear in her eyes. He managed a slight shrug.

“If it’s any consolation,” he offered weakly, “You were right, there’s three of them.”

End of Part Three

Part 4A

Part Four

“Guard them,” Clora’gerax barked, gesturing to the smallest of the trio of Jem’Hadar.

Sixth Lota’sharam nodded obediently. He turned to Natasha and Jirel and pointed over to a corner of the chamber with a jerk of his rifle.

“You do know you can’t use those, right?” Jirel said with a hint of smugness as he gestured to the ugly energy weapon in the soldier’s hands.

In a single, swift motion, Lota’sharam swung his weapon around in his hands and slammed the rifle butt into the Trill’s exposed stomach, causing him to double over and collapse onto the ground in wheezing pain.

“Good point, well made,” he managed to gasp, as he struggled for air.

As he continued to writhe in pain, Natasha did her best to stand her ground, keeping her focus on the largest of the Jem’Hadar, who was clearly the leader of the group. “What are you doing here? How the hell do you even know about this?”

Clora’gerax glanced at the gleaming red jewel in the centre of the room, then turned back to her, his grey scaly face studying her own features with intrigue.

“Ah, and I assume that you must be the one they call Natasha Kinsen,” he replied, in lieu of a direct answer to her questions, “I always believed that you would be taller.”

As she struggled to process whether or not she had just been insulted, he continued. “Still, it is thanks to you that we know about this place.”

Of all of the answers he might have given her, she hadn’t been expecting that one. As she stared back in shock, Jirel managed to awkwardly clamber back to his feet.

“You know, doc,” he coughed, still short of breath, “You really should have warned me that your fan club was going to be here.”

“I—I don’t understand—” she began.

Clora’gerax grinned. Until this moment in her life, she had been completely unaware that it was possible for a Jem’Hadar soldier to gloat.

“Your own writings, Natasha Kinsen,” he explained with relish, “We discovered everything we needed to know about the Jewel of Soraxx from your own personal logs. All of them preserved in the black box of your ship.”

Natasha looked aghast. That she had somehow, even inadvertently, brought this situation on herself. To her side, Jirel just tutted.

“See, that’s the problem with Starfleet,” he chided, “Too many logs.”

The Trill kept his tone as bold as possible, trying not to show how anxious he was about their somewhat futile situation. Inside, it was taking all of his self-restraint to resist the ever-building nervous urge to scratch his spots.

“The only part that was missing,” Clora’gerax continued, ignoring the Trill, “Was the jewel’s exact location.”

Natasha managed an understanding nod at this. She hadn’t had time to make a log record of the most recent part of her research, the final translation of the coordinates she had saved from the Navajo, and brought onboard the Bounty, before the Jem’Hadar attack.

“Fortunately,” Clora’gerax concluded, gesturing around the amphitheatre, “You were kind enough to lead us right to it.”

“But,” Natasha managed to get out, still trying to process the situation, “Why do you even care about this—?”

It wasn’t Clora’gerax that answered, but the slightly smaller Jem’Hadar to his left, who had been entirely silent until this point.

“Why do we care about the most powerful weapon in the galaxy?” Second Panar’atan snapped, his face twitching slightly as he spoke, “Surely that is obvious, even to you!”

Both Jirel and Natasha noted the look of mild irritation that crossed Clora’gerax’s face when his subordinate jumped into the discussion unannounced, but he restrained himself from any sort of immediate rebuke.

“Most powerful what now?” Jirel chimed in, totally confused, “It’s just a big old jewel.”

“Ok, I think it might well be much more than that,” Clora’gerax smiled, “Isn’t that right, Natasha Kinsen?”

Jirel looked over at her as she shrank back slightly.

“I mean, there’s a lot of writings about the Jewel of Soraxx, and a lot of them are very vague,” she began, “But some scholars have pointed out that there is evidence the Soraxx may have used it as some sort of power source. Or even as a...weapon.”

Jirel scoffed, his breathing now almost recovered. “And you didn’t think that was important information to share with us?”

“We found it quite important,” Clora’gerax noted.

“Most of those theories have been discredited,” she insisted, “By my father as much as by anyone. When you look more deeply at the sources being used to build those arguments, the language and the context being used could just as easily be seen as referring to the jewel’s power and strength in a symbolic way. Because of what the jewel represented.”

“What a uniquely...Federation perspective,” Clora’gerax spat out.

“He’s insulting you,” Jirel offered to Natasha, “Just in case you didn’t get that—”

“I got that.”

“The real truth,” Clora’gerax continued, almost starting to grandstand in front of them, “Is that this jewel truly is the ultimate power in the galaxy. Why else would it be so heavily guarded?”

He gestured around, alluding to the series of traps and pitfalls that they had all had to overcome in order to get this far.

“And,” he added, “Once we use the jewel’s power to return to the Dominion, we will bring back to the Founders something that will help us achieve a glorious victory over the Federation.”

“Obedience brings victory!” Lota’sharam snapped in involuntary excitement, earning him a withering glare from his two superiors.

“Shut up,” Clora’gerax muttered, pointing to their prisoners, “And guard them.”

The smaller Jem’Hadar nodded and corralled Natasha and Jirel over to the corner he had indicated earlier, leaving Clora’gerax and Panar’atan standing alone.

“Second,” the taller Jem’Hadar said to his subordinate, “Let us complete our mission.”

Panar’atan nodded, as the pair of them turned back to the glowing red jewel in the centre of the room. Natasha watched on helplessly, her father’s greatest accomplishment now so close, and so agonisingly out of reach.

The two Jem’Hadar began to walk towards the illuminated stage.

Towards their victory.

* * * * *

Thick smoke filled the cockpit of the Bounty as Sunek sent the ship on another death-defying turn towards the ground, only to jerk back the controls and pull the small ship away from meeting an untimely end at the last second.

“Grenk’s shuttle is still on our tail, matching our course,” Klath reported angrily from the tactical console behind the Vulcan.

“Can’t this guy just take a hint?” Sunek griped, wrestling with his controls to flick the ship around to the left and avoid another micro-torpedo blast.

“It would appear not.”

Behind them, Denella bounded up the steps to the cockpit and staggered over to her engineering console, struggling to keep her footing as the inertial dampeners only partially compensated for the wild ride the Bounty was on.

“Ok, some good news,” she reported as she slipped into the relative stability of her seat, “Hull breaches are all sealed up, for the moment at least. And I managed to get one of the phaser cannons working.”

“Excellent,” Klath said, his eyes lighting up.

“Not so fast,” the Orion woman interrupted, “Firstly, it’s a total botch job. Probably gonna be good for one shot at best. Secondly, the phaser power junctions were completely fritzed, so I’ve had to reroute most of the relays through...the replicator system.”

Sunek turned his head at this, Klath also giving her a curious look.

“What? Only non-essential system left onboard with enough capacity to handle the job,” she shrugged.

“And by handle the job,” Sunek questioned, “You mean...?”

“I mean we take that one shot, we’re on ration packs for the rest of the trip.”

Sunek and Klath looked at each other across the cockpit, neither exactly liking the sound of that particular fate.

“Better make it count then, I guess,” Sunek said as he swivelled back around to his console, “And don’t worry, cos I think I’ve got an idea.”

With his back now to the others, he didn’t see that his comment elicited clear looks of worry from both the Klingon and the Orion. Instead, he was focused on turning the Bounty through a full 180 degree turn, just as another nearby weapons blast rocked the whole ship.

“This piece of junk!” the Vulcan snapped, bashing the side of his console with his foot, “Controls are too slow, that wasn’t my fault!”

“She won’t do what she’s told unless you treat her right, you know,” Denella shot back, coming to the defence of the ship she’d spent so long repairing and maintaining.

“Fine, I’ll apologise later. Klath, we’re headed to that forest, about thirty clicks due west. Get your shooting finger warmed up.”

“Why?” Klath grunted, “If we are to die in battle, I would prefer not to end up stuck in a tree like some pathetic cha’Do’.”

“You won’t, trust me,” Sunek grinned, “Although I have no idea what one of those is.”

The Bounty veered towards the forest, still relentlessly pursued by the Ferengi shuttle, and began to reduce altitude.

“Sunek, we’re getting a little low,” Denella warned, as half a dozen alarms simultaneously rang out from her console.

“That’s kinda the whole point. Klath, ready with that one shot of ours?”

“Always,” the Klingon replied, still none the wiser as to what the plan was.

“Ok then, we’re going in.”

Denella couldn’t help but flinch as the Bounty dipped down below the tree line of the gigantic forest, nearly colliding with a trunk as it did so. The small Ju’day-type ship navigated between the towering trunks, which were spaced out wide enough thanks to the broad reach of their individual branches. There was room for the ship to move. But not a great deal of room. The pursuing shuttle followed them in, firing another micro-torpedo for good measure.

Sunek’s fingers danced across his control panel with careful precision as the ship veered left and right, in between the huge, ancient trees. He may not have been a traditional Vulcan, but he could still focus when he needed to. And he definitely needed to right now.

A panel on Klath’s console sparked out, as the Bounty’s port wing clipped one of the enormous trunks, gouging out a section of the wood and cracking the tip of the wing.

“Hull integrity going critical,” Denella reported over the cacophony of alerts, “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Definitely,” Sunek lied, “We still got our friend with us?”

“Grenk’s shuttle is still in pursuit, and gaining,” Klath bellowed, “It is a smaller vessel, more able to manoeuvre in this environment. This plan does not appear to be working!”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that,” Sunek shot back, “Prepare to fire!”

The Bounty turned again. Through the cockpit window, Denella and Klath could see that they were now on a collision course with a particularly imposing tree.

“Sunek?” Denella screamed over the sound of another explosion, as the tree grew larger and larger ahead of them.

“One sec!” he shouted back, “And...fire, Klath!”

The Klingon jabbed his finger down on his controls. A burst of dark red energy spat out from the phaser cannon mounted on the ship’s port wing, impacting straight in the middle of the tree’s gargantuan trunk. At the same time as the weapon fired, the replicator in the ship’s dining area exploded into a thousand tiny pieces, leaving a smouldering hole behind.

The phaser blast was enough to completely vaporise the central section of the trunk, momentarily creating a clear gap just large enough for Sunek to fly the limping Bounty through a fraction of a second later.

By the time Grenk’s shuttle arrived, however, gravity had taken over, and that gap had disappeared. The top portion of the tree slammed down hard onto the dirty orange hull of the shuttle, buckling it and sending the small craft on an immediate spiral down to the forest floor. It skidded along through the undergrowth, clipping another tree on the right-hand side, before coming to rest a smoking, immobile ruin.

At the same time, above the tree line, the battered Bounty emerged in a sudden explosion of stray leaves and branches. With its wing tip still gently smoking, it rose unsteadily at first, but it slowly regained altitude and stabilised its course.

Sunek finished the manoeuvre and turned back to the others, the widest grin in the Alpha Quadrant now splashed across his face.

“Now come on,” he said, holding his arms wide and waiting for the adulation to arrive, “How cool was that?”

Denella looked a slightly paler shade of green than usual. Klath merely grunted.

“An acceptable use of our one shot,” he replied, checking his console, “Grenk’s shuttle has been neutralised.”

“Really? That’s all I get? Did you see how we—?”

“Yep,” Denella replied, a little too quickly, “Saw it.”

She recovered enough composure to check her console, which was still flashing a myriad variety of alerts at her. “And I can also see the half dozen fresh hull breaches we’ve picked up.”

“Everyone’s a critic...” Sunek muttered.

As a minor moment of calm descended on the cockpit, save for the alerts still gently chirping at them, Sunek allowed himself to fully take in the bigger picture for the first time, and gestured at his two colleagues.

“By the way, where the hell are the others?”

Part 4B

Part Four (Cont'd)

The two Jem'Hadar approached the raised stage in the middle of the central chamber of the final resting place of the Jewel of Soraxx and paused. They stood at the base of the stone staircase that ran up to the jewel itself and began to check the area around them.

From the other side of the room, Natasha thought they almost looked reverential, as if they were paying their respects to the jewel as the ancient residents of this planet might once have done. But she also knew that the more likely explanation was that they were being tactically minded, checking for any other potential booby traps before they continued. She chewed her lip and looked over at their guard, seriously wondering if the other Jem'Hadar soldiers were now far enough away that she and Jirel could safely overpower Lota'sharam given the right moment.

Then, her focus was taken away by an unnecessary distraction.

"I'm sorry," Jirel said from her other side.

She turned to look at him, slightly baffled. "For what?"

"For, y'know, making you breakfast."

She paused and half-scoffed, not entirely sure where the Trill was going with this given the gravity of their current situation.

"I'm just saying," Jirel continued, "It looks like we're gonna die, so I feel like I need to say I'm sorry. I guess I just misread the signs."

Her half-scoff metamorphosed into a full scoff. "Really? This is what you want to deal with right now?"

"Yeah, might not be the best time, but—I mean, there were definitely signs, right? And I know what you're saying about last night, and how little you say it meant, and that's cool. But I just—I feel like there's something between us."

"There really isn't."

"See, you say that," he persisted, "But I know. I felt a connection."

"Jirel, you absolutely didn't."

"Really? Do you honestly think that? Cos I think we definitely—"

"I flipped a coin!" she spat out in exasperation, abruptly enough to silence him.

She looked back over to see the dumbfounded look on his face and sighed deeply. She really didn't want to deal with this now. But apparently he did.

"What?" he managed eventually.

"Metaphorically speaking, at least," she continued despite herself, "I actually used my combadge. But, like I said, I'd been completely alone for six months, and I just wanted a...companion. Any companion. Except I ruled out Klath cos I really don't have the upper body strength for all that, and I ruled out Sunek cos...y'know."

Jirel, still dumbfounded, managed a shrug of understanding at that part at least.

"So, yeah, I decided that I was gonna head for either your cabin or Denella's, so...I flipped for it. Fifty-fifty choice."

"Huh," was all Jirel could manage.

"Honestly, it didn't really matter either way to me, for what it was gonna be. I just didn't want to be alone for another night."

"Huh."

"And, that's kinda that. You wanted to do this now. And I've done it. So, to conclude, I'm sorry, but there really isn't any sort of connection here."

Jirel briefly searched around for something else to say, before sticking with what felt most natural.

"Huh."

Seeing the slight look of hurt in his eyes, she offered him an apologetic shrug and then turned her attention back to their guard, who she found was now watching them intently, apparently intrigued by the pair of them.

"And what the hell do you want?" she snapped.

"Your conversation is fascinating," Sixth Lota'sharam admitted.

"It really isn't."

“What’s the matter?” Jirel asked the Jem’Hadar with a snort, “You never had a row with your partner—?”

“I’m not his partner,” Natasha clarified to their captor as quickly as she could.

“Yep, getting that now.”

Lota’sharam, for his part, stared blankly back at Jirel, not really understanding the question in the first place.

“I have no partner,” he stated flatly.

“Really?” Jirel pressed, “Strapping young man like you?”

“The Jem’Hadar don’t really work like that,” Natasha said, “They’re generated in birthing chambers. And even if they wanted to, they don’t have the…apparatus.”

She gestured dismissively down at Lota’sharam’s crotch. He glanced down as well, confused as to what he was supposed to be looking at.

“Oh,” Jirel mused, “Well, no wonder you’re always so angry—”

That, of all things, seemed to do it. She couldn’t stop herself from turning back round to face him, frustration clearly etched across her features.

“Can you just, for one second, stop? Please? Just take a second to look at the situation we’re in and really - I mean really - take it in, hmm? Cos we’re screwed here, ok? And all you can think about is, what? Trying to chat me up? Or cracking stupid jokes?”

“I use a lot of coping mechanisms in situations like this,” he replied, entirely seriously.

“Yeah, well, they’re not helping. They’re really not helping.”

Lota’sharam continued to watch the two figures in front of him as they bickered, continuing to take advantage of this chance to study the enemy’s behaviour close up. Even if he didn’t really understand half of what they were talking about.

As Jirel and Natasha argued, and their guard watched on, none of them noticed that on the other side of the chamber, First Clora’gerax and Second Panar’atan had finished their strategic assessment of their quarry, and were now ascending the stone steps. They proceeded with caution, not certain that they had eliminated the possibility of there being more hidden tricks somewhere ahead of them, but it didn’t take them long to reach the top.

Once there, they saw the jewel up close, gazed at the deep red glow that was surrounding it. They stepped towards it.

And that was when the three figures on the other side of the chamber took renewed interest in where they were.

Because then, they all heard the voice.

* * * * *

The Bounty swept in across the clearing where the pyramid stood and then stopped dead in its tracks, hovering over the area.

Inside the cockpit, Klath jabbed a finger down on his comms panel. “Denella, we are in position. You should proceed.”

The Orion woman’s voice came back across the comms link from where she was primed in the ship’s transporter room. She wasn’t happy. “Crap. Klath, this is useless. I can’t get a fix on them. I can’t get a fix on anything down there.”

“Psh,” Sunek scoffed from the pilot’s seat, “There’s always something…”

Klath ignored the Vulcan’s comment and went to work on his own scans of the area, looking at the data in puzzlement.

“It appears that there is some sort of energy field shrouding the structure,” he reported, “It is possible that this is what also prevented the disruptors from firing earlier.”

“Yep,” Denella’s frustrated voice came back over the link, “That’d probably do it. Alright, this was a bust. I’m coming back up.”

The comms link clicked off, as Sunek swivelled around in his chair and fixed his colleague with a knowing look. “So, I take it we need a Plan B?”

There was no reply from the frustrated Klingon.

“I mean,” Sunek ventured into the silence, “We could just leave them behind…?”

Klath looked straight up at Sunek, deeply unimpressed.

“Kidding,” the Vulcan added, “Obviously!”

Before Klath allowed himself to question how much he trusted that the Bounty’s pilot had really been kidding, Denella bounded back up the

steps and into the cockpit.

“If I could just get another shot with the phaser cannon,” he grunted at her, “We might be able to penetrate the field.”

“No can do,” she sighed, “Now the replicator’s well and truly cooked, no pun intended, the only other functioning systems that could take that sort of power flow would be life support or propulsion. And I’m assuming we still want both of those?”

“Plus,” Sunek added, gesturing to the ancient stone pyramid, “How sure are you that firing phasers at that old thing won’t bring the whole roof down on the pair of them.”

Klath growled in frustration and smashed his fist into his console.

“Hey!” Denella yelled indignantly, “Can everyone please stop doing that? You’re gonna break something!”

Klath went to reply, just as the console he had just smashed sounded an alarm.

“What now?”

Denella watched the Klingon’s jaw literally drop as he saw what his console was now telling him.

“What, Klath?” she persisted, growing more worried.

“According to my scans,” he said eventually, “A small Rigellian freighter just entered the atmosphere, and is commencing an attack run on our position.”

He looked down at his still-clenched fist, and then down at the console where he had struck it. The one that, as Denella had rightly complained about, he had clearly somehow broken.

“I do not know my own strength...”

“Ok,” Denella shook her head, ignoring the baffled Klingon to her left, “That sounds stupid. Sunek, any chance we can verify that the old fashioned way?”

“Getting us a visual now,” the Vulcan grinned, swinging the ship around to line the cockpit up with whatever the sensors were detecting.

As the view out of the window settled on their new adversary, the trio in the cockpit stared in disbelief, even as the ship grew closer.

“Well,” Sunek said eventually, breaking the silence, “They certainly don’t make Rigellian freighters like they used to.”

He grabbed for his controls in desperation, just as the Jem’Hadar fighter fired its first shot.

Part 4C

Part Four (Cont'd)

Who are you to gaze upon the Pride of Soraxx?

The voice seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere all at the same time. It reverberated around with a deep bass tone, but it was impossible to tell whether it was echoing off the walls of the chamber itself, or was directly bouncing around in their own heads. The pitch sounded vaguely masculine, but was bereft of any kind of notable accent or unique audible marks that Natasha could detect.

From the far side of the chamber, she noticed that the two Jem'Hadar that had climbed to the stage were now frozen in place in front of the jewel, which was still shining with the same intense red light as before, but now appeared to be gently pulsing.

It was beautiful.

Jirel stood next to her, unabashedly unnerved by the voice and anxiously trying to look around for the source, but finding nothing. Even as he remained frozen in place, he idly reached a hand up to itch his spots.

It was weird.

"You're hearing that too, right?" he managed to whisper to Natasha.

She didn't say anything, and barely reacted to his words at all, her focus still entirely on the pulsing jewel in the centre of the chamber. But she slowly nodded in acknowledgement.

Up on the stage itself, a scant few paces from the jewel, Clora'gerax and Panar'atan remained frozen to the spot, unsure of their next move and trying to gauge the threat posed by the booming disembodied voice. Eventually, Clora'gerax took a step forward, looking up towards the roof of the chamber, which was still shrouded in darkness.

"I am First Clora'gerax!" he bellowed, his own voice echoing around the vast amphitheatre, "And I claim this prize for the Dominion!"

"Bold move," Jirel muttered to himself.

"It's not possible," Natasha whispered, ignoring the Trill's comment and still trying to focus on what she was seeing, "After five thousand years, how can it still be—"

You are not worthy of the Pride of Soraxx. You will leave this place.

The sound of the voice cut Natasha off from her musing. Given the disconcertingly vague source of the voice, it wasn't entirely clear whether it was addressing Clora'gerax specifically, or all five figures inside the chamber.

Clora'gerax looked around uncertainly, but he was no nearer figuring out where the voice was coming from. To his side, Panar'atan seemed more sure of himself.

"This is yet another trick, First," he hissed firmly, "Just like all the others. We must take it! We need it—!"

Clora'gerax swiftly held a hand up to silence his subordinate, still warily glancing around the chamber. The smaller Jem'Hadar stopped speaking, but only seemed to take that course of action begrudgingly.

"Who are you to demand that of us?" Clora'gerax eventually shot back, his voice still loaded with confidence despite the situation.

I am the Guardian of the Pride of Soraxx.

"What do you mean by that?" Clora'gerax persisted.

I am that which guards the Pride of Soraxx.

The Jem'Hadar paused for a moment, seemingly in confusion. From his vantage point, Jirel had to admit that hadn't exactly cleared anything up.

"So, you are responsible for the traps that we encountered?" Clora'gerax asked, trying a different tack, "They posed little threat. Hardly a fitting way to guard such a valuable prize."

Those were but a fraction of my power. They were there to be heeded, not to destroy.

Panar'atan, looking even more on edge than before, stepped forward at this point, flanking his commanding officer.

"We are not frightened of you!" he snapped in as close to the general direction of the voice as he could ascertain.

You should be.

That was a good line, Jirel had to admit to himself.

"What the hell is it?" he managed to mutter in Natasha's direction.

She had been trying to figure that out for herself as the bizarre conversation had been unfolding, but without a tricorder, she was at a loss.

“I have no idea,” she whispered back in awe, “Elaborate security system, automated program, higher state of consciousness...?”

Her voice drifted off as she watched on, consumed by the scene in front of her. She took an involuntary step towards the base of the stage. Lota’sharam, his attention also entirely focused on the unfolding drama in front of him, didn’t stop her.

The two figures on the stage itself remained where they were, standing their ground.

“First Clora’gerax,” Panar’atan snapped again, “We must take it, now.”

Clora’gerax looked at his subordinate. He saw the way his hands were shaking, saw the way his eyes were twitching.

“You require white,” he offered simply, “Your mind is still troubled. Leave this to me.”

“I require the jewel!” he snapped back, “Just as you promised! The jewel will lead us back to the Gamma Quadrant and end this torment!”

Clora’gerax looked at the pained features of his loyal second, and thought about the paltry remains of his own supply of ketracel white back on their ship. He forced his own mounting withdrawal effects away to the back of his mind, and turned back to the glowing jewel.

“We are not leaving!” he shouted into the ether, “We have been wandering for too long. My crew are close to insanity! We need this power —!”

You are not worthy.

“We serve the Dominion!”

You are not worthy.

The unearthly roar filled the cavernous chamber. It took a few moments for everyone present to realise that it wasn’t coming from the mysterious voice. It was coming from Panar’atan.

“I no longer care what you think!” he roared.

“Second Panar’atan—!”

Before Clora’gerax could say anything else, Panar’atan rushed forwards on stage towards the plinth where the jewel stood.

“Victory is life!” he bellowed, his face twitching violently as his withdrawal took hold.

He reached out and grabbed the jewel.

The whole room began to shake.

* * * * *

“I am so getting bored of this!”

Sunek pitched the Bounty around to avoid a volley of disruptor fire from the Jem’Hadar fighter, which instead impacted in a series of small explosions on the forest below.

Usually, in the midst of a battle, Klath couldn’t have disagreed more with the Vulcan’s assessment, but still bereft of weapons to return fire and reduced to impotently tracking their enemy on his sensors, the Klingon begrudgingly had to side with his colleague.

“I mean,” the Vulcan continued as he swerved out the way of another blast, “One way or another, I’ve spent way too much of today getting shot at. A really unfair amount.”

“Focus forward, Sunek,” Denella replied over the increasingly familiar chorus of alarms, “Keep us out of range!”

“That’s exactly what I am doing—!”

As he spoke, he turned the Bounty to the right, just as the Jem’Hadar fighter fired again. Except this time, his carefully attuned Vulcan mind was a tiny bit too slow. Not very slow. Approximately 0.025 seconds too slow, in fact. Still, an eternity for a Vulcan.

And more than enough time for the disruptor blast to strike the Bounty’s port-side wing, gouging a deep hole straight through it. The whole ship lurched violently as the impact sent them spinning wildly off course.

“Apart from just then!” Sunek added.

Through the cockpit window, the tumbling view resolved into a view of a grassy landscape, the surface of the planet below.

The ship was in a death dive.

Denella was thrown clean out of her chair, impacting against the side of the cockpit with a dull thud and crying out over the sound of snapping

bone. Klath clung onto his own station with grim determination, feeling the edge of the unit slam into his midriff as he was thrown into the console, knocking the wind clean out of his body. And Sunek gripped onto his own controls as he slid from side to side, fighting the urge to vomit.

The Bounty's engines began to whine as the little ship plunged towards the ground, smoke billowing out from its damaged port wing.

A new, insistent alarm blared out from Klath's console.

"Altitude now 8000 metres," Klath bellowed, "We must pull up!"

Sunek ignored the sarcastic quip that jumped to the front of his mind, and focused on grappling with the controls. In fact, with a great deal of effort, he dismissed all of his emotional instincts. The reactions telling him to close his eyes and scream as loud as he could in the face of his impending death. Instead, he channelled his Vulcan intellect and focused on arresting their descent. With a rapid series of logical and accurate inputs, he managed to stop the spinning, bringing at least two of the directions he was working on back under his control.

"6000 metres!" Klath barked, as a bank of screens behind him obliterated themselves in a shower of sparks.

Sunek took as deep and as calming a breath as he could manage in the circumstances and pulled back on the controls, hoping that there was still enough time to force the crippled ship's nose up. Slowly, it began to rise.

Not fast enough.

Two more explosions rang out behind him. Another alarm joined the party. He ignored them, focusing zen-like on the task at hand.

"Structural integrity at critical levels," the monotone voice of the computer added unhelpfully.

"4000 metres!"

Despite his becalmed interior, Sunek felt his face creasing in pain from the exertion he was putting in. A flare of sparks burst out from the wall next to him, as the nose raised still further. And the green land below grew even closer.

The Bounty creaked and whined from the stresses it was being put under, threatening to tear itself apart before the ground even became an issue.

"2000 metres!"

He could suppress his emotions no longer. He could feel them bursting out of his chest. He gritted his teeth and kept his full force on the controls.

And he screamed.

The Bounty's nose levelled out just as it reached the grassy landscape below, the ship skimming along the ground close enough to disturb the tops of the tallest blades and leave them swaying in its wake. And then the nose rose up further, and the ship took off towards the heavens.

Sunek's emotional scream effortlessly segued into the biggest sigh of relief in history.

"Nice flying," Klath said from behind him, allowing the situation to overwhelm him before he had a chance to realise he was actually paying the Vulcan a compliment.

Sunek took a moment to spin around in his chair and give the Klingon a victory smile.

"Ah, Klath," he grinned, "I knew you had a compliment in you somewhere."

The Klingon merely grunted, before he spotted Denella trying to ease herself up from where she had landed. He moved over to help her.

"You are injured," he stated, unnecessarily.

"Yep," she replied weakly, as Klath helped her into her seat, "Where's the Jem'Hadar ship?"

Sunek tapped his controls as he levelled the Bounty off at a safe altitude.

"I think we lost them," he reported confidently.

He looked back up to the cockpit window, and immediately emitted a loud gulp. The Jem'Hadar fighter was dead ahead, its disruptors glowing.

"No, wait," he added lamely, "The other thing."

Part 4D

Part Four (Cont'd)

Debris tumbled from above, huge chunks of metal and stone smashing into the floor of the amphitheatre.

Panar'atan remained frozen in position, his hands touching either side of the jewel, which now glowed a ferocious deep red. Clara'gerax, standing a few steps away, shielded his eyes in vain against the inferno and struggled to maintain his footing amidst the carnage, glancing around the collapsing room with wide-eyed confusion.

On the floor below, Lota'sharam had forgotten all about his guard duty, and raced over to the foot of the steps up to the stage where his superiors stood to try and render assistance.

Jirel and Natasha were in the clear. At least as far as their guard was concerned.

You will release the Pride of Soraxx.

"We've got to do something," she urged, looking over at the Trill.

"Totally agree, we should definitely do something," he shouted over the sound of the falling masonry, "Any ideas what? Any at all?"

Beneath their feet, they felt the solid ground begin to flex and contort, as if it was made of jelly rather than rock. Natasha looked around. She had nothing.

They watched on as Lota'Sharam clambered up the creaking steps, in support of his fellow Jem'Hadar. Panar'atan closed his eyes as the light from the jewel grew brighter and brighter.

You will leave.

The red light grew searingly intense. Jirel and Natasha turned and shielded their eyes but the light seemed all around them.

And then it wasn't.

After a few seconds, Natasha opened her eyes and looked around. The rumbling continued, the stones continued to fall, the floor continued to flex underfoot.

But the Jem'Hadar were gone.

* * * * *

One moment, they were staring down the barrel of the twin disruptors of the Jem'Hadar fighter, both blazing hot with deadly fire.

Then it simply wasn't there.

It vanished in front of their very eyes. And the Bounty was alone.

Sunek slowly relaxed from where he had been gripping at the corners of his console with enough force to dent the metal and turned to Klath and Denella.

"What the hell?"

* * * * *

"What the hell?"

Jirel looked around the crumbling chamber, but couldn't see any evidence of the three Jem'Hadar soldiers. There was no transporter effect to be seen, no afterglow from an energy discharge, no scorch marks from any sort of weapons fire. It was simply as if one second the three soldiers had been there, and the next they weren't.

They were not worthy.

"Thanks for the explanation," Jirel offered weakly.

Natasha ignored the voice, and ignored Jirel. As shaking in the ground slowly subsided and some sort of normality returned to the chamber, she stepped up to the foot of the steps that led to the top of the stage. Where the Jewel of Soraxx still stood. Her movements didn't go unnoticed by Jirel.

“Um, doc?”

She didn't respond.

“Natasha?”

She started to climb the steps.

Jirel raced over and grabbed her arm, trying to literally drag her away from her task. She brushed him off and continued to ascend. He considered his options for a moment, and as soon as he realised he didn't really have any, he followed her. She reached the top and stood staring at the glowing red jewel. Everything that her father had worked for. Everything that had kept her going through the war, her isolation on Kesmet IV, and everything else, was right there in front of her. She could almost touch it.

“It's beautiful,” she whispered to nobody in particular.

Who are you to gaze upon the Pride of Soraxx?

She licked her lips, her focus still on the jewel itself, not quite sure of what to say to the voice. What do you even say to that question?

“Nobody!” Jirel shouted quickly as he arrived at the top of the steps, apparently having no such issues grasping with the metaphysical connotations of how to answer it.

There was no reply from the voice. Jirel looked up above them, though he wasn't exactly sure what he was expecting to see. Feeling slightly ridiculous as he did so, he continued to try and start a conversation with thin air.

“We're nobody, ok? Pair of nobodies. Just a couple of travellers who got a bit lost. And, just to make this absolutely clear, so there's no confusion here, those guys who were up here before? We're not with them. So don't let their whole attitude get in the way of letting us go.”

She forced her attention away from the jewel and back to the babbling Trill, who fixed her with a serious glare and gestured back down the steps.

“So we're just gonna be on our way, ok?”

He was addressing the voice. But she could clearly see that he was also addressing her.

“What the hell are you doing?” she hissed.

“Trying to reason with the big scary disembodied voice that just made a bunch of Jem'Hadar soldiers disappear. What does it look like I'm doing? Wanna give me a hand?”

“I don't think you can reason with it,” she replied, “I'm getting pretty sure that whatever it is, it's automated. A lot of the phrases and statements are being repeated.”

“Still, never hurts to try.”

“Jirel, it's—We're here!” she implored, gesturing to the jewel, “The actual Jewel of Soraxx, just like I said! Right where my father's research said it would be! And we can take it!”

“Yeah, I'm getting the distinct impression that it really doesn't want to be taken.”

Jirel recognised the look on her face. The one of single-minded obsession. He'd seen that sort of look before on various disparate faces during his journeys around the galaxy, and he knew it was never a good sign. She looked back at the jewel, the red light now reflecting off the tear that was starting to form in the corner of her eyes.

Objectively, she knew he was right. Whatever she was doing, she didn't need reminding what had just happened to the Jem'Hadar. But she was so close. She took another step closer to the plinth without even thinking.

You are not worthy of the Pride of Soraxx.

“Yep, fair enough, we can see that,” Jirel babbled, making a grab for her arm, “So we're just gonna get out of your hair—”

“Who is worthy of the Jewel—the Pride of Soraxx?” Natasha interjected before the Trill could get any further with his efforts to reverse course.

“Hey, doc,” Jirel muttered, his two lines of spots feeling itchier than ever before, “Don't argue with the big scary voice...”

“I'm just asking a question.”

“Thought you said this was all automated—”

Those who deserve it are worthy.

“Really don't think this is getting us anywhere,” Jirel muttered.

Natasha ignored him, trying to find a way around the circular logic of the voice. “But...how will you know?”

I will recognise when the worthy arrive. That time has not yet come.

“Right. Can’t argue with that,” Jirel continued, “So, let’s—”

“Can you live with yourself, Jirel?” Natasha shot back at him, “If you just leave the greatest prize in the galaxy down here? Thousands of people, scientists, archaeologists have dedicated their lives to finding this. And here it is!”

He saw the obsessive look in her eyes again and stifled a grimace.

“Natasha,” he replied, taking her hand and squeezing it, “Listen to me. I know I’m not a Starfleet captain, or some fancy leader of an enterprising away team somewhere, but I have been around the quadrant a few times. And I know when it’s time to cut your losses. I’m sorry. This is over.”

She looked back at the jewel, the tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

Leave this place.

The jewel began to glow brighter, much as it had before. Natasha didn’t move.

“Ok, I’ve seen this bit before, and this definitely doesn’t end well for us,” Jirel said, turning back to the steps, “Come on!”

He started for the way down, trying to drag her with him. For a moment, she resisted, kept her gaze glued on the treasure that had been her goal for so long. Then, reluctantly, she turned away, and followed Jirel down the steps.

Leave.

Debris began to tumble down all over again as they picked their way through the rock-strewn floor and headed back the way they came.

“Where are we going?” she yelled through the carnage.

“Anywhere that’s not here,” he managed to shout back, “Honestly haven’t given it any more thought than that.”

They dodged their way around tumbling stone and metal as they reached the corner of the room where they had first entered. Reaching the base of the steep slope they had tumbled down, they stared up at the impossible climb, the surface slick with vines and moss.

“Well, guess that’s not an option,” Jirel offered weakly.

Natasha looked around in desperation as the walls continued to crumble. She pointed off to one side, spotting what looked like an open doorway.

“There!” she shouted, as Jirel followed her gesture.

“Really?” he cautioned, “Might be full of booby traps and laser blasts and all sorts of weird stuff.”

“Can it be any worse than in here?”

A particularly large chunk of rock slammed down behind them. Jirel shrugged. “Good point.”

They rushed through the door, leaving the havoc of the disintegrating chamber and the Jewel of Soraxx behind. The door led to a passageway, similar to the ones they had encountered elsewhere within the pyramid as they were on their way to the jewel. They wasted no time in scurrying along, as the sounds of the collapsing chamber reverberated from behind them. They raced forwards, struggling to keep their footing as the walls of the corridor began to shake. Suddenly, they turned a corner and were presented with a dead end. A solid wall of stone, covered in vines, blocked their path.

“No, no, no,” Natasha panicked, as the rumbling grew stronger, “There has to be a way out, a door, an exit, something!”

Without a second thought, Jirel began to hop around on the floor. He watched the ground intently as he brought his boots down again and again with as much force as he could muster on the stonework underfoot.

Hearing the stomping coming from behind her, Natasha turned and saw the Trill’s odd movements, almost like he was trying to tap dance in the middle of the apocalypse. Although he didn’t look up, he could tell that she was staring. And he was definitely aware of how ridiculous he looked.

“What? You wanna get out of this or not?” he said defensively, “On the way down here I couldn’t take two steps without hitting some sort of trapdoor.”

He continued to hop, skip and jump around in front of her as the corridor around them crumbled and disintegrated. Despite their situation, despite the fact that she had lost the Jewel of Soraxx, despite the fact that she had lost everything, despite the fact that she was about to be crushed to death in an underground monument built by a long-dead civilisation, she couldn’t help it.

She burst out laughing.

This was enough to make Jirel look up at her, as he continued to jump around. He saw her laughing, and found it infectious.

He joined in.

Giving up on his pursuit of triggering a pressure pad that for once didn’t seem to exist, he stood next to her, as the entire world collapsed around them, as they laughed.

Eventually, they stopped. He reached for her hand. She took it.

Further down the passageway, the ceiling began to cave in.

This felt like the end.

In the days that followed, neither of them would be able to admit in their own minds which one of them had instigated the kiss. But both of them allowed it to happen.

They were so wrapped up in the final moment of their lives, that they barely registered the sensation of the transporter effect taking hold.

* * * * *

They were still mostly unaware when they rematerialised on the Bounty's transporter pad, in front of an amused audience. After a few moments of them still failing to acknowledge anything other than each other, their audience realised that they might have to hurry things along.

"Ahem," Denella coughed, politely but forcefully.

Klath emitted a low, slightly awkward growl.

Sunek just grinned.

That was enough to snap them back to reality. Natasha broke from the kiss and pushed Jirel a short distance away. Jirel, for his part, smiled at his crewmates, slightly meekly.

"Oh, hey, guys," he managed, "We were just, um..."

"Yep, looks like you were," Denella smiled back, gesturing to the transporter, "Fortunately for you, the energy field that was blocking us from finding you went haywire over the last few minutes. We finally got a transporter lock."

Natasha nodded, trying to maintain a dignified air.

"The structure was collapsing," she offered by way of explanation, "Any field must have been disrupted by that."

"Hey, Jirel, you missed a hell of a lot up here," Sunek said excitedly, "We even made a Jem'Hadar ship disappear!"

Klath glanced over at the Vulcan, not looking impressed. Sunek shrugged. "That might not be what happened. It's not clear—"

"So, did you get it?" Denella asked expectantly, "The Jewel of Soraxx?"

Jirel looked over at Natasha, who looked down at the transporter pad glumly.

"Not so much," Jirel offered eventually.

"Great," the Orion woman sighed.

"A fool's errand," Klath added, folding his arms to underline his point.

Jirel turned back to the three unimpressed faces of his crewmates and offered them a shrug, trying to think of a way to explain what they had been through.

"Things got...complicated down there," he managed.

Sunek glanced at the pair of them and smiled knowingly. "I bet they did."

Natasha sighed. Jirel rolled his eyes.

"Shut up, Sunek," they replied in unison.

End of Part Four

Part 5 (Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part Five

The Bounty limped through interstellar space at warp three, the best speed that Denella was happy to let them risk given the patched up nature of the repairs she had managed to carry out. The little ship had been through the wringer and then some.

At this speed, it would now take them several days to get back to Starbase 216, but as the Orion engineer had pointed out, at least there was less chance of them flying apart trying to get there this way. An ugly hole still adorned her wing where the Jem'Hadar weapon had struck, while the various hull breaches, either battle damage or self-inflicted, had been patched up and papered over with whatever Denella could find to do the job.

"All things considered," she said to Jirel, as they stood and surveyed the ugly pieces of scrap metal she'd bolted in place across a succession of tiny holes in the ship's modest cargo bay, "We're probably gonna bankrupt Admiral Jenner fixing all this."

"I honestly don't think our understanding goes that far," the Trill admitted, "Unless one of us really does have pictures of him with that Horta."

Denella let out a long sigh, looking back at the damage with a grimace. Like any good engineer, any damage to her ship felt personal, like it was an injury that she herself was carrying. It didn't help that she was carrying actual injuries of her own, her fractured rib still feeling sore despite the work their temporary doctor had managed to do. Plus, like the rest of the crew, she was feeling exhausted and burned out.

"Was it worth it?" she asked after a few moments of silence.

Jirel glanced over at the green-skinned woman, looking confused. Denella didn't buy his innocence for a second, but she still fleshed out her query.

"Convincing us all to take off across the quadrant, being late for the admiral, getting the ship smashed up halfway to hell and back, and not even getting the treasure at the end of it. Was it worth it just to try and impress a pretty Starfleet officer?"

"That's not why I did it," he retorted. He was pretty sure he couldn't have sounded less certain of anything if he'd tried.

She glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow.

"I mean," he continued, feeling slightly sheepish, "I mostly did it for the priceless magic diamond."

"And...?"

"And...a bit for the other thing."

Denella shook her head and smiled, looking back at the cost of their adventure writ large on the walls of the cargo bay.

"Well, I guess we'll have to see what we can do," she managed in the end.

They turned and made for the exit of the cargo bay.

"Hey," she continued, "Seeing as we're gonna be surviving on energy bars until we get the replicator fixed, Klath's promised to treat us to a couple of bottles of bloodwine from his personal stash tonight. You in?"

"Disgusting Klingon booze and a bunch of old drunken war stories from our resident Klingon blowhard?" Jirel replied with a smile, "Wouldn't miss it for the world. But I'm gonna check on our guest first."

She looked over at him. He immediately clocked her knowing grin.

"Not like that."

"Right," Denella nodded as they reached the exit, "Well, you have fun."

The doors parted as they walked through.

"Just promise me one thing," she added.

"What?"

"Let's not do another treasure hunt for a while."

* * * * *

Klath walked into the Bounty's dining area clutching two precious, and rather large, bottles of bloodwine. He reacted with slight discomfort

when he saw that only Sunek was present.

The room itself was in as bad of a state as the rest of the ship, shrapnel strewn across the deck plates. He had been expecting that at least some of the damage would have been cleared away by now, but then he realised that would have been Sunek's job. So it hadn't been done. On the far wall, there was little more than an ugly hole in the wall where their replicator had once been. The missing replicator was the reason for the stack of slightly stale energy bars and ration packs in front of Sunek on the table. He gestured to them sarcastically.

"Dinner is served."

Klath growled slightly, before setting the two dark coloured bottles down on the table with deliberate care.

"A 2362 and a 2349," he explained with pride, "Both exceptional."

"I'll drink to that," the Vulcan replied, dropping the remains of an energy bar onto the table, "Might take away the taste of the food at least."

Klath nodded and sat down. An uncomfortable silence descended on the room.

"Well," Sunek said eventually, grabbing one of the bottles and twisting it open, "No time like the present to crack these open."

"The others will be joining us?" Klath asked, trying to keep the note of hope out of his voice.

Sunek shrugged and poured two overly generous cups of bloodwine. They downed their drinks in unison. Another long silence descended.

Eventually, an impish smile crossed Sunek's face.

"So," he said, pouring himself a second glass, "Tell me more about how much you liked my flying today."

Klath muttered gently to himself and reached for the other bottle.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

The door chime disturbed her mid-sentence. She stifled a sigh of frustration, put the padd down on the table and walked over to the door, tapping the button to open it.

On the other side, Jirel stood smiling back at her. "Hi."

She didn't smile back. He coughed slightly awkwardly.

"Can I come in?" he continued, quickly adding, "Y'know, not like—Just, y'know, to talk?"

She sighed, then gestured him inside as she walked back over to the small desk in the corner of the cabin. He walked inside and allowed the door to close behind him, but remained standing. He gestured to the padd where she had dropped it on the desk.

"Anything interesting?"

"It's a copy of my dad's papers on the Jewel of Soraxx," she replied, "I mean, I've read them a dozen times already, but..."

"Huh," he nodded, "Maybe I'll give them a read sometime."

She gave him a knowing look.

"You're right. That was a terrible lie."

She smiled thinly and idly picked up the padd, flicking through the pages on the screen.

"Thought I might write an addendum to it," she continued, "A few extra notes about what we found down there, y'know? Maybe close the chapter somehow."

"And what exactly did we find down there?" he asked.

She set the padd back down and sighed deeply, mulling over her answer in her head. Truth be told, she didn't have many answers at this point.

"We found what my father said would be there," she said eventually, "Even if we didn't get the jewel itself."

He looked over at her, studying her face and seeing subtle signs of regret.

"Is that enough?"

"I guess it'll have to be," she shrugged, "Whatever was going on down there, it looked like the Jewel of Soraxx is pretty well protected. From everyone."

He smiled, but at the same time shifted his weight slightly on his feet, not necessarily wanting to say what he probably had to.

“I mean, you could always go back?” he suggested eventually.

“Go back?”

“Well, if I know Starfleet, as soon as you tell them there’s some strange new world out there, they’ll have sixteen science vessels warping over there before you can say questionable use of resources. And I’m sure they’d have you on their crew in a second.”

Natasha idly turned the padd around in her hands, mulling this over, but keeping the other thoughts that threatened to overwhelm her at the back of her mind.

“Probably not after I resign my commission,” she replied, “Like I said, I don’t think there’s a place for me in Starfleet any more.”

“Even after your retirement plan went this well?” he asked with a slight grin.

She looked over at him and nodded.

“Well,” he shrugged, “If you’re not going back to Starfleet, then I was serious about there being a job for you here.”

“Here?” she snorted.

“I mean, you’ve seen the amount of bones we break in a typical week. We could definitely use a medic onboard.”

He felt a flicker of hope inside as she looked to be seriously considering his offer.

“So, I leave Starfleet because I’m tired of all the fighting,” she posited, “And I join your crew instead?”

“Exactly!”

“Even though in just the last few days, by all accounts, you’ve had to fight a gang of Miradorn, an angry Ferengi, a fully armed Jem’Hadar warship and a five thousand year old disembodied voice with God-like powers?”

He paused and considered this slight flaw in his argument.

“Fair point,” he replied, “But I like to think we do it with a bit of style.”

He shot her his best space adventurer grin. She smirked back.

“Well, thanks for the offer, but I—”

“Just say you’ll think about it.”

He fixed her with the same grin, but his eyes were tinged with a slight look of something else. She couldn’t quite tell if it was hope or desperation, and she was far too tired to narrow it down any further.

“I’ll think about it,” she nodded.

“I’ll take it.”

He stepped back towards the door, idly wondering if there was any bloodwine left in the dining area, before pausing as he did so to look back at her again.

“And, hey,” he added, “You always know where I am, right? If you want some...breakfast?”

“Goodnight, Jirel.”

“Seriously, I’ll be just down the corridor—”

“Goodnight, Jirel,” she repeated sternly.

He held his hands up good-naturedly and walked out of the cabin, leaving her to sigh and shake her head.

Now alone, she considered returning to the padd, but she could feel the fatigue in her body. She glanced at the bed, and knew that she at least had to try to sleep. As she settled down, she found herself questioning what she really was going to do next.

She considered going back on her original plan, remaining in Starfleet. But the thought of that left her cold. She considered what life would be like on the Bounty, with Jirel and his motliest of crews. And that left her cold as well. She looked across at the padd that still sat on the desk, and idly considered a future following in her father’s footsteps, attempting to become the quadrant’s foremost archaeologist. And despite how much she adored her father, and respected the work that he had done, that left her equally cold. In fact, any possible future she could imagine, from becoming a katterpod farmer on Bajor to a dabo girl on Ferenginar, left her cold.

Although she was willing to admit that all of that might be down to the draft that was still somehow inexplicably present in her cabin somehow.

She sighed again, flicked the lights off, and tried to sleep.

The second she closed her eyes, it was there, right in front of her. The twisted face of the ensign she had left behind. In the corridor of the Navajo. And try as she might, she couldn’t shake it.

That's it, she thought to herself, that's why I'm feeling cold.

When she had that face on her conscience, she wondered whether she would ever bring herself to move on. She doubted she could even bring herself to fall asleep.

So instead, she scrunched up her eyes, curled up in a ball, and wept.

* * * * *

He had no idea where they were. And he only had a vague idea of how they had got there. But he knew where they had to go.

First Clora'gerax was still processing what had happened to them. One second, he had been standing in front of the Jewel of Soraxx, as Second Panar'atan had made a grab for it. The next, he was standing on the metal deck of his ship. It had taken a while to realise that they had not only been instantly transported out of the chamber and back to their ship, but also that the ship itself had been sent thousands of light years out into the cosmos in the blink of an eye. Still, the remaining crew of the Jem'Hadar fighter were even now working on triangulating their position, and calculating their best option for getting back to Dominion space.

First Clora'gerax let them work for the time being, as he watched Second Panar'atan bark out orders on the other side of the ship's bridge.

He would have to kill him, that much was clear. For his insubordination back on the planet, but also because his withdrawal was now becoming a clear danger to the ship. He would do it swiftly, mercifully, and he would make sure Panar'atan's remaining ration of ketracel white was distributed among the rest of his long-suffering men.

He just hoped that would give them enough to get them home. Because now they had something vital to deliver back to the rest of the Dominion. Maybe not the jewel itself, but precise details on its location and a first-hand account of its awesome power.

And Clora'gerax suspected that this information would prove very useful indeed.

He allowed himself a slight smile, as his men continued to work.

* * * * *

"Hurry up, you imbeciles!"

The whiny voice reverberated out into the forest, loud enough to cause a small flock of native bird life to flee from their perch high in a nearby tree. Not for the first time in the last few hours, the two Miradorn twins looked at each other, panting from exertion and telepathically debating whether it was time to terminate their current employment. Specifically, to terminate it using the knives they had stashed on their belts.

But, also not for the first time in the last few hours, they ultimately decided that it wouldn't be in their best interests, financially speaking. At least, not right now.

And so, Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan returned to the task at hand, and continued to clear the debris from around the prone form of the crashed Ferengi shuttle.

The sooner they cleared that, the sooner they could complete repairs to the ship's impulse engines and get themselves back in orbit. From there, their boss had promised them that he would be able to signal to whatever passing ship they could find and negotiate their passage back to a safe port. And they knew that he probably could. He was a fine negotiator.

Even if he wasn't a particularly fine boss.

"I said, hurry up!" Grenk spat at them.

He sat a few feet away from them, perched on a felled log near the shuttle and shovelling lokar beans from a small pouch into his mouth. As far as was concerned, he was supervising repairs to his shuttle.

Shel-Lan and Gel-Lan shared another telepathic glance, and continued to work, positioning themselves either side of a large boulder and straining to lift it and move it away from the shuttle's resting place.

As they worked, and debated their future employment status, Grenk looked up at the darkening skies overhead.

He silently cursed Jirel and the crew of the Bounty.

And swore that one day he would have his revenge.

The End

Inside Baseball/Inside Bounty - Thoughts and musings assembled from reading back over notes from my files. Presented in hope of kindling the reader's interest, but mainly in service of the author's boredom.

I started writing the Bounty series around 2006, one of a dozen Trek fanfic ideas across different eras, ships and crews. But for all the universe-shattering stories I played around with, something kept drawing me back to the entirely small scale tale of five misfits on a broken down little ship. The fact that, when constrained only by my own imagination, this was where my mind went instead of an epic tale of heroic Starfleet crews saving the universe is strictly a matter for me and my therapist.

This first story went through plenty of redrafts from 2006 through to me finally posting it online in 2021. At one point it ballooned to full novel length, but once I made the decision to structure ST: Bounty like a TV show (each story with a 'running time' of 38,000-ish words), I trimmed a lot of the fat. Abandoned plot points included a confusing asteroid field sequence when the Bounty fled from Grenk's shuttle on Hestina, which made little sense from an astrophysical or a storytelling perspective. And the story inside the Soraxx tomb had initially involved Jirel, Natasha and the Jem'Hadar becoming trapped inside and working together to escape, but switched to a more Indiana Jones-style maze of traps.

Character-wise, the biggest transformation was with Natasha. In the first outlines, she was called Kristen (with, presumably, a different surname in mind, as 'Kristen Kinsen' is a nightmare of a name) and was originally a substantially more duplicitous character than she ended up being. Down to her escaping from the USS Navajo's brig during the initial Jem'Hadar attack, having caused the death of a crewmate on an away mission due to her obsession with the Jewel of Soraxx. But I couldn't make that character sympathetic enough to be a fulcrum to the series, so the devious Kristen morphed into the more guilt-ridden Natasha. Elements of that original character would become the basis for the character of Maya Ortega introduced later on.

The rest of the Bounty's misfit crew only subtly changed from the first outline. The unjoined orphan Trill. The wacky emotional Vulcan. The dishonoured exiled Klingon. The grease monkey former slave girl Orion. All onboard a battered, long-suffering ship far removed from the polished starships of established Trek. Again, my therapist says I'm making good progress.

For the Bounty itself, I wanted the ship to be a canon design. I considered the 'Merchantman' from Star Trek III. But in the end I picked the Maquis Raider from Voyager's "Caretaker". Partly because this felt more usable (the Bounty tends to land on planets rather than hang in orbit, and this seemed a more 'landable' ship). But also because a wannabe space adventurer like Jirel would want a ship that looked 'cool'. I call it a Ju'Day-type raider, even though that name was apparently just an in-joke on set. By the time I'd realised that, I'd already made the name part of the Bounty canon.

Looking back many episodes later, there are a few out of character nuances here that, if I were to do another draft, I'd probably change. Natasha's seduction of Jirel isn't entirely out of character from a need for companionship, but the way she acts reads like a legacy of her more morally ambiguous 'Kristen' persona. And Denella's haphazard fighting style against the Jem'Hadar goes against the far more adept, Klingon-trained fighter she quickly becomes as the series unfolds. There is also a reference by Jirel to a night of drinking with the ship's "resident Klingon blowhard", which clashes with the gruff, untalkative Klath that we get later on. But I'll put that down to either sarcasm on Jirel's part, or maybe Klath becomes a lot more talkative after some good bloodwine.

A number of ongoing plot threads are left dangling at the end. Natasha's guilt over her actions before the USS Navajo's destruction, Grenk's desire for vengeance against the Bounty's crew and the Jem'Hadar ship sent back across the galaxy by the Jewel of Soraxx. Each of these threads will (hopefully) be resolved by the end of the series.

Finally, I am a sucker for a wordy title. Give me "Looking for par'Mach in All the Wrong Places" or "For the World Is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky" over "The Cloud" or "Ethics" any day. Through its development, this episode had a number of different titles, including "The Long Spiral Downwards", "The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" and "The End of the Rainbow". The final title is from Matthew 6:19-21. A reference to the literal 'treasure hunt' the Bounty's crew goes on, and also to Natasha's conflict between the physical treasure she craves, and the moral guilt she carries from her last moments aboard the Navajo.

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