

Star Trek: Bounty - 102 - "Be All My Sins Forgiven"

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Star Trek: Bounty - 102 - "Be All My Sins Forgiven"

by [BountyTrek](#)

Summary

When the Bounty arrives at Starbase 216 to return her to Starfleet, Natasha finds herself wrestling with her recent mistakes, while Klath is hunted by a shadowy figure from his own past who is hell bent on revenge.

Prologue

Prologue

Of all the bars he had visited across the galaxy, Kortar's Rest on the Klingon outpost Dona'tu vagh had long been Kahlor's favourite.

There was nothing especially remarkable about it. If anything, the opposite was true. Kortar's Rest was the sort of place that, in the bustling urban sprawl that surrounded it, you could walk past every day of the year on your way to somewhere more interesting and still not realise it existed. And that was exactly what Kahlor looked for in a bar these days. Somewhere that offered a grizzled old warrior the comforting cloak of anonymity. He knew that there was no danger of running into his shipmates here.

The IKS Kron'gah, of the third fleet of the Klingon Empire, had arrived in orbit of the planet two days ago. Ostensibly seeking a safe haven while they completed repairs following a run-in with a Breen battle wing, now they were here, Captain K'lor had seen no reason not to allow his tired officers a few days of R&R.

The rest of the crew, younger and more boisterous warriors, had immediately headed for the more bustling nightspots that the outpost had to offer, seeking bloodwine, drunken scuffles and companionship. But Kahlor was happy to keep away from such crowds, and especially from his tiresome shipmates. An officer of Kahlor's advancing age still serving with such a lowly rank always tended to be the butt of most of the jokes amongst the younger generation of soldiers at the best of times. After all, was he too good for Sto-vo-kor?

But in Kahlor's case, there were also rumours about the deeper reasons for his current rank. Nothing was officially stated in the public record, but gossip and hearsay had quickly spread amongst the rest of the crew about his past indiscretions, making his life onboard doubly miserable.

That was another reason why Kahlor came to places like this. His own company was all he deserved.

The bar had been empty when he had first arrived, and even as late as it was now, there were barely half a dozen patrons scattered around the place. Probably all with similar tales of misery to tell. Even so, Kahlor had opted to sit in one of the booths along the far side of the establishment, allowing himself a further layer of seclusion. He finished the dregs of the drink in front of him, a particularly fiery chech'tluth-based cocktail blend that was a speciality at Kortar's Rest. Within moments, a fresh glass was placed in front of him by a discerning waitress.

He barely had time to take a sip before he heard footsteps approaching his booth.

She slipped into the seat opposite him without saying a word. Just from looking at her, he couldn't discern her species, but she was humanoid in appearance, with a slightly elongated cranium and a thick ridge of reddish bony protrusions running across the top of her forehead.

He might have had more luck trying to pin down her heritage if his inebriated eyeline hadn't been drawn further down. She wore an elegant deep blue dress with an especially plunging neckline, which was leaving little to even the dullest of imaginations. She also didn't seem especially offended by the elderly Klingon's wandering gaze. If anything, the salacious smile on her face suggested that she had rather been expecting it.

Kahlor didn't need to be a genius to realise that the woman wasn't sitting with him in a formal capacity.

"I do not require...company this evening," he stated flatly.

She reached across the table and picked up his drink, taking a delicate sip. Kahlor snarled internally at her presumptuousness, but he remained composed for the moment.

"That's a shame," she smiled seductively, "Would it change your mind if I told you that my services have already been paid for, in full?"

Kahlor couldn't help but flash a furious glare at her as he scanned around the still mostly empty expanse of Kortar's Rest, looking for any sign of his shipmates from the Kron'gah. He was sure that some of them had tracked him down somehow, and would right now be having a hearty laugh at their latest plot to humiliate the old soldier. But he could see nobody he recognised. In fact, none of the scant few patrons in Kortar's Rest seemed remotely interested in the scene that was unfolding in the secluded booth.

He turned back to his unwanted drinking companion. She traced her finger around the glass, slowly and deliberately.

"I don't give out the names of my clients," she said, answering his question before he even had a chance to ask it, "Perhaps someone on Dona'tu vagh thought you could do with being cheered up tonight."

Her perfect pronunciation of the outpost's name in original Klingon surprised and intrigued him, but he was in no mood to push the conversation any further.

"They are mistaken," he replied, irritably swatting her hand away from the glass and reclaiming his drink.

"Really?"

She looked the craggy warrior in front of her up and down, then silently balled up one of her hands into a fist and squeezed down with one of her long fingernails until she pierced the pale skin of her palm. Kahlor felt his old heart beat faster as she carefully opened her hand, allowing the blood to pool in her palm. Keeping her eyes locked on his and ensuring that she had his complete attention, she brought her hand up to her mouth and licked the streak of blood from her skin.

The elderly Klingon suppressed a gulp. And several other urges that rose inside him as well.

"Suit yourself," she half-whispered, "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

She stood and slowly swaggered away towards the exit. Kahlor suppressed the impulse he felt to call after her and focused on calming himself. Realising how dry his mouth had become, he took a long slug from his drink.

It happened immediately. As the fiery liquid hit his stomach and he set the glass back down onto the table, a surge of pain pulsed through his body. It was enough to make him want to clutch his chest in agony. But he didn't. Because he couldn't move his arms. In panicked torment, he instinctively tried to stand up. But he couldn't move his legs either. In fact, he couldn't move at all. He went to call out in anguish, but he couldn't even speak.

He was paralysed. Mute. Completely, and invisibly, tied down to his seat.

"It is known as Replimol 16," a new voice said.

As Kahlor remained frozen in place, a stocky Klingon in plain warrior garb sat down opposite him. He didn't recall seeing him in the bar earlier, nor did he remember hearing anyone new walk in. But the stranger had clearly been watching for some time. Kahlor's still-functioning eyesight was drawn to the ugly deep scars that ran down one side of his opponent's face. A sign of a brutal life, despite his relative youth.

"A powerful neurotoxin," the scarred Klingon continued, "Which, if I understand the potency of the dose you just received, is something you should already be very much aware of."

The stranger barely even bothered to lower his voice as he spoke. Their solitary location in the private booth meant that he didn't need to pay much care to any of the scant few other patrons overhearing him.

The intense burning in Kahlor's chest flared up even more. It felt as though his entire body was about to explode. Stabbing pains shot out in all directions, like a thousand painstiks trying to burrow their way out of his flesh. And there was nothing he could do but sit stock-still in his seat, almost all external signs of the torture he was going through rendered invisible by his paralysis.

The other Klingon smiled in satisfaction as he saw a thick bead of sweat trickle down Kahlor's face, past his wide, swollen eyes. "It was developed by the Breen during the final months of the war," he continued, as casually as if they had been discussing Klingon opera, "With the Dominion lines collapsing, they began to look for more desperate means of striking back. Including chemical warfare."

The searing pain continued to spread, sending ripples of agony down his arms and legs.

"Unfortunately for them, they didn't have time to complete their research. As such, Replimol 16 only works in highly concentrated doses, rendering it impractical as a means to attack a planet's water supply, or sow any form of mass devastation."

He picked up and examined the glass on the table, idly swirling the deep red liquid inside around. "But, in far smaller quantities, it remains a very capable poison. Personally, I have found that all it usually takes is to ensure that the intended recipient is suitably...distracted."

He set the drink back down and gave Kahlor an evil leer. "She was certainly worth the price."

Kahlor's eyes flickered in desperation. He remembered the mysterious woman, and the excessive attention she had paid to his drink. He also remembered the excessive attention he had paid to her, and how little she was wearing, rather than what she might have been doing with the glass.

The pain reached his head itself, thundering through his skull as his temples flared in red hot spasms of agony. Several more beads of sweat followed the first down his ridged forehead.

"First, it attacks the motor functions, rendering the victim completely immobile," the stranger continued, "Then it moves to the nervous system itself, focusing on the pain receptors, specifically designed to be a most agonising experience. Apparently, some of the test subjects the Breen worked on had over 92% of their neurons stimulated before they finally succumbed to death."

He leaned forwards over the table, glowering at the older Klingon with open contempt and watching as Kahlor's eyes began to flicker. Sweat was now pouring from his brow, dripping onto the table in front of him.

"And what a death it will be," he hissed, "There will be no honourable exit for you. No glorious battle or blood-soaked crusade. No place in Sto-vo-kor. Just this. A pitiful, agonising, lonely death in this backwards fleapit of a bar."

Kahlor's heart started to palpitate. His vision began to blur.

"Sit here and die without honour, Kahlor. Just as the Sons of Marlek did."

In his final moments of consciousness, a sliver of recognition flickered in Kahlor's eyes as he heard that name. Even as every inch of his body felt like it was on fire.

The scarred Klingon stood, adjusted his bulky armour and made for the exit. Not once looking back.

By the time he reached the door, Kahlor was dead.

He found her casually leaning on the side of his shuttle. In the time it had taken him to complete his business, she had taken the opportunity to change into something significantly more dignified, and was finishing off treating the self-inflicted cut on her palm with a dermal regenerator.

“It is done,” he stated simply.

She didn't look up and merely shrugged in disinterest and held her healed hand out expectantly. He removed a small pouch from his belt and passed it to her.

She examined the contents of the bag, the latinum inside rattling slightly. Her head immediately snapped back up. “Where's the rest of it, Kolar?” she spat, “We agreed on double what's in here.”

He calmly tapped the controls next to the door of his shuttle and it slowly opened. “The task is not yet complete,” Kolar explained.

“You told me that he was the last one! I want the rest of my latinum—!”

“One more,” he stated firmly, “Then you will be paid in full. Do not worry about that.”

Before she could offer a further retort, he clambered into the dusty green shuttle and moved over to the pilot's seat, powering the craft back up and preparing to lift off. She looked down at the meagre funds in the bag again and scowled darkly, realising that she hadn't really left herself with another option. She was in this to the end, one way or another. She angrily climbed aboard the shuttle and sat down in the seat next to him.

As the shuttle door closed behind them, Kolar absently retrieved a small padd from a storage slot underneath the shuttle's controls. The screen of the device displayed little more than a list of twelve names. The surviving crewmen from the IKS Grontar, a Bird of Prey that had operated during the Klingon Civil War.

He hadn't been lying to her. Kahlor's name was the eleventh. He allowed himself a thin smile of satisfaction as he struck that name off. Now only one remained. The shuttle lifted off, leaving the streets of Dona'tu vagh behind, and departed to search out the twelfth name on the list.

His sole remaining target.

Klath.

Part 1A

Part One

“Help me!”

She woke with a start, sitting straight up in bed and sucking in a lungful of stale recycled air. As she tried to calm her breathing down, she ran a shaking hand across her clammy forehead. Natasha Kinsen, former junior medical officer for gamma shift onboard the late USS Navajo, lay back down in bed and sighed deeply.

It was only a dream.

When she was a little girl back on Earth, that sort of revelation after a nightmare would have reassured her, reminded her that there was nothing to be scared of. Even if she had to run to her parents in order to hear it.

But right now, that same fact did nothing to calm her. Because it was the same dream that she had been having every night. The same burning section of corridor on her old ship, the same despairing cry for help from the same mortally injured young ensign. The young ensign that she had left behind to die on the Navajo when she had fled. The bloodied face that she had run away from. The one that she was still running away from. And the one that, no matter how hard she ran, she couldn't escape.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, then swung her legs out of bed, reaching for the flask of water that sat on the floor next to her and taking a long thirsty gulp. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, feeling her heart rate slow back to normal.

It was a morning ritual that she was becoming increasingly used to.

Even with her eyes closed, sitting in a windowless cabin, she was a seasoned enough space traveller to detect the sensation of the vessel she was on slowing to sublight speeds. She also knew that meant that the Bounty, the small merchant ship that had rescued her from her unplanned exile on a remote planet in the Kesmet Sector after she had escaped the destruction of the Navajo, was arriving at Starbase 216.

She was back with Starfleet. She was home.

And she felt numb.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, after she had showered and dressed, Natasha walked up the steps into the cockpit of the Bounty to find the rest of the ship's ragtag crew all present and correct.

At the front of the cockpit, idly rocking back and forth in the pilot's seat, was the ship's resident laughing Vulcan, Sunek, who had turned his back on the cold logic of the rest of his species. To the left of the room as she looked was the imposing Klingon tactical officer, Klath, while at the rear of the room, manning her own console, was Denella, the Bounty's Orion engineer.

And in the middle of it all, in his self-appointed captain's chair, was Jirel Vincent, the unjoined Trill she was still struggling to figure out. Despite the fact that they had spent a night together after the Bounty had rescued her, and before she had managed to cajole the crew into an ultimately fruitless search for the Jewel of Soraxx.

She'd never admit it to the wannabe space adventurer in front of her, but that night they had spent together had been the only night since the Navajo's destruction when she hadn't been plagued by nightmares. But she was sure that was just an unhappy coincidence.

“Morning, doc,” Jirel said as she entered the cockpit, gesturing through the cockpit window, “Just in time for our grand arrival.”

Starbase 216 was one of several such facilities that had been constructed as a planetary facility on a Federation-aligned world, rather than an orbital platform or a standalone station in deep space. Through the cockpit window, Natasha saw the eerily Earth-like qualities of the planet below. For just a second, it looked like she really had come home.

And yet, she still felt numb.

“Good,” she managed to reply, the simple comment sounding even more weak and hollow than she had been fearing it might.

Oblivious to her inner turmoil, Jirel grinned back at her as he jammed a finger down on the comms panel of his chair, putting on his best captain's voice to make a good impression to both the starbase below and their guest. “Starbase 216, this is the Bounty, requesting clearance to land.”

There was a pause. Quite a long pause. Jirel's grin started to hurt slightly.

“This is Starbase 216,” the response eventually came, a female officer's voice drifting over the speakers, “We have no record of your ship's registry, Bounty. Break off descent or we will consider your approach a hostile action.”

Jirel's grin dropped off his features like a stone. To his side, Klath's console sounded out an alert. “They are locking...” the Klingon paused as further identical alerts chimed out, “Multiple weapons on us.”

From the front of the cockpit, Sunek let out a hearty chuckle.

“Well, our reputation clearly doesn’t precede us,” Denella added with a deeply amused shake of her head.

With his grin now located somewhere near his ankles, Jirel quickly jammed his finger back down onto the comms panel. “Um, Starbase 216, this is the Bounty again,” he said, appreciably faster than his earlier hail, “There’s no need to—Um, just—If you could check with Admiral Jenner? I’m sure he’ll—I mean, I’m sure you’ll find our landing clearance. Um, over?”

There was another pause. An even longer one. Revelling in the discomfort in the room, Sunek swivelled around with as serious a look as he could manage to maintain. “Should I prepare for evasive manoeuvres, sir?” he deadpanned, eliciting a further smirk from Denella and a roll of eyes from Jirel.

“Sunek,” the Trill muttered, “Shut up.”

For once, the Vulcan actually obeyed that request. He didn’t say a word. He did, however, deliver the most elaborate mock salute Natasha had ever seen in Jirel’s direction.

Eventually, just as Natasha was starting to wonder whether the starbase below really was about to open fire, the same female officer’s voice came back over the comms link. “Clearance for landing confirmed, Bounty. Landing pad J-12.”

“Smooth, Jirel,” Sunek grinned as he tapped his controls and started to guide the Bounty through the planet’s atmosphere, “Real smooth.”

Jirel looked back over at Natasha and mustered as laid back a shrug as he could manage. “Probably just her first day.”

Natasha smiled despite herself and watched as Sunek guided the Ju’day-type raider down through the atmosphere.

Starbase 216 was an irregular collection of functional hemispherical modules of differing sizes rising out of the ground of the planet. They were dotted around a wide expanse of one of the northern continents of the planet, surrounded on all sides by lush blue-green forests. Each of the modules were surrounded by a series of circular landing pads, connected to the main modules by covered walkways. As they approached their designated landing point, Natasha also spotted various settlements off in the distance, towns and cities on the Federation-aligned planet existing in harmony alongside the starbase itself.

The Bounty, still scarred and wounded from the many recent firefights it had been involved in, gently glided down onto landing pad J-12, dwarfing the two small runabouts and collection of one-person worker bees that were lined up on the edge of the pad.

“Another perfect landing,” Sunek chirped, shutting down his controls, “Now, how about we find the nearest bar down here, hmm? Drinks are on me.”

“Same thing he always says when we get to a Federation planet,” Denella said to Natasha with a shake of her head.

“No bar tab,” Klath nodded.

“Psh,” the Vulcan replied, slightly affronted, “I’m offering to walk to the replicators and back all night, aren’t I?”

He jumped out of his seat and made for the exit of the cockpit, but the slow uptake from the rest of the crew caused him to slow down.

“Count me out,” Denella sighed, standing from her own console and arching her back in a lazy stretch, “I’ve got a repair checklist the length of my arm to start working through. Need to give the poor old girl a serious makeover.”

Jirel stood and gestured at Natasha, giving Sunek an apologetic shrug. “And we’ve got a hot date with Admiral Jenner. Gonna drop our guest off and...explain why we’re five days late.”

“Explain by saying...?” Denella asked, intrigued.

Jirel considered this, recalling their misadventures on their return from the Kesmet Sector. Their futile trip to try and locate the mysterious Jewel of Soraxx. “I’ll think of something,” he offered eventually.

Sunek shook his head at the chorus of negative responses and turned to Klath. “Well, buddy. Looks like it’s just you and me.”

Klath glanced around the cockpit, looking around for anything to use as an appropriate excuse of his own. At a loss, he reluctantly nodded. “I...suppose so.”

He stood and joined the rest of the crew as they prepared to disembark. Jirel gestured to the bat’leth which was slung over his back, as usual. “And hey, Klath, leave that behind, yeah? Ever hear the one about the heavily armed Klingon warrior who walked into a starbase and started a war?”

The Klingon went to protest, then sighed in silent defeat and removed the weapon from his back.

“Cheer up, Klath,” Sunek grinned as he led them down the steps at the rear of the cockpit, “How much danger can there be on a starbase?”

* * * * *

Denella stood a short distance away from the Bounty and unhappily surveyed the damage. Jirel stepped down off the ship’s rear ramp and

walked over to her, turning and following her line of sight. It didn't take long to see why she was looking so glum.

The Bounty was a mess.

All around the ship, the hull was pock-marked with dozens of ugly scrapes and charred scars from weapons fire. The starboard wing was especially badly hit after a glancing torpedo strike, while the other wing had an ugly hole blasted right through it, a shimmering forcefield the only thing helping to maintain the structural integrity of the appendage.

"Crap," he offered simply.

"That's your engineer's official report as well," the green-skinned woman offered without a trace of a smile, wiping her face and leaving a smear of grease behind before walking off to check the rest of the ship.

As Jirel surveyed the sorry sight of his long-suffering vessel, a trio of Starfleet officers exited the main module of the starbase they had landed next to and marched over to where they stood. All three wore yellow undershirts below their matching grey and black uniforms. And the two on either side of the trio had their phasers drawn.

"Boy oh boy," the officer in the middle of the trio, carrying a much less threatening engineering toolkit, said as he looked up at the damage.

He was a tall man, with light brown skin and a typically serious Starfleet haircut, contrasting jarringly with the scruffy mop on top of Jirel's head. Still, if he was put off by the sight of the Trill, his Starfleet levels of politeness didn't let it show. He smiled warmly and offered a firm handshake.

"Lieutenant Ravi Kapadia," he said, "Welcome to Starbase 216. Admiral Jenner ordered me to oversee a repair schedule down here, but...I'm not sure where to start."

He gestured to the Bounty and chuckled. Jirel smiled back as he broke off the handshake and pointed over to Denella, who was walking back towards them. "Pretty sure our engineer is way ahead of you with all that, chief."

As Kapadia turned around and saw Denella, Jirel didn't need to be telepathic to see that this was the first time the Starfleet officer had met an Orion woman in the flesh. Even though she was clad in a set of dirty grey overalls that didn't really fit, her green hair was messily tied back behind her head and her face was somehow even more streaked with dirt than it had been just moments ago, Kapadia's jaw still hit the ground.

Denella, for her part, barely glanced at the young lieutenant as she proffered him the weathered padd in her hand. Kapadia didn't take it. He was still staring.

"Ok, Lieutenant," she began, "I've drawn up a rough list of where I'll need to start. I'm assuming that you can replicate most of..."

She trailed off as she realised Kapadia still hadn't taken the padd. Or indeed moved at all. She looked up to see him smiling slightly dumbly at her, his jaw still hanging somewhere past his knees. With a sigh, she looked over at Jirel.

The Trill coughed slightly and tapped the officer on the shoulder, enough to jolt Kapadia back into the moment. Still flustered, he nodded dumbly and took the padd. "R—Right," he stammered, his voice croaking slightly through his dry mouth, "Well, I'm sure we can work it—Work through it—Um, this, together."

Denella grabbed Jirel by the arm and walked a few paces away from the still-babbling Kapadia, muttering surreptitiously to him. "Jirel, can you talk to the admiral? I really don't need...that," she gestured at the Starfleet officer, "Not again. I mean, my checklist covers everything. If they just get us the supplies, I can do all the rest myself—"

"Denella, look at the state of her," he replied, gesturing to the Bounty, "We're gonna need his help on this one. But I promise, as soon as I'm done with the admiral, I'll come back down and help, ok? It's not just gonna be you and Lieutenant Libido."

They both looked back at Kapadia, who quickly returned his attention to the padd when he realised he'd been caught staring at her. Denella sighed even deeper. "Fine. But if he doesn't stop drooling soon, I'm gonna have to whack him with the thick end of a coil spanner."

She reluctantly walked back over to the Starfleet engineer, as Natasha walked down the Bounty's ramp and over to Jirel. The two armed security officers that had accompanied Kapadia out to the landing pad moved over to them.

"Lieutenant Kinsen, welcome back," the taller of the two offered, "We've been asked to escort you directly to Admiral Jenner."

The shorter officer glanced distrustingly at Jirel. "Both of you."

Natasha nodded, finding herself struggling to focus on anything beyond the familiar uniforms the two officers wore. The one she had worn for the last decade. The one that now made her feel numb. The frail smile she managed to give them felt bitter as it crossed her face.

To her side, the more relaxed Trill gestured to the phasers in their hands. "Don't think you need those, guys," he grinned, "She's one of you, remember."

Neither officer smiled at him, nor did they lower their weapons. The taller of the two offered him an especially curt reply.

"They're for you."

Not for the first time since they had arrived at Starbase 216, Natasha noted Jirel's cocky grin disappearing from his face as fast as the local gravity would allow.

Part 1B

Part One (Cont'd)

The journey to Admiral Jenner's office had not taken long.

That was mostly thanks to a speedy turbolift ride all the way up to the top of the starbase module they had landed by, but also thanks to the two security officers literally marching them along through any walking phases of the trip.

Since they had arrived at their destination, the reason for the haste in their journey had become less apparent, given that the admiral was clearly happy to keep them waiting. For half an hour and counting.

They had been deposited in a plush waiting area, filled with a selection of comfortable furniture and staffed by a single Bajoran ensign working diligently behind a warm mahogany reception desk. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows curved around the outer edge of the room, affording spectacular views across the planet's surface.

Not that Natasha was paying a great deal of attention to the view. She had uncomfortably perched herself on the edge of one of the plush sofas, feeling deeply out of place. The scuffed overalls she wore, a pair she had borrowed from Denella, were a million miles away from the Starfleet-spec surroundings. Although, as she again considered the uniforms she had seen everywhere on their trip up here, she couldn't help but think that she'd feel equally out of place wearing one of those right now. Even back amongst the familiar surroundings of a Federation facility.

As she contemplated her situation, and tried to avoid thinking about the face of the ensign in the corridor, she couldn't help but wonder what Jirel thought he was doing.

"Yeah, like I said, he's definitely expecting me."

The Trill casually leaned on the reception desk, trying to look as charming as possible despite the stern look he was getting from the ensign on the other side.

"Again, if you would take a seat, sir," the young Bajoran replied with disdain, failing to remove every layer of sarcasm from the word 'sir' as she addressed the scruffy Trill, "I'll let you know as soon as Admiral Jenner is available."

Apparently unperturbed by her tone, Jirel kept the charm dialled up. "Listen, Ensign...?" he let the word hang with a hopeful smile.

"Lenaris," she sighed eventually, "Ensign Lenaris Kendra."

"Listen, Kendra," Jirel continued, deliberately dropping the formalities and going straight for the Bajoran's first name, "Me and Admiral Jenner go way back, and he has this thing he likes to do to mess me around, y'know? He likes to keep me—keep us, in this case, waiting out here."

He gestured back to Natasha, who didn't look especially unhappy to be kept waiting.

"And it's hilarious, obviously. A really great bit. But today, I'm kinda busy. So, we can just skip all this messing around and—"

"Admiral Jenner is currently on a diplomatic call with the Tholian ambassador," Ensign Lenaris explained patiently, "Once he has concluded their discussions, he will see both of you. I assure you that there's no...messing around."

Jirel nodded knowingly, glancing down at the desk in front of her and spying the brushed metal comms panel. "Yeah, right. That's the sort of thing he says when he knows I'm here."

"Or...when he's on a diplomatic call with the Tholian ambassador," Lenaris replied, in a tone of voice that she usually reserved for subspace calls to her bratty five year old nephew back on Bajor.

"Right, right. I like it, you're really going with this, aren't you?" he said, wagging his finger at her before looking over her shoulder and pointing at something, "Hey, so, is that replicator for general use, or...?"

Despite it being one of the oldest tricks in the book, Ensign Lenaris naively turned to look at the replicator in question, allowing Jirel a free moment to jab his finger down onto the comms panel. By the time she swivelled back round and realised what he had done, he was already speaking.

"Hey, Bryce, nice try with that Tholian thing, but next time you might wanna—"

"Jirel, get off this damn channel!"

The admiral's voice came back with a level of anger that suggested either he was committing to the bit about the Tholians with far more relish than a Staffleet admiral necessarily should be doing while on duty, or that Jirel had miscalculated the situation somewhat.

The ashen-faced look on Ensign Lenaris's face rather gave away the answer to that one.

A few moments later, Lenaris was being comforted by Admiral Jenner himself in the entrance to his office.

“Again, sir, I am so sorry,” the Bajoran babbled through reddened eyes, “I had no idea he would—It won’t happen again, sir, and I fully accept the consequences of—”

“Don’t worry, Ensign,” Jenner replied as calmly as he could manage, “You’re not the first secretary of mine to fall foul of Jirel’s...persistence. Just communicate my apologies to Ambassador Losaran and his people, and make sure we send them a little something as well.”

“Yes sir,” Lenaris nodded, considering this for a moment, then adding, “Anything in particular, sir?”

“Whatever you normally get an eight foot tall crystalline being to say sorry. Improvise.”

Lenaris nodded and exited the office, still at an understandable loss as to exactly what she was supposed to send. Admiral Jenner whirled around to stare across at the two other figures in the room.

In front of the expansive wraparound desk that dominated the lavish office that befit the commander of a starbase, Natasha had been standing to attention for so long that she was worried she was about to sprain something. She also couldn’t help but feel vaguely ridiculous being so formal in her current attire. But still, even if she was still sure her future didn’t belong in Starfleet, she was determined to uphold protocol for the time being. Even if it meant standing to attention in baggy overalls.

To her right, Jirel was clearly free from any such hangups. If she had been shocked by his behaviour in the reception area, she was doubly shocked when the Trill turned to one of the quadrant’s most decorated officers and held his arms out for a hug.

If it was meant to be a disarming tactic, the admiral definitely didn’t take it that way.

“Two months, Jirel,” he fired out, as he stalked across his rich burgundy carpet to his desk, “Two months I’ve been working on the Tholians. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get one of their delegations around a negotiating table?”

“Cos of all the legs, right?” Jirel offered.

As a disarming tactic, that worked even less well than the offer of a hug. Jenner continued to rant at him as he took a seat behind his desk.

Bryce Jenner himself was a stout man, with short greying hair and brilliant blue eyes. Although he had aged, Natasha knew that his reputation was surpassed by few in the fleet. His time in command of the USS Firebrand was the stuff of legend. As, it had to be said, was his temper.

“You show up five days late,” he barked at the Trill, “You hand my engineers a repair list the length of a Sovereign-class refit, and then you go and pull a stunt like that? Seriously, Jirel, next time I get a message from my exec that we’ve got every phaser bank on this base trained on your little ship, I’m not gonna tell them to hold their fire.”

Jirel’s arms flopped down to his sides, conceding defeat on the chance of a hug. “Ok, honestly, I thought the Tholian ambassador thing was a —”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

The admiral wrung his hands together, trying to calm himself down.

“Look, this little arrangement is getting complicated enough as it is. You met the security detail, I assume? There’s a lot of protocol to follow when a Starfleet admiral invites someone like you to his office these days. Everything gets logged, questions have to be answered, it’s a pain in the ass. So when I give your crew these little errands to run, the least I expect is that you take it seriously.”

“Ah, ok,” Jirel said, gesturing to Natasha, “We did take it seriously this time. And here she is.”

Jenner looked over at Natasha, almost for the first time since she had walked into the office. Seeing her standing to attention, his mood immediately softened. “Lieutenant Kinsen,” he said apologetically, gesturing for her to stand at ease, an offer which she readily accepted, “I am so sorry for all this distraction. Welcome home.”

“Thank you sir,” she replied, her voice sounding oddly small in the expanse of his office.

“I can’t tell you how happy we all were to hear that someone survived out there,” he said, his tone offering her nothing but kindness that she felt she didn’t deserve, “Must’ve been hell.”

She stifled her reaction to the emotions that bubbled to the surface at the admiral’s words. Guilt, pain, anger, sadness, all mixed together.

“It’s...not something I’ll ever forget,” she managed eventually.

Behind the desk, the grey haired admiral studied her face in silence, and for a moment she was worried that he had already seen through her facade. Eventually, he nodded and smiled. “Well, if you’re up to it, you’ll be debriefed tomorrow. For now, you’ve been assigned quarters here on the base. Please, get some rest.”

She knew there was precious little chance of that, given the nightmares that had haunted her over the last few months. But she nodded graciously. “Thank you, sir.”

“Any chance I can get in on that?” Jirel chimed in from her side, “You’ve gotta have more than one spare set of quarters around here.”

Jenner sighed and turned back to the Trill, all of his kindness evaporating. “You’re getting your repairs,” he grunted, “As many of them as I can sign off, anyway. This is an active Federation starbase, you know. Not your own personal shipyard.”

“Yeah, but—”

“You want your own quarters? You know where the damn Academy is.”

Natasha was more than a little surprised to see that this shut Jirel up immediately. Partly because she had been starting to think that such a thing wasn’t possible, and partly because he genuinely looked hurt by it. Before she could consider this any further, the door chime to the office rang. Jenner turned back to her and smiled.

“One more thing, Lieutenant. News that you survived travelled fast through the fleet, and there’s someone who’s been desperate to see you. Enter!”

As he barked out the command, Natasha turned to see the doors part and a face from her past walk in. The dark-skinned man wore a Starfleet science uniform, with three pips affixed to the collar. Jirel immediately noticed that Natasha’s mouth had dropped open in shock. He also noticed how the newcomer’s face instantly creased into a delighted smile as he made a beeline for her, gripping her in a tight hug, which she reciprocated.

It was a hug that went on for long enough to make Jirel feel distinctly uncomfortable. For reasons that he didn’t entirely want to admit to himself. It was also a hug that only stopped after the Trill’s second awkward cough was loud enough to register with both parties.

“Hey,” the Trill offered weakly, “It’s just—Y’know, other people in the room, here.”

The newcomer looked slightly contrite as he acknowledged the others. Natasha, for her part, still looked to be in a mild state of shock.

“Sorry,” he offered with a shrug, “But it’s not every day your wife comes back from the dead.”

If Natasha’s face had been a picture of shock, it had nothing on Jirel’s.

Part 1C

Part One (Cont'd)

“So there we were, no weapons, no shields, with five Jem’Hadar fighters bearing down on us...”

Klath scowled and quietly wondered how he’d allowed himself to get into this position.

On the other side of the table, Sunek was midway through telling the story of the Bounty’s misadventures prior to their arrival at the starbase to a small audience. Except, as Klath had silently noted, this particular telling carried several embellishments of the author’s own creation. Instead of Jirel and Klath fighting off a pair of Miradorn in a bar brawl on Hestina, it had been Sunek and Sunek alone. Instead of Denella and Klath who had defeated a pair of Jem’Hadar soldiers in hand to hand combat while searching for the Jewel of Soraxx, it had again been Sunek and Sunek alone. And now, instead of them battling one Jem’Hadar fighter, there were five.

And there had also been an unnecessary number of tangential segues seemingly designed for no other narrative purpose than to underline the supposed sexual prowess of the Bounty’s pilot.

If that nauseating part of the whole spectacle hadn’t been enough, it was clear even to Klath that while Sunek’s choice of audience were listening to his story, they didn’t believe a word of it. Even the odd word that was actually the truth.

“...I steered us right between them, like, threaded the needle to perfection, and those first two fighters flew right into each other and just...!”

The Vulcan excitedly underlined this part of his work of fiction by miming a huge explosion with an accompanying sound effect. Klath’s scowl deepened.

Sunek had suggested they head to the local township, rather than the starbase itself, to find somewhere for a drink. All the better to avoid the stuffy confines of a Starfleet rec area. So, they had followed the Vulcan’s instincts and ended up here. The bar itself wasn’t to Klath’s tastes, decorated in bright gaudy colours, but the drinks menu was long, and the walk from the Bounty had been even longer, so they had elected to stay.

Most of the other patrons were local residents of the planet itself. A curious insectoid species with vaguely orange exoskeletons, prominent mandibles and huge black compound eyes that they had managed to discern were called Kraterites. The locals didn’t seem to mind the arrival of a Klingon and a Vulcan, though it was somewhat hard to tell given that their native language consisted of a succession of chirps and clicks that neither of their universal translators seemed willing to even attempt to translate.

Still, it had meant that it had been easier for Sunek to spot the two female Starfleet ensigns when they had walked in to enjoy a spot of downtime of their own. And despite Klath’s protestations, the Vulcan had insisted on approaching them, and moreover had somehow managed to convince them to join them for the evening.

Right now, as Sunek’s tale continued, Klath couldn’t tell if that was a decision they were regretting or not.

“Really?” one of the two women, a human who had introduced herself as Lara D’Amato, said to the excitable Vulcan, “They both just...”

She echoed Sunek’s earlier explosion mime, down to the unnecessarily loud sound effect.

“Oh yeah,” Sunek nodded, still convinced that this was all going well, “Lit up the place like a fireworks display. But, there were still three more of ‘em, so I swung the ship around, and—”

“Let me guess,” the other woman, a blue-skinned Andorian named Taris, said.

This time, she and D’Amato mimed the explosion together, before collapsing in fits of giggles that revealed how much they believed about the Vulcan’s tale.

“Fine, laugh it up,” Sunek shrugged, still unabashed, “But that all happened, right, Klath?”

He looked over at the burly Klingon for support, flicking his head and gesturing with his eyes in such a way that even Klath could tell was a plea for backup. Not that Klath was ever going to read it that way. Klingons weren’t good at small talk.

“His story is...exaggerated,” he said eventually, eliciting further smirks from the ensigns.

“Ah, come on!” Sunek pouted, “Would it have hurt to play along for a bit?”

“Only a foolish warrior lies about his victories,” the Klingon countered.

Taris and D’Amato both nodded in sombre agreement, as they looked back at Sunek, who shrugged in defeat. “Well, maybe I miscounted.”

“So,” Taris said to Klath, “We’ve suffered through all your friend’s best lines, you got any you wanna try out while we’re here?”

Klath sighed. Klingons weren’t good at lines either.

“Klingons believe that actions speak louder than words,” he offered simply, in a tone entirely bereft of any sort of flirtatious subtext.

“Wow,” D’Amato admitted, “That’s a good one.”

Taris nodded, as the two ensigns eyed up the confused Klingon in a new light. Sunek, not appreciating the sudden lack of attention on him, jumped back into story mode. "Hey, ok, how about I tell you how we - I mean, it was mostly me - escaped from this crazed Ferengi marauder...?"

As the ensigns rolled their eyes in amusement and Sunek launched into his blockbuster take on the Bounty's run-in with a Ferengi trader called Grenk and his modestly armed shuttle, Klath was distracted by a familiar uneasy feeling. He felt an unnerving tingling sensation somewhere in the back of his mind. A feeling that he was being watched.

Suppressing the instinctive urge to reach for the bat'leth that he knew wasn't there anyway, he scanned around the bar as casually as he could manage, not wanting to let anyone out there know he was aware of them. It was still as bustling as when they had arrived, and all Klath could see was Kraterites, chattering away to each other in their unintelligible tongue. And while their large, unblinking eyes made it hard to tell who exactly was watching who, Klath couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

But the uncertain feeling remained. So much so that when Taris gently tapped him on the arm to get his attention, his hand instinctively shot out and grabbed her wrist tightly, accompanied by a deep growl as he snapped his head around to the ensign.

"Ow! What the hell?" the Andorian cried out, as D'Amato and Sunek both reacted with equal amounts of shock to the Klingon's sudden movement.

Klath released his grip as soon as he realised his mistake, a feeling of foolishness washing over him as Taris rubbed her wrist and winced in pain. "I was just asking if you wanted another," she said, nodding her head at the empty glass in front of him.

"I apologise," he managed to reply, "Are you hurt?"

Taris allowed D'Amato to take a look at her wrist, still glaring at the Klingon. "Nothing broken," D'Amato replied eventually, flashing Klath a similarly unhappy look, "But you need to chill out, ok?"

Klath looked around at the two distinctly unhappy ensigns, and the equally unhappy Sunek, under the oblivious belief that the Klingon might be jeopardising his chances of getting anywhere with either of the Starfleet officers. "Perhaps I...should get the drinks?" he offered eventually. Nobody disagreed.

He stood and made his way to the bar itself. A Kraterite bartender quickly moved over to meet him and began to chatter excitedly, handing him a drinks menu for good measure. Still feeling an unsettling sense that he was being watched, and having no idea what any of the options on the menu were, he gruffly pointed at a drink at random and indicated the need for four of them with his fingers. The bartender chirped a few times, before getting to work.

Presently, four very tall glasses, filled with four very lurid green cocktails and topped off with four very luminous straws, were placed on a tray in front of him. The disgruntled Klingon briefly considered trying to change his order, before sighing and picking up the tray.

If the High Council could see me now, he thought to himself.

"Interesting choice."

The voice came out of nowhere. Still on edge, he spun around so quickly that he nearly dropped the tray. The source of the voice just smiled at him, the reddish ridge of bone across her forehead almost blending into the harsh red lighting running around the walls of the bar.

He had no idea what species she was, but felt it was rude to ask. It was also, presumably, rude of him to take quite so much time to check her and the revealing deep blue dress that she wore over. But it took Klath a few seconds longer to realise that.

She didn't seem to mind, looking him up and down at the same time and smiling, before looking back at the tray of gaudy cocktails with amusement. Klath felt himself squirm involuntarily.

"Wrong order," he found himself saying, though he wasn't sure why.

She kept her eyes fixed on him as she picked the glass in front of him on the tray up and took a small sip through the straw, before setting it back down. "Quite nice," she conceded, her voice measured and overly sultry, "I think the locals call it a Kraterite Love Sling."

Klath suppressed a fresh grimace. Any hope he had of at least selling it as a warrior's drink based on the name disappeared in an instant.

"I've been watching you," she added, maintaining eye contact and running a slender finger down the same glass, "You don't seem to be enjoying the company you're with."

This got his attention back on her, but it was more from suspicion than anything else. Could she have been the one that he had sensed? "That is none of your concern," he stated flatly, but firmly.

"I could make it my concern," she replied with a flirtatious smile, "I can promise you that I'd be much more...agreeable company."

Klath felt something inside him stir as she licked her lips, but he was still on edge, and something about her unsettled him. "Another time, perhaps."

At this, she shrugged and turned around, walking off incongruously into the crowds of chattering Kraterites with an exaggerated shimmy of her hips. Klath watched her leave.

"Hey! Klath! Where the hell are those drinks?"

Sunek's bellowed call from across the bustling bar snapped him back to normality. With a mildly annoyed growl, he returned to the table and

set the tray down.

“Wow,” D’Amato laughed when she saw the glasses, “What is that supposed to be?”

“It is...” Klath paused, recalling the specific name the mysterious woman had used and deciding to play dumb for the sake of his flagging reputation, “Green.”

Taris shrugged and picked up one of the glasses. Sunek and D’Amato followed suit. Klath remained troubled, his senses still on edge. He no longer felt like he was being watched, but something was definitely wrong.

“You ok, buddy?” Sunek asked, as he swirled his drink around with the straw.

Klath ignored him, still piecing everything together in his head. He was definitely missing something. Something about the woman he just met. The one who said she had been watching him.

The drinks. She’d touched one of the drinks. One of the glasses. But which one?

He looked down at the tray. The glass that had been closest to him was now missing. One of the other three must have picked it up. He visualised them all taking the glasses from the tray, rewinding the scene in his head.

Taris lifted her drink up, bringing the straw to her mouth.

It was that one.

Before her lips touched the straw, Klath smacked the glass out of the shocked Andorian’s hand, sending it flying onto the floor where it smashed into tiny pieces.

“Seriously,” Taris snapped, “What the hell is your problem?”

“I apologise,” Klath said simply, pushing the remaining glass on the tray over to her and standing up to leave, “Take mine.”

“Klath?” Sunek asked, looking as shocked as the two ensigns at his friend’s erratic behaviour.

The Klingon ignored him. He crouched down to the broken glass and tore a strip from his tunic, soaking some of the liquid up, before standing and looking back at the bemused faces around the table. “Excuse me,” he said simply.

He turned and exited the bar, as the others watched on. After a few awkward moments, Sunek shrugged and turned back to the two Starfleet officers.

“So, as I was saying, this Ferengi ship must’ve had...twenty, thirty disruptors...”

* * * * *

She leaned on the dirty metal hull and yawned, checking the local time again with a glance inside at the shuttle’s chronometer.

It wouldn’t be too much longer now. She knew that Kolar often had a tendency to gloat, but given how crowded the bar had been, she suspected that this time he would just need to see proof of his success before returning.

As she waited, she allowed herself to speculate about what she might do now. The latinum that he was paying her wasn’t exactly a king’s ransom, but it would afford her the chance for a modicum of luxury, for a few weeks at least. As she contemplated whether it would be too vain to invest in a medical procedure she had read about that could accentuate the curves of her skull ridge, she heard footsteps approaching.

She turned to see Kolar stalking back to the shuttle. It didn’t take an empath to see that he wasn’t in a satisfied mood.

“You failed!”

As he spat out the words, he aimed a rough slap across her face for good measure. The blow was a glancing one, but it stung enough to bring tears to her eyes. She whirled away from any follow-up attack and backed away from the fuming Klingon, gently rubbing her swollen face.

“What do you mean?” she grunted back, tasting blood in her mouth, “I gave him exactly the same dose as the others.”

“Did you see him drink it?” he hissed.

She went to retort, but couldn’t help but pause for a fraction of a second. Which was more than enough of a reaction for him to deduce exactly what the answer was before she had a chance to decide whether to lie or not.

Growling with rage, he stormed back into the shuttle.

She felt her jaw tenderly, reasoning that it might be a good idea to keep her distance from him for a while longer given his anger. Inwardly, she cursed herself. She had become so used to their usual plan in dealing with the names on Kolar’s list that she had stopped waiting around to guarantee that their targets physically drank their spiked drinks. Because they had always done it before.

Except, apparently, this time.

She could already sense this was going to impact her chances of being paid in full, any thoughts of sculpting her skull ridges now disappearing fast. Kolar clambered back out of the shuttle clutching a large holdall and closed the shuttle's door behind him.

"You made a mistake," he chided, becalmed but still clearly angry, "And now you've jeopardised everything."

"I didn't mean to," she managed in return, "I thought he would—!"

"You were wrong!"

She shrank back further, her still-aching jaw reminding her that she didn't want to risk a run-in with the Klingon's simmering wrath. "What now?" she replied quietly as the door sealed shut.

Kolar shot her a glare, then looked out across the township below, from where they had parked on a small landing platform on top of a nearby hill. Beyond the lights of the town, shimmering in the gloaming, he could make out the spherical modules of the starbase.

"Now," he said eventually, determination clear in his voice, "I need a new plan."

"What?"

He gestured down at the township, in the vague direction of the bar they had found Klath in earlier.

"First of all, I think we should keep an eye on his Vulcan friend down there..."

Part 1D

Part One (Cont'd)

Klath wasn't the only person who had spent the evening with the distinct feeling that they were being watched. Although at least Denella knew that her particular voyeur was entirely harmless. Even if he was becoming incredibly annoying.

The first day of repairs was drawing to a close, and despite Jirel's promise to return in good time, she hadn't seen the Trill since he had left for the admiral's office. Which meant that, as she had been fearing, it had just been herself and Lieutenant Kapadia, and her meticulously planned repair schedule was being ruined by her even more pressing need to try and keep herself and the gawking officer working as far away from each other as possible.

She eased herself out from underneath the Bounty's starboard landing strut, having spent the last hour reconfiguring the lateral sensor array, while Kapadia had been tasked with stripping down the heavily damaged port-side winglet on the other side of the ship. Except, as she stood up and gently rubbed her aching back, she realised that Kapadia was actually standing right next to her, idly holding a padd and a hyperspanner.

"Port's the other side, lieutenant," she sighed.

Her comment snapped him out of whatever trance he was in, and he immediately started babbling. "Oh, no, sorry, I just—The port side's all stripped down and ready to go tomorrow. We can start fitting the replacement parts first thing in the morning."

He looked back at her with a slightly goofy amount of pride. She resisted the immediate temptation to roll her eyes to the heavens. "Ok?" she managed, "Well, this is your starbase. You don't need my permission to clock off for the day."

"R—Right," he stammered, "But I...just wanted to let you know we might have those replacement deflector parts you need."

He clumsily passed her the padd. She accepted it and glanced at the details.

"It's not an exact match," he continued, "B—But we've got a set of parts for a Mayweather-class freighter in the stores, and it should be an easy enough job to modify them for your needs."

"Looks good to me. Thanks. We can start on this tomorrow as well."

Kapadia nodded and shifted his weight on his feet uncomfortably. She handed the padd back and looked at him with a sigh. "Was there something else?"

"Oh, um," he started, "I just—I mean, I was working in the—inside the ship earlier, and I noticed that your replicator is..."

"Obliterated?" Denella finished for him, "Yeah, that one's kind of a long story. But I've got a replacement model on the requisition list I made up."

"I know. Yeah. Um, it wasn't that—I just thought, seeing as, y'know, the replicator doesn't work, if you wanted to get some dinner? I know a great place over in the township, and—"

"That's ok, Lieutenant," she interjected quickly, "I'm not the dating type."

Kapadia's face dropped. "No, wait," he stammered, "I was—I just meant to, y'know, discuss the repair schedule. I didn't mean—"

"Yes. You did."

It wasn't said with anger, just sadness. She may have been used to Kapadia's sort of reaction by now, and it may have been harmless, but it still acted as a painful reminder of what she had been, where she had come from. No matter how many years went by, she never really completely escaped the Syndicate.

"And, you know, it's fine," she continued, "Same as all the others, you've heard the stories, and played the holo programs, maybe even acted out a few little fantasies with an ex or two, and now you've actually met a slave girl in the flesh, and you thought you'd see how easy it is."

"Oh, no," Kapadia blurted out, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Enjoy your dinner, Lieutenant," she said, stopping him from digging any deeper into the hole he'd created for himself, "And I'll see you in the morning."

She walked off, leaving a despondent Kapadia standing alone. She suppressed another deep sigh and ran her hands across her tired face, leaving another three fresh grease marks behind on her green skin. As she neared the cargo ramp at the rear of the Bounty, she was surprised, but also glad to see Klath approaching the ship.

"Ugh, Klath, am I glad to—"

The Klingon barely acknowledged her as he walked up the ramp and on into the Bounty, leaving the Orion woman looking somewhat miffed.

"Huh," she continued, to nobody, "Why is everyone being an asshole today?"

It didn't take her long to find the Klingon. There weren't exactly a lot of hiding places on a ship the size of the Bounty. Though she was slightly surprised to find him in the medical bay, checking what appeared to be a small piece of his own tunic under a medical scanner.

"Klath?" she said cautiously, seeing how the Klingon's hackles were clearly raised, "What's going on?"

"Nothing," he replied, gruffly. It was the only acknowledgement he paid her, the rest of his focus still on the results of the scan.

Moments later, he looked up from the scanner and growled slightly. He turned and exited the medical bay, heading towards the cockpit. Denella gamely followed, finding him affixing his bat'leth to his back with a sense of urgency, then beginning to work on his tactical console.

"Klath, talk to me," she persisted, "Don't you dare go all 'moody Klingon warrior' on me. Not after the crappy day I've just had."

He didn't look up at her, continuing to work on his console. But after a moment, he did reply. "I cannot involve you in this. Please, let me work."

"Come on. What the hell were you doing in the medical bay? Why're you tooling yourself up with weapons? What are you checking?"

They were all good questions, but Klath ignored them all. Denella's frustrations reached breaking point, knowing what it sometimes took to get the Klingon's attention, she mentally apologised to the Bounty herself, stepped forwards and slammed her hand down on top of his console with all her might.

Klath jerked his head up to look at her. Attention secured.

"Thank you!" she sighed, "Now, come on, talk. What are you doing?"

After a further moment of contemplation, the Klingon gestured down at the tactical console in front of him. "There was something in my drink, back at the bar," he explained tersely, "The medical computer suggests that it was some form of toxin."

Denella took this in her stride. "And you definitely didn't order it like that? Cos I know how weird some of those Klingon cocktails you like can get..."

Her attempt at brevity was met with a dark glare.

"Someone is trying to kill me."

The words hung in the air forebodingly. She felt a chill run down her spine. Klath returned his attention to his work. "I must move quickly," he continued, "I am attempting to gain access to a manifest of recent arrivals on the planet. Passenger craft, sensor traces for smaller vessels—"

"Wait," Denella said, trying to catch up with what he was saying, "You're trying to hack into a starbase's records?"

"You do not think I can?"

The Orion woman looked over at his console, checking the limited progress that he had made and shook her head. "Well, not like that, you can't," she scoffed, moving alongside him and taking over.

As she went to start working on the problem, Klath gently put his hand on her arm and caused her to pause. "Denella," he cautioned quietly, "I alone must take this risk. If they were to detect what we are doing here..."

She considered this for a moment. "You know, I believe your people have a saying for this sort of situation."

She paused, summoning up an appropriate quantity of phlegm into her mouth before she continued.

"nItebQobqaDjup 'e' chaw'be' SuvwI'."

Klath was taken aback.

"Been learning a bit on the side," she smiled, as she turned back to the console and set about breaking half a dozen Federation laws.

Klath's mouth curved into an appreciative smile. Her pronunciation had been terrible, but the meaning of her words more than came across.

A warrior does not let a friend face danger alone.

End of Part One

Part 2A

Part Two

“Help me!”

Natasha jolted awake, looking around at the unfamiliar surroundings and taking a moment to realise where she was.

By all accounts, she had eventually dozed off curled up on the sofa of the guest quarters she had been assigned on Starbase 216, rather than the bed itself. She couldn't remember precisely when she'd finally managed to fall asleep, or how long it had taken her, but at least she seemed to have made it through until dawn before her nightmares had woken her this time.

The same nightmare. The same dream. The same face.

She stood up, paced over to the replicator and thirstily gulped down a glass of water. As she calmed her breathing, she crossed over to the window that ran along the far wall of the room and tapped the controls to raise the blinds. Her room was roughly halfway up the main dome of the base, giving her fairly unobstructed view out across the planet's surface. As she gazed out and took a few deep centring breaths, she saw the twin suns of the system casting a bright orange hue across the landscape.

The quarters themselves were entirely nondescript, but as luxurious as she had expected them to be. But even here, surrounded by all the conveniences that Starfleet had to offer, she could find no comfort.

Makes sense, she thought bitterly, after all, what do I have to be comfortable about?

She turned away from the view and looked over at the wardrobe in the corner of the room, where a freshly replicated uniform was hanging up, ready for her to attend her debriefing. The merest thought of the debrief sent a shudder down her spine. She still wasn't sure what she was even going to say. What could she say, after what she had done?

She took a couple of steps towards the uniform, studying the familiar blue undershirt and the lines of the grey and black jacket. As she reached out and felt the material, she idly wondered whether she still even respected it any more. With another deep breath, she grabbed the outfit and walked over to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, fresh from the sonic shower, she stood in front of the room's full-length mirror, now dressed in that same uniform. She continued to study it, running her fingers down the seam of the jacket. No, she decided. She definitely still respected the uniform. That definitely wasn't the issue here.

The issue was that she didn't respect herself wearing the uniform.

As she turned back to the view out of the window, the door chime rang out, startling her.

“Come in.”

She heard the doors part behind her, and a familiar voice chime out.

“Hey, doc,” Jirel said, “Did I ever tell you I have a real thing for women in uniform?”

Natasha turned back to see the Trill grinning back at her as he walked into her quarters, before he turned his attention to the fancy surroundings of the room. She suppressed a smile, but wasn't entirely happy with the unexpected distraction. She didn't want to deal with Jirel's space captain routine.

“This really isn't a good time—”

“Yeah, I know,” he said as he idly paced around the room, “Don't worry, I won't stay long. Just wanted to see what these quarters were like. Very nice. Very...Starfleet.”

She wasn't sure from his tone whether that was meant as an insult or not. She was pretty sure, though, that a bunk inspection wasn't the real reason he was here.

Things had gotten awkward between the two of them when Jirel had revealed his nascent feelings for her during their hunt for the Jewel of Soraxx, and she had hoped she had clarified the situation sufficiently to overcome that particular issue. But then she had seen his reaction to her ex-husband showing up, and she had started to have fresh doubts. She hoped she was wrong. Because she really didn't want to deal with Jirel's spurned lover routine.

“Nice view,” the Trill added, casually gesturing out the window.

“Again, I honestly don't have time for...whatever this is,” she said with a dismissive tone, “I really need to prepare for my debrief.”

He nodded in understanding, but continued to breezily tour the room, leaving her feeling like she had no choice but to force the issue. “Jirel,” she sighed, “Tell me this isn't about Cameron.”

“Who?”

“You've met,” she said pointedly, before begrudgingly continuing, “But, fine, you really wanna do this? Yes, I'm married. Or I was married. We divorced, before the war. It...wasn't meant to be, I guess. And I haven't really seen him since. So, is that enough for you?”

Jirel scoffed slightly, doing his best to look offended. “Wh—? You think I came all this way to ask about that? For your information, I came to wish you good luck. Y’know, for the...debrief thingy. And, I’d also like you to note the amount of times we’ve both said the word ‘debrief’ and I haven’t made a single inappropriate joke.”

She studied his face again, which still appeared to be in laid back space captain mode. “Really? That’s why you came over.”

Under the most basic of scrutiny, the Trill’s poker face collapsed. “Nah,” he said with an apologetic shrug, “It was the husband thing.”

“Ugh,” she said with a roll of her eyes “Jirel, I have way too much on my mind right now to waste time with some insane, stupid jealousy thing—”

“Um, what? Jealousy? Who said anything about jealousy? Who’s jealous?”

As she went to answer, the door chime rang out again. She closed her eyes in frustration. “Come in!”

She opened her eyes as the doors parted again and Cameron walked through, not exactly formally dressed. He wore a tight gym top and shorts, drenched with sweat and clinging to his muscular physique. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted the self-diagnosed jealousy-free Jirel trying to draw himself up into a bigger pose. And not entirely succeeding.

“Hey, Nat,” Cameron smiled apologetically, “Sorry for the state I’m in, just finished the morning workout, and I wanted to catch you before you left.”

“Don’t apologise,” she found herself saying before she realised it.

When they had been together, it had been his scientific mind and easy-going character that had been most attractive to her. But the body had definitely helped. He smiled knowingly at her comment, and she instantly felt her attraction diminish. She never liked that particular smile. The smile that was a combination of false modesty with a hint of smugness, one that gave away the fact that he knew exactly the effect he was having on her.

“Working out, huh?” the in no way jealous Jirel chimed in, “Hey, wanna race to the end of the corridor and back?”

Natasha looked over at the Trill in mild disbelief. Cameron, for his part, acknowledged the presence of him in the room with them for the first time. “Sorry,” he offered with a friendly smile, “Who are you, exactly?”

“I’m—”

“Nobody,” Natasha said quickly, mentally flinching at the hurt look this elicited from the jealousy-free Jirel, “I mean, not nobody—He’s a friend. His ship rescued me.”

The two men shook hands, the firm handshake continuing for some time.

“Well, I guess I owe you one, whoever you are,” Cameron said as he pumped the Trill’s hand, “For bringing Nat back, just when I thought she was gone forever.”

“Yeah,” Jirel replied, ignoring the mounting pain in his wrist from the continuing handshake while still definitely not feeling any jealousy, “Aren’t I the best.”

Natasha watched as the two men continued to exchange the galaxy’s longest, most passive aggressive handshake for several more seconds. Eventually, when it looked like they were going to end up fusing at the wrist, she stepped in.

“Ok, so—Stop that,” she grabbed their hands and separated them, “Again, both of you, I really need to be getting on.”

“Of course,” Cameron nodded, “But, hey, I came by to ask if you wanted dinner? Tonight? Officers’ club?”

She studied his face, but there was no trace of the superior smile any more.

“Nothing weird, I promise. Just two people who have a lot of history, and haven’t seen each other in a long time having a fancy dinner and catching up. Hmm?”

Jirel, who as he himself had already made abundantly clear, was definitely not jealous of the situation that was unfolding in front of him, even surprised himself with his next comment. Especially given how he wasn’t jealous in the slightest.

“Hey, if you’re...y’know, if you need dinner, or whatever. You can have—I mean, we can do dinner on the Bounty?”

This time, her glance at the Trill ratcheted up from mild to severe disbelief. “On your ship with the broken replicator?”

“Your ship only has one replicator?” Cameron chimed in with clear amusement.

“Ah, joke’s on you, friend,” Jirel replied smugly, “Because, actually, as Natasha just pointed out, my ship currently has no replicators. So...”

He tailed off, all of a sudden aware that he wasn’t entirely sure what his point was going to be. Mercifully for all involved, the awkward silence that descended on the trio was broken by Natasha’s combadge chirping into life.

“Commander Bari to Lieutenant Kinsen,” an unfamiliar but oddly calming male voice rang out, “I’ve been asked to carry out your debriefing. If you’d be available—”

“Yes, Commander,” she replied quickly, making for the door, “I’m available right now.”

In a strange way, she almost felt like she owed Jirel for this one. In the midst of all that awkwardness and passive aggression, and even though she still had no idea what she was going to say, suddenly her uniform and her official duties seemed a whole lot less terrifying. Or, at the very least, if the alternative was to stick around in her current surroundings, she would rather take the debriefing.

She stepped through the door and exited, leaving Jirel and Cameron looking at each other uncertainly.

“I mean,” Jirel managed eventually, “We’re getting it fixed…”

* * * * *

The pain assaulted his senses before he had a chance to even open his eyes. Piercing shards of fire burned into his skull with an intensity that caused him to visibly flinch and squeeze his eyes even more tightly closed. Even as he considered trying to move, he was forced to hold back a violent wave of nausea that coursed through his body.

This, Sunek was forced to admit to himself, is a bitch of a hangover.

He tentatively opened his eyes and looked around, trying to get his bearings. He could immediately see that he was in a strange room. He lay sprawled on the sofa in a small living area, a replicator recessed in the wall to his right and a table and chairs over to the other side. Aside from a couple of carefully cultivated plants by the table, there was no obvious sign of anyone living here.

But as he took in the decor, he realised that he was definitely in the quarters of a Starfleet officer.

Maybe I got lucky, he thought to himself, despite the fact that he could barely remember anything about the previous night after he and Ensigns D’Amato and Taris had switched from cocktails to shots. Although, if that was the case, one vital memory he was missing was who he had got lucky with.

He forced himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his hands through his messy hair. To his left, he heard a door open.

“Morning, spaceman.”

He turned around to see the blue-skinned Ensign Taris, clad in a fresh Starfleet uniform, walking into the room. Despite his weakened state, he immediately tried a winning grin. “So,” he managed, gesturing at her and then back at himself, “I guess we must’ve—”

He paused, swallowing quickly to control a sudden rush of nausea. Even with Sunek’s usual amount of misplaced confidence, he realised it probably wasn’t a good look.

“If you’re gonna throw up, at least try to aim for the bucket.”

This was a new voice. He turned back and saw D’Amato strolling out of a door on the other side of the room, wearing a similarly fresh uniform.

Bunkmates, Sunek couldn’t help but smile to himself, nice.

“Don’t think I’ll be needing that,” he replied, trying to maintain as much dignity as he could.

“Hah,” Taris snorted, as she grabbed her breakfast from the replicator, “You definitely needed it last night.”

D’Amato let out a chuckle as she joined her bunkmate at the table, scoffing down a bowl of muesli. Sunek forced himself to stand and shuffle over to them, his mind still painfully blank. “Hell of a night,” he offered, grasping for something else to say before simply adding, “Hell. Of. A. Night.”

The two ensigns shared a knowing glance. Taris shook her head as D’Amato turned back to him. “You can’t remember anything about last night, can you?”

“How much is there for me to remember?” he ventured with a slight leer, glancing from one woman to the other.

“Ok, no,” Taris jumped in with a roll of her eyes, “Before you start thinking...that, let me help you out with the headlines: You drank yourself under the table back at the bar, to the point that you couldn’t even remember the name of your ship—”

“Never mind where it was parked,” D’Amato added, as Sunek’s leer slowly vanished.

“So, we took pity on you,” Taris continued, “Got you past starbase security even as you tried to start a sing-a-long of your favourite Catullan drinking ballads and carried you all the way back here, only for you to thank us by throwing up for most of the night and then collapsing on the sofa.”

“It was really hot,” D’Amato added with a smirk.

Not for the first time in his life, and certainly not for the last, Sunek inwardly cursed the fact that all of the rich tapestry of emotions he had chosen to embrace as a member of the V’tosh ka’tur included the concept of shame. “Oh,” he managed, his voice sounding as small as he suddenly felt.

The two ensigns chuckled again and continued to eat their breakfast, as Sunek suppressed another stab of pain in his head.

“Feeling rough, I take it?” D’Amato smiled.

“Like I’ve got a wild sehlat stamping on my head,” he grimaced, “Why are you two so chipper?”

Taris stood and returned her empty plate to the replicator. “Are you kidding? I felt worse than you when I woke up.”

Sunek looked baffled. D’Amato smiled and gestured to her blue undershirt. “Perk of working in the medical wing,” she explained, “I fix us up with a neat little hypospray. Part anti-inflammatory, part mood stabiliser, part antiemetic. The Galaxy-class starship of hangover cures. Got introduced to it by a bunkmate back at the Academy.”

“Fascinating,” Sunek managed sarcastically, as he rubbed his head, “Wouldn’t have any of that going spare, would you?”

“Sorry,” the young ensign grinned, a touch of wickedness in her eyes, “Starfleet only.”

“Now,” Taris added, gesturing to the door, “We’ve got duty shifts to get to, so you need to scoot.”

Sunek, now feeling a whole range of emotions, none of them especially good, gently hobbled over to the door. “Just one thing,” he said, forcing his cheeky side back to the surface with all his willpower.

“What?”

The Vulcan gestured to the three of them and grinned. “This totally counts, right? If my friends ask what happened?”

Feeling slightly better already, Sunek chuckled to himself as he ducked out of the door, moments before an empty muesli bowl smashed against the wall where he had been standing.

Part 2B

Part Two (Cont'd)

Natasha sat and waited, idly tapping her foot on the floor.

She was on her own in a large meeting room somewhere in the bowels of this particular dome of Starbase 216, where she had been led a few minutes earlier by a very polite Bolian ensign. The room was dominated by a large rectangular table, which was surrounded on all sides by high-backed chairs. The only accoutrement on the polished surface of the table was a small cup of coffee the same ensign had provided for her before he had scuttled off.

And since the Bolian had left, she had been alone. With her thoughts. Which wasn't a particularly good place for her to be these days.

As she sipped her drink, trying to ignore the reflection of her uniform in the table, she wondered if this was all part of the debrief. Making her sweat before the questions began. She forced herself to calm down. This was a briefing, she reminded herself, not an interrogation. She hadn't done anything wrong.

No, she corrected herself, as the blood-soaked face of the young ensign flashed into her mind for a moment, that wasn't true either.

In the months since the destruction of the Navajo, she had been given plenty of time to think about that one officer she had left behind. She knew there was nothing she could have done for him. You didn't need years of medical training to know that he had been moments from death. But she equally knew that wasn't the point. Even without the Hippocratic Oath she had sworn to uphold, her basic Starfleet training should have told her to at least try and get the mortally wounded man into the escape pod with her.

Instead, she had deserted him. She had left him to die. She had run away, she had run all the way here. And she was still running.

Her dark thoughts were interrupted as the meeting room door opened. A single figure entered, clutching a padd.

"Lieutenant Kinsen," the man said with a formal tone, "Apologies for keeping you waiting."

He was a tall, rangy humanoid, with long jet black hair tied back in a ponytail. He walked smartly over to the table and sat down opposite her, placing the padd on the table. Three pips on his collar belied his rank, and his deep black eyes belied the fact that he was Betazoid. She immediately felt uncomfortable under the gaze of a telepath.

"Part-Betazoid," he said, without prompting, causing her to stifle a gasp, "Sorry, I felt your mood change. Don't worry, I'm just here to debrief you, not read your mind."

She managed a slight smile and shifted in her seat, not feeling reassured.

"I'm Commander Javin Bari," he continued, "And the purpose of this meeting is to establish as many details as we can about the Navajo. We had no idea there would even be a survivor to talk to, and in lieu of the black box, any further details you can provide might help bring closure to the crew's families."

She nodded, trying to block out any thoughts about the missing black box, which she knew had been picked up by a group of rogue Jem'Hadar. Probably best not to get into all that, she told herself. "I understand, sir," she replied, "I'll tell you everything I can."

If the empath on the other side of the table realised she was lying, his face didn't betray it. "Ok then," he smiled warmly, gesturing to her, "How about you start at the beginning."

She suddenly felt excessively warm, stifling in the layers of her uniform. She licked her lips, and started to talk.

"We were in the Kesmet sector, near Cardassian space. Captain D'Vora's orders were to rendezvous with the fifth fleet. It was oddly quiet, given the last few weeks we'd had. The Navajo had been part of a tactical wing making runs at weakened Dominion supply lines after the Battle of Ricktor Prime."

"I see," Bari nodded, checking his padd, "Forgive me, but you know a surprising amount of tactical information for a junior medical officer."

She stared blankly down at the table, her eyes drawn to the reflection of the Starfleet insignia on her chest. "When you're the one that treats the wounded in a war," she replied quietly, "You start to make it your business to know when they're going to arrive."

Bari nodded in understanding and gestured for her to continue. She took a sip of her coffee and calmed her breathing.

"The Jem'Hadar ships must have come out of nowhere," she half-whispered as she recalled the fateful moments, "One minute, I was returning to my quarters after my shift, the next the ship was being torn apart around me. Bulkheads collapsing, conduits exploding...I don't even think the bridge crew had time to raise the shields."

She paused and took a couple more deep breaths. Bari remained silent, waiting for her.

"I tried to get to sickbay," she said eventually, "But there was no way through. Main power went out almost immediately. The turbolifts were offline, and it would have taken hours to get there through the Jeffries tubes."

Bari picked up the padd and made a note of something. She suppressed a flinch and ran a finger under the collar of her undershirt, reminding herself that part-Betazoids could only read emotions, not thoughts. Assuming he's telling the truth about his heritage, she thought wryly.

“So I tried to do what I could. I walked the deck, looking for casualties, and...then Captain D’Vora ordered us to abandon ship. It can’t have been more than a couple of minutes since the attack had begun—”

She stopped and tried to compose herself. Bari set the padd down and focused on her with an understanding look. “And so you made it to an escape pod,” he said gently.

“Yes,” she said, her voice now hoarse. She forced the ensign’s face out of her head.

“And...nobody else made it?”

She looked down at the table, her eyes again found the reflection of her uniform. Her stifling, suffocating uniform.

“I don’t know if any more pods escaped,” she said eventually, “But the Navajo was destroyed moments after my pod—I mean, I barely made it out of the explosion in time. I was lucky, I guess.”

Because I ran, she thought to herself, while everyone else stayed.

She dismissed the thought as fast as she could. Bari cocked his head slightly, and she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d dismissed it fast enough.

“Well,” he said eventually, “Thank you, Lieutenant. I’m sure this must have been difficult for you.”

She didn’t look up from the table, but she nodded. Despite everything else she was feeling, she felt herself relaxing slightly as they reached the end of the questions.

“One final thing,” Bari added, tensing her up all over again, “Your escape pod would have had room for at least, what, a dozen crewmen? I appreciate the state the ship must have been in, there was no time for any sort of organised evacuation, but...were there no other crew members in the immediate vicinity?”

The question cut through her like a phaser blast. Time felt like it had stopped. She kept staring at her reflection, the pips on her collar, the combadge on her chest. She felt sick.

As the silence lingered, she forced herself to look back up, at the inky black pupils of the Starfleet commander opposite her. A senior officer, asking for the truth.

“No, sir,” she replied.

Bari stared at her for a few more moments, then noted something on the padd again. She felt her stomach constrict into a knot. Part of her willed herself to retract her answer. To finally stop running and tell the truth.

Before she could act, she heard the door to the meeting room open. She didn’t look over, but did wonder whether it was a security detail, one that Bari had just sent for via the padd. But whoever it was, Bari looked surprised to see them. He stood up from the table and snapped to attention. Natasha turned and was equally surprised to see Admiral Jenner approaching them. She quickly stood up as well.

“At ease, both of you,” the admiral muttered, “Commander Bari, is the debrief complete?”

Even with the additional powers of deduction granted by his heritage, Bari was still confused by this question. “Um, yes, sir,” he affirmed, “I was just finishing up.”

“Very good,” Jenner nodded, “I relieve you.”

Bari didn’t move, still confused. Natasha felt equally perplexed.

“Is there a problem, Commander?” Jenner continued, as he sat down in one of the available chairs.

“No, sir. It’s just—”

“Good. Have your summary on my desk by 1400 hours.”

After another long confused pause, Bari acquiesced, bowing slightly and exiting the room. As the doors closed, Jenner turned to Natasha and gestured for her to retake her seat. She did so, slightly uncertainly.

“Lieutenant,” Jenner grunted, “Just so you know, the following conversation is not part of your debrief. Furthermore, this entire conversation will be completely off the record. Do you understand?”

Natasha swallowed hard. She had no idea where the admiral was going with this. “Yes, sir,” she managed, “I understand.”

“Good.”

Jenner leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands together in front of him on the table, and lowered his voice to a dark whisper.

“I need to ask you some questions,” he continued, “About Jirel Vincent.”

Part 2C

Part Two (Cont'd)

Klath walked into the familiar confines of the bar he and Sunek had been in the night before. Though this time he wasn't looking for relaxation. He was looking for combat.

The Klingon picked his way through the few Kraterites that made up the afternoon's patrons and headed straight for the bar area itself.

Denella had been able to get him the information he needed from the starbase's records, and he had spent most of the day so far poring over them. He had been looking for anything out of the ordinary in the manifest of transports, starships and Kraterite vessels that had arrived in orbit or requested landing clearance over the last few days.

He knew that anyone looking for him could just as easily get to the planet by booking passage on a freighter, or stowing away on a passenger transport and keeping their name off the official records, but he was betting that whomever was after him would need more of a base of operations, as well as a quick and easy escape route.

And eventually, he had found a lead. A single Klingon shuttle that had been tracked to a landing site near the local Kraterite town. The shuttle's clearances had checked out, so nobody at the starbase or within the civilian Kraterite authorities had questioned it. And as far as Klath was concerned, it was exactly what he had been expecting to find. Now, he just needed some more details of who he might be facing.

And so, after managing to sneak away from the Bounty while Denella was distracted by the ongoing repairs, he had made a beeline for the same bar. He had already asked her to do too much, and didn't want his friends getting any more involved with this matter.

He reached the bar area and gestured to one of the unblinking Kraterite bar staff, who scuttled over with the uncomfortable gait that seemed endemic to their species. Klath stopped the Kraterite before they could pass him a drinks menu.

"I wish to access the security records of this establishment," he stated flatly.

It was hard to tell how the Kraterite took this, given how difficult it was to read their unconventional features at the best of times, but it chattered slightly before shaking its head. Klath scowled and leaned in closer, speaking slightly louder in a somewhat prehistoric attempt to overcome their communication issue.

"Perhaps there is someone else I can speak to," he pressed, "Where is the owner?"

The Kraterite chattered some more, glancing from side to side at some of the other staff nearby, but didn't appear any more amenable to helping him. Instead, it tried again to push the drinks menu into his hands.

Klath's scowl deepened, realising that he was getting nowhere. A more skilled or patient negotiator might have persisted with the softly-softly approach, or perhaps tried harder to find a way around his current communication problem. A truly committed diplomat might even have accepted the offer to order a drink and spent more time studying the Kraterites to gain a deeper understanding of their wider customs and mannerisms.

But Klath wasn't an especially skilled or patient negotiator, and he certainly wasn't a diplomat. So he opted for a different - but in his opinion, equally effective - means of progressing past their current impasse.

He turned and walked a few paces over to a nearby table, where a couple of Kraterites were quietly chirping to each other and enjoying a couple of disconcertingly-hued drinks. He turned back to the barman, to ensure that he still had the Kraterite's attention, then lifted the table up and overturned it with a single movement. The two glasses smashed on the hard flooring, and the pair of Kraterites, finding their conversation so rudely interrupted, jumped back in shock and clicked angrily in Klath's direction.

As the bar staff started to rush around in panic behind him, the Klingon calmly walked over to the next table and repeated the process. Another set of glasses went tumbling, another group of Kraterites had their afternoon ruined.

Klath started to feel that he was making real progress.

After the fourth upturned table, and with the bar now in a state of mild chaos in the face of his ongoing impromptu redecoration of the premises, he heard a louder and more angry clicking sound from behind him. He turned to find himself looking at a new Kraterite, this one substantially larger than the others, wielding a small, stubby wooden club in one of its hands and clicking its mandibles together with aggression.

Because of his decision not to quietly observe the Kraterites, he couldn't tell for sure, but Klath suspected this was the owner, unsurprisingly irate at the damage being caused to his establishment and eager to intimidate the unruly patron into moving on. Except, as the Kraterite uncertainly stood its ground and looked up at the much taller Klingon, it wasn't clear who was doing the intimidating.

Klath's scowl transformed into a satisfied smile as he drew his bat'leth and squared up to the bat-wielding figure in front of him. The weapon in the Kraterite's hand started to shake slightly.

"I wish to access the security records of this establishment," Klath stated again.

A few minutes later, Klath had been brusquely led into the back office of the establishment, and was sat in front of a rudimentary computer console, with full access to the bar's security records.

Diplomacy, he mused to himself, is overrated.

As the Kraterite owner watched on nervously from the corner of the room, he scanned through the recorded footage from the night before. It didn't take him long to locate the footage of himself with the mysterious woman, and despite his unfamiliarity with the controls, he was soon able to complete a scan of her movements inside the premises throughout the night. It helped that she didn't seem to have spent all that much time in the bar at all, as he had suspected.

If she was an assassin, spending too long around one of her targets would have attracted too much suspicion. Even without Klath's sixth sense picking up on him being watched. Instead, she had spent just long enough to locate him, deliver her deadly addition to his drink, and leave.

Unfortunately, that didn't give him much to go on, but as he scoured the rest of the footage, something caught his eye. As the screen reached the point in the night when he had smacked the drink away from Ensign Taris, on the other side of the room, a new figure had entered. One who departed as soon as he saw what Klath was doing. A Klingon male.

He did his best to zoom in on the figure, and even with the rudimentary equipment available, he could see the scar running down the Klingon's face. He emitted a low growl of recognition, as he downloaded the files to a small padd and stood up, turning back to the Kraterite in the corner.

"Thank you," he boomed, "You have been most helpful."

He stalked out of the back office, leaving the Kraterite to chitter to itself.

The Kraterite language was one of the most complicated in the galaxy for humanoids to understand, indeed negotiations over the planet's entry into the Federation had taken longer than any other in history not because of any specific requests or particular points of contention, but simply because it had taken that long to complete and verify the nuance of the translations for all relevant formal documents.

Still, the Kraterite bar owner's current chattering was more readily translatable, as it watched the looming Klingon stalk off and considered the minor devastation he had left behind.

It roughly translated as: I'm getting too old for this.

* * * * *

Denella was still having trouble concentrating on the repairs.

Not because of any further unwanted attention from Lieutenant Kapadia. In fact, since her choice comments to him the night before, he seemed to be making a particular effort to stay out of her way. Aside from a formal couple of check-ins to keep track of their respective work schedules, she had barely crossed paths with the Starfleet man all day.

Instead, today she had something different to worry about. It hadn't taken her long to discover that Klath had sneaked away from the ship at some point during the day without warning, and that now he was on the planet somewhere facing an apparent assassin by himself.

A warrior does not let a friend face danger alone indeed, she scoffed to herself.

It wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. And when Klath had his mind set on something becoming a solo mission for him alone, he usually made sure that it was. But that didn't mean she wasn't worried. And it felt wrong to just be casually carrying on with her meticulous repair work when he was out there somewhere.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The voice caught her by surprise, and snapped her back to reality. She whirled around to see Jirel standing a few steps away from where she was working on the port side of the Bounty's hull. She also realised she could smell a faint burning smell, but she kept her focus on the Trill.

"Why are you creeping up on people like that?" she shot back.

"Um, I asked first," he replied, gesturing behind her, "Further question, why the hell are you burning a hole through the ship?"

She turned around to discover the source of the burning smell. As she had been daydreaming about her own worries, it seemed that she had indeed managed to burn a deep additional gouge into the ship's scarred hull with the laser cutter she was wielding. In shock, she flicked the cutter off, said a silent apology to her poor ship, and turned back to Jirel.

"I'm not—! I mean, as it turns out, I am doing that," she conceded, "It's just...I'm worried about him."

"Yeah, me too," Jirel nodded in understanding, "But Natasha says they're divorced, so—"

"Hold on," Denella said, thoroughly confused, "We might be worried about two different people here. I'm talking about Klath?"

"Oh, yeah," Jirel replied, not entirely convincingly, "Me too?"

The Orion woman studied the Trill for a moment. She was glad that he had finally been here to help for most of the day, but it was clear that he wasn't exactly on top of his game. He'd been working slowly and ponderously, as if he was being sidetracked by something playing on his mind as well. The way he was now squirming rather backed that idea up.

“But, um, yeah, Klath, mmhmm,” Jirel said in quick succession, before forcing himself to calm down, “I mean, you know him though, right? He goes through these little Rambo phases every now and again.”

Without the dubious benefits of orphan Jirel’s upbringing back in Colorado, Denella didn’t have enough of a grasp on ancient Earth culture to understand that reference, but she managed a nod. “I know. But this time it feels...different. This isn’t just some little fracas or a bat’leth duel. Someone actually tried to poison him.”

Jirel nodded, having heard all about Klath’s experience in the bar.

“It’s just—Could you try talking to Admiral Jenner?” she persisted, “I dunno, you’ve got this whole understanding, so maybe he can spare some security officers to go track him down?”

He maintained a reasonable poker face this time, not wanting to reveal to his engineer how badly his latest interaction with the admiral had gone. How stretched that particular understanding was starting to feel. “Sure,” he managed eventually, “I guess I can try and—”

Before he could complete his sentence, they heard footsteps approaching. They turned in unison to see a trio of Starfleet security officers marching across the landing pad towards them. None of them were the same as the officers in his and Natasha’s earlier escort, but they all had their weapons raised in a similar manner.

Jirel looked back at Denella, wondering if even his misplaced confidence could stretch as far as making this out to be more than a coincidence. “Um,” he offered to her weakly, “Surprise...?”

She didn’t look convinced. As the officers reached them, the leader of the trio, a stout human woman with short cropped blonde hair and an expression that suggested only business, surveyed the pair of them. Jirel, eager to defuse the tension, stepped forward with his hands up, assuming that this was another welcoming committee from the admiral.

“Ok, fine,” he said with a grin, “Take me to your leader. And again, no need for the phasers.”

The lead officer fixed him with a withering look, before gesturing to the Orion woman standing next to him. “These are for her.”

Feeling oddly hurt again, though for the opposite reason to the last security detail he had come up against, he turned to Denella. “Um, what the hell—?”

“If you’ll come with me ma’am,” the officer interrupted, gesturing the grease-streaked Orion back the way they had come.

“Me?” Denella half-scoffed, “What have I done to deserve all this?”

“You are charged with violation of Federation property, unauthorised access of Starfleet records and deliberate misuse of a starbase data stream uplink.”

Jirel looked back at Denella in shock, as the officers walked off, taking the Orion woman with them and leaving Jirel alone. Wondering how exactly he was going to spin this one with the admiral.

Part 2D

Part Two (Cont'd)

The Officers' club was every bit as luxurious as Natasha had been expecting.

High up on A Deck in one of the secondary modules of the starbase, right at the top of the dome and completely encased in transparent aluminium, the view was astonishing whichever way you looked. Especially as the twin suns were now setting on the horizon, casting warming red and yellow glows across the landscape which merged into a beautiful spectrum of orange hues.

And that was before you got to the food, a full a la carte menu prepared not in a replicator, but by a team of chefs pulled from the four corners of the quadrant. For a mere lieutenant like Natasha, it was a privileged experience indeed.

Judging by Cameron's knowing smile as she tucked into her Tarkelian tea-infused soufflé with Thalian chocolate dipping sauce, she suspected that he knew that all too well.

"Good, right?" he said, gesturing to her half-eaten dessert with a fork loaded down with a generous helping of his own Mapa bread and butter pudding.

"I know this word has been misused for centuries," she said, her mouth still full, "But I'm happy to confirm that this is literally the best thing I've eaten all year."

He chuckled as she finished her mouthful and took a sip of the sweet wine that their Benzite sommelier had explained at great length was the ideal pairing for her particular choice of dessert. She didn't want to admit as much to her ex-husband, but she had needed something like this. Not just the meal, and not necessarily the company, but a genuine moment of indulgence and pleasure, in amongst all of her angst and worry.

The questions that the admiral had asked her after her debriefing still preoccupied her, even while enjoying her meal. They had all been about Jirel, but none of them had been about anything specific, or anything important as far as she could tell. Simply questions about his ship, his crew, and his general frame of mind as she had seen it during their time together. If she thought that his off the record grilling of her was going to be the start of a thrilling unofficial black ops investigation into some sort of smuggling ring Jirel was suspected of being a part of, she ended up being very disappointed.

Across the table from her, Cameron finished his own mouthful of food and toyed with the remaining dessert in front of him for a moment. "It really has been good to see you, Nat," he said, "I know things...didn't exactly work out for us—"

"Yeah, I was meaning to ask, how is Lieutenant Ramirez?"

For the first time all evening, Cameron's warm demeanour dropped momentarily, replaced by a grimace and a slight look of shame. Natasha didn't necessarily want to dwell on that aspect of the end of their marriage, and the role that a certain junior lieutenant who had served under Cameron onboard the USS Ticonderoga had played in it, but she did take some satisfaction for having briefly knocked him for six.

"Fair enough, I deserved that," he nodded, setting his fork down and wiping his mouth with a napkin, "It's just that...when I heard what happened to the Navajo, I really thought you were gone."

It was her turn to suppress a grimace, simultaneously forcing the face of the ensign to the back of her mind. She put her spoon down, despite there still being plenty of her delicious dessert remaining. She didn't feel hungry any more. "I don't like to think about that. About what happened."

He nodded in understanding, as she drained her wine glass and composed herself. She felt like a traitor all over again, sitting in such lavish surroundings, eating the feast that had been presented to her, when so many more deserving officers had perished out there.

"Truth is," she admitted, gesturing down to her uniform, "I don't like thinking about any of this any more. The wars, the killing, the..."

She paused. The ensign's face was going nowhere yet.

On the other side of the table, Cameron considered her words as he took a sip from his own wine glass. "Listen," he said eventually, "Things are gonna change. We've come through a lot these last few years, but I was in a briefing just this morning where a half a dozen admirals talked at length about the dawn of a new age of exploration for the fleet."

Natasha suppressed a snort of derision. "Yeah, they always say that. And then, the next thing you know, there's a coup on Romulus, or Vulcan explodes, or something—"

"Nothing like that's gonna happen, trust me."

She looked back at him, seeing something kind in his eyes that triggered memories of a time before she felt like this. Before the war and the Navajo, before Kesmet IV and the ensign in the corridor, before even Lieutenant Ramirez. "Why do you care this much about what I think?" she asked softly.

"Well, I was gonna save this for the digestifs. But I've just been assigned to a new posting. USS Copernicus. Nebula-class."

"Congratulations?"

"Let me finish," he smiled patiently, "Our first mission is a six month mapping survey in the Gamma Quadrant. And I know what you're

gonna say, but it's safe now. The Founders are no longer a threat, the war's over. Besides, we're not interested in Dominion space. We're headed to the unknown, unexplored space, where no one has gone before. Remember that?"

"Rings a bell."

"Thought it might. And...it just so happens that the Copernicus still has half a dozen positions to fill in her medical staff."

He gestured at her, and the blue undershirt she was wearing. For a moment, she was lost for words. And for a moment, she wondered whether there really was a future for her here, a future where she still wore this uniform.

"Cameron," she sighed eventually, "If this is your way of trying to make up for—"

"It's not. I promise."

She looked over at him uncertainly. He pushed his plate away and wrung his hands together. "Look, I screwed up, I know that. And I know there's no way I can ever fix that, nor should there be. But I also know how good a doctor you are, and after what you've been through, you deserve this, Nat."

His words were clearly meant as a comfort. He had no way of knowing how hollow they sounded to her.

She looked back down at the unfinished plate of food in front of her, trying to keep the darker thoughts from bubbling up all over again. "I'm not sure I do," she said eventually.

"Come on," he pressed, "I know you can be modest about your work. Too modest, if you ask me."

She stared into the remains of her soufflé, trying to picture herself back onboard a starship, in her uniform, alongside her fellow officers.

"I mean, what else would you do?" he pressed, "You gonna go back to Earth? You'll go stir crazy and you know it. Or, what, were you planning on bunking up with that Trill space cadet?"

Whatever semblance of a spell he was starting to cast over her was instantly broken. She looked back up at him, noticing the dismissive tone he had used and the familiar superior smile that was creeping through on the corners of his mouth. The one she really hated.

"Don't even dare do that," she snapped, "This isn't about me 'bunking up' with anyone, Cameron, for god's sake."

He wiped the attitude from his face, clearly seeing his mistake. She stood up and straightened her uniform.

"I'm sorry, Nat. I just meant—"

"I know exactly what you meant. And I've dealt with a lot of stupid crap from that Trill space cadet this last day or so. But I thought you knew better than that. Apparently not."

She felt the eyes of several other diners in the room on her, and elected not to make any more of a scene. Instead, she turned and made for the exit, swerving around the perplexed Benzite sommelier as she did so. Cameron considered calling out. But he didn't want to make a scene either. He'd given her the offer, that was enough for now. He reluctantly returned to his dessert.

Natasha kept walking. She couldn't think about the offer, she had too much other stuff to think about.

She thought about the admiral's questions about Jirel. She thought about Commander Bari's questions about the last moments of the Navajo. Most of all, she thought about the face of the ensign in the corridor. The one she had left behind.

She looked down at her uniform, and felt numb.

* * * * *

The heavy stone struck the edge of the blade, sending a shower of sparks out into the night.

Klath perched calmly on a rock, overlooking the main Kraterite township below, and ran the smooth grey stone in his hand down the edge of his bat'leth, carefully sharpening his favourite weapon.

Darkness had well and truly descended by this point, and in the absence of any more technological solution, he had hastily set up a campfire using branches from the surrounding trees to keep the worst of the cold away. He knew that he might be on his personal mission for some time, and this had seemed as good a place to set up camp as any.

On the other side of the crackling flames, she started to come around where she sat awkwardly propped up on a rock, her hands and feet tied up. She saw the Klingon at work on his bladed weapon, but elected not to cry out.

Although she felt groggy, she tried to piece together where she was and how she had got there from what little she could remember.

As far as she could recall, she had been making her way back to Kolar's shuttle after spending the evening indulging herself around the Kraterite township, trying to make the most of being stuck here until her employer had completed his plan.

With Kolar still withholding payment of the full amount of latinum they had discussed, she couldn't afford passage away from the planet. She

wasn't even sure if she'd ever see the full payment now, given her failure, but either way she was stuck having to wait for Kolar to be ready to leave to get anywhere, regardless of whether he was going to pay her in full or not.

Even though she was sure there was no affection intended, Kolar had at least warned her about straying too far and spending too much time in the open, at least until he told her that it was safe to do so. He seemed to know enough about their final target to know that she shouldn't take any chances with him. But she ignored him.

And so she had spent the evening out and about in the township, trying to find some sort of entertainment on a planet with only a Federation starbase and an indigenous people that spoke a virtually incomprehensible insectoid language to choose from.

She had failed.

And then, she remembered. As she had been making her way back down a mostly empty street on the outskirts of the township, ready for another uncomfortable night of fitful sleep on the deck of Kolar's shuttle, the attack had come. She hadn't seen where it had come from. She hadn't even realised that there was anyone following her. But she had felt something heavy hit the back of her head. As she watched Klath continue to sharpen his blade, she noted the blunt side of the bat'leth in his hands, and the specific mystery of what she had been struck by seemed to be resolved.

On the other side of the fire, Klath didn't look up. But he sensed that she had stirred. "You were sloppy," he grunted as he worked on the blade.

She still didn't say anything, instead working on gently testing the material binding her hands together for any sign of weaknesses.

"For an assassin, your actions were too obvious," he continued, striking the stone across the blade again, "The clothing, the immediate focus on the drinks, the...suggestive behaviour."

"Worked well enough on the others," she replied eventually.

That was enough for Klath to stop his work and look over at her, the flickering firelight accentuating the deep scowl on his face. "The crew of the Grontar," he replied. It was a statement, not a question.

"Sounds like you've been expecting this."

Klath looked down into the flames. The reflection of the fire flickered in his eyes as he recalled something from deep within his memory. He felt the rush of shame at the same time. The shame that he had kept buried inside him for many years. The shame from the Sons of Marlek.

"All of them?" he asked eventually, focusing back on his prisoner.

She nodded back, having given up on trying to find a weakness in the ropes.

Klath growled quietly and stood up, gripping the freshly sharpened bat'leth in his hand and stepping around the fire to where she sat. As he got nearer, she instinctively squirmed to try and get away, her eyes entirely focused on the weapon in his hands.

"I should kill you," he said as he walked.

She didn't reply.

He stood next to her and looked her over, still not sure of her species. As he remained frozen in place, she tensed up further, expecting the worst. He moved around behind her and brought the blade into position. She closed her eyes.

He swung the weapon down with practised precision, knowing exactly how to manoeuvre the swing to finish the job in a single blow.

She gasped as she felt the bonds on her arms split apart. He walked back around to her front and crouched down until they were eye to eye.

"Go," he muttered.

She remained where she was, her shoulders still tense, sitting up against the rock, unsure whether or not this was some sort of trick.

"Go back to your Klingon master," he continued, more forcefully, "And take a message to him."

She watched on in confusion, as he stood up and slowly paced back over to the other side of the fire.

"Tell him that if he wishes to kill me, as he has killed the others from the Grontar, then he must do it himself. No more hiding behind assassins and poisons."

He spat the words out. She flinched slightly, but nodded.

"Tell him that when he is ready, I will be waiting."

He reached the rock where he had been sitting and perched back on it. She hurriedly grappled with the bonds around her feet, untying them and unsteadily standing.

Klath watched as she turned and made off into the night. He conceded to himself that there was a possibility that she might just try to escape from the planet by other means without delivering his message, but he was fairly certain she was still waiting on a payment. And so she would go back to the scarred Klingon. And he would come to Klath.

After a moment of further contemplation, and after subduing a further bout of shame, he returned to the task of sharpening the blade of his

weapon.

Preparing himself for battle.

End of Part Two

Part 3A

Part Three

"Help me!"

The familiar words and the haunted face flitted across her consciousness. But this time, for once, Natasha felt oddly calm.

I should have tried this earlier, she thought.

She hadn't been able to get any sleep overnight, and in frustration, she had decided that maybe she should try to come here. And, in a way, it was working.

She leaned back and let the cool breeze blow gently on her face, closing her eyes and trying to maintain this level of calm for as long as possible. She sat alone on the hilltop, overlooking a vast sprawling city. The skyline was a bemusing and beguiling hodgepodge of buildings, from towering modern skyscrapers to quaint stone buildings dripping with history. Below her, figures walked this way and that through the park, talking, laughing and generally enjoying life.

This time, she really was home. At least, a fictional version of home.

Yet, although being here brought her some fleeting calm against her dreams, she still felt numb.

"Nice view."

She turned to see Jirel leaning on the holodeck arch, the door back to the corridors of Starbase 216 closing shut behind him.

"How did you find me?" she asked, with only the slightest bit of warmth.

"Come on," the Trill smiled, before clearing his throat and calling out into the air, "Computer, locate Natasha Kinsen."

"Natasha Kinsen is in holodeck nine," the emotionless reply came.

"See?" Jirel gestured, "You Starfleet lot want more alone time, you really need to do something about that."

She couldn't help but smile, as he walked over and flopped down next to her. They shared a moment of silence as they contemplated the skyline in front of them. "London," she said eventually, "Or at least, London circa 2355."

"I've never been," Jirel admitted, "Always thought it'd be bigger."

"This was where I grew up," she continued wistfully, "While my father was lecturing archaeology at the Royal Academy. I used to think this place was the centre of the universe."

"I've heard that about Londoners," Jirel replied with a grin, "Hey, is it true that you still use those old 23rd century transporter pads to get everywhere?"

"Nah," she shook her head, "There's a couple of them over near Trafalgar Square, but they're really just there for the tourists."

Jirel nodded and looked back out, suddenly finding himself forgetting what he had actually come back to the starbase to do. Finding it hard to leave.

"I guess," she continued, without prompting, "This park is where it happened."

"Ugh. No happy story ever started with that sentence."

"I was ten years old. Me and a few friends were playing right around here. We were a nightmare bunch of kids, always getting into scrapes, climbing trees, jumping off walls. All of that. One time, someone even got hold of her dad's stun pistol. That was a painful afternoon."

Jirel smiled, now listening to her intently. His reason for coming to the starbase seeming less important with every passing moment. Whatever it had been.

"But one day," she said, gesturing to a tree below them, "We were climbing that tree down there, and this little boy fell. Probably dropped about ten feet. Pretty big fall for a child. He wasn't hurt badly, but you'd never have known that from the noise he was making."

She paused, smiling to herself as she remembered the scene. "Anyway, the others just ran off. They all panicked, I guess. But, I dunno, I just felt an urge to help him. He'd cut his knee, twisted his ankle, banged his head, and I...patched him up. Best I could do, anyway."

"At ten years old?" Jirel asked, genuinely impressed. She nodded.

"Used some fabric from my dress to bandage his knee, used some ice from the drink I'd had to soothe his head, even made him a crutch out of an old tree branch so we could hobble home. And that's when it happened, I guess. When I decided I wanted to be a doctor. Something about helping that kid, stopping the pain, fixing what was broken, it...felt good."

She idly pulled a handful of grass out of the ground and threw it up into the artificial breeze, watching it cascade back to the ground. "I miss that feeling," she said in a quiet voice.

Another silence descended. Jirel looked over and saw the sadness in her expression. "I offered you a job on the Bounty, remember?" he said with a hopeful smile, "Plenty of broken things to fix with us."

"I'm a doctor, not a psychiatrist," she replied, mustering a smile.

She was slightly surprised to see that the usually jovial Trill didn't seem overly amused this time. A question popped into her head, but she decided to ignore it, turning back to the wider view and electing to go with a different question instead. One that had been playing around on her mind ever since they had arrived at the starbase.

"How do you know Admiral Jenner?"

Now it was Jirel's turn to look out at the view. He contemplated a typical joke answer, but he felt that she deserved better than that. Though maybe not the full truth. "You remember back on that planet you led us to, when we were picking our way through all of the Soraxx's little tricks and traps? That part where the tricorder broke, we were about to die, and I just went for it."

"I remember," she replied with a snort, "They don't teach that at Starfleet Academy."

"I know."

He looked back and smiled enigmatically. It took her a moment to process what he was saying. When she didn't she couldn't help but snort even louder at how preposterous it sounded. "You? You went to Starfleet Academy?"

"Class of '59," he said, with a misplaced look of pride that almost immediately collapsed, "I mean, I don't think I can technically say that, what with me flunking out and everything, but..."

She stared at him, shaking her head slightly in disbelief.

"Hey, I told you I was adopted by a Starfleet officer, right? And what else do kids of Starfleet officers do but follow in their footsteps?"

"So, the admiral—?"

"Was one of the lecturers while I was there. Before he got his extra pips, of course. And, even though I...didn't make it. We somehow kept crossing each other's paths. And..."

He drifted off, losing track of how he planned to end this particular story.

"And now he's sending you on recovery missions?" Natasha asked with a shake of her head, "I'm sorry, but there's absolutely no way that's true."

She couldn't exactly picture the scruffy Trill lounging in front of her in a cadet uniform, diligently attending astrophysics lectures and first contact seminars. Even for a single semester.

"Pretty much," Jirel shrugged, smiling back breezily, "Gotta keep hold of a few secrets though, right?"

The ensign's face flashed into her mind for the first time since they had started talking. She suppressed the instinctive flinch. "Right," she nodded simply.

Jirel relaxed and leaned back on the grass, having now entirely forgotten his reasons for coming to the starbase in the first place.

"Guess that does explain why he asked about you," she said eventually, causing him to sit back up and take note.

"Who?"

"Admiral Jenner. He asked me about you. Yesterday."

"Huh," Jirel managed, "He did, did he?"

As he considered this, he suddenly remembered the real reason he was here.

"Crap. I've gotta go."

"Wh—?" she asked, as he stood up, "Why?"

"No biggie," he shrugged as he left her alone on the grass, "It's just...Denella's been arrested."

He walked back through the holodeck arch and left her to wallow in her past.

* * * * *

Sunek whistled a jaunty tune as he strolled down the Bounty's cargo ramp.

He wasn't entirely sure where the rest of his crewmates were. He hadn't seen any of them since yesterday, and even then had been trying to avoid them lest he ended up getting involved in any of the repair work. But equally, he didn't really care where they were. Not after the

message he had just received.

As he reached the bottom of the ramp, he was approached by a frustrated man wearing a Starfleet engineering uniform. Lieutenant Ravi Kapadia hadn't had the dubious pleasure of meeting Sunek yet, but at this point he just needed to speak to anyone.

"Excuse me?" he managed, trying to match pace with the cheery Vulcan as he sauntered across the landing pad, and trying not to ask too many questions as to why this Vulcan was cheery or sauntering in the first place.

"Sorry, can't stop," Sunek replied, patting Kapadia on the shoulder, "Got a hot date."

Kapadia's brow furrowed in further confusion. "It's just, I need to run through some of these repair plans that your engineer - Denella? - provided for me, and I can't seem to find her anywhere?"

Sunek stopped on a dime, forcing Kapadia to come to a quick stop himself.

"Wait," the Vulcan said thoughtfully, "Does it still count as a hot date, singular, if there's two of them?"

Kapadia opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't actually think of anything to say to that. After a further moment of contemplation about his metaphysical conundrum, Sunek shrugged. "Well, whatever. Keep up the good work, Lieutenant!"

Sunek patted Kapadia's shoulder again and shot him a beaming smile, then resumed his jaunty march across the landing pad, leaving the Starfleet officer staring at his wake.

A short while later, Sunek was on the outskirts of the Kraterite township, still whistling to himself. His destination was the same bar as the night before, the one that the text-only message from Ensign Taris and Ensign D'Amato had said to meet them at, from 1700 hours.

While Sunek would never admit as much to anyone, there was a significant disadvantage to his life embracing his emotional side. It was something that went beyond the simple fact that plenty of the emotions were more painful than he had appreciated before his time with the V'tosh ka'tur. It was more of a butterfly effect-style pattern of mistakes that his emotions would often generate.

For example, had Sunek not experienced the strong emotion of humiliation when he had woken up hungover in the shared living area of two attractive Starfleet ensigns, he wouldn't have been in quite such a foul mood ever since.

And, had his mood been better, he might have cast a more critical eye over the text message that he had received. The one he was now acting on. He might have questioned why two Starfleet officers would be communicating with him via text, rather than a proper comms link. He may also have questioned why these particular officers were getting in touch at all, given how anyone could have objectively seen how little they were interested in him.

But Sunek was humiliated, and in a foul mood. So when he saw the message, a message that seemed to validate him in just the way he wanted to be validated, his ego did a backflip and his libido lit up like a dabo wheel.

And so, instead of dispassionately analysing the situation, Sunek's uncontrolled emotions had told him to march himself straight to his hot date (or two hot dates, depending on how you were counting) with D'Amato and Taris.

He walked on towards his destination whistling an old Vulcan folk tune. He was still whistling as he passed a secluded alleyway near to the bar he was heading for.

He stopped whistling when he felt the hypospray dig into his neck.

Instead, in his last moments of consciousness, he looked back at the events of the last few hours, and with the benefit of hindsight finally realised how much of a fool he had been.

Then he slumped to the floor, and stopped thinking about anything.

Part 3B

Part Three (Cont'd)

Jirel stood in front of the imposing wooden door of the main reception hall of Starbase 216 and paused for a moment of reflection.

Is this a good idea?

He decided not to answer that question for the time being. The fact was that he needed to see the admiral right now. And this was where he was. So he prepared to do what he always did in just about every situation. Go charging right in and hope that he could somehow talk his way through to the other side. He listened to the sound of polite conversation and clinking glassware from the other side of the door and took a deep breath, summoning up his usual fragile front of bravado. Shields up, red alert.

It was a good idea.

The scruffy Trill stepped through the doors in his faded grey tunic and trousers, into Admiral Jenner's formal reception for the crew of the USS Copernicus, before they went out into the unknown.

The reception hall of Starbase 216 was suitably large. The ceiling was easily three stories high, and Jirel was sure he'd been in shuttlebays that felt more cramped. Right now, the hall was filled with Starfleet officers as far as the eye could see, all dressed in brilliant white dress uniforms. Civilian waiting staff glided effortlessly around the room carrying trays adorned with canapes and champagne. Or whatever synthesised version of champagne was permitted at a Starfleet reception.

Jirel strode through the crowd, his shields of misplaced bravado holding firm under a barrage of stares from the assembled throng. He returned fire to some of them with a confident smile or two, pretending like he belonged while idly wondering if there had been anything in his limited wardrobe back on the Bounty that might have come halfway to passing as appropriate attire.

Still, this was definitely a good idea.

He swerved around a couple of particularly confused Grazerites, still keeping an eye out for the admiral, only to quite literally run straight into another familiar face carrying a glass of champagne. Or at least, he had been carrying it. The liquid was now spilled all down the front of his immaculate dress uniform.

"Seriously," Commander Cameron Kinsen snapped at the wearily familiar Trill in front of him, "Who are you?"

"Hey, Cameron!" Jirel beamed, channelling auxiliary power into his bravado, "Great party! Sorry about, um..."

He started to wipe the champagne off the slowly simmering officer's jacket.

"Stop that," Cameron snapped, grabbing Jirel's hand, "And what are you doing here? This is a Starfleet reception, not a neighbourhood frat party!"

Jirel's shields took a direct hit. He considered devising an elaborate backstory about how he had accepted an offer to join the Copernicus as a civilian envoy. He even contemplated telling the champagne-covered officer that he was a guest of honour, his Trill symbiont having served about another USS Copernicus with an earlier host. Even though he didn't have a symbiont, or have any idea if there had been a previous ship.

Mercifully, just as he was imagining what rank he would have had in this fictional previous life, and whether Commodore would be pushing it too far, he spotted his quarry.

"Hey! Admiral!" he shouted through the crowd, "Admiral Jenner! Over here!"

Cameron shook his head and tapped his combadge, even as Jenner looked over in their direction. "Security to the reception hall," he barked, "Now."

"No need for that," Jirel replied, waving goofily at the admiral, who had fixed him with a firm scowl.

Jenner reluctantly excused himself from his current company and made his way over, his scowl deepening with every step.

But this had still definitely been a good idea.

"Hey, I get it," Jirel said to the admiral as he approached, "My invite got lost in the mail, that's fine—"

"What the hell are you doing?" Jenner hissed at him, clearly in no mood to mess around.

Jirel rotated his shield frequencies, keeping his bravado levels intact as he fixed the admiral with a glare of his own. "We need to talk."

"Jirel," Jenner scoffed, "You don't get to—"

"Either we talk now, or I head to the front of the room at your very important little party here and try to get a karaoke contest started."

Jenner grimaced further. Jirel kept his gaze focused on him, not wanting to blink first.

"Sir," Cameron offered, "Security are on the way—"

"That won't be necessary, Commander," Jenner replied curtly, eliciting a look of surprise from the younger officer, "I'll handle this."

He jerked his head towards the exit and marched off. Jirel went to follow, but not before he allowed himself a moment to fire a final shot of smugness in Cameron's direction, impacting directly on the officer's own bemused defences.

"Sorry about the shirt."

* * * * *

Jenner led Jirel down the corridor and into a small meeting room, empty save for a small table and four plain chairs. He didn't take a seat.

"Thanks for seeing me," Jirel began, "It's just, I need to—"

"How long have you been here?" Jenner snapped before he could get any further, "Two days? Three?"

"I mean, two, I guess—?"

"And here's where we are," the admiral continued, ignoring any attempt to answer his rhetorical question, "I've got your engineer in the brig charged with hacking into Starfleet records..."

"That's actually what I was here to talk to you about—"

"...I've got half a dozen complaints on my desk about that Klingon of yours causing a scene at some Kraterite bar earlier..."

"Was not actually aware of that—"

"...Yesterday, I was handed a report from base ops about a sighting of a - and I'm quoting here - 'severely inebriated Vulcan in the company of two junior officers' two nights ago..."

"I'm sure he was just—"

"...And that's before we get back to this repair schedule the size of a war fleet I've got to somehow clear with the head of operations."

"It's really just a few—"

"So," Jenner concluded, "You say we need to talk? Where exactly do you want to start?"

Jirel paused and licked his lips, his bravado shielding falling to critically low power levels after that flurry of direct hits.

"And make it quick," the admiral added through the silence, "Cos if this takes longer than five minutes, I'm calling in that security detail Commander Kinsen just summoned and telling them they can report that you were resisting arrest."

"Ok," Jirel said, sticking to the main issue at hand, "Denella. It's—I'm here about Denella."

Jenner paced across the room, his hands clasped behind his back, allowing him to continue for the moment.

"I just thought you could, I dunno, maybe—"

"What?" Jenner scoffed, "Have a word with Starfleet security? Tell them to just drop the charges? Hey, maybe I can team up with you and your drunk Vulcan pilot, and we can plan an elaborate jailbreak, hmm?"

Jirel's shields collapsed. "I mean," he offered weakly, "We've got our understanding...?"

Jenner sighed in exasperation and stared down the Trill on the other side of the room. "Look, I'm gonna be straight with you here, for your own sake: You are nowhere near as big a deal as you think you are, ok? And you, and the rest of your little crew, need to start realising that. I can slip you the odd assignment here, I can arrange the odd repair there, and I'm very grateful that you were able to bring Lieutenant Kinsen back. But you cannot just show up here and start acting like you own the place. Because you don't, Jirel. I do."

Jirel remained silent as the admiral continued to fire. A hull breach was in progress.

"And whatever our little understanding might be, it doesn't extend to pulling the sort of stunts you're trying to pull. My understanding will only get you so far. And frankly, you're pretty much running on empty right now."

Jirel forced himself to suppress the flinch, not wanting to reveal quite how much damage his words were inflicting. With no other option left, he tried to land a disruptor blast of his own. "If I'm as unimportant as you're saying," he replied eventually, "How come you're asking Natasha about me?"

Jenner's face twitched slightly in annoyance. Jirel had scored a hit, no matter how late and futile it might have been.

"Here's what's gonna happen," the admiral retorted, "You're gonna get your repairs done, get back on your ship, and get the hell away from my starbase. For a long, long time. I'm out of errands. And I'm definitely out of patience."

"And Denella—?"

"Is in the hands of Starfleet security."

“Right,” Jirel said with a sad shake of his head, “It’s like that, is it?”

Jenner checked his watch and sighed, smoothing his uniform back down and preparing to return to the reception. “Jirel, if it was up to me, it would have been like that months ago.”

The admiral made for the exit, leaving Jirel behind. As he reached the door, the Trill found one final question to fire off. “So...who was it up to?”

Jenner stopped for a moment. He considered giving an answer, but decided against it. Instead, he stepped through the door. Jirel was left alone, in several meanings of the word.

This might not have been a good idea, he conceded to himself.

Part 3C

Part Three (Cont'd)

Thud-dunk.

Denella reached out and grabbed the little rubber ball out of the air as it bounced off the wall in front of her, trying to remember why she had the ball in the pocket of her overalls in the first place.

She was getting somewhat concerned about it, given that as far as she could tell, it looked like a key component of the damping system used inside the Bounty's main landing struts. As far as she could remember, she hadn't done any work in that particular area for some time. In fact, they were one of the few parts of the ship not currently in need of major repair. It was also possible that she'd misidentified the little rubber ball completely.

Still, the idea that she might have an important part of the ship's landing gear in her pocket was mildly troubling. Though at least it gave her something to pass the time.

Thud-dunk.

She threw the ball against the floor, bounced it up onto the wall of the brig, and caught it as it arced back over to her again.

She was sitting on the floor of the small holding cell she had been placed in. Aside from her and the ball, all there was inside was a simple single bed and a small table on which was the canteen of water she had been provided. Since she had been marched in here, she had barely seen anyone else, aside from at mealtimes. She certainly hadn't seen any sign of her crewmates, despite Starfleet visiting hours being as open and friendly as you might expect.

So, she had little to do but worry. About what was to become of her, about whatever Klath had gotten himself into, and about what this little rubber ball was actually supposed to be.

She sat and worried. And threw the ball.

Thud-dunk.

"Stop that," a voice piped up from the entrance to the cell.

She caught the ball and looked over. Standing on the other side of the Starfleet-issue forcefield was the short-haired blonde security officer who had been in charge of bringing her here. "The ball," she gestured, "Stop that. Some of us are working on the other side of that wall."

"Oh," Denella said, mustering a weak smile, "Sorry."

The officer didn't match her smile. She instead gestured to someone standing around the corner from the holding cell's entrance, currently out of Denella's line of sight. "You've got a visitor."

The Orion woman stood and approached the forcefield, hoping to see Klath, safely back from his misadventure. Or possibly Jirel, having wrangled some way of getting her out of here. In fact, right now, she'd even have been glad to see Sunek. Though she made a mental note not to say as much if it was him.

Instead of any of her crewmates, however, Lieutenant Kapadia stepped into view, awkwardly toying with a padd in his hand. "Erm, hi," he offered, "I've got some questions about your, um, repair schedule? And I can't find anyone else from your ship?"

Denella looked back through the gently shimmering forcefield, not entirely sure how to answer. "I've been arrested, Lieutenant," she eventually went with.

Kapadia nodded and gestured to the confines of the cell. "Yes, I'd rather gathered that. But, still, I don't know who else to ask."

He looked over at the security officer, who was stifling a yawn as she kept one eye on their conversation.

"I mean, you know how it is," he continued, "Based on what I've seen, the entire secondary antimatter injection assembly is going to need to be completely realigned—"

"Hey!" Denella snapped, taking great offence to that comment, "The secondary antimatter injection assembly doesn't need realigning! I built that whole assembly myself from scratch, and—"

"Ugh," the security officer called out, stifling an even bigger yawn, "It's been too long a shift for me to stand here listening to you two nerds. I'll be in the office if you need me."

She patted Kapadia on the shoulder and walked off. As she left, he turned back to the still angry Denella and smiled. "Thanks for playing along," he said, eliciting a confused look from the Orion woman, "I thought that might get rid of her. And your secondary antimatter injection assembly is perfectly aligned."

"Damn right it's perfectly aligned," she muttered.

Kapadia merely nodded at this, as the two of them took a moment to appreciate their shared love of a perfectly aligned secondary antimatter injection assembly. It was an engineer thing.

“So, I guess we should address the whole ‘being arrested’ issue?” Denella said eventually.

“It might help,” he nodded, “And may I say that you’re taking your impending trip to a Federation penal colony very well indeed.”

“Believe it or not,” she replied, without a trace of humour, “I’ve been in much, much worse situations than this.”

Kapadia looked back at the defiant look on the Orion woman’s face, and instantly realised that he didn’t doubt that statement for a second. “They’ve, um, explained what you did,” he said, “The evidence points back to your ship pretty strongly. Why on earth were you trying to hack into a starbase computer system?”

“I didn’t try to,” she pointed out, “I did.”

He acknowledged the technicality with a curt nod, but patiently waited for a better explanation.

“And it’s not like I was trying to hack the base’s prefix codes or anything. I just gained access to the transit history. Check the logs on the Bounty if you don’t believe me.”

“Transit history? Why?”

“I’m a shuttlecraft spotter,” she offered with a wry look, “Heard a big rumour there was a genuine 23rd century Deltan speeder in orbit.”

Kapadia’s face creased into a smile, but he maintained his curious look at her, not settling for that sort of an answer. Eventually, she sighed and shrugged. “Because my friend needed me to. Ok?”

The Starfleet engineer stared back at her for a moment, weighing this up. “Hmm,” he said eventually, gesturing at the detention cell again, “Whoever they are, must be a really good friend.”

“Yeah. He is,” she nodded with complete sincerity, “Remember how you reacted when you first met me? That’s how most people do. But Klath...he didn’t do that.”

Kapadia nodded back in understanding, awkwardly shifting the padd between his hands with a slight feeling of shame at the reminder of his slack-jawed conduct the day before. “I should, um, I should go,” he managed, “Get...back to work.”

“Hey,” she replied, “Next time you see any of my shipmates, please let them know where I am. Ok?”

He nodded and walked away, lost in thought. Denella heard the doors to the room open and close, and she was alone again. She considered her options, and realised with frustration that there was still nothing she could do except to sit around and wait for some sort of miracle. Everything else was completely out of her control.

Although she was feeling hungry. And to solve that issue, she just needed to get the security officer’s attention. And that was something that was very much in her control.

She sat back down against the wall and picked up the rubber ball again.

Thud-dunk.

* * * * *

Klath sat and waited, trying to ignore the irritating chattering noises all around him.

Having sent the mysterious woman on her way with his message and rested up on the hill, he had elected to return to the township to eat. He already knew that wherever his adversary was, he was more than capable of tracking his movements. If anything, the more conspicuous he made himself, the less likely it was that he would end up being taken by surprise.

He had stopped in a small eating establishment, supposing that after his earlier antics it might be a bit rude to return to the other Kraterite bar. But this one seemed to be just as popular with the locals. Boisterous clicks and chirps came from all corners as various Kraterites socialised together, serving as an irritating distraction to the hulking Klingon.

Still, he tried to focus on his surroundings. He sat, and he waited. And tried as much as possible not to think about the Sons of Marlek. Because he hadn’t thought about them for a very long time. They were connected to a part of his past that he had never told anyone willingly, and that he knew the details of weren’t easy for most people to find. Which meant that whoever was stalking him was personally connected in some way.

And that meant he had to be alert.

He had positioned himself at one of the rear tables of the venue, making sure that he had a clear view of all available entry points, with only the solid rear wall of the building behind him and no blind spots to either side. He knew that there was no way they could fight in here. But he wanted to make sure there was no possibility of him being surprised.

A half-eaten meal sat in front of him. He had no idea what it had been, some sort of cooked meat served with mostly raw pieces of the local vegetation, but it had been edible. Enough to keep him going for as long as he needed.

Knowing that his quarry was a fellow Klingon, he paid the hunched, nervous Kraterite bartender no real attention as it tentatively approached his table, clutching a small padd. Eventually, after a few nervy clicks in his direction, Klath looked over. The bartender flinches slightly, but handed Klath the padd, gesticulating at it with its other hand.

“What is this?” Klath asked with clear annoyance, eliciting a series of further clicks.

He reluctantly looked down at the padd and activated the screen. There was a simple message displayed on it. A message for him. It didn't take him long to realise who it was from.

And his scowl deepened even further.

* * * * *

Sunek was beginning to get tired of waking up with a sore head. Although this time it didn't take him long to realise that something was different. That this was no common or garden hangover.

Partly because he didn't remember drinking anything. But mostly because he woke up to find himself shackled to a tree, on top of a hillside, in the middle of nowhere.

Night was starting to fall around him, but he could make out that he was in a clearing, surrounded by tall fronds of blue-green grass. A vague memory of walking through the township drifted to the forefront of his mind, along with the hissing sound of a hypospray. Which at least cleared part of the story up.

“Hey!” he called out, not even knowing if anyone was around to hear him, “I like a bit of kinky stuff as much as the next guy, but buy me a drink first at least?”

He managed to at least make his words sound confident, even if inside he felt no such emotion, as he worked in vain against his restraints.

The fist that slammed into his side seemed to come from nowhere. Certainly he hasn't seen who it belonged to. But it struck with enough force to make his vision blur.

“Quiet!” the owner of the fist hissed into his ear.

Sunek coughed and hacked, trying desperately to suck vital air back into his lungs. As he gasped, his assailant moved into view, the scarred Klingon sizing up the curious Vulcan that he had taken as his captive. Frankly, Kolar couldn't see what even Klath saw in the pathetic specimen in front of him. But he knew they were close, that they were shipmates. And he was sure that would be enough to bring the other Klingon to him. So that he could meet Klath on his turf.

“You talk a lot for a Vulcan,” he spat, with barely concealed disgust.

Sunek, still gasping for air, failed to give an immediate response. Kolar had no way of knowing how much of a galactic rarity he had just witnessed. Instead, he snorted and walked off, keeping his eyes primed on his surroundings and his senses heightened in the twilight.

He was sure that Klath had gotten the message by now, and he revelled in the fact that he was nearing the end of his journey. A journey that had already taken him all across the quadrant to track down and deal with eleven members of the Grontar's crew so far.

He had already dealt with his accomplice a few hours earlier. She had returned with Klath's message, and after she revealed that she had been kidnapped by him, Kolar had decided that she was becoming too much of a liability. Her body was still laid out somewhere in the undergrowth behind him. He didn't care who discovered it after he was gone. All that was left for him to do was deal with the Grontar's captain. He had saved the biggest prize for last.

“Hey,” Sunek gasped out eventually, “Whatever you think I owe you, that's cool. Just let me get back to my ship, call in a couple of favours, and—”

“I require nothing from you, you pathetic k'pekt,” Kolar snapped, as he cautiously scanned the undergrowth around them, “You are merely bait for my prey.”

Sunek considered this. All told, it didn't do a lot to settle his nerves. And when he was nervous, he talked even more than usual. “When you say ‘bait’...” he started, before looking worried, “Oh crap, tell me you're not hunting some sort of weird Vulcan-eating monster that lives on this planet. Cos, honestly, I'm mostly gristle—”

“Quiet!” Kolar snapped again, as he continued his vigil.

Sunek suppressed a shiver as a cold wind blew in across the top of the hill. He was only wearing his short-sleeved tunic and trousers that he had left the Bounty with earlier in the day. “Wouldn't have a spare jacket around here would you?” he grunted unhappily, “Kinda thought I was gonna be spending tonight indoors...”

Kolar brushed off his irritation at the Vulcan's continued predilection for conversation, trying to keep himself primed for the fight. “The cold is good,” he muttered back, embracing the chill, “As we Klingons say: Revenge is a dish best served cold.”

“Psh, yeah. There's a similar saying on Vulcan,” Sunek replied, gamely continuing the conversation with his captor, “Course, that one's more to do with plomeek soup in the summertime. But I don't care what temperature it is outside, I prefer my soup hot, y'know...?”

Kolar felt himself bristle in annoyance as the Vulcan babbled on from where he was shackled to the tree, seemingly having a lot to say on the subject of serving suggestions for plomeek soup.

He idly allowed his hand to drift down to the d'k tahg dagger on his belt. The one he had already used once today.

And as the Vulcan continued to talk, he began to wonder whether it was vital to his plan that his bait remained alive.

Part 3D

Part Three (Cont'd)

“Hey!”

Natasha stopped in the middle of the corridor and turned in the direction of the familiar voice. She saw Cameron pacing quickly over to her, wearing his dress uniform. Which, for reasons she instinctively felt she probably didn't want to go into, seemed to have some sort of synthehol stain down the front of the jacket.

“Glad I found you,” he continued, gesturing back towards the reception hall, “Thought you might have joined us at the reception. Where were you?”

She stifled a grimace and looked down at her own standard issue uniform, not wanting to reveal that she'd spent almost the entire day hiding on the holodeck, retreating into the safety of her childhood memories rather than dealing with any of her present day issues. “Thought that was for top brass and Copernicus crew members only,” she replied, “Unless you were expecting to see me in a waitress outfit serving canapes?”

He mustered a smile and shook his head. In a roundabout way, that was one way of telling him that she hadn't accepted his offer yet.

“There's still slots available on alpha shift, you know. You could be working directly under the CMO. Really great guy, Doctor Yepht. Denobulan. You'd learn a lot.”

The ensign's face flitted around in her mind.

“You're saying I still have a lot to learn?” she asked with a tight smile.

“Come on, Nat,” he persisted, “You haven't got long left to make a decision. We ship out to Deep Space Nine tomorrow for final crew rotation. Next stop, the Gamma Quadrant.”

“I'll think about it.”

She turned to walk off, back towards her temporary quarters. He called out, forcing her to stop on the spot. But she couldn't bring herself to look back at him. “What's going on? Why are you denying yourself this chance? Like I said, you deserve this.”

No, she thought to herself, I don't.

“As soon as I make a decision,” she managed, “You'll be the first to know.”

She started walking again. He called out again. “Oh, by the way, your Trill friend made a hell of a scene at the reception.”

She stopped. This time she turned around.

“What?”

“Yep, and he wasn't serving canapes either.”

Cameron smiled. It wasn't his usual superior smile. This one was slightly more furtive, like he was sharing state secrets with her. “Rumour has it the guy got dressed down pretty badly by the admiral for that. I mean, properly chewed up and spat out. Sounded like when my shuttle pilot instructor at the Academy caught me leaning the thrusters on the redline.”

Natasha couldn't help but muster a smile as she remembered Jirel's earlier admission. “Probably felt like that for them, too.”

“What?”

She shook her head, not really wanting to get into all that here, with her current company. “Oh, y'know, just—the admiral. I guess it probably reminded him of chewing out cadets at the Academy.”

Cameron looked confused. “Pretty sure Admiral Jenner never taught at the Academy, Nat. Why would you think that?”

She struggled to hide her surprise as he eyed her up with befuddlement. She managed to muster a casual shrug. “I dunno. Must've got my admirals confused. I...need some rest. Sorry.”

She turned back again and took off down the corridor. Her mind now racing with thoughts other than the face of the ensign.

“Seriously,” Cameron called after, “I can't keep the offer open much longer!”

She ignored him and continued to walk, lost in thought, all the way back to her quarters. Cameron watched her disappear around the corner. As soon as she got back, she hurried over to the computer terminal and called up the information she needed. Cameron was right. Admiral Jenner had never lectured at the Academy. Not even a guest slot here and there.

She leaned back in her chair in confusion and considered the story that Jirel had spun her. She knew it hadn't been the whole truth, but now she was wondering if even part of it had been anything other than lies. As she looked out at the darkness outside her window, she found that her head was full of fresh questions.

She also realised something else.

She hadn't thought about Cameron's offer once.

* * * * *

Sunek was still shivering, and now he felt like he was alone.

Kolar had continued to pace around the clearing in front of him for some time, but now, as far as Sunek could tell, he had disappeared into the undergrowth and left him.

Which in a way was good news, because it meant that the seemingly unbalanced Klingon that had kidnapped him wasn't around any more. But it was also bad news, because Sunek was still nervous, and he couldn't exactly settle those nerves by talking some more if there was nobody to talk to.

He struggled with his bonds again, trying to free himself, but the knots were tied far too tightly for that to be an option. After a few more desperate movements, accomplishing nothing other than giving himself a nasty rope burn, he paused and sighed.

Then, from somewhere in the brush, he heard someone approaching. Which made him even more nervous.

"Hey," he said, returning to his tried and tested method of dealing with that particular emotion, "There you are."

No response. That didn't stop him from continuing.

"So, I was just thinking...See, I didn't have any dinner tonight. Was kinda hoping I'd be eating in the company of these two Starfleet ensigns, y'know? Man, they were both so hot—You know what, that doesn't matter. Point is: Any chance you packed a picnic?"

As he continued with his impromptu monologue, he saw a figure rise up beside him.

"Shut up, Sunek," Klath muttered.

"Klath? Oh, thank Surak, you're here! You're here to rescue me! See, I always knew you'd come through for me—"

"I am not here to rescue you," Klath replied, interrupting him.

Sunek's face dropped. He saw Klath step forwards, his attention now on scanning the surrounding area rather than on untying him. "Klath, seriously," he persisted, "There's a crazy old Klingon up here. We need to get out of here now. Like, we seriously need to run."

"Klingons do not run."

"And Vulcans don't tell knock knock jokes! Couple of big old trendsetters, that's what they'll call us! So, just...untie me and let's—!"

"Kolar!"

Klath bellowed the name out into the darkness, loud enough for it to echo around the hilltop.

"Well don't do that!" Sunek snapped in exasperation, frantically redoubling his efforts to free himself from his bonds.

Klath ignored him and continued to look for signs of his adversary.

"How do you know his name anyway—?"

Sunek shut up as the undergrowth parted ahead of both of them, and the other Klingon returned, stepping into the light and revealing his scarred features. Klath's only reaction was to tense up in preparation for the fight.

"Klath," Kolar growled at him, "I always suspected that, of all of them, you would prove especially difficult to kill."

Klath's eyes narrowed as he slowly stepped forwards, preparing to reach for the bat'leth that was still sheathed on his back. The two Klingons slowly began to circle around, sizing up their respective enemy.

"Hey, now," Sunek chimed in, "This is all getting a bit serious guys—"

"Silence!" Kolar bellowed across the clearing, keeping his focus on the other Klingon.

Klath spied the d'k tahg in Kolar's belt, reasoning that the small dagger would still be a potent weapon even against a bat'leth, but suspecting that his greater reach and power would prove to be decisive. He went for his blade. But he didn't get to it before Kolar reached behind his back and pulled out a disruptor pistol.

That was something Klath hadn't been counting on.

"And yet," Kolar leered darkly, "Perhaps not so difficult to kill after all."

Klath stared down the barrel of the weapon, moving his hand away from the bat'leth on his back.

"Such a noble plan, Klath, to come here and rescue your friend. How easy it was to get you to meet me on my terms."

Kolar dismissively gestured at Sunek, who was watching the unfolding scene in front of him with increasing amounts of worry.

“There is no honour in that,” Klath shot back, gesturing to the disruptor, “In shooting me where I stand. Let us settle this properly, like warriors.”

Kolar’s eyes narrowed. “Really,” he spat, “And tell me why I should allow you an honourable death, when the Sons of Marlek were offered no such luxury.”

Klath didn’t react to the name externally, but inside he felt fresh shame.

“Hey,” Sunek spoke up again, “Seeing as this is clearly some sort of personal matter you two need to sort out, how about you, y’know, let your old buddy Sunek go, eh? And I’ll get right out of your very impressive hair.”

Klath stifled a grimace, wondering if the last thing he was destined to hear was the familiar sound of Sunek running his mouth. He very much prayed that it wasn’t. However, Sunek’s comment did at least seem to give Kolar a reason to pause.

“Really, Vulcan? You have no idea what this is about?”

“None at all. And I’m really good at forgetting a face, so if you let me go, I’d have nothing to tell anyone about—”

“You’d forget this face?” Kolar persisted, deliberately running his free hand across the scarring on his cheek.

Sunek felt himself gulp involuntarily.

“Surely not,” the Klingon continued, “This is a face that tells its own story, surely. A story of a lifetime of pain and humiliation. A story that started off in the Tygon Nebula.”

He fixed Klath with a dark stare as he said that name. Klath growled quietly. “This does not concern him, Kolar,” he managed to reply, his hand twitching as he wondered how quickly he could draw his bat’leth.

Realistically, even he had to admit he couldn’t do it faster than a disruptor blast could travel. Kolar had the upper hand in every respect. And he knew it.

“Perhaps he wants to hear the story,” Kolar offered.

“This is between us,” Klath pressed, “He does not need to know.”

“Yep,” Sunek nodded, “I don’t need to know anything. And, again, if you just wanna untie my hands, I’ll be right out of here.”

Kolar continued to pace around, ignoring the Vulcan’s comments and keeping his weapon trained on his adversary. “Have you never wondered, Vulcan? About why this man ended up being your shipmate? Why a Klingon serves onboard your pathetic little garbage scow of a vessel, on endless pitiful delivery runs, instead of serving the empire?”

Sunek glanced over at Klath, whose attention was still on the other Klingon. “I mean...it’s never really come up,” he offered weakly, “He was with Jirel when I joined.”

Inside, Sunek had to admit that he had asked himself that question more than once since he had met Klath many years ago. But the Klingon was also a decidedly private individual, and Sunek wasn’t a huge fan of personal conversations at the best of times, so he had never pushed the issue.

“Go on,” Kolar spat at Klath, “Tell him.”

Klath ground his teeth together. Kolar tightened his grip on the disruptor.

“Tell him about your war crimes.”

End of Part Three

Part 4A

Part Four

“Help me!”

She didn't even react to the voice any more.

She stood in her quarters, back in front of the mirror, staring at herself. More specifically, staring at the uniform.

The ensign in the corridor was going to stay with her, she could see that now. His bloodied face, his twisted body, his cry for help, that wasn't going anywhere. The only question was whether she was going anywhere.

She considered the clean lines of the freshly replicated uniform. Could she just brush her experience on the Navajo under the table, push everything else to the back of her mind, join Cameron onboard the Copernicus and just carry on with her Starfleet career? Like a freshly replicated uniform, she could be reborn. No trace of what the uniform had been before, or where it had come from. Just the crisp, clean lines of Starfleet, brought to life out of thin air.

Her gaze wandered over to what was behind her in the reflection, the empty quarters. The bare walls and furnishings of a guest room bereft of any sort of personal items, any sign of who she was. What sort of person lived here? A blank slate. Just like the uniform. She could be a blank slate, dressed in a blank slate.

Lieutenant Tabula Rasa, reporting for duty.

And yet, as her attention returned to the Starfleet insignia, the pips on her collar, could she live with herself in this uniform? Given all it stood for, could she ever feel like she wasn't making a mockery of it every time she put it on?

She sighed deeply and tore her attention away from the mirror. She couldn't wait any longer. A decision needed to be made. And deep down, she realised that she'd already made it. Or maybe there had never been a decision to make in the first place.

She moved over to the door and stepped into the corridor with as much purpose as she could muster, despite the weight of her sins on her shoulders.

She walked on, down the empty corridor. Feeling like she was being followed by the ensign's face.

* * * * *

The Klingons continued their standoff on the hilltop, as Sunek tried to process what he was being told.

“Um, Klath,” he offered eventually, “What the hell's he saying?”

“Nothing,” Klath replied quickly.

“Good. Cos, just for a second there, it sounded like the crazy Klingon with the disruptor pistol over there just called you a war criminal.”

“Yes,” Kolar hissed, “That's exactly what you are, isn't it, Klath?”

Klath didn't respond, but he felt the pang of shame growing inside him. Kolar took advantage of his silence to keep talking. “You see, many years ago, Klath indeed served with the Klingon Defence Force. A fine officer as well, most honourable. He even reached the rank of captain.”

“Huh,” Sunek mused uncomfortably, “You think you know a guy...”

“And that,” Kolar continued, “Brought him command of the IKS Grontar—”

“Stop this,” Klath growled, “This is between us!”

His words did little to throw the other Klingon off his story.

“Klath, Son of Morad, commanded that ship during the Klingon Civil War. The Grontar was loyal to the forces of Gowron—”

“Enough!” Klath roared, instinctively drawing his bat'leth. Kolar kept his disruptor trained on him, but took a step back.

“Woah, woah,” Sunek said quickly, “Remember, buddy, disruptor beats sword.”

Klath stared back at the disruptor and lowered his bat'leth, but kept it in his hands should a chance present itself. Kolar, unperturbed by his sudden outburst, returned to the tale he was telling.

“One day, while patrolling along the outer edge of Klingon space, the Grontar detected an unidentified ship in the Tygon Nebula, and honourable Captain Klath immediately set a course to investigate.”

The battle-scarred Klingon couldn't have put more sarcasm into the word 'honourable' if he had tried. Across from him, Klath growled

impotently.

“They were attempting to hide from our scans. It merited investigation,” he explained, to himself as much as to anyone else, “We were acting on intelligence that suggested those loyal to the House of Duras were running illegal weapons across the borders near that very nebula.”

Sunek listened with rapt attention, having forgotten all about his useless efforts to release himself from his bonds.

“Yes,” Kolar muttered, his eyes flashing with anger, “That was your mission, wasn’t it. And what did you find in the nebula? A ship belonging to the Sons of Marlek.”

“A ship that was covertly operating well outside of recognised procedures!”

“Captain Klath wasted no time. For the glory of the empire, and for Gowron, he opened fire as soon as he was in weapons range—”

“The vessel was working for the House of Duras. It was a legitimate—”

“It was a freighter!”

Kolar bellowed out into the night, silencing Klath on the spot. Sunek didn’t know a lot about Klingon culture outside of the basics, but he was getting the picture.

“A simple old freighter on a resupply mission,” Kolar spat, “No weapons. Limited shielding. Versus a fully armed Bird of Prey. The Grontar cut through it in seconds. They didn’t stand a chance.”

Klath experienced a fresh rush of shame. He felt Sunek’s gaze on the back of his neck. He refused to turn and meet it, telling himself that was because he didn’t want to take his eyes off his adversary, rather than because he didn’t want to have to make eye contact with his friend.

“There had been traps sprung on our forces before, from battleships hiding away from sensors,” he explained, “The nebula interfered with our attempts to identify the vessel—”

“And yet you could identify that it was a ship loyal to Duras,” Kolar shouted out, “You were still able to target your weapons and plot your attack run. You were able to do a great many things, for a vessel so crippled by this nebula.”

Klath reached for a response. He failed to find one.

“Twenty-seven Klingons aboard,” Kolar continued, “Every one of them condemned to a death without honour!”

“I mean,” Sunek offered meekly, “It was still a battle—?”

“It was no battle. It was a slaughter! And my brothers, the Sons of Marlek, were denied their right to enter Sto-vo-kor. And I was condemned to a life of misery.”

He absently ran his free hand back down his scars, his eyes narrowing at Klath. “Tell me,” he continued, “Was there a great feast onboard the Grontar that night? Did you toast each other with bloodwine and sing songs about the glorious battle of the Tygon Nebula?”

“The High Command punished me for my actions,” Klath replied, “When the war was over, they judged that my actions had not been honourable. I was...discommended. And I carry that punishment with me every day.”

“Not good enough.”

Klath stared back at the other Klingon. He felt the shame that he had carried for so long rising up inside him. He wasn’t entirely sure that he disagreed with Kolar’s comment.

“So,” Klath offered, “You have been killing the crew of the Grontar.”

“Each of them left without their honour,” Kolar affirmed, “All suffering the same fate as the one you bestowed on my brothers.”

Shaking with the rage he felt, he brought the disruptor to bear once again, pointing it straight at Klath’s chest.

“And now, it is your turn.”

* * * * *

Some distance away from the lonely hilltop, Natasha walked briskly down the corridor of the starbase, experiencing a different kind of loneliness.

She had been walking for some time, ignoring the other Starfleet personnel she had been passing along the way. In fact, if she’d counted right, this was her fourth lap of this particular length of corridor. And she was approaching the door again.

The first time around, she had walked straight past it, without even a glance. The second time, she had at least slowed her pace and looked the door straight in the metaphorical eye. But at the last second, she had sped up again and embarked on another lap. Third time lucky, she had actually stopped in front of the door for several seconds. To the point that, if the person on the other side had walked out, they would probably have had the fright of their lives. But eventually, she had set off on lap number four.

And now, here she was again.

She stopped in front of the deep red coloured door and stared it down again. It looked identical to every other door on this level, and most other doors on the starbase. Each one of the doors on this level led to a set of quarters.

After a few more moments of staring, she reached out towards the door chime. Her finger paused over the sleek black surface of the controls.

“Doctor, help me!”

Just as they had done over the controls to the escape pod on the Navajo, when she saw the face of the ensign in the corridor.

The one she had left behind.

She took her hands away from the control panel as if it was on fire. If she hadn't known before, she definitely knew now. This was the wrong door.

She turned away and walked off back down the corridor. Just as she rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, the door opened and Cameron peered out, looking both ways down the corridor.

Behind him, on the floor, a small pile of luggage stood, ready for him to beam up to the Copernicus before they left orbit. But as he was placing the last container down, he thought he'd heard somebody. In fact, given that he still hadn't heard from Natasha, he rather hoped he'd heard somebody.

He shrugged and walked back inside his guest quarters.

Must've been nobody.

* * * * *

A short time later, Natasha stood in front of a similar, but somehow more imposing door. But she had no issue pressing the door chime of this one, despite the lateness of the hour.

“Enter,” a familiar voice boomed out from inside.

She took a deep breath, and stepped through into Admiral Jenner's quarters.

The admiral himself sat at his desk, still in uniform, with a stack of padds piled in front of him. He looked surprised to see her, which she couldn't exactly blame him for.

“Lieutenant Kinsen,” he said, keeping his tone even and calm, “I don't usually get visitors at this hour unless someone's declared war on us. And it's a really bad sign if the medical staff are reporting that sort of thing.”

She stood in front of his desk, at attention. She licked her lips and took a gulp of dry air.

“I apologise, sir,” she managed, “Actually, I'm here to resign my commission.”

Part 4B

Part Four (Cont'd)

Klath stared at the dirty mottled barrel of the disruptor pistol and braced himself.

He still had his trusty bat'leth in his hands, but he knew that there was no way he would be able to traverse the distance between himself and Kolar and actually use it in anger before the trigger was pulled. He needed a miracle. And the overwhelming sense of shame he felt inside was telling him that he didn't deserve one.

Behind him, Sunek had returned to straining against his bonds. He hadn't had time to fully process what he had heard during Kolar's speech, but as far as he was concerned, that could wait for later. Right now, he was only concerned with helping Klath, he was only worried about the disruptor being pointed at his friend.

Except, there was no way he could help Klath, because he was tied to a tree.

Not that even his own substantial ego could claim that, if he wasn't tied up, he would rush the huge Klingon warrior with the disruptor and wrestle him to the ground. After all, he always considered himself a better talker than a fighter. But at least he might have been able to do something.

He was worried for his friend. And, if he was being entirely honest, he was worried about himself as well, given that once Kolar had shot Klath, he was pretty sure that the Klingon would have no reason to keep Sunek himself alive.

Still, there was nothing he could do to help. As he struggled against his bonds, he felt impotent, useless, and was still consumed with some serious feelings of embarrassment for the ease with which he'd allowed himself to be kidnapped. If only he'd realised that there was no way he and his big stupid mouth had managed to convince those two Starfleet ensigns that he was worth anything.

And that was when he realised. He did have something he could use.

He had his big stupid mouth.

"Holy crap! What the hell is that?"

He screamed it out at the top of his voice, looking out ahead of him across the valley below at nothing in particular.

It was, Sunek immediately thought, probably the worst attempt to distract someone in the entire history of the universe. And Kolar didn't fall for it. He didn't even consider looking in the direction that Sunek was looking.

However, the surprising sound of the Vulcan opening his big stupid mouth did at least cause him to briefly glance over at where he was tied up. And to do that, he took his eyes off his quarry.

That was all the invite Klath needed. He attacked.

* * * * *

"You're sure about that?"

Admiral Jenner's words were still calm and measured.

"Yes sir," Natasha replied, still standing to attention in her uniform in front of his desk.

He regarded her for a moment, then slowly and wordlessly poured himself a cup of green tea from a pot next to him and gestured for her to take a seat opposite him. "Can I get you anything?" he asked, gesturing at his drink.

It wasn't exactly standard Starfleet protocol for an admiral to propose getting a lieutenant something to drink, and she declined the surprising offer, even though her mouth felt dry.

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," he replied eventually after taking a sip of his tea, "Truth is, I think Starfleet Headquarters were hoping to make you a post-war poster girl."

"Sir?"

"These days, we need all the happy stories we can get. And you...surviving out there for so long, coming back from the dead, so to speak. I think the admiralty were very interested in spreading that news around the fleet."

He offered her a smile. She couldn't bring herself to smile back. In fact, she felt sick again. "I'm sorry sir," she managed eventually, "But I've made my decision. I just...felt I should tell you in person. Sir."

He nodded and took another thoughtful sip of his tea. "Forgive me for prying, Lieutenant, but what will you do with yourself instead?"

Natasha looked back at him, but she didn't have an answer. In a way, her silence answered the question for her.

"I understand," he continued down a different track, "You told Jirel about our earlier conversation."

She was slightly thrown by this change of subject. Not the first time that Jenner had moved one of their talks in such a way. Her brain began to connect the dots. "It was off the record, sir," she replied simply, "And I thought that he should know."

"I'm also going to assume he's offered you the chance to join his little crew? Which I'm sure is a very tempting offer."

Despite the sarcasm in his tone, this threw her even further, but she managed a nod. The admiral paused and looked down into his almost empty cup of tea. "I wondered," he continued with an odd hint of reluctance, "If you ended up taking him up on that offer, if you could do something for me, Lieutenant?"

"An order, sir?"

"I lost the privilege to give you those as soon as you made your big announcement," he reminded her, "Think of this as more of a...friendly request."

"Off the record?" she asked, intrigued.

He nodded tightly and continued. "Lieutenant, you've served Starfleet well. So, regardless of what your future holds, I trust you. And I've appreciated your candour in our conversations so far. I'm requesting that if you do end up taking Jirel up on his offer, if you'd...keep an eye on him for me."

She grasped for a response, too many questions floating around in her head all of a sudden. "You want me to...spy on them, sir?"

"Not at all," he replied with a shake of his head, "This would just be an informal arrangement. I'd just like to be...kept apprised of Jirel's movements. If you take up his offer, that is."

Her head was swimming.

"Admiral, forgive me for asking, but why are you so interested in..."

And then she realised. And she couldn't help but smile in disbelief. Jirel. The orphan Trill. Brought up on Earth.

By a Starfleet officer.

* * * * *

She found him sitting at a cafe in Starbase 216's main arboretum, at a table by himself.

Jirel was staring out across the green scenery in front of him, with an almost untouched glass of what he'd been unhappy to discover was synthanol in front of him.

He could really have done with something stronger. He'd made no headway trying to get to Denella. He'd not heard from the admiral since their somewhat explosive encounter in the reception hall. And he had absolutely no idea where Klath or Sunek had got to. All things considered, he was feeling lost.

All around him, he could hear the merry chatter of conversation as myriad different species from across the galaxy walked through the arboretum in matching uniforms, coexisting in blissful, relaxed harmony.

Jirel scowled. He hated Starfleet.

And then, he saw Natasha approaching him. In a uniform of her own. And he smiled. He was glad to see her. Or at least, he was until she opened her mouth.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, eliciting a look of confusion from the Trill.

"Tell you what?"

"That Admiral Jenner is your father."

Part 4C

Part Four (Cont'd)

Klath charged forwards, his eyes focused on the disruptor pistol.

Despite being temporarily distracted by Sunek's not especially clever plan, Kolar quickly realised that his opponent was making his move, and brought the pistol back to bear. But he wasn't fast enough. Klath slammed into his side and sent him crashing to the floor. The pistol flew from Kolar's grasp and skittered away across the dusty ground.

The two Klingons continued to desperately wrestle for the upper hand, grappling with each other on the ground. Kolar ensured that he maintained close combat to ensure that Klath's bat'leth remained unusable for the time being.

For a moment, Kolar gained the upper hand, rolling Klath onto his back and sinking his hands onto his throat. Klath grimaced with effort as he choked and spluttered a fraction of a lungful of air, and desperately used the last of his strength to kick his opponent off him.

Kolar went flying through the air with the force of the sudden powerful impact and landed in a cloud of dust.

"Yeah! Go Klath!" Sunek shouted out from his immobile vantage point, adopting the role of impromptu cheerleader for the time being.

Freed from the clutches of his rival, Klath ignored the pain and sprung back to his feet, finally able to bring his bat'leth to bear. A few feet away, Kolar regained his own footing and drew the d'k tahg from his belt. Now both armed with more traditional bladed fighting weapons, Klath allowed himself a sliver of satisfaction. This would be a good fight. No disruptors.

They circled each other again. Klath thrust forwards a few times with his larger two-handed blade, testing out his opponent's defences, and Kolar deftly parried each one away with a strong flick of his dagger.

"You fight well," Klath noted, panting slightly from the exertion of the fight.

"I have had to, all my life," the scarred Klingon replied, his words still bereft of warmth, "Thanks to you and your crew."

Kolar jabbed out with his blade, and Klath parried the arc of the weapon away.

"Still," he countered again, "There was no need to hide behind poisons. We could have settled this like Klingons from the start."

"Your crew did not deserve a fair fight. And neither do you. I am sorry that you will die in combat."

Klath whirled his bat'leth around in another attacking arc, and Kolar deftly jumped back out of his reach.

"I have lived with the guilt of my actions since that day," Klath replied, "And I will do so until the day I die."

Kolar thrust forwards again, anger flaring in his eyes. "That day is today, Klath. Today the Sons of Marlek have their vengeance."

Klath channelled a fresh rush of shame into something more productive, charging forwards with his bat'leth raised to his chest. He parried the thrust of Kolar's dagger, before spinning his own weapon around and delivering a firm blow with one of the ends to the other Klingon's stomach. Kolar staggered backwards, threatening to lose his footing on the stony ground.

Without waiting, and still powered by his sense of shame, Klath immediately sought to capitalise, rushing forwards while his enemy was off balance to deliver the killer blow.

But the turbulent mix of guilt and remorse that was currently powering him caused Klath to miscalculate. Kolar regained his footing sooner than he had been expecting, and he had been anticipating Klath's attack. He dodged the sharp edge of the bat'leth and slammed his dagger down onto the end of the weapon's handle, catching Klath off guard and sending his trusty weapon skittering away out of his hands.

A bulky boot to the stomach sent him flailing to the ground. He tried to right himself, but before he had the chance to do so, he felt Kolar's foot come down on his arm. He roared in pain, the sound echoing out into the darkness with enough intensity to cause Sunek to flinch, and almost put him completely off what he was trying to do.

Through the gloom, Klath could see Kolar standing over him, the glint of the blade raised above his head. And he stopped struggling. Perhaps today was a good day to die. He prepared to embrace whatever lay ahead on the other side.

Of all the things he was expecting to see in his last moments, a disruptor blast fizzing into Kolar's right arm was not one of them.

Now it was the other Klingon's turn to scream out in pain, instinctively grabbing his arm and losing focus on his prey. The air was thick with the stench of burnt flesh.

Klath's acceptance of his fate was forgotten. He slammed his leg up into Kolar's torso and pushed him back. Kolar toppled back onto the ground. The d'k tahg dropped out of his grasp. Klath pounced on it and grabbed the weapon. He stood above the ailing Kolar, their positions suddenly reversed.

Through the agony of his bloodied and burnt arm, Kolar stared up at him. Klath stared back.

"batlhblHeghjj!"

May you die well.

He cried out the Klingon phrase as he plunged the blade down into his enemy's chest. Just before the blow was delivered, Kolar's expression changed. From pain to relief. And then his eyes glazed over. The blade remained sticking out of his chest, even as Klath removed his hands from the grip and sunk to the ground in exhaustion. It was over.

As he usually did after a battle, he felt a surge of power and strength. As if he had absorbed some of the life force of his slain foe.

But this time, he felt something else. Regret.

He sat panting next to his fallen enemy and took a moment of contemplative silence.

"Um, a thank you would be nice?"

Sunek's voice broke his respectful moment. Klath looked over to see the Vulcan still trussed to the tree trunk, with Kolar's disruptor pistol underneath his right foot.

"You?" Klath managed through his weary gasps of breath.

"Well, who the hell did you think did it? Section 31? Now, seriously, if it's not too much trouble, can you untie me?"

Klath forced himself back to his feet, wincing at the injuries across his body, and walked away from Kolar's unmoving form. He avoided eye contact with Sunek as he approached and began to untie him. He was keenly aware now of how much the Vulcan had seen. How many of his secrets he now knew. And given how talkative Sunek was, he feared that they wouldn't remain secrets for very long.

Sunek, for his part, remained silent. Despite his usual candour, his focus was on the dead Klingon further across the clearing, a thousand questions spinning through his head. And he wasn't sure how many of them he wanted answered.

* * * * *

Denella lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. She wasn't entirely sure how many hours she had been in the holding cell now, but it had been long enough that the game with the rubber ball had lost all of its lustre.

She sighed. Still worried about Klath, but increasingly worried about herself. With still no sign of any of her crewmates, she was wondering whether she really was heading for a Federation penal colony.

It probably wouldn't be that bad, she had eventually surmised. After all, this was the Federation. It wasn't like they were about to send her to Rura Penthe. Still, it wasn't exactly what she'd been planning to do with the next ten years of her life.

Just as she started to contemplate the most efficient way to get her sentence reduced for good behaviour, she heard footsteps approaching, and the forcefield being deactivated.

"Get up," the familiar voice of the female security officer barked, "You're free to go."

Denella looked up in confusion. The officer stood impatiently in the entrance to the cell, gesturing for her to leave. "What're you waiting for? Room service? Get out of here."

She uncertainly swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, not entirely this wasn't the officer's especially cruel revenge prank for the number of times Denella had distracted herself with the rubber ball game. But the officer did nothing as she carefully stepped out of the cell.

"I don't understand," she managed to get out, once she was safely on the other side of the cell's forcefield.

"Neither do I," the blonde woman replied with a shrug, "But those were the orders we received. If you really want to stay, I can contact the head of security and ask them to check for a fourth time?"

Denella decided not to push things any further, and instead she quickly made for the door, planning to get back to the Bounty and figure out exactly which one of her shipmates had finally come through for her. And what the hell had taken them so long.

As she stepped out into the corridor, she was shocked to see Lieutenant Kapadia waiting for her. Her eyes narrowed slightly in confusion.

"You? You did this?"

The engineer shrugged meekly and nodded, then gestured for them to start walking away from the security area. She didn't need a second invitation.

"I, um, did what you said," he explained as they walked, "I checked the records on your ship. For what you'd accessed. It was just like you said. Nothing critical, nothing major, just the base's transit logs for the last two weeks."

"Yeah," Denella nodded, "Just like I said. But—?"

"So, I got in touch with starbase security, and I said I'd done it."

Denella stopped in her tracks and stared back at him. "You did what?"

"Um, y'know, I said I was working on repairing your ship. It's an old design, and the ODN relays we had in storage would probably be too fast for your data couplings. So I wanted to check if there were any older Federation vessels on the planet or in orbit that we could ask for some spares. And, um, because I can be too eager sometimes, I accessed it from where I was...on, erm, your ship."

She looked back at her fellow engineer with a mildly amused grin. "Our data couplings'll work just fine with any old ODN relays."

"I know," he shrugged, "Fortunately, the head of starbase security doesn't."

"So...what?" Denella asked, "You're gonna take the ten years in a penal colony instead?"

"W—Well, actually, all I did was access Starfleet records from a non-standard interface," he replied with a slight grimace, "It'll stay on my permanent record, but they're not gonna be sending me to a holding cell any time soon. I hope."

He smiled back at her. She studied his face a little more, hoping that her gut feeling she was now having wasn't accurate. "Hang on," she said sternly, "Please tell me you didn't do this because you wanted another chance to try and ask me—?"

"No," he said quickly, flushing with embarrassment, "It wasn't that. I just...I saw the logs. What you did wasn't an act of treachery. It was an act of loyalty. And given the sort of risk you took, and where you ended up, I figured that had to be one good friend."

Her face dropped as he said it, as she remembered the significantly more pressing issue that she had to deal with. "Crap," she whispered, "Klath."

She took off in the direction of the Bounty's landing pad as quickly as she could, before Kapadia even realised what she was doing. The engineer was left on his own, looking slightly sheepish in the middle of the corridor. But after a second, he smiled and walked on.

Must be a really good friend.

* * * * *

It didn't take Denella long to reach the landing pad where the Bounty sat, and she tore straight up the landing ramp. She didn't even bother to check the state of the repairs, as she climbed the ramp, ran through the cargo bay itself and into the main living area of the ship. She stopped when she got to the medical bay.

There, she saw a dishevelled Vulcan and a battle scarred Klingon sat tending to their wounds as best they could.

Sunek was running a dermal regenerator over his wrists, which seemed to be covered in some sort of rope burn, while Klath was tending to his right arm and wincing slightly. They both looked up as the Orion woman stood staring at them.

"Look at the state of you two," she managed with a relieved smile, before stepping over to Klath and wrapping him in a warm hug.

Klath writhed uncomfortably from within the hug, only partly because of the additional pain it was causing to at least three separate injuries on his body.

"Please, Denella," he managed to grunt, "Not in front of the Vulcan."

Denella's relieved smile became a relieved laugh as she broke the hug, looking back at the impish grin of Sunek from the other side of the small medical bay. "Hey," he said, holding his own arms out, "Where's mine?"

The Orion woman shook her head and glanced from one to the other, a more serious look on her face as she sized up their injuries. "What the hell happened?"

Klath remained silent, and she noticed with concern that he looked away from her when he heard the question. As if he had an answer for her, but didn't want to give one. Confused, she glanced over at Sunek, who she was certain would be distinctly less circumspect in giving her all the gory details. Instead, the Vulcan looked over at Klath, then back to her, and shrugged.

"He won."

That didn't clear anything up for her. But something about the atmosphere in the room told her that it might be best not to pursue that line of questioning too deeply for the moment.

"So, it's all over?" she offered instead, to Klath.

This time, he looked up at her.

"Not quite."

Part 4D

Part Four (Cont'd)

More so than before, Jirel wished that he had something stronger than synthehol to hand.

He hadn't said anything to her question, but the look on his face was all the proof that Natasha needed that she was right. She took his lack of a response as a cue to sit down at his table. They were away from any other patrons at the arboretum cafe, giving them plenty of room to talk.

"Did you really think I wouldn't figure it out?" she asked, in lieu of any forthcoming comment from the Trill. She was almost offended.

"Honestly?" he replied eventually, "Didn't think you'd be interested enough to bother."

She shook her head as he idly toyed with the glass in front of him. "I really should have realised earlier," she continued, "Everything you said about being adopted by a Starfleet officer, and this 'understanding' you have with the admiral, and then seeing how you both seemed so interested in what each other was doing."

"The others never figured it out," Jirel shrugged, "Though in their defence, they're definitely not interested enough to bother."

They sat in silence for a moment, before he reluctantly forced himself to continue. "Well, now you know. That's my big secret. Not that there's many family ties left, from what I can tell. He's made it pretty clear to me that he wouldn't be too upset if the Bounty was sucked into a quantum singularity."

"Really?"

"Really," he nodded, "Apparently, I'm nowhere near as important as I thought I was."

"Well, I could have told you that," she offered with a smile.

She took a moment to look out across the benign serenity of the arboretum grounds and sighed gently. "It was a good lie," she continued, not letting on about how much of an expert she felt she was becoming at that sort of thing these days, "But you really shouldn't have pushed it with that whole bit about going to the Academy."

"Actually..."

She turned back to him in surprise. He winced and continued. "I mean, I never actually made it to the Academy, so much, but the old man was very insistent that his son took the entrance exam."

"Huh," she mused, "And you...?"

"Oh, flunked it," he nodded quickly, "Like, super flunked it. Not even as if I just missed the cut. And, while I'd like that to all be a crowning act of teenage rebellion, the sad part is I was actually trying."

"I guess that didn't impress him?"

"Nope. That was kinda the final straw," he sighed, "I genuinely think up to that point he thought I was gonna somehow make good, turn everything around and follow in the Jenner family tradition. His father was a starfleet captain, his grandfather was a starfleet captain, his great-grandfather was—I mean, you get the idea."

She nodded. He continued. "And, that was that. I'd been nothing but a letdown, so shortly after that, he went back to the captain's chair, and I left Earth for...well, a lot of stuff."

"And your own captain's chair?" she offered with a slight smile.

"Yeah. Finding your first command in a scrapyard doesn't count in his eyes though. Apparently, finders keepers isn't a legitimate route to captaincy. Still, he's kept an eye on me through the years. And, by the sounds of what he's been asking you, he still is."

He paused for a moment and looked out across the peaceful serenity of their surroundings with a sad shrug. "Just...I dunno. MIGHT be kinda nice if he asked me, instead."

A moment of silence descended again, before he took a deep breath and turned back to her, trying to locate his usual happy-go-lucky self. "So, there's your big scoop. No more secrets."

"Really?"

"Well," he added, more meekly, "Some more secrets."

She leaned back in her chair and considered what she'd heard. And then considered her own secrets. "I resigned my commission," she said, apropos of little.

"Really?" he asked, "I mean, I know you said that was your plan, but I thought you'd changed your tune. Especially with, y'know..."

He gestured around the spotless arboretum. "This. It's a lot to give up."

She felt a rush of sadness, looking down to the ground as she did so. A familiar bloodied face crossed her mind.

No more secrets.

"I ran," she muttered, almost to herself, "Back on the Navajo. I ran away."

"You ran away from the spaceship that was about to explode? Yeah, I think I'd have been with you on that one."

"No," she said, failing to keep the emotion out of her voice, "I didn't tell—I haven't told anyone. But there was a man. A boy, really. In the corridor, as I was getting to the escape pod."

Her voice dimmed to a whisper. Jirel listened intently. In her mind, she was no longer in the arboretum. She was back on the Navajo, standing in the door of the escape pod, staring at the bloodied ensign.

"Doctor, help me!"

"I couldn't have saved him. His wounds were..." she stifled a sob, "But I could have—No, I should have done something. Helped him, comforted him, been there for him. But...I froze. I panicked. I ran away, and left him to die."

"But...you said you couldn't have saved him—?"

"That's not the point," she said quickly, "I failed. Right there and then. I failed myself, failed that poor ensign, failed my uniform, my training, my oath as a doctor..."

Her voice trailed off. She looked over at him, tears welling in her eyes. "The worst part is...I didn't even know his name."

She heard her voice waver. She composed herself as best she could. "Of all the four hundred and seventy five people onboard the Navajo, I have no idea who he was."

She sank down in her chair, defeated. Jirel considered her words in silence, mulling over the gravity of her impromptu confession.

"Would that make it any better?" he asked eventually.

She looked out across the arboretum. She didn't have an answer. "So," she managed instead, wiping away a tear and composing herself as best she could, "No secrets here either. That's who you're dealing with. You're dealing with the woman who ran away, and hasn't stopped running since."

"Hmm," Jirel mused, "Sounds like you'd fit in perfectly on the Bounty after all."

Of all the things she'd been expecting him to say, giving her another job offer hadn't been near the top of her list. "Wh—? Really?"

"Really," he nodded, "One way or another, we're all running away from something."

Now it was her turn to pause and consider what he was saying.

"In my case," he added with a familiar cheeky grin, "About half a dozen Nausicaan creditors and a couple of really angry dabo girls. Unrelated incidents."

This time, it wasn't much of a stretch of her deductive powers to see through the lie. But she also saw something else. Instead of just a cocky wannabe space adventurer with some annoying level of unrequited feelings for her, she now saw the orphan Trill with the impossible to please father, forever living in the shadow of a Starfleet admiral.

"Listen, Nat," he said, more seriously, "Whatever you did, you were in the middle of a war. And you don't need me to tell you that war can do funny things to people, especially when they come face to face with their own mortality. So, I dunno, should you be proud of what you did? Probably not, by the sounds of it. But you can't keep beating yourself up over it forever. You know why?"

He gestured around the arboretum, at the other Starfleet officers and personnel walking here and there throughout the grounds. "Cos I'll bet that, in that exact same position, most of these people would have done the exact same thing. Everyone's a Starfleet officer when things are going well. But when you're all alone, and everything around you is falling apart, we're all just fragile, fallible people."

Natasha looked around at the other officers, at their pristine uniforms. She couldn't help but picture the ensign's face again. She gestured to her own outfit. "I just...don't think I can wear this any more."

"That's your prerogative," Jirel shrugged, his cheeky grin flickering back into play, "Just say the word and we can Betazoid wedding this place right up."

He playfully grabbed the corners of his tunic top. She managed a smile. "I'm serious," she replied.

"So am I. About the job offer, I mean."

She looked back at him and saw the seriousness in his eyes. She slowly nodded.

"Also," he added with a twinkle, "Totally serious about the 'you and me getting naked' thing if you're—"

"Let's stick with the job offer for now."

He nodded back and smiled. They stood up and started to make for the exit of the arboretum. As she walked, she remembered something else.

No more secrets.

“There’s one issue,” she said, “Admiral Jenner wants—”

“Wants you to spy on me? Yeah, I kinda figured as much. But I guess I can live with that.”

“Really?”

He looked back at her as they reached the exit. “Sure,” he smiled, “At least dad’s finally showing an interest in me.”

She smiled back. She felt odd. It took her a while to realise why.

She no longer felt numb.

* * * * *

On top of the hill, as the first signs of the twin dawn started to break over the horizon, Klath stared down at the body of the Klingon in front of him. He allowed himself a moment of peace, to take in the serenity of the moment.

A serenity that was shattered seconds later.

“Ugh,” Sunek grouched as he stepped up next to him, “It’s freezing up here. Why the hell didn’t I bring a jacket this time—?”

“Sunek,” another familiar voice called out, “Don’t ruin this.”

Denella stepped up on the other side and looked down at the body.

Klath knew it was probably a bad idea to come back here, given that it wouldn’t be long before Kolar’s body was discovered, either by Starfleet or the local Kraterites. But even as he tended to his own injuries, he felt an urge to return. And when they had heard why, his colleagues had insisted on coming along. He had felt slightly uncomfortable about accepting their requests, but deep down he was also glad for the company.

Even from Sunek.

“He looks kinda peaceful,” Denella offered, “Should we bury him?”

Klath looked up at the two deep orange suns poking their way over the horizon and shook his head. “There is no need. The body is an empty vessel now. His soul has departed.”

“For Sto-vo-kor?” she asked.

Klath looked back down at Kolar’s unblinking eyes.

“Perhaps.”

Denella considered this cryptic response. She was still sure that she hadn’t got the full story on what happened out here from either of them, but for the time being she had resolved not to push the matter any further.

“Klath,” she mused, “If this Klingon was actually trying to kill you—”

“Oh, he was,” Sunek chimed in.

“—Then why do you want to do all this?”

Klath considered explaining the full story. About the reason he was so eager to bestow honour onto this particular Klingon. But, just as Denella had decided not to press her questioning, Klath decided not to reveal the truth just yet. Another day, he thought darkly.

“Because he fought well,” he replied instead, “It feels wrong for us to leave here without doing something.”

Denella considered this, then nodded. “You know,” she said to him, “You still owe me an apology. A warrior does not let a friend face danger alone, wasn’t it?”

Klath grimaced. “Yes,” he offered, “I apologise.”

“Well,” she said with a slightly brighter tone, “If we’re gonna do this, I think I might have just the words for it.”

Klath and Sunek looked over at her curiously as she sucked in a deep breath and filled her mouth with phlegm once again.

“nuqDaq 'oH puchpa'e'.”

She looked back at Klath and smiled proudly, certain that her pronunciation had been a lot closer this time. Klath merely looked confused.

“Pretty good, eh?” the Orion woman beamed.

“You just said ‘Which way is the bathroom?’.”

Sunek stifled a laugh. Denella's face dropped. "Oh. Well, what's the one that goes: May you never defeat your last enemy, great warrior of Kahless?"

Klath's mouth curled into a smile. "I will teach it to you tomorrow," he replied, "For now, we should begin."

She nodded. Sunek cleared his throat. "Just so long as my voice is up to it," he offered with a grin, "The cold doesn't agree with my vocal chords."

"I'll be sure to remember that," Denella fired back.

Klath ignored their banter, and took a step closer to the body. The other two followed him. And followed his lead as he began to roar into the sky as the suns continued to rise.

On a lonely hilltop, a scant few kilometres from a Federation starbase, a disgraced warrior, a former slave girl and a laughing Vulcan joined together to perform the Klingon Death Howl.

End of Part Four

Part 5 (Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part Five

Sunek skipped down the wide corridors of Starbase 216, merrily ignoring the confused looks he was getting.

Although Starfleet personnel were used to seeing the unexpected, none of them could disguise their shock at seeing a grinning Vulcan in shabby maroon overalls skipping down the corridor carrying a dented box of Delavian chocolates under one arm.

He stopped outside a specific door and pressed the door chime, before licking the palm of his hand and running it over his unkempt mess of hair as he did so. Not that such a last minute action was ever going to tempt that back into order.

The doors parted, and he put on his best winning grin. It wasn't matched by the person who answered the door.

"Oh, it's you," Ensign Taris said.

"Mind if I come in?"

Taris looked the scruffy Vulcan up and down and shrugged. "Yes."

That was enough to make his grin drop slightly, but he did his best not to let it throw him off his game. "Chocolates!" he shouted, awkwardly waving the box at her, "Got you some chocolates. Y'know, for you and your...bunkmate."

Taris took the box and examined it cautiously, as if she was dealing with a container of trillithium resin. "Lara!" she called back into the room, "That weird Vulcan who threw up on our sofa's here!"

Sunek suppressed a wince at that memory, as Taris was joined by Ensign D'Amato, who looked equally bemused to see him.

"Oh, it's you," she echoed, with even less enthusiasm than her friend.

"Yeah, and he got us chocolates," Taris said with a sarcastic look of mock excitement.

"Full disclosure," Sunek admitted, pointing to the box, "Those have been in our cargo hold for a really long time, so you might wanna give it a quick once over with a tricorder before you actually eat any of them. But, y'know, thought that counts, right?"

The ensigns looked back at him, both equally nonplussed.

"So," D'Amato asked eventually, "Why are you here?"

Finally given the lead-in line he'd been looking for, Sunek summoned up his best hero pose. "Oh, I just thought you ladies might be interested to hear how yours truly was just involved in a terrifying life or death struggle. And how I saved not just myself, but my friend as well."

He allowed himself a mental fist pump as he saw their faces light up.

"Wait, your friend?" Taris asked excitedly, "The big Klingon?"

"Is he here?" D'Amato added, peering out into the corridor.

Sunek mentally retracted the fist pump. "No! He's not—! The point is, I saved him. And narrowly avoided death myself. So, I thought, where better to celebrate than with my two favourite ladies?"

He topped off the question by leaning so far into the hero pose he was sure he felt a muscle spasm in his lower back. Taris and D'Amato just looked at each other, suppressing smirks.

"Goodbye, spaceman," Taris said.

"Thanks for the chocolates," D'Amato added.

They stepped back and allowed the door to close, leaving Sunek and his hero pose in the corridor, trying not to overhear the sound of developing laughter on the other side of the door.

"Ok," he shouted back, "But this definitely counts as well!"

* * * * *

Denella walked back out from under the Bounty's forward section for the fifth time, paying close attention to the results on her tricorder screen as scanned the hull. Off to one side, Lieutenant Kapadia waited patiently. It was only when the Orion engineer started on her sixth tour of the ship that he called out.

“I, um, have a full report on the repairs here,” he said, proffering a padd.

She didn't look up from her tricorder, tutting loudly and shaking her head as she spotted something on the scans. “See? I knew there was something. There's a point zero two variance in the seals around this new hull plate here.”

“The tolerance for that sort of seal is point two seven,” Kapadia pointed out with a frustrated smile.

“It's not about what the tolerance is,” she offered back, “It's about making the repair the best it can possibly be.”

“You know, before this posting, I worked at the Utopia Planitia yards. For three months I fitted hull plates to one of the new Prometheus-class ships. And I can tell you, we never got the variance on the seals down to point zero two.”

“What are you saying?”

“I—I'm saying that, technically, you now have a better hull than a Federation starship. Based on certain parameters.”

Denella offered him a half-smile and looked over the rest of the scans. It was true that the Bounty had got far more extensive treatment than she'd dreamed of. And she had to grudgingly admit that the Starfleet engineer had completed the job impeccably.

Granted, the brand new sheets of tritanium across the Bounty's hull looked completely out of place next to the weathered look of the rest of the ship. But she was struggling to find any genuine faults anywhere. They'd even got themselves a fancy new replicator, safely installed in the dining area.

Still though, something felt wrong.

“I know that look,” Kapadia offered.

“Yep,” she admitted, “It's the ‘someone else messed with my ship while I wasn't around’ look.”

“In my defence—”

“I'd been arrested for crimes against the Federation. I know.”

She sighed and took one last look up at the hull. Eventually, she turned back to him and gestured for the padd. “Fine, I'll sign off,” she said in defeat, “But if you tell any of my crew that anyone in an engineering uniform can fix her like this, I'll have to kill you. I've got a reputation to protect.”

“Understood,” Kapadia nodded, as Denella tapped the padd and handed it back.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, more relaxed than they had been before, but still not entirely so.

“So,” Denella said eventually, “Thank you. For...everything, Lieutenant.”

“Any time,” he said with a faint smile, “And, um, I'm sorry. For my conduct, earlier. When we, um, when I...asked you to dinner.”

“I thought that was just to go over the repair schedule?” she asked warily.

“No,” Kapadia corrected her, “You thought I was trying to score a date with the Orion slave girl. And...you were right.”

Denella's face tightened, a reaction that wasn't missed by the contrite Kapadia.

“And you were also right to...y'know, call me out on it. It was unprofessional. And I should be better than that. No matter how—”

He stopped himself before adding. “I should just be better than that.”

She felt herself relax slightly as she looked at the repentant officer. She forced a shrug. “Yeah, you probably should. But...I dunno. You're not alone, put it that way. And we made a good team with these repairs.”

Kapadia nodded, a relieved smile creeping onto his face.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm still not going for dinner,” she added, “But, next time, we can grab a coffee and catch up. I've always wanted to hear about Utopia Planitia.”

His smile grew. She mustered a guarded smile of her own.

“Next time?” he asked, with a hint of confusion.

She shrugged and gestured back up to the Bounty.

“We need a lot of repairs.”

* * * * *

Natasha dropped the small shoulder bag onto the bed and looked around the confines of the cabin. It felt smaller somehow, even though it was

the same cabin she had slept in on the Bounty's journey to Starbase 216. Except now, it wasn't just temporary accommodation, it was home.

At least for the time being.

"Hey."

She turned to see Jirel standing in the doorway.

"Let me guess," she sighed as she gestured for him to come in, "Nobody ever knocks on this ship."

"We knock, then we walk in anyway," he said, before a deadly serious look crossed his face, "Except with Sunek's cabin. Never do that with Sunek's cabin."

She rolled her eyes as he gestured to the bag on the bed. "Unpacking going well?"

"One benefit of not owning anything, I guess," she shrugged, "And I kinda like it. No baggage. Fresh start?"

He studied her face, searching for something. "You sure about this?"

She ignored the question, not really wanting to think about the answer right now, and opted for one of her own. "You sure you're ok with me spying on you for your father—?"

"Yeah, about that. Can we...keep that between us?"

"The others really don't know?"

"Pretty sure they don't," he shrugged and smiled, "And I'd like to keep it that way."

She shrugged back and nodded. "If you wanna keep running, that's up to you."

His smile slipped slightly, but he nodded back.

"I was meaning to ask," she added as he turned to leave, "Why Vincent? Why Jirel Vincent?"

"Mother's name," he replied after a pause, "Or, adopted mother, whatever. Took it on when I left Earth. Kinda wanted to distance myself from the old man, I guess."

She nodded. It made sense. He stepped out of the cabin, then turned back and grinned.

"Besides? Jirel Jenner? Kinda sounds dorky."

* * * * *

Klath walked into the cockpit to find it empty, save for Sunek in the pilot's seat. He growled slightly and slipped into the seat at his tactical console.

"Hey," Sunek offered, ignoring the antisocial growl, "I was waiting for you to show up."

He quickly jumped out of his seat and stepped over to where Klath sat. The Klingon watched on warily.

"So, listen," Sunek continued, "About...y'know, all that stuff your Klingon buddy was talking about. Was that...?"

Klath suppressed another growl. He had been dreading this moment ever since his showdown with Kolar. Of all the people onboard the Bounty to know his most uncomfortable secret, his biggest shame, the loud-mouthed Vulcan would not have been his first choice.

"I would prefer not to—"

"Yeah, I know," Sunek cut in, "You prefer not to...anything. But I'll take that to mean it was all true."

Klath shot an angry glare at the Vulcan standing over his console. But eventually he conceded the truth with a tight nod.

"Ok, that's all I needed," Sunek replied, "And, I know you might not believe me when I say this, but...your secret's safe with me."

Klath stared back at the most talkative man he had ever met. He was right. He didn't believe him.

"It's the truth," Sunek shrugged, "Way I see it, whatever you got up to before we met is no business of mine unless you want it to be. Besides, we've all got skeletons in our closets, right?"

He flashed the Klingon a grin, though all Klath found himself wondering was what skeletons the Vulcan was hiding. Still, he managed another nod. And then said something that he had previously wished he would never have to say to his most irritating of crewmates.

"Thank you."

Sunek's grin widened further and he shot Klath a wink. Both actions caused the Klingon's glower to deepen. Mercifully, before it deepened

too far, they heard footsteps bounding up the steps to the cockpit. Jirel walked in, followed by Denella and Natasha.

“Right,” the Trill said, as he jumped into his centre chair and Denella slid into her rear engineering station, “Let’s get out of here while we still can.”

Sunek looked over at Natasha, who stood awkwardly at the rear of the cockpit. “Hey,” he winked, “Hear you’re joining us on the ship of the damned.”

“Thought I might tag along,” she replied.

She tried to ignore the less welcoming glare she was getting from Klath, noting that she’d struggled to connect with the Klingon from the start, and still seemed to be struggling.

Jirel spun around and gestured to the right side of the cockpit, where a previously unused console mirroring the position of Klath’s tactical controls sat. “We’ve even got a seat for you.”

Natasha moved over and sat down, appreciating the chance to blend in. Until she saw the dead screens and dusty controls in front of her.

“I mean,” Jirel added, “Not entirely sure what that was all used for, but we’ll figure something out.”

Sunek chuckled and returned to his pilot’s seat, tapping his control with practised precision and preparing the ship for departure.

Jirel kept his focus on Natasha, as she leaned back in her seat. “Last chance to change your mind,” he offered, “We’re about to leave all those Federation creature comforts behind.”

“I don’t…”

She stopped herself from saying ‘deserve that’.

“I don’t need that,” she said instead.

Jirel nodded back.

The Bounty lifted up from the landing pad, and the starbase disappeared from sight.

* * * * *

From his office at the top of the main dome of Starbase 216, Admiral Bryce Jenner had a clear view as he watched the Bounty lift off towards the heavens. It didn’t take long before the small ship, and his adopted son, was out of sight.

He sighed and took a sip from the crystal glass in his hand, feeling the alcohol burn his throat on the way down. A bottle of old Earth scotch, vintage 2328, stood behind him on his desk.

To one side sat a padd, with the details of Commander Bari’s report on the debrief of Natasha Kinsen still visible on it. Not that the Betazoid’s thorough review of her troubled emotional state had told him anything he didn’t already know.

He closed his eyes and listened to the piano music that drifted around the room. Chopin’s Nocturne in C-sharp minor. Nothing he had chosen specifically, just part of his usual calming playlist he had requested from the computer.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered.

Behind him, shrouded by the shadows being cast by the low suns, a figure patiently stood. “Understandable,” the figure said calmly, “But it’s all necessary.”

Jenner opened his eyes and drained his glass. “It’s necessary for me to spy on my own goddamn son?”

“We’re just keeping an eye on them, like you said,” the figure reminded him, “All for the greater good.”

Jenner set his glass down on the desk, staring daggers at the figure. “That’s all you’re giving me?” he snapped, “After everything I’ve already done for you?”

The figure slowly walked over to the sofa in the corner of the huge office and made themselves comfortable. “We’ve been over this. You know I can’t give you anything more. At least, not yet.”

The admiral balled his hands up into fists as his frustrations rose, forcing himself to focus on the piano music and calm down. He glanced back out of the window, looking up at where the Bounty had disappeared from sight moments ago.

“It’ll become clear one day,” the figure said, “We just have to let it play out.”

Jenner grimaced and reached for the whisky bottle.

“Help me!”

Natasha lay in bed in her cabin, staring up at the ceiling, reflecting on how the voice seemed to have become little more than background noise. She had accepted that it was going to be with her for a long time, whether she was wearing a Starfleet uniform or not. And she knew now that she would never do that again.

So she was going to have to find a way to live with it. To come to terms with the nightmares that she knew would be waiting for her again tonight whenever she managed to fall asleep.

And she knew what she had to do if she was ever going to live with it. If she was ever going to live with herself.

She had to stop running.

She stood from the bed, padded over to the tiny desk in the corner of the cabin and tapped the somewhat antiquated computer interface. It didn't take her long to connect to a nearby network and search the public records from the war to find what she was looking for.

She called up the records of those lost onboard the USS Navajo.

Four hundred and seventy four names and profiles displayed in a neat, unemotional list.

With a deep sigh, she began to work her way down the list, one name at a time.

Looking for the face that haunted her dreams.

The End

Chapter End Notes

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.

This episode was a combination of two different ideas. Originally focused on Natasha's return to Starfleet, in her more machiavellian 'Kristen' phase (see Ep 101 Notes), she was thrown in the starbase's brig for her crimes and the episode was resolved by Jirel blackmailing Admiral Jenner into releasing her to be part of his crew. But making Natasha significantly more sympathetic trimmed down the plot to the point where it was merged with another story I was fleshing out around Klath's discommendation. This helped 102 to kick off a 'trilogy' of sorts, each focusing on Klath, Sunek or Denella after they had been left with supporting roles in 101.

The one part of the pre-merger draft which survived (and probably shouldn't have) was Natasha's debriefing. Originally, this scene revealed the extent of her crimes. But here, it ends up being an unintended red herring, as the part-Betazoid angle to Commander Bari's character never pays off. I should have made him a boring old human. Incidentally, some lines from the brig scenes written for 'Kristen' were recycled into parts of Denella's own incarceration.

The merger with Klath's story also led to the quirky design of Starbase 216. Originally, it was a space station, but the idea of a murderous Klingon running around a dedicated Starfleet facility seemed too much of a stretch. One draft even had Kolar and Klath's showdown inside a cargo bay, with some long tedious exposition about how it was shielded from sensors. But I changed it to a planet-based facility. Which have featured in both TOS and TNG, so I'm taking them as a 'thing'. That way, Natasha's plot takes place in traditional Starfleet surroundings, while Klath and Kolar face off away from the eyes of Starfleet Security.

This episode features the first 'original' species in ST: Bounty, the Kraterites. I was influenced by the insect design of the Jarada which were referenced but never seen in the TNG episode "The Big Goodbye", and then featured in the non-canon book "Imbalance" (as a teenage Trek nerd, I voraciously consumed the TNG Pocket Book series, at great cost both financially and socially). The Kraterites had a similar insectoid design and weird language, but were far less aggressive and powerful than the Jarada.

The reasons behind Klath's discommendation were important. I knew this aspect of his character tracked close to Worf's arc in TNG, and I was eager to ensure that, while Worf loses his honour in an entirely selfless act, Klath's own dishonour would be more deserved and entirely down to his own actions. The destruction of an unarmed freighter was enough to hang Kolar's revenge plot from, and also made it clear that it was a genuine mistake that Klath has had to live with ever since.

Here we kick off two big themes of ST: Bounty. Firstly, characters gain knowledge of other characters' secrets, which happens a lot in the first season. Sunek learns the truth about Klath's dishonour, while Jirel and Natasha exchange secrets (Jenner being Jirel's adoptive father and Natasha's actions on the Navajo). And secondly, we get the first sight of the Bounty's unofficial 'ethos'. If Commander Sisko perfectly summarised DS9 with his "It's easy to be a saint in paradise" speech in "The Maquis", then Jirel summarised the Bounty with his "We're all running away from something" comment. Though Klath would, obviously, argue that Klingons do not run away.

I was eager to establish Admiral Jenner and his fractured relationship with Jirel early on, both to build Jirel's character and also to

explain why the Bounty was out looking for the Navajo black box in 101 in the first place. His scene in the epilogue with the unseen figure, as well as his request for Natasha to keep tabs on his son, is another plot thread designed to pay off later on.

In the first outlines, Denella and Sunek's roles were tiny. She just dealt with the clumsy advances of Lt Kapadia as she repaired the Bounty, while Sunek disappeared with Tanis and D'Amato after they met at the Kraterite bar (to wake up at the end of the episode on their sofa, as still happens). But this early in the series, I wanted them to be doing more. So Denella got her hacking/arrest plot which gave her interactions with Kapadia more to them, while Sunek became embroiled in Klath's plot to not only give Kolar an in-story audience to explain his quest for vengeance to, but also to act as a Deus Ex Sunek during the final fight.

Title-wise, this episode was always "Be All My Sins Forgiven". Both referencing Klath's past sins that led to his discommendation and Kolar's need for revenge, and also Natasha's sins from the Navajo's destruction, which she has to confront when she is returned to Starfleet by the Bounty.

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