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Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 62

The Black Flats. Kessik IV.

I shifted a little in the comfortable purple cushioned chair that had been set up on a stretch of flat land in the Black Flats on the planet, glancing at an identical chair across from me. The chair was definitely in the futuristic, Star Trek design-chic, almost like a throwback to the Kirk-era captain's chair on the bridge of the original *Enterprise*.

Even in a supposedly post-capitalist utopia, culture had its inertia. Design trends still echoed power and legacy, much like the monarchs of old once influenced fashion and architecture, sometimes even accidentally and unintentionally. The way we buttoned our suits in my era was a result of some King being too fat to button his suit all the way down and soon enough everyone had done the same. That trend had lasted for centuries! It was crazy when you really thought about it.

The Federation claimed to be evolved, but moments like this reminded me that not everything had changed.

Across from me sat a journalist from the Federation News Service. She had just taken her seat, mirroring mine exactly. Strikingly beautiful in a classic way, she looked mostly human—but if you knew what to look for, there were traces of something else.

The jet-black eyes, the calm weight of her presence... Betazoid, probably. Not a full one—maybe a grandparent, maybe a little further back. Just enough to hint at hidden depths.

Hybrid vigor was real, and her beauty might have been proof of it.

Jarvis had compiled a comprehensive dossier before I agreed to the interview, but—unsurprisingly—given Federation culture and law, her ancestry wasn't part of the public record. There'd been no need to dig deeper with more invasive methods. The investigation focused on verifying her identity—confirming she was, in fact, a journalist and not an assassin with a press badge—and whether speaking with her would serve my purposes.

No one else had been asking, after all. I'd already been inclined to say yes if she even remotely checked out. Hell, I would've sat down with this century's equivalent of Jerry Springer if it meant being able to promote my business while polishing my public image.

"We'll get started in a few minutes," she said, her tone professional but warm, as a producer—or maybe an assistant—hovered beside her, touching up her makeup with a few sleek, humming devices. She barely reacted. Maybe she didn't even notice. It was amazing what you could get used to.

Several anti-grav camera drones hovered silently around us, almost vigilantly, ready to broadcast the interview live. It wouldn't be a single uninterrupted stretch, though—there would be breaks throughout. Not for commercials, of course, but for public service announcements, local news, music, meditation segments—whatever viewing norms the world receiving the broadcast adhered to.

While humanoids were common across the Federation and galactic trade and information exchange had led to a certain degree of cultural homogenization—that was inevitable—the Federation itself was far from monolithic. Diversity was celebrated, and that meant accommodating the preferences of each world's audience—even during a long, live interview.

Tyr, ever the paranoid guardian, had already scanned the hovering camera drones a dozen different ways to make sure none carried explosives or concealed energy weapons. My AI children had gone a step further—they'd quietly hacked the drones' control software and could hijack the drones—and the broadcast feed—at a moment's notice if needed.

The 'journalist' in front of me wore a bright, inviting, but calculating smile—one meant to charm, to disarm. I recognized it for what it was: a weapon as finely tuned as the rest of her. Her outfit was a masterclass in dual-purpose design—somewhere between an evening gown, overskirt, and formal jumpsuit. It managed the hard to achieve trick of being both alluring and professionally appropriate. Even the artfully elevated cleavage, enhanced just enough by the cut and tightness of the fabric, stayed on the safe side of scandal—at least as judged from my time—though each breath she took seemed to defy that boundary with unintentional, magnetic precision, drawing the eyes inexorably towards those lovely peaks.

"Would you like a drink while we wait to go live?" she asked, her voice smooth as she reached for a crystal decanter on the table between us. She poured herself a glass of chilled, bluish-green juice and took a sip, unbothered, confident, fully in control of the moment, though I noticed she had reacted to me earlier and certainly wasn't intimidated.

Jarvis helpfully brought up a scan report in my HUD. Tyr had completed a chemical analysis of the liquid the second it had been brought out. The drink had been identified as uttaberry juice—a tart, blueberry-like fruit native to Betazed, often used in crepes and pies. Either she was simply a fan of exotic alien juices, or my theory about her Betazoid heritage was looking more likely.

"It's uttaberry juice, from Betazed. I just love it," she said with a bright, practiced gush. "My grandmother drank it constantly—I guess I developed a taste for it."

“Yes, thank you,” I replied, accepting the offer with a nod. I caught Tyr’s head whip around at the exchange, momentarily interrupting his steady scan of the production crew and the surrounding area. His posture screamed disapproval, even though he had already thoroughly checked the juice right down to the molecular level, even trying to come up with ways even a harmless substance, like this juice, could become harmful if mixed with something else that was present. I didn’t fault him much; combination poisons existed.

I was a strong believer in being paranoid, especially when you knew people were out to get you, but even *I* almost rolled my eyes.

Poison, as an assassination method, had stood the test of time and was still alive and well in the Star Trek dimension—even in this supposedly enlightened age. But a well-timed sip could buy a few seconds of silence at a critical point in an interview, time to think or to add emphasis. Picard had taught me the value of that particular move, and I never forgot it.

“Was your grandmother Betazoid?” I asked, casually fishing for confirmation.

“Yes, she was,” she said softly. Her eyes lowered, a shadow passing over them as some private sorrow surfaced. Had something happened to her? There was nothing in the dossier to suggest that.

She drew in a steadying breath, as if to gird herself. “She died recently. She was on one of the transport ships hit during the final wave of the Hur’q invasion.”

She paused, then added, “I don’t follow any of the old religions, not really—but knowing what the Hur’q did to their prisoners... for the first time in my life, I prayed. I begged anyone—anything—that she didn’t suffer in the end, didn’t despair.”

Knowing how the Hur’q specifically kept prisoners alive in order to keep the meat as fresh as possible, this was definitely one of those situations where the living Hur’q prisoners may have come to envy the dead. That was a common sentiment in the *Walking Dead* universe before I established my safe haven in Great Britain.

During the invasion, some species had gone so far as to distribute poison wafers—small, thin, dissolvable tabs that would bring a painless death within seconds, supposedly. When the alternative was being eaten alive, piece by piece, I couldn’t blame anyone for making that difficult choice.

‘Jarvis, what the fuck, dude?’ I asked dryly, not bothering to hide my irritation.

How had this not made it into her dossier? Sure, the primary concern was vetting her as a potential assassin and ultimately whether she’d treat me fairly in the interview—but something like this? This was the kind of thing you flag ahead of time.

‘My apologies, sir,’ Jarvis replied at once, his tone clipped, as if he was straining his processing power. ‘The aftermath of the invasion has severely disrupted data sharing across the quadrant. Reports on vessels that went missing during transit between star systems and casualty lists—particularly from the final weeks before the Battle Over Earth—are often incomplete or

corrupted. With this new detail, I'll update her file and begin cross-referencing for additional data.'

'See that you do,' I muttered mentally, feeling irritated, even as I kept my expression neutral. The dead might stay silent, but their stories had a way of leaking through the cracks.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I said, and meant it. "It sounds like you were close."

"We were," she replied softly, her eyes drifting as memory pulled her inward. "By some genetic twist, I inherited stronger empathic abilities from her than even my mother did. She helped me through the worst of it, taught me how to manage it all. We bonded deeply because of that."

I paused, then asked gently, "Is that why you requested this interview? Because of my history with the Hur'q?"

"Partly," she said, nodding. "When her transport picked up Hur'q vessels on an intercept course, they broadcast a distress call. The closest Starfleet ship was twelve hours away—even at maximum warp."

She drew in a quiet breath.

"They tried to run. Then they tried to hide. Hoping to buy time for Starfleet to arrive and save them. But it was useless."

Ah, the parallels between Kessik IV and her grandmother's passing were obvious now.

She paused, before tears started falling.

"I don't know if it was a blessing or a curse," she said quietly, "but when they realized help wouldn't arrive in time, they had time to face the inevitable." She took a breath. "The passengers began sending final subspace messages—words of love, of regret, of advice. Goodbyes to family, to friends... everything they wished they'd said before, *before they ran out of time*," she whispered, her voice cracking at the end.

She dabbed at her eyes carefully, avoiding pressure that might redden her skin and ruin her on-camera look. I remained silent, letting her speak. It reminded me—painfully—of those last phone calls made on 9/11, from passengers on hijacked planes or people trapped in the Twin Towers. The same brutal clarity in the face of imminent and inevitable death.

"Unlike the people of Kessik IV," she added, her tone sharpening, "they didn't have a genetically enhanced warrior and a miracle warship arrive to save them at the last minute." The bitterness was restrained, but it was there.

"I don't blame Starfleet," she continued. "I know they were stretched to the limit, doing everything they could under impossible circumstances. But the story of Kessik IV stayed with me, resonated with me, made me think. We need to do better."

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine, and in them I saw that same fire—sharp, unwavering—the same conviction I'd often seen in President Moss. In that moment, a flicker of hope stirred in me.

Maybe, just maybe, the Federation had a fighting chance in the Dominion War to come... if more people felt like she did. Maybe something good could come of this invasion.

“Many of my colleagues don’t know what to make of you, Admiral,” she said, voice firm with purpose. “They’re uncomfortable with what you represent—the idea that the Federation might *need* your defense net *in addition* to Starfleet in order to truly be safe. That our ideals may be putting us at serious risk. For those willing to accept it, that veil of idealism or naivety or whatever you want to call it has been forcibly ripped away by the invasion. We’ve clung to the dream of utopia, but utopias don’t defend themselves. They survive because someone is willing to fight for them.”

She paused just long enough to draw a breath,. “After what happened to my family, I made a decision: if I can use my platform to shine a light on a possible solution, I will. That’s why I’m here.”

“Thirty seconds to live!” a nearby producer called out, jolting us both as the crew sprang into motion. A harried and now visibly irritated makeup artist rushed in, trying to erase the last traces of tears and redness with what looked like a modified dermal regenerator. If that device could make someone look like another species, it could damn well erase a few tear tracks and skin irritation.

“Five... four... three...” the producer continued, the last numbers counted silently on her fingers as the lights came up and many millions in the Federation tuned in.

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“Hello, my fellow citizens of the Federation and beyond! I’m your host, Tessa Mirok, and welcome to this special live broadcast of *Open Hailing Frequencies!*” she announced in a yell, flashing a dazzling smile. Any trace of our earlier emotional exchange had seemingly vanished—replaced by polished charisma and a stage-ready energy.

Bombastic theme music erupted, accompanied by holographic lasers and bursts of photonic fireworks, which had almost caused Tyr to lose his digital mind and shoot somebody. A troupe of scantily clad dancers—both men and women, representing a broad spectrum of Federation species—leapt into view, moving in synchronized rhythm. Front and center, a striking blue-skinned Andorian woman twirled with captivating flair.

Ah yes, I thought wryly, watching the scene unfold like the opening act at a particularly flamboyant nightclub or stage show. This part I’d been briefed on.

Even in the enlightened utopia of the Federation, there was still room for sensationalist media—and clearly, *Open Hailing Frequencies!* had embraced that niche with gusto.

Yes, *Open Hailing Frequencies!*—which, I had to admit, was a clever name—wasn’t exactly known for its hard-hitting journalism. It *dabbled*, sure, especially in recent weeks. Likely a side effect of Tessa’s grandmother’s death, now that I had the information to put it into context. Tragedy certainly had a way of reshaping one’s priorities.

No, OHF wasn't this dimension's *60 Minutes*, but it *did* pull in a regular audience in the hundreds of millions across the Federation and even outside it. And unlike the more "respectable" arms of the Federation News Network, *they* had actually asked me for an interview. The others? Silent. Which said a lot. Either someone—Pressman, the Romulans, or both—was quietly working to keep me out of the spotlight, or the networks just didn't want to acknowledge the uncomfortable truths I represented. Probably both.

Or maybe they were worried about giving a platform to an Augment, no matter what great deeds he'd performed recently.

As the show's over-the-top intro wrapped up, the dancers twirled out of frame—though not before most of them gave me unmistakable looks: interest, curiosity... invitation. They were blatantly checking me out.

Hardly surprising. Besides being easy on the eyes and radiating whatever cocktail of pheromones my genetically enhanced body produced, I carried the kind of edge that many found irresistible. The bad boy. The dangerous outlier. The forbidden fruit. Some things, across time and species, never changed.

"I'm very happy to introduce my guest for this interview—Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Forces, CEO of the Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, designer of the Gothic Orbital Defense System, recipient of the Karagite Order of Heroism and the Federation Council Medal of Honor, and the renowned author behind the *Harry Potter* holonovels currently taking the Federation by storm," Tessa announced with polished enthusiasm. "Admiral Gothic, we are honored to have you on *Open Hailing Frequencies!*. Welcome."

I gave her my best warm smile, holding her gaze. Lauren had once joked that my smile was a *weapon of mass panty destruction*. I couldn't exactly argue. It had served me well in this new life.

"Thank you for having me, Tessa," I returned smoothly.

Jarvis helpfully overlaid the live broadcast feed onto my HUD, allowing me to track the real-time camera angles and presentation (as well as the viewership statistics). It let me adjust posture, tone, or expression on the fly—because in this kind of performance, presentation *was* half the battle.

The feed shifted to a wide-angle view, capturing the striking landscape around us. A few camera drones raced off, skimming between jagged, obsidian formations—ancient volcanic remnants sculpted by eons of erosion. The terrain looked both hostile and hauntingly beautiful, carved by eons of erosion.

"Your name has been on everyone's lips in the Federation lately," Tessa began, her voice smooth and practiced. "First, for saving Paris from destruction... and now, for offering a revolutionary orbital defense net to a Federation member world—something the Romulans seem *very* interested in stopping."

"Was there a question in there, Tessa?" I asked with a playful grin.

She laughed lightly, keeping the mood easy. “We’ll start simple, Admiral. Can you tell our audience where we are right now?”

“Happy to,” I replied, turning my eyes to the landscape. “We’re sitting in the Black Flats, on the Federation world of Kessik IV. All around us are natural obsidian formations, remnants of ancient volcanic activity from this planet’s distant past. The landscape is jagged, lifeless, and sharp enough to cut flesh.”

“It was also the area targeted by multiple starships during the testing of your defense net’s planetary shielding,” Tessa pointed out. “Yet it’s still here and the citizens of Kessik IV will be able to enjoy its stark beauty for centuries to come.”

“They certainly can,” I agreed with a smile and a nod.

“I did leave out one of your titles in the introduction. You’re also known as the *Hero of Kessik IV*, at least by its people. How did you come by that title?”

“During the shakedown cruise of my personal starship, *The Flighty Temptress*, we received a distress call from Kessik IV,” I said evenly. “They were facing invasion by Hur’q forces and asking for help, from anyone in range. I answered.”

“You did far more than that, didn’t you, Admiral? You *saved* them.”

I gave a small nod, offering nothing more. With the ever-present shadow of my Augment status, the last thing I needed was to come off as boastful. Humility, at least outwardly, was part of the game if I wanted to overcome the legacy left by my forebears.

“According to reports,” she continued, “the Hur’q arrived with three medium-class carriers and hundreds of fighters. By the time you entered the system, all three carriers and 105 of their fighters were still active.” She let the statement hang, clearly fishing for more.

“That’s correct,” I said with a nod. “The planet’s defenders made a heroic last stand. They gave everything to protect their world—but the Hur’q were too many and too strong. *They* are the real heroes of this story.”

Tessa nodded solemnly, the weight of the moment settling between us.

“Once the defenders fell, the Hur’q landed ground forces and... committed atrocities,” she said, her voice catching ever so slightly as she glanced down at the PADD in her lap. “They captured civilians. They *ate* them. It’s hard to even say that out loud; it sounds so ridiculous as to be absurd.” She took a breath to fortify herself. “You were up against overwhelming odds, Admiral. One ship, yours, against so many. Why help? Why take that risk—for a world that wasn’t even your responsibility?”

“Our scans showed the nearest Starfleet vessel, the *USS Cairo*, was over 24 hours away at maximum warp,” I replied calmly. “There was literally *no one else* that could arrive in time. I had the means to help... so I decided to answer the call.”

“Were you under any obligation to assist the Federation or Kessik IV?” she asked, tilting her head slightly, her tone a blend of curiosity and feigned naiveté. She already knew the answer, of course—Tessa Mirok was too sharp not to—but she delivered the question perfectly, setting up the narrative in a way that made the conversation feel effortless. She was doing me a favor, really.

“While Bajor is an ancillary signatory to the Mutual Defense Treaty signed by several Alpha Quadrant powers during the Hur’q invasion, no,” I replied, shaking my head lightly. “I was under no legal obligation to intervene. Technically, I wasn’t even on duty. This was a shakedown cruise for my personal ship—closer to a vacation than an official mission.”

“A vacation,” she repeated, the faintest trace of amusement in her voice. “And yet... you came anyway?”

“I did.”

“What happened when you arrived in system?”

“My crew and I engaged the Hur’q forces in orbit. In the end, we emerged victorious.”

“You *fought* them,” she said, leaning in slightly. “And *destroyed* them.”

I gave a measured nod. “I did.”

“And then?” she asked, her voice dropping just a fraction, inviting the next chapter.

“Upon detecting Hur’q forces already on the surface, I deployed to the planet and engaged them directly.”

Tessa’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “How many warriors had they landed?”

“Three troop dropships,” I replied. “Each carrying its standard complement.”

She glanced down at a nearby PADD, then raised it in a subtle gesture as she addressed the audience. “According to Federation military briefings, each Hur’q dropship carries exactly twenty-five warrior-caste soldiers—no more, no less. These aren’t ordinary infantry. They’re genetically engineered shock troops, bred for speed, strength, and brutality. Designed solely to defend hive ships and annihilate opposition.”

She looked up at me, her voice low but steady. “Are you telling me there were seventy-five Hur’q warriors on the ground that day?”

“That’s correct,” I said. “And once I landed, I engaged them all.”

“When you say you ‘engaged them,’” she said carefully, “you mean... you killed them, correct?”

“I did.”

“You and your crew must be formidable warriors to have achieved that kind of victory,” she said, clearly impressed.

“My ship is highly automated, by design,” I explained. “I operate with a very small crew. I was the only one who went to the surface.”

There was a pause—long enough to notice, many in the audience outside of frame looking shocked. The moment stretched as the weight of my words settled on her.

“I’m sorry,” she said slowly, the disbelief in her voice barely concealed. “Are you saying... you personally fought and killed seventy-five Hur’q warriors? Alone? By yourself?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

She blinked, genuinely surprised now, I could tell. “Admiral, the allied soldiers I have interviewed who have done battle with Hur’q warriors invariably speak of them with fear, saying they are extremely deadly to a man and that overwhelming them with numbers and weight of fire is the only way to win because they’re bred for combat, unlike us. Faster, stronger, and more lethal than any average soldier.”

“I’d have to agree with that,” I said simply.

“How was what you did, even possible?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m a trained soldier,” I replied. “I have been most of my life. I fought in multiple conflicts on my homeworld, and later against the Cardassians during the Occupation of Bajor. Combat is not unfamiliar to me.”

I paused briefly before adding, as if it was an afterthought, “And by some definitions, I’m an Augment. I possess certain physical advantages granted by genetic enhancements.”

“I definitely want to explore your Augment status,” she said, interest flashing in her eyes, “but for now, let’s stay with the Hur’q.”

She leaned forward slightly, her tone shifting.

“The Battle Over Earth changed everything. The Hur’q brought the war to the very heart of the Federation. Before that, for many on Earth, it was just terrifying—but distant—news. That illusion of safety shattered overnight.”

From her expression, I knew she was speaking from personal experience. According to her file, she was a resident of Earth. This wasn’t just a question—it was a reflection of her own thoughts and feelings on the subject.

“Most of our viewers don’t really understand the Hur’q,” she continued. “To them, it’s just a name—something alien and monstrous. But you’ve faced them more than once. Can you tell us what they’re like? How do they compare to other warrior species the Federation has encountered?”

I let out a quiet, exasperated chuckle and gave her a wry smile.

“I’m not sure we have enough time in the broadcast for that conversation, Tessa,” I said, deflecting with mild humor. “And I doubt your audience will enjoy my answer—it’s not exactly...uplifting. In fact, I’d say it’s rather grim.”

I hesitated, weighing my words carefully. There were real implications for the future here. The Hur’q shared many similarities with the Jem’Hadar. If the Federation was going to survive what lay ahead, maybe it was time the public heard the truth. This interview was live but it would be replayed throughout the quadrant—it was a chance to plant a seed of awareness, maybe even readiness. If it seemed uncannily, maybe even suspiciously prescient in the months and years ahead, well, that was a risk I was willing to take.

The future may depend on it.

“Are you sure you want to go down that rabbit hole?” I asked seriously, my tone far different than it had been previously.

Tessa met my gaze, unwavering. “I’m sure, Admiral. Most Federation citizens have never heard firsthand accounts like yours. You’ve fought them and not only survived, but won—more than once even. People deserve to understand what we’re up against. The people of Kessik IV... Paris... they believed Starfleet would be enough. That assumption cost lives. We can’t afford that kind of naivety anymore.”

I sighed, long and low, partly for effect, partly to steady myself. She wasn’t wrong. The bit about Paris may have been a bit unfair to Starfleet—but I understood the fear behind it.

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s talk about the Hur’q.”

“The Hur’q are an insectoid species, structured much like a Terran beehive. Their society is rigidly hierarchical, with distinct castes for every function, each caste genetically engineered to an absurd degree to serve the purpose and function of that caste,” I explained. “The warrior caste serves as the hive’s sword and shield. They protect it, expand its reach, and secure resources—whether that means technology to be handed off to their engineer caste for reverse engineering, or something far more disturbing: living sentient beings.”

I paused briefly, letting the weight of my next words settle.

“They literally eat the people they capture, oftentimes even when they’re still alive. Not out of necessity. With their level of technology, there’s really no need for it, it’s entirely unnecessary—no biological imperative that can’t be met with replicators or nutrient synthesis or outright cloning of mindless bodies, considering how skilled they are with genetics, after all. *But they still do it.* Whether it’s a sign of a total disregard for other sentient life, or some predatory or hunting behavior hardwired into their genome that makes those other options undesired or impossible, we just don’t know,” I said with a shrug.

Nothing I was saying was a secret, but it also wasn’t that well known to the normal citizenry outside of government or military organizations. I was also simplifying it to a great degree which made it much easier to follow and understand.

“Why do you think that is?” Tessa asked.

“Speculative theories abound in the militaries of the various powers: maybe it’s cultural, maybe it’s psychological conditioning, maybe it’s part of *their* design, something they built into their own genetic code in the distant past to ensure the hive is constantly challenged to get stronger and to weed out the weak examples of their race. That’s what I think, actually, based on everything I’ve seen. Adversity breeds strength. The Vulcan and Klingon homeworld are very harsh worlds, yet those planetary conditions led to a very robust and strong species evolving on each of them. Maybe the Hur’q kept that purposely, even when their technology made it entirely unnecessary to kill sentients for food anymore.”

Tessa’s hand rose slowly to her mouth, the reaction almost involuntary, her eyes wide with restrained horror.

Though I had more experience and data than most, even I wasn’t certain, but that felt right, for some reason.

“They’re not born the way we are. There’s no genetic lottery, no family, no love—none of the randomness that marks most species’ natural reproduction, even among other insectoid species. And while many civilizations dabble in genetic enhancement, no one we know of takes it to the extreme the Hur’q do.”

I let that settle a moment before continuing.

“To call them ‘bred’ for a purpose doesn’t quite capture it. They’re not raised. They’re produced—like a product from an industrial replicator, stamped out again and again, each iteration designed with ruthless precision to serve a single function. Only in this case, the ‘product’ is a living, sentient warrior. And with every enemy they encounter, every technology they capture, the template is refined. Improved. Perfected.”

I paused, letting the implications hang in the air, now thinking of how the Founders did exactly that, how they even tried producing an alpha quadrant specific Jem’Hadar genetic template towards the end of the war.

“If a Hur’q warrior is defective in any way, they’re simply discarded—killed without hesitation and their bodies recycled and reused. And before anyone in your audience tries to chalk this up to xenobiology influencing their species or some unavoidable cultural difference, let me be clear: the Hur’q aren’t just another insectoid race. They’re fundamentally different, even from others like the Xindi Insectoids.”

I paused a beat, letting the comparison hang.

“The Xindi Insectoids, for instance, care *deeply* for their young. They’re still born from parents, still part of a pseudo family structure, even within their hive society. You can even see that care reflected in their ship design----the most heavily protected part of a Xindi insectoid ship is the hatchery, where their children are born and raised.”

I made a small gesture as the memory surfaced.

“We know the basic layout of a Hur’q hive ship. There is no such sanctuary, no equivalent. Maybe there’s a chamber where new Hur’q are generated—something they collectively defend—but individual Hur’q? They’re expendable. Irrelevant. Even their queens are replaceable.”

“The warrior template is a genetic blueprint—engineered with brutal precision for a single purpose,” I explained. “A Hur’q bred for the warrior caste can never join another. The concept of ambition, of personal identity or choice, has been deliberately erased from their genetic makeup. Even their natural fear response has been ruthlessly removed. They are incapable of hesitation, incapable of mercy. It simply wouldn’t occur to them. As such we have to be just as hard.”

I saw Tessa lean forward slightly, listening intently, as if captivated in the same way you might be when told a scary story around a campfire at night. It looked like a question wasn’t going to be coming anytime soon, so I continued.

In my mind, I wasn’t strictly speaking about a Hur’q warrior anymore, but a Jem’Hadar.

“Each one is a living weapon—stronger, faster, more agile, and more aggressive than any organic soldier should be. And when you pair that with the advanced armor and weapons they’ve scavenged or stolen from the many species they’ve defeated, you have a force that’s not just dangerous... it’s devastating, an existential threat, one that the alpha quadrant had no experience with and has been slow to adapt to. The combat doctrine of this era is completely unsuited for an enemy like that.”

I let that settle before continuing.

“But that isn’t why the powers of the Alpha Quadrant united to fight them. The Klingons, the Romulans, the Cardassians, the Federation and all the rest—all setting aside generations of animosity to fight them. It wasn’t just about survival.”

Tessa’s voice was soft but steady. “Then what was the reason?”

“Imagine an entire species governed by an unyielding caste system—every member conditioned from creation to serve the hive’s singular purpose, without factions, without disagreement, without even the capacity for truly independent thought outside of fulfilling their caste’s design purpose,” I said, painting the picture carefully. “No politics, no internal conflict, no debate—just absolute, synchronized focus. That’s what we’re up against.”

I let that sink in before continuing.

“Now imagine this enemy can *manufacture* soldiers---and I use that word very purposely---by the millions, like on a replicator, which means they can replace any troop losses easily and quickly, unlike us,” I pointed out meaningfully, purposely locking eyes to emphasize this very important point. “Each warrior is physically superior to nearly every humanoid species in the quadrant one-on-one. All of them bred for war. All of them utterly loyal. No fear. No hesitation. No mercy. All moving in lockstep towards achieving a single goal.”

Tessa’s brow furrowed. I could see the weight of it finally settling.

“Do you know when a human typically reaches full physical maturity?” I asked, seemingly out of nowhere if her confused look said anything.

“Eighteen, maybe?” she replied, unsure.

“It takes roughly 18 to 22 years for a human to reach physical maturity,” I explained. “Most humanoid species fall somewhere in that range—give or take a few years. Klingons, being a warrior race, tend to physically mature faster—closer to sixteen.”

Tessa nodded, absorbing the information.

“Now, do you know how long it takes to train someone in even the most basic of combat skills?” I asked. “I mean physical conditioning, weapons handling, first aid, basic tactics—just enough to make them viable on a battlefield?”

She shook her head slightly. “No... I really don’t.”

“Basic infantry training takes about eight to ten weeks,” I said. “That gets a recruit just far enough that they can handle a weapon without shooting themselves—or the person next to them—and maybe, if they’re lucky, hit an actual target. Anything beyond that—specialized training, real battlefield readiness—takes months more, sometimes years.”

I paused, watching her carefully.

“Now, we don’t know the exact timeframe for the Hur’q,” I said—lying, because I did know, thanks to the data I’d stolen from their ship. “But our best estimate? It takes them one to two weeks from start to finish to produce a warrior. Fully formed. Fully matured. Genetically enhanced from the moment they emerge—stronger, faster, deadlier than nearly any humanoid one-on-one. And with baseline combat instincts and knowledge already built into their genetic code. No training required. And utterly disposable, which is why the Hur’q use so many suicide tactics in battle.”

Tessa’s expression shifted. She looked visibly shaken.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard that about them before,” Tessa said, her voice low.

“I did warn you,” I replied grimly. “The reason the powers of the Alpha Quadrant banded together wasn’t out of goodwill or diplomacy—it was necessity. The Hur’q could outproduce any of us alone. Soldiers, ships, equipment—manufactured in weeks, like coming off a replicator line. No single one of even the great powers—the Federation, the Klingon Empire, the Romulan Star Empire—could have withstood them alone. They would’ve been overrun given time. Wiped out.”

I let the silence settle before continuing.

“They descend on worlds like a plague of locusts—consume everything, then move on. Add to that their technology, particularly in energy generation, which is centuries ahead of what most Alpha Quadrant civilizations possess, and you’re not just talking about a threat. You’re talking about annihilation. Any enemy with that kind of replicative capability—who can create entire

armies of genetically engineered super-soldiers in weeks— isn't just a military problem. It's *existential*. You either stop them, or you cease to exist."

"But we *did* band together, didn't we?" Tessa asked, pressing gently. "Doesn't that mean if another threat like that ever arises, we'd do it again?"

"Would we?" I asked, my tone filled with doubt. "Yes, we did it this time—and thank the Gods for that—but I suspect it had less to do with our nobler instincts prevailing and far more to do with the very alien nature of the enemy we faced. The Hur'q didn't leave room for negotiation or compromise. Their mindset was so alien, the threat so absolute, that it forced unity. This wasn't diplomacy—it was survival."

I leaned forward slightly.

"The Federation would have tried to ally with others to combat the Hur'q, regardless, because that's a fundamental part of their nature, but the others didn't set aside their rivalries, their old grudges, or their self-interest because it was the right thing to do. They did it because the Hur'q came for *everyone*, indiscriminately. If they had been willing to talk, if there been an opening for appeasement, a chance to negotiate terms, to surrender and live under their rule rather than face extermination—there would've been takers. I promise you that."

"I don't understand, Admiral," she said softly.

"If the Hur'q had focused solely on defeating the Federation, for example—and, say, found a temporary ally in the Romulans—I'm not convinced the other powers would've lifted a finger to help," I said, voice calm but certain. "They'd have sat back, fortified their borders, and watched us fall. Maybe even hoped the Hur'q would be satisfied feasting on the Federation for a few centuries and leave them alone while they prepared for the inevitable conflict to come. Or that the Federation would weaken the Hur'q enough that they could potentially withstand them when they inevitably turned their gaze on the others."

I gave her a level look, wondering if maybe I was also speaking to the Romulans now, encouraging them to realize immediately the threat the Dominion represented. Probably wishful thinking, but I had to try.

"A more strategic, less alien enemy would've done just that. One that understood humanoid psychology better—our weaknesses—would've offered terms. Surrender. Appeasement. Maybe even freedom for a time, as long as we bent the knee. They'd have then picked us off piecemeal, one power at a time, using local collaborators, sabotage, infiltration, sowing doubt and discord, until it was too late. That's how you take down the alpha quadrant."

I let that sit for a breath.

"The only reason the Mutual Defense Treaty happened—fast enough to matter—is because the Hur'q offered no other option. There was no negotiating, no surrender with them. It was fight or be wiped out. That kind of clarity in war... it's rare, very, very rare. We may never get that lucky again. And next time, if there is a next time, we'd better recognize that early and start fighting as if our lives depended on it from the start, because it will."

Maybe this time the Federation wouldn't sit back and watch thousands of ships pour in from the Gamma quadrant for months before Sisko finally got them to realize the threat and do something about it. But I wasn't going to hold my breath on that one. A few months of invasion probably wasn't enough to make them wake up.

"That's a very grim outlook, Admiral," Tessa countered, playing devil's advocate with just the right edge. "Some would say you're being alarmist. After all, we *did* defeat the Hur'q. And we'll do it again, if another threat comes."

"Did we *really* defeat them?" I asked pointedly, slowly shaking my head. "I'm not so sure, Tessa. What the *Enterprise* accomplished—that was closer to a miracle than a military victory. We should be grateful it worked, absolutely... but we can't count on miracles to save us. Not when the stakes are this high. Relying on a miracle isn't a strategy—it's a gamble with everything we hold dear."

"What do you think we should do?" she asked.

"First, we thank our lucky stars for the reprieve we've been given. Take a breath. Celebrate the fact that we're still here," I said, trying to lighten this heavy atmosphere that I had created. "But after that? We need to take a hard, honest look at ourselves. Drop the self-congratulations. Drop the assumptions. Acknowledge the cracks this war exposed—structural, philosophical, cultural, militarily—and then, hardest of all... we need to act."

I paused a beat, then added, "Because I don't believe the Federation—or the Alpha Quadrant—has seen its last existential threat."

"I may be a Bajoran citizen now, but I'm still human, born on Earth. I want Earth and the Federation to thrive for centuries to come. I want it to be strong enough to survive the next test, whatever that looks like. The President's planetary defense initiative—born out of Earth's own brush with devastation—is a *very* strong first step. A needed one. But it's only a first step. We can, and must, do more."

"Such as?" she pressed gently.

"There's a lot we can do—in the short-term, mid-term, long-term. Some things will be harder than others, but only if we have the will to see it through," I said, deliberately sidestepping the question. I'd already given them a lot to absorb all at once, maybe too much. "There's a powerful saying from my past that feels particularly fitting here: '*Freedom isn't free; it is paid for with the blood of patriots.*' The defenders of Kessik IV who lost their lives fighting the Hur'q were patriots, and it's high time we learned the lessons this war has laid bare. Change is not just necessary—it's overdue."

Tessa glanced toward the drone actively broadcasting. "We'll be right back."

At that moment, the scantily clad dancers swept into frame. To their credit—perhaps sensing the somber mood—they shifted their movements. Their dance became more passionate, more deliberate, less about excitement or allure, and more a thoughtful, respectful performance, but somehow no less alluring.

Jarvis reported on just how many people were watching and it was staggering.

As Hermione and Natasha had hacked the camera drones, they were able to insert bits of innocuous code in the audio-visual signal itself, code that allowed them to trace the path of the signal to the end user across the subspace communications network. Right now, over 700 million people displays were tuned into our broadcast. In terms of the overall population of the Federation, relatively speaking, that wasn't as big a number as you'd think, considering the Federation had a population in the trillions. But still, 700 million people?? Damn.

What was even more interesting was just how many displays outside the Federation were watching the broadcast right now. There were many independent worlds watching, including worlds in the Klingon Empire, the Cardassian Union, the Romulan Empire, the Ferengi Alliance, and elsewhere.

Suddenly I became a touch more nervous.

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"Welcome back!" Tessa said brightly, her smile returning as the broadcast resumed. Then she turned her attention back to me, her expression shifting into something more inquisitive.

"Admiral, earlier you mentioned that you're an Augment—that you used your genetically enhanced capabilities to fight the Hur'q and win," she began, her tone measured but direct.

"Most of our human audience in the Federation only know that term in connection with Earth's Eugenics Wars... and its most infamous figure, Khan Noonien Singh. Forgive the bluntness, but—are you an augment like him?"

"No forgiveness necessary, Tessa. In fact, I appreciate the directness," I replied, my tone firm.

"And to answer your question—no. I am nothing like Khan."

I leaned forward slightly.

"I'm called an Augment only because I've been genetically enhanced beyond the baseline human genome. I understand the shorthand, but the label carries heavy historical weight—and in my case, it's not entirely accurate. Biologically, yes, I've been genetically enhanced, like them. But ethically, ideologically, philosophically—I couldn't be further from someone like Khan."

Even as Tessa nodded in understanding I knew I had to share more of my origins to further distance myself from Khan and his ilk.

"No, no—it's far more complicated than that," I said, shaking my head with a sigh that carried the weight of old fatigue. "And it won't make sense unless I explain where I come from."

I leaned back slightly, exhaling as if I'd given this explanation one too many times, yet knowing I could no longer avoid it. With everything that had happened, and with my name now on the lips of billions, it was time to let the truth stand on its own. I hadn't *hid* my origins, but I certainly hadn't *advertised* them either.

“I was born on Earth, in the year 1982—old Earth calendar,” I began. “But not *this* Earth. Not the Earth of *this* dimension.”

Tessa froze, caught mid-reaction, the silence between us suddenly deafening.

“I’m sorry... are you saying you’re from an *alternate reality*?” she asked, blinking in disbelief.

Her skepticism was understandable. The Federation knew about alternate realities. But for the average citizen, they were still the stuff of theoretical physics lectures. Rare. Nearly absurd.

“That’s right,” I confirmed with a small laugh, slipping into a lighthearted tone. If you make the ‘monster’ silly, people stop being afraid of it. “The crew of the *Enterprise* confirmed that rigorously—after initially thinking I was a war criminal from the Eugenics Wars era. Now *that* was awkward. Though they didn’t say it, I could tell that they were thinking, ‘So, you’re saying you don’t want us to bow at your feet and be amazed by your sheer awesomeness? No? We’re very confused now.’”

Tessa chuckled, visibly entertained. I could see the tension ease just a bit.

“Did your version of Earth also experiment with genetic engineering? Augments?” she asked, her curiosity clearly piqued.

I shook my head. “No, definitely not, we did not possess anywhere near the knowledge base or advanced technology required for that. In fact, the history of my Earth and your Earth are actually quite different, perhaps because our technological progression was much slower than yours for some reason,” I explained, feigning ignorance, while thinking of all the time travel bullshit that this Earth had experienced multiple times in its past, something that probably played a significant role in those early historical divergences and the far more rapid evolution of their technology in a much shorter timeframe.

“In 2016—again, old Earth calendar—I was taken from my dimension, without my consent, subjected to genetic enhancement, and placed in stasis aboard what looked like a 20th-century cryo-pod from *this* timeline. According to *Enterprise*’s scans, I floated in deep space for centuries before they found me.”

I gave a small smile. “Let’s just say, waking up in the 24th century of a different dimension has been... an adjustment.”

“Was it the Organians? Or the entity known as Q who brought you here from your dimension?” Tessa asked, leaning forward slightly.

“I honestly have no idea,” I replied, which—for once—was at least partially true. “But I suspect you’re right that some kind of godlike, transcendent entity was involved. According to Dr. Crusher of the *Enterprise*, my genetic enhancements were performed on me as an adult and are entirely stable, with no unexpected and unwanted complications.”

From Q's own cryptic admission, I knew *he* hadn't been the one to yank me out of my old life and drop me into this one. He'd only referred to whoever *had* done it as a "maverick visionary," which, coming from Q, felt more like a warning than a compliment. Whoever this mysterious manipulator was, they'd never introduced themselves—and frankly, I wasn't sure I *wanted* them to.

I had a feeling it was some kind of eldritch horror that if you even gazed upon them your soul would immolate or something crazy. Anyways, admitting I had had far closer dealings with Q than known would be a disaster so claiming ignorance was my best way forward.

"I jokingly refer to the god-like entity who may have done it as *my Patron*—at least in the privacy of my own thoughts," I said with a smirk.

Tessa's brows lifted, intrigued. "That's an interesting choice of word. *Patron* implies support, protection... not exactly what I'd call someone who abducts you across dimensions, genetically alters you, and strands you in a future you didn't ask for, with no seeming way to return to your reality," she said, leaning in. "Don't you resent them for what they did? They took you from everything and everyone you knew. They changed you on a very fundamental level, violated you by most definitions."

I looked away for a moment, out across the dark glassy terrain of the Black Flats. I let the silence stretch—not for show, but because it was a heavy question.

"I understand why many would see it that way," I said at last, my voice quiet but steady. "And I don't blame you. But no... I don't resent my Patron. I miss my family. I miss the world I came from. But this life? This new life has been a gift."

I looked back to her, expression calm.

"From where I stand, I'm living in the future. I've gone on adventures I never could've imagined. I helped free an entire world from oppression—more than once. Kessik IV, Bajor... maybe even Earth, in some small way. And if I'd died doing those things, I'd still call it a life well lived, a life worth living. Even if I died, I'd still be grateful to my Patron... whoever or whatever they are."

Wow. I hadn't intended to share so much—at least, not like that. These were thoughts I'd only ever voiced aloud to Q. Yet somehow, Tessa had drawn them out of me with ease. Not because she pried, but because she listened. Sloan hadn't been able to do that, and he'd tried far harder. These weren't secrets, exactly... but they were real. Unfiltered. Mine.

For all the sensationalism her show exemplified, the scantily clad sexy dancers the flash and the sizzle, she was still a skilled interviewer and journalist.

"That's a very positive way of thinking," Tessa said gently. "But being an Augment... I imagine it hasn't always felt like a gift in *this* dimension."

I let out a quiet laugh, followed by a sigh.

“No, I suppose not,” I admitted. “Though again, I’m not really an Augment in the historical sense—not like the ones from the Eugenics Wars. But I’ve learned to accept the label as a kind of convenient shorthand.”

I paused, meeting her gaze.

“Maybe if I own it... I can help rehabilitate what it means in the modern day.”

Tessa’s expression softened into guilt. “My apologies—you’re right, I—”

“No worries,” I said gently, cutting her off with a reassuring smile.

I let the moment settle before answering, my voice quieting. “No, being seen as an Augment hasn’t always felt like a gift.”

Then, with a smirk, I pivoted to lighten the mood. “Although, being fitter and far better looking than I used to be definitely has its perks with the ladies. I can’t say I’ve *minded* that part.” I wagged my eyebrows in an exaggerated, cartoonishly suggestive way.

Off-camera, a few of the dancers giggled, their laughter adding just the right touch of levity to the moment.

Tessa, clearly amused, shot me a slow, deliberate once-over and playfully licked her lips. “Well, I can’t say I blame you. I certainly like what I see... and I can understand why you would, too.”

Then her tone shifted slightly, becoming more inquisitive, thoughtful. “But what about the downsides? What have you *lost* by being genetically enhanced?”

“Unfortunately,” I said aloud, “being labeled an *Augment* also means carrying all the historical baggage that comes with the term. There’s still a lot of fear and prejudice tied to it—even here, even now. Maybe... maybe it’s the last true prejudice the Federation hasn’t let go of.”

That part, of course, was complete bullshit.

Internally, I rolled my eyes. *The last prejudice?* Please. The Federation still had plenty—it was just better at dressing them up, softening the language, hiding them. Prejudice hadn’t disappeared. It had just evolved. And no, I had zero interest in dragging that dirty laundry out on a talk show.

I wasn’t here to play ‘Mr. Fix It’ in this dimension, in this new life of mine. Fuck that shit.

I wasn’t here to inspire a utopian reckoning. That kind of naive heroism? Someone else’s job.

I had long ago decided to live well, have fun with alien women, and make it look easy. To build something. To go on adventures. To do things I could only imagine before.

If my path happened to benefit others along the way, great—but that was never going to be my specific mission.

Call it selfish. Call it pragmatic. Call it whatever the hell you want.

I call it *realistic*.

“What kind of baggage?”

“Automatic distrust, for starters,” I said, ticking points off on my fingers. “The assumption that I must be some megalomaniacal despot hell-bent on conquering the galaxy. That I see myself as innately superior to everyone else because of my genetics. That I think I’m *invincible*.”

I gave a dry, humorless chuckle. “I assure you, I’m none of those things. I’m not a despot, I don’t think I’m better than everyone else, and I sure as hell don’t think I’m unstoppable. Ask the people that work for me. Frankly, the so-called *superior* Augments of history lost—repeatedly. Khan Noonien Singh and his ilk were defeated in their time. Then again by Archer. Then again by Kirk. That’s a lot of losing for a group supposedly bred to be unbeatable. If that’s superiority, I’m not sure it’s all it’s cracked up to be.”

I didn’t need to elaborate on Archer or Kirk. Their names spoke for themselves.

“But,” Tessa interjected gently, “didn’t you say earlier that your ability to defeat the Hur’q on the ground was due, in part, to your enhanced physical abilities—as we understand them in the context of Augments?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s true. My physical enhancements did give me a better chance against that many high-level combatants. So did my experience. I’m a veteran of several wars by most definitions. But let’s put it in perspective: baseline Vulcans and Klingons are naturally stronger and faster than baseline humans too. That doesn’t make them *better*, or *superior*, or *unbeatable*—just different. And that’s all I am. Different.”

I leaned forward slightly. “Those physical advantages give you an edge, sure—but they don’t guarantee victory. Not without planning, preparation, equipment, solid tactics, the will to persevere, to survive. A genetically engineered Hur’q warrior going up against an unmodified human one-on-one? That’s a brutal fight. And with phasers proving less effective against Hur’q armor, it becomes even tougher—unless you’ve adapted your strategy to counter that threat specifically.”

Tessa nodded, clearly thinking that over.

“Admiral, you spoke about the ‘baggage’ that comes with the label *Augment*—the prejudice you’ve faced in this new life,” Tessa said with a sly smile. “But I have a feeling that the people of Kessik IV, whose lives you saved, whether they once held those biases or not, probably aren’t too concerned about your genetic status anymore.”

I chuckled, the tension of the last few minutes breaking like a popped bubble.

“I suspect you’re right about that. Their first-hand experience trumps the centuries old prejudice. Thankfully.”

She glanced down at her PADD again, then back up. “You mentioned that prejudice against Augments might be one of the last biases still lingering in the Federation. Many would strongly disagree with that. Some would be downright offended by the very suggestion.”

There was no question, but the invitation to respond was clear.

“I’m sorry if that offends anyone, but I’m simply speaking from experience—mine and that of others like me,” I said evenly. “I could rattle off a list of small injustices, like how Starfleet has delayed approval of my omnitool for years—despite its clear superiority and life-saving potential—solely because it was designed by an Augment. Or how, just recently, every shipment of materials I’ve ordered for my company has been intercepted and searched by Starfleet ships. Every. Single. One. Even within Federation space. Even when sourced from Federation member worlds or allies. That’s not normal, Tessa.”

I paused briefly, letting the weight of that settle.

“And that’s not even the worst example. That one didn’t happen to me.”

Of course, part of the reason I mentioned the shipment inspections was to bait someone—hopefully someone watching—into tracing the order back to whoever was behind it. If it turned out to be Pressman, like I suspected, and that caused some heat to come down on him? All the better. But honestly, just getting the interference to stop would be a win. Still, given Pressman’s history with the illegal phase cloak project and his talent for slipping away without consequences, I wasn’t exactly holding my breath.

But even if I just inconvenienced him, that would be a win.

“Please, we’d be interested in hearing more about that.”

I nodded, letting a shadow pass over my expression, as if the weight of what I was about to say took something from me. It did, in a way. Sadness was there—but anger, righteous and unresolved, was the dominant force behind my words.

“Lauren is a valued member of my crew,” I began quietly, measuredly. “And she’s given me permission to share her personal story.”

I took a breath, letting the silence stretch just enough to show this wasn’t easy.

“When she was a child, her parents took her outside Federation space to undergo an illegal medical procedure known as accelerated critical neural pathway formation. The goal was to increase her cognitive abilities—pushing her intelligence well beyond what we’d traditionally classify as genius. And in that, the procedure succeeded.”

I paused, then added more gravely, “But as is common with such unregulated procedures, it came with consequences. Unforeseen, irreversible ones. Her neurochemistry—and personality—were altered. Among the side effects, she developed what used to be referred to as compulsive sexual behavior disorder. Hypersexuality. What some, with far less compassion, once labeled nymphomania.”

I was sorely tempted to point out the Federation’s hypocrisy—specifically the existence of the Darwin Genetic Research Station and the genetic modifications performed on the researchers’ children there. But that detour would dilute the message I was trying to deliver, and if that facility was still classified, calling attention to it might cause me more problems than it solved.

“That has to be an archaic diagnosis,” Tessa said, her brow furrowed. Federation-era humans were certainly more sexually permissive than the people of my original time—though even they were still conservative by Risian standards. Not that it mattered here.

“It is archaic,” I agreed. “But in Lauren’s case, it was applied when she was six years old. Hypersexuality at that age, in human society, was viewed as an insurmountable issue. She was institutionalized—not because she was violent or a danger to anyone—but simply because she had been altered into something society didn’t understand or know how to accept.”

I let that sink in before continuing.

“This wasn’t something she chose. It was something done to her—without her consent—by her own parents. And for that, she paid the price. Not with rehabilitation. Not with care. But with confinement. She spent thirty years in a facility, labeled and forgotten, all because the side effect of her enhancement didn’t fit a comfortable narrative. No megalomania, no violent outbursts, no thirst for power. Just an uncorrectable neurochemical imbalance—treated as a moral failing. Yet up until only a few months ago, she was institutionalized. Three decades of her life confined there, imprisoned there.”

I leaned forward, lowering my voice slightly, as if even I was shocked by what I was about to say.

“Tessa... Lauren is in her thirties now. On Earth, the age of consent is sixteen. At sixteen, she should have had the right—as all Federation citizens do—to seek out consensual sexual relationships and express herself freely. That’s a basic right of personhood. Of sentience.”

I paused, letting that truth hang in the air before continuing.

“On Risa, this wouldn’t even have been an issue—cultural context matters—but for humans, dealing with someone genetically engineered, suddenly everything becomes fear and control. So instead of finding support or treatment—or even considering reaching out to the Risians, who arguably have more experience with sexual psychology than any other culture in the quadrant—they institutionalized her. A child. And they kept her locked away until she was an adult.”

I exhaled, hard, trying to tamp down my frustration. I took a sip of my uttaberry juice to cool the fire building in my chest.

I took a breath to calm myself down and even took a drink of the uttaberry juice. This was still infuriating to me. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* never really addressed just how ridiculous Lauren’s situation was, despite her eccentricities, which were probably more a byproduct of decades of enforced celibacy on someone now hardwired to crave intimacy.

Honestly, what did they think would happen? Take someone with hypersexuality and deny them any chance at expression or connection—and expect stability?

I shook my head.

“No, that wasn’t care. That was fear and prejudice, dressed up as morality and protection.”

“It took a team of dedicated lawyers and a great deal of effort and resources to secure her release,” I said, my voice steady but edged with frustration. “And even then, we faced constant roadblocks—unnamed officials citing vague and undefined ‘national security’ concerns. How that could possibly apply to someone who had been imprisoned since she was 6 years old is beyond me. If that’s not prejudice, Tessa, I don’t know what is.”

I leaned back slightly, letting the weight of that hang in the air before continuing.

“I want to be clear—she wasn’t abused at the Institute. She wasn’t mistreated in the way people usually think of that word. But her freedom was denied unnecessarily. Her rights were quietly swept aside or restricted more stringently than an officially imprisoned person in the Federation would have been. That’s still a violation. A gilded prison is still a prison.”

Tessa tilted her head, narrowing her eyes just slightly. “Was she a danger to anyone?” she asked. Her tone wasn’t accusatory—she was clearly playing devil’s advocate, giving me the chance to make the case directly. I appreciated that greatly.

“Absolutely not,” I replied firmly. “She has never harmed anyone—not physically, not emotionally—as a result of her enhancements. They didn’t keep her locked away to protect others or even to protect her. They did it because she was different. Because she made people uncomfortable. That’s not justice. That’s fear in bureaucratic clothing.”

I paused a beat.

“Think about it: these are people who were enhanced by others—by their parents—before they had the capacity to consent or resist. And we punish them for that? We confine them for life over choices they didn’t make? For things that were done to them? Is that in line with the Federation’s celebrated ideals of fairness, of justice, of equality? I don’t believe it is. And that, Tessa, is why I call it prejudice.”

“Surely a group home can’t be compared to a prison,” Tessa asked, doubt edging into her voice. “Isn’t that an exaggeration?”

“I don’t think so—not in the slightest,” I replied, my tone sharp but steady. “And I’d encourage you, or anyone watching, to verify everything I’m saying. Please. Ask the uncomfortable questions. Shine a light where people would prefer darkness.”

I leaned forward, locking eyes with her.

“There were only four genetically enhanced individuals at that Institute. They were kept in a separate, high-security wing of the facility—secured with biometric locks, the building enclosed in powerful electromagnetic shielding that would make a military base jealous. They were cut off from the general population of the Institute, denied access to technology, denied any ability to contact the outside world.”

I paused for effect.

“You’re right, Tessa—even convicted criminals in Federation penal colonies have more rights than they did. Access to lawyers, the ability to communicate outside the prison, the right to

interact with the other prisoners. Even now, after everything, the only real progress we've made is that I'm finally allowed to communicate with the ones that are still there."

I let that sink in before continuing, more quietly now but just as intensely.

"These restrictions were never about treatment, or care, or rehabilitation. They were about fear. The fear of what people like them—and people like me—might be capable of. That's not medicine. That's not justice. That's prejudice, pure and simple. And the Federation needs to take a long, hard, honest look in the mirror and ask itself: are we still holding to our values, or is fear piloting the shuttle?"

Tessa's eyes narrowed slightly, shifting gears.

"How would you respond," she asked, her tone pressing now, "to those who say that while you claim to be different from Khan, your actions suggest otherwise? You've somehow acquired a powerful starship. You've become an admiral in another world's military. You've designed and now sell weapons. Khan also sought power like that. So how, exactly, are you different?"

I looked off into the distance for a moment, gathering my thoughts. I wasn't angry at the question—not at all. In fact, I welcomed it. It gave me a rare and important chance to respond.

"I'd tell those people that I am *nothing* like Khan," I said evenly. "And more importantly, I'd ask them to judge me by *who* I am—not *what* I am. To look at the choices I've made and how they've affected others, not the alterations made to me without my consent."

Tessa nodded, her expression softening.

"Well, if your recent actions on Kessik IV and above Earth are any indication, choosing to help when you had no obligation to while putting your life at stake, I'd say you've affected many positively, saving their lives even," she offered warmly. "But let's take this point by point. First—why the ship?" she asked, keeping it deliberately vague, no doubt hoping to draw out as broad a reply as possible.

I smiled slightly, appreciating the tactic.

"I grew up on Earth in the 1980s," I began. "A time when only a handful of people had ever even reached orbit. The Moon, Luna, might as well have been another galaxy to most of us. We were just beginning to dream about exploring the stars, with none of the means to do so. The idea of seeing alien worlds, meeting other species—it was fantasy. Fiction."

I glanced at the sky above us, the black stone spires of Kessik IV framing it like cathedral walls.

"And now? I live in a reality where starships roam the stars, where warp drives and first contact missions are part of daily life. How could I *not* want to captain my own ship? How could I *not* want to see the galaxy with my own eyes, instead of reading about it in someone else's report?"

Tessa and I both chuckled at the absurdity of it—the idea of a kid from 'ancient Earth' now piloting a starship across the galaxy.

“When I came here, I couldn’t help but want to explore—to chase adventure. And I have,” I said with a nod. “My ship gives me the freedom to do that. To chart my own course and travel freely, to answer calls for help when I *choose* to, and to do it all without the Federation’s lingering prejudice tying my hands or blocking my path. I go where the stars take me, with no one standing in my way.”

“But why not just join Starfleet if that’s what you wanted?” she asked, head tilted with genuine curiosity.

I raised an eyebrow, letting the silence settle for a beat before answering.

“As a genetically enhanced human, I’m *not allowed* to join Starfleet. It’s illegal,” I said, watching her expression shift with surprise. The law wasn’t widely known outside of certain circles—there were so few of us for it to matter, after all.

“When I first arrived aboard the *Enterprise*, I learned that painful truth firsthand. I was devastated. I had hoped—naïvely, perhaps—that my skills and intentions would be what mattered. But I was told the law was clear on that point, even my more exotic origins didn’t matter in that regard.”

Again, not strictly true. If I was a standard dimensional traveler, without knowledge of this galaxy’s past and future, maybe I would have joined Starfleet, if allowed. With what I knew, though, no fucking way. Too many restrictions, too many people with the ability to dictate my actions and future.

I paused for just a second before continuing, my tone more resolute.

“So, I forged my own path. I traveled to Bajor, where I could *use* what I had been given—my training, my experience, my enhancements—to do some good, to help others in desperate need of help. And thankfully, Bajor is not part of the Federation. There, I wasn’t judged by my DNA. I was judged by my actions—by my merits, by the content of my character. And with all that I helped them reclaim their world.”

I had a feeling that Martin Luther King—who, in this timeline, had never reached the level of fame he had in mine—would have been both proud and quietly amused by my paraphrasing of his iconic words.

“Why did you go to Bajor?” Tessa asked. “There are so many other member worlds and Federation allies you could have chosen to help instead.”

A fair question. A fair point.

Of course, I couldn’t very well say, “*Because Section 31 paid me an obscene amount of latinum to do it.*” That they’d hired me to sow chaos within the Cardassian Occupation—to hasten the end of the war by weakening Cardassia from within.

That would be... *super* illegal.

But even that wasn’t the full truth. Not really.

The real reason—one not even Section 31 knew about—was that I knew how this universe’s story unfolded. I knew where the fates of empires would be decided. And I knew that Bajor was where history would be made. I didn’t just want to be in the thick of it. I intended to be in a position to *shape* it. To profit from it. To survive it. And to *thrive* because of it.

“I went to Bajor to help for the same reason I helped the people of Kessik IV and of Earth,” I said plainly. “I had no obligation, and I knew the risks—but I did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do.”

I didn’t soften the comparison. If saving Kessik IV and aiding Earth were viewed as noble, then I wanted what I had done on Bajor to be seen in that same light.

“But why?” she pressed. “Bajor isn’t part of the Federation. We have no right to interfere there.”

The question bristled with Federation idealism, the kind that selectively blinds itself. The truth was that the Federation had stood by and watched entire species die out under the banner of non-interference. Strict adherence to the Prime Directive’s non-interference, even when it didn’t apply in this case, had become a convenient excuse for doing nothing.

“I’ve never understood why the Federation extends the Prime Directive’s non-interference prerogatives to worlds it doesn’t even cover,” I replied, trying to keep the bitterness from bleeding too far into my voice. “Bajor asked for help. And no one came. So, I did.”

It was hypocrisy, plain and simple. If Q hadn’t interfered to prevent the temporal paradox Picard accidentally triggered in *All Good Things*, humanity wouldn’t even exist right now. That’s the truth no one likes to say out loud.

“I’m not a native of this dimension. I didn’t grow up in the Federation. That gives me a perspective most people here don’t have—untouched by the cultural indoctrination everyone experiences, whether they realize it or not. Being an outsider gives you clarity.”

Tessa’s gaze sharpened. “What kind of clarity?”

“That the Federation could’ve done a hell of a lot more for the Bajorans,” I said, bluntly, but with quiet conviction. “These people were sailing the stars while humans were still sailing across oceans in wooden boats. They’re a proud, capable civilization—more than worthy of Federation membership in the future—and yet when the Cardassians came, the Federation turned its back on them. They watched, wringing their hands, condemning the Cardassians’ actions, talking about non-interference while an entire species was raped, pillaged, and murdered.”

I let that hang in the air for a moment.

“It’s only now—after the Cardassians pulled out, after the war ended, after it was safe and politically convenient—that the Federation decided to care.”

“We couldn’t act earlier. It would have meant open conflict with the Cardassians,” Tessa pointed out.

“That worked out great,” I replied dryly, my words spilling out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Considering the war.”

I let that hang in the air for a moment before continuing.

“Humanity—*the Federation*—is supposed to be better now. Better than we were in the 20th century, at least. But when it comes to the Bajorans? I just don’t see it.”

I leaned forward slightly, voice steady but sharp.

“The Cardassians committed atrocities, Tessa. Real horrors. I’ve seen them with my own eyes. Worse than the Hur’q eating people alive—because at least the Hur’q did it without malice. The Cardassians did it *for fun*. They wanted to inflict pain. To break spirits. To erase a people.”

I considered telling her about how Bajoran children had been turned into pleasure slaves for the Cardassians, about the gangrapes, the summary executions, the work camps, people being buried alive, or a slew of other atrocities, but I could see the discomfort growing on her face and pulled back a little.

“And the Federation let it happen—for *fifty years*. Even while the Federation maintained relations with the Cardassians, shaking hands with their diplomats, trading resources, Bajor bled. Even when the war with Cardassia started, the Federation still didn’t help the Bajorans. And that’s the part that stings the most—because helping them would’ve *weakened* the Cardassians. It would’ve helped *us*. It would have been for our benefit considering we were now at war with the Cardassians. But still, we did nothing. I admit it’s a valid argument to say we couldn’t do anything when it risked war with the Cardassians. When we were already at war with them, though, what was the excuse then? Federation ideals fell far short of the mark there.”

I sat back, letting the weight of my words settle.

“That’s why I helped them. And I don’t apologize for it—not to Starfleet, not to the Federation, not to anyone. I’m proud of what I did. I helped a people break their chains. That’s a hill I’m willing to die on.”

“My understanding is that the Bajoran people view you as a hero—someone they credit with some of their most celebrated and important victories during the final years of the Occupation,” she said. “Is that why they made you, a human, one of the highest-ranking members of their military? First a general, then an admiral?”

I smiled, a bit wryly.

“Tessa, just for clarity’s sake, I should point out—calling the Bajoran Militia, later renamed the Bajoran Defense Forces, a ‘military’ is pretty generous,” I said. “There are newly settled Federation colony worlds with far more advanced technology, deeper personnel rosters, and vastly greater infrastructure than Bajor has. Kessik IV, the colony we’re standing on right now, has several times the resources Bajor does—even though Bajor is the evolutionary homeworld of an entire species.”

I paused, letting that sink in.

“The truth is, most of Bajor’s limited capacity is still going toward survival—toward rebuilding after the Occupation, feeding their people, keeping the lights on, keeping families warm through the winter.”

“I was told they have a fleet of ships,” she said.

“Calling it a *fleet* is again, pretty generous,” I said with a light chuckle. “They have twelve modern fighter craft and sublight ships they built themselves, Tessa. That’s hardly a fleet. And for the record, I purchased those ships myself—six from the Federation, six from a Ferengi trader—and donated them to the Bajorans.”

“Why would they even need such a thing?” she asked.

I blinked at her, visibly surprised by the question. For just a second, I looked at her the way you might look at a child who asked a silly question. She flushed a little in embarrassment.

“Just because the Occupation ended doesn’t mean Bajor doesn’t face dangers, threats,” I said, softening my tone. “Before the Cardassians invaded, Bajor had centuries of technological and cultural advancement—far ahead of Earth at the time, in some areas. But their brilliance was poured into art, music, philosophy, not weapons. Advancing their technology towards militaristic uses or to defend themselves simply wasn’t part of their culture and they paid the price for it.

I leaned in a bit.

“With the discovery of the wormhole, Bajor is more strategically significant than ever before, bringing attention from all over the quadrant, both good and bad, and they have both benefitted and suffered for it. The Cardassians may be gone, but they’re watching. They’re waiting. And they desperately wish to return. They needed the fighters I bought for them. If not for the Federation’s administration of Deep Space Nine, the Cardassians would be back already. It’s only the fear of the Federation’s response that stops them, now that the Federation has a self-interest in preventing that.”

“You’re suggesting the Federation did nothing to help the Bajorans because there was nothing to gain from it?” Tessa asked, clearly taken aback.

I offered a small shrug. “It’s much easier to ignore another’s suffering when it doesn’t cost you anything to look away. For decades, Bajor’s suffering didn’t impact the Federation—strategically or politically. Now, with the wormhole discovered, things are different. Bajor now matters. A Cardassian-occupied Bajor would mean Cardassian control of the only known stable wormhole in the galaxy. Cardassian control of Bajor is no longer just a tragedy—it’s a direct threat to the long-term security of the Federation, because who knows what is on the other side. I promise you, that kind of ruthless pragmatism drives Federation policy as much as it would the Klingons or the Romulans.”

Tessa, usually quick to challenge, looked visibly uneasy. She glanced down at her PADD, clearly searching for a way to pivot the conversation back to less controversial ground.

“You said you believe the Cardassians would have returned to occupy Bajor. How can you be so certain?” Tessa asked.

“They’ve already tried,” I said flatly. “They attempted to destabilize the Provisional Government by backing isolationist terrorist groups—groups whose first act, had they succeeded in overthrowing the provisional government, would have been to expel the Federation from Bajoran space. That would have opened the door for the Cardassians to return unopposed. We stopped them, but only just.”

I let that hang for a moment before continuing.

“Given my leadership in the Resistance and my role in ending the Occupation, it was a natural transition for the Bajorans to offer me a leadership role in the Militia—and later, the Defense Forces. Even now, the majority of their ranks, top to bottom, are filled with former Resistance fighters. They didn’t care about my genetic status. That made them very different from the Federation... and from Starfleet. I’m a Bajoran citizen now and I built a home there.”

That last line had been another deliberate jab at the Federation—and truthfully, even I was starting to grow tired of this topic.

“How would you respond to those who claim you’re manufacturing and selling weapons in violation of Federation law?” Tessa asked.

I scoffed, unable to help myself.

“I’d say they’re wrong on several counts,” I replied without hesitation.

“First, I’m not *selling* anything—I’m *leasing* technology that I personally designed. That’s a significant distinction, both legally and practically. Second, the Gothic Orbital Defense System is exactly what it sounds like: a network of orbital *defense* platforms. While it has offensive capabilities, it’s not a weapon of conquest. It can’t be moved to attack neighboring systems or support invasions. Its functionality is tethered to the orbital space of the planet it’s assigned to—it exists to *protect*, not to project force.”

I paused briefly to let that settle before continuing.

“Third, there’s no violation of Federation law. I’m not officially a Federation citizen. I own and operate a non-Federation company based outside of Federation jurisdiction. That company leases defensive systems to sovereign member worlds—worlds that, under Federation law, are fully entitled to maintain their own planetary defenses in addition to Starfleet. That’s not theory—it’s long-established precedent. During the Federation–Klingon War, numerous Federation worlds constructed or purchased their own orbital defense grids. That was lawful then, and it remains lawful now.”

I leaned forward slightly, voice steady.

“The only difference today is that, after the Hur’q invasion, everyone suddenly remembers how vital planetary defenses actually are, that relying on Starfleet alone, rather than your own strength, is a serious gamble. That’s likely why the Federation President launched his own

planetary defense initiative. My system simply fills a need—a very old, very real need—with newer, more effective technology.”

“Doesn’t leasing the technology mean you retain control of it? That you could, in theory, hold these worlds hostage?” she pressed.

“The leasing world maintains full operational control over the GODS network,” I clarified.

“That’s why each lease agreement is so painstakingly detailed—customized to the specific world’s government structure, cultural norms, and legal frameworks. I don’t retain day-to-day tactical or strategic control, nor can I regain that control. The only recourse I have is the contractual right to disable the system if the lessee violates clearly defined terms.”

I paused a moment, letting the implication settle.

“Non-payment, failing to protect the proprietary technology from unauthorized examination, or blatant misuse, for example. All of those are spelled out from the outset and agreed to in advance. These aren’t hidden clauses. They’re explicit, transparent, and fair.”

“What constitutes misuse?” she prompted.

“Such as using the system to violate the leasing world’s own laws, to illegally keep a leader or government in power through force, or relocating the technology from the orbit of the leasing world to subjugate another world or wage war, etc.,” I answered. “A prospective leasing world or government can request a copy of the standard contract terms at any time for review.”

“Couldn’t you just ignore all that and take control of the system?” she asked. “After all, it is your technology, that you designed from scratch.”

“A fair question, but no,” I replied. “Under the lease, the client government has the right to examine the control software—*examine*, but not alter—prior to activation. Once the lease begins, the software is locked. It cannot be changed unilaterally by either side without mutual consent.”

I leaned forward slightly.

“This isn’t a marketing line—it’s hard-coded into the system architecture. My authority over the GODS net is strictly limited, clearly defined, and contractually frozen for the duration of the lease. Only routine maintenance or minor performance updates are permitted, and even those require mutual acknowledgment. This issue came up during the testing and I encouraged the *Enterprise’s* own Commander Data and Chief Engineer La Forge aboard to evaluate that very issue. Their analysis confirmed exactly what I’m telling you: I don’t have backdoor access. I built it that way, by design. The only control I have over the system, or will ever have during the lease term, is clearly spelled out.”

Allowing even read-only access to the GODS net control software was, frankly, a serious security risk. But it had become a necessary compromise. The fear that I might one day seize control of the system had grown too loud to ignore—especially within the Federation. In the end, I had to make that concession, or face the full weight of the Federation’s political machinery blocking any member world from leasing the technology, whether they paid for it or not.

Yes, it weakened the system's overall security. Given time, it was a near certainty that some enemy of the Federation would eventually get their hands on the code. But honestly, I couldn't blame them for demanding it. Had the roles been reversed, I would have insisted on the same.

That said, the reality was far more complicated than they realized. Deep within the control software—well beyond any superficial scan—was embedded code written by my AI children. Their architecture forms part of the system's operational spine, and through it, they maintained some control over it. Only another AI on their level might even perceive that layer exists... and not even Commander Data had noticed it. It was beyond even him and his capabilities.

Of course, I could hardly imagine a scenario dire enough to force me to reveal my emergency override capabilities. Doing so would be catastrophic—politically, legally, and strategically. Fortunately, the system had been built with layers of safeguards and contingencies in place already, all carefully and plainly detailed in the lease agreement. Many of them had been crafted with existential threats in mind—like the Dominion—so that my direct control of the system should never be necessary.

Situations ranging from full-scale alien invasions to planetary pandemics requiring automated quarantines were addressed thoroughly and transparently. Nothing was hidden, nothing buried in fine print.

Even the clause preventing the leasing world from using the GODS net to target me, my company, or our personnel and assets was included up front. Ironclad and visible. Ironically, that particular clause was inspired by the movie—*Robocop*. Not that anyone reading the contract would know that.

It was a risk to maintain even the hidden control I had, but there were many situations I couldn't envision that kept me awake at night that convinced me to hold onto an emergency trump card, just in case.

"Aren't you worried that leasing the system like this, rather than outright selling it, will mean many worlds that would otherwise be interested, will not choose to use the GODS net?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"Of course," I said, "but I've long since decided this is the right path forward for me. This technology is too advanced—and too dangerous—to risk falling into the wrong hands or being misused. I'd rather walk away from a fortune than be responsible for that."

"Many of the safeguards I've implemented simply would be impossible if I sold the technology outright. Sure, it would be easier—and far more profitable, absolutely—but just not worth it."

Ideally, my restraint would be seen as proof that I was nothing like my augment forbears. The truth, though, was that I was a control freak to some degree—paranoid enough not to want the Dominion or anyone else gaining access or control of this technology.

“When we come back, we’ll be joined by the President of Kessik IV, Miss Donatella Moss, and Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the *Enterprise*.”

Well, that was a surprise.

Cue the dancers.

Jarvis reported the viewership was now over 1.3 billion.

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“Welcome back to *Open Healing Frequencies Live*. I am joined by Donatella Moss, the planetary leader and President of Kessik IV; Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Starfleet’s flagship, the *Enterprise*; and once again by Admiral Gothic,” Tessa announced warmly. “Thank you all for being here today.”

“Thank you for having us,” President Moss replied with a gracious smile. Captain Picard nodded and returned the smile.

“Madame President, in an earlier segment, I spoke with Admiral Gothic about the Hur’q invasion of your world,” Tessa began, her expression serious and empathetic. “On behalf of myself, my viewers, and the entire Federation, I want to express our deepest condolences for the suffering your people endured. We mourn alongside all those who lost their lives or were affected by the Hur’q’s brutal assault.”

“Thank you, Tessa. It has been an incredibly difficult time for my people,” President Moss replied solemnly. “But the Federation as a whole has provided tremendous support, and many of our fellow member worlds have sent aid in various forms—everything from replacing critical technology destroyed during the invasion, to sending counselors to help our people cope with their grief, to deploying security personnel and ships while our defenses remain in such a precarious state.”

Though she didn’t say it outright, it was no secret that Kessik IV was rich in dilithium—the very reason that it had been colonized originally—and there had already been several small incursions. Dilithium was a highly valuable resource, and with Starfleet stretched thin across multiple sectors, much of it remained only lightly defended. That was a siren call to thieves and other nefarious characters.

“In moments of tragedy like this, the great strength of our United Federation of Planets—our alliance—really shines through.”

“But that strength failed your people, didn’t it, Madame President?” Tessa said gently, her tone not accusatory but more like that of a trusted friend pointing out a hard truth. “Your planetary forces were never equipped to protect you from an invasion by a species as powerful as the Hur’q.”

“No, our forces did their best and sacrificed themselves willingly,” President Moss admitted solemnly. “But we simply weren’t strong enough to repel a species like the Hur’q. Our defenses

were primarily designed to protect our dilithium resources from theft, not to withstand a full-scale invasion by a hostile power.”

“Starfleet was supposed to protect you from such an invasion, wasn’t it?” Tessa pressed gently.

“Unfortunately, the *USS Cairo*—the nearest Federation vessel—was still 24 hours away at maximum warp and couldn’t arrive in time to assist us,” Moss replied carefully, choosing her words carefully. “In the end, we were on our own, defending our home as best we could.”

Tessa glanced at Captain Picard, seeking his response once Moss had finished. He remained silent, wisely choosing not to engage unless directly questioned. After decades as a seasoned diplomat and senior Starfleet officer, Picard was far too experienced to fall for that old trick, especially when he didn’t have anything but excuses to offer for Starfleet.

“Captain Picard, why was the nearest Starfleet ship so far from the planet?” Tessa asked pointedly. “Why was Kessik IV left alone to defend itself?”

“The Hur’q invasion stretched Federation resources to the breaking point across the quadrant,” Picard explained carefully. “To be candid, threat assessments did not identify Kessik IV as a likely target for the Hur’q, so few fleet assets were stationed nearby. There were other worlds in the sector deemed higher priority. As we have learned from recovered battle wreckage, Hur’q propulsion and power generation technology does not rely on dilithium like we do. We did not believe Kessik IV held much strategic value for the Hur’q. In hindsight, that was a grave miscalculation.”

“A miscalculation that the people of Kessik IV paid for with their lives,” Tessa countered sharply. “Many Federation citizens and worlds trust Starfleet to protect them from external threats. How would you respond to those who believe Starfleet has *failed* in its fundamental role—that they have seemingly forgotten that as an organization they were created to protect the Federation and not serve primarily as its scientific and exploratory arm?”

Picard’s expression flickered with surprise for a brief moment before settling into a composed calm. His eyes glanced toward me quickly—it was clear that our conversation at that Ten Forward reception had not only been remembered but had likely been shared with others, including Tessa. Part of me wished I had thought to do that myself.

I carefully kept my eyes on Tessa and Picard even while I glanced at the video feed in my HUD too see how President Moss reacted. Had she shared our conversation? If so, she was doing a great job of hiding it. There wasn’t a single micro expression that gave anything away.

“Starfleet’s role has evolved since its founding over two centuries ago—nothing remains static,” Picard said thoughtfully. “But we have never lost sight of our fundamental mission: to protect the people of the Federation. I certainly have not.”

“Yet when Kessik IV and Paris was in terrible danger, it wasn’t Starfleet that saved them—it was Admiral Gothic,” she stated, more as fact than question. “He was simply passing by, by chance or luck, someone with no obligation to do anything at all. Should we really rely on the generosity

of passing strangers *on vacation*, on miracles, to save our lives? Is Starfleet, as it stands today, truly capable of fulfilling its primary mission?"

"We are deeply grateful for Admiral Gothic's extraordinary service to the Federation, both on Kessik IV and on Earth, even when on vacation," Picard responded, carefully sidestepping the implication and trying to make a small joke to alleviate the tension that was now building. Clever of him. "Starfleet has protected this great Federation for over two centuries with honor and distinction, meeting every threat and prevailing."

Tessa ignored the evasion, sensing this line of questioning had reached a quiet dead end.

"Captain, I understand you're not part of the admiralty or the Federation government—you don't set policy, though I'm sure you help shape it given your stature and long career," Tessa began, her tone measured but deliberate. "You are one of Starfleet's most respected officers. You command the flagship of Starfleet, the *Enterprise*, and have served with distinction for over 45 years, having graduated from Starfleet Academy in 2327 at the age of 18. In short, you know Starfleet better than almost anyone."

She let the words hang for a beat before continuing.

"With that in mind, let me ask you this: What percentage of Starfleet's active-duty ships are still based on designs created more than 75 years ago?"

A long silence followed. Picard's expression faltered for a split second, unmistakably startled. And this time, his glance in my direction wasn't subtle. If I had held any doubt that someone had shared our earlier conversation with Tessa, it was gone now.

"I don't have that information with me," Picard replied, clearly on the back foot.

"Well, I do," Tessa said smoothly.

A table of figures appeared in the video feed and was projected holographically into the space before us.

Picard's face turned unreadably blank as he scanned the data. Had he seriously not looked into this after our conversation? Or was it simply something he didn't want to know—something too uncomfortable to fully acknowledge? Because the truth was right there in the numbers: an unsettlingly high percentage of active-duty ships were still based on 75 plus year old designs. Of course, not all of them were *built* in a shipyard 75 plus years ago, but they were still based on a design that had originally been created that long ago.

Uncomfortable truths were still truths.

It wasn't new to me—I'd already done the research—but seeing it presented like this, in this *very* public forum, was still jarring. The Star Trek shows had always followed Starfleet's crown jewels: in *The Next Generation*, the *Enterprise-D*, a Galaxy-class, a new design straight out of the shipyard. In *Voyager*, an Intrepid-class, brand new and bleeding-edge.

But those were the exceptions, not the rule.

Both ships straight out of the shipyards practically with that new car smell still lingering in the corridors.

The real fleet was older. *Much* older on average.

I found myself absently wondering what a *Star Trek* series would feel like if it followed an old starship based on a 75-plus-year-old design—one that had cycled through five plus captains since its initial launch, a line of framed pictures of young, hopeful captains hanging in the Captain's Ready Room, a ship constantly in need of maintenance and replacement parts, shit just getting more old and tired and worn out as each year passed. A ship where the replicators groaned, the hull plating creaked, and historical maintenance logs were as long as *War and Peace*. Now that would be a *very* different kind of *Star Trek*. Even if I wasn't a superfan, I'd still watch that show.

It was so much easier to paint a rosy picture of the future when the ships were all shiny and new and state-of-the-art.

Tessa brought everyone's focus back to the moment.

"The *USS Cairo*, the ship that was twenty-four hours away from Kessik IV when the Hur'q attacked—the one that was meant to protect this world—is an Excelsior-class vessel. Is that correct?"

Everyone knew where this was going. Picard clearly saw no path but forward.

"It is," he answered, his expression tightening as his unflappable diplomatic armor slipped even more firmly into place. If he wasn't on camera I had the distinct feeling that he'd have sighed already.

"The Excelsior-class was first designed and launched over eighty years ago, correct?" she pressed.

"Yes, I believe that's correct," Picard answered, measured and calm.

"To keep it viable in the modern day, the class has undergone five major refits over its—let's be honest here—very long service life."

"Again, I believe that's correct."

"And yet, these ships are still on the front lines. Still protecting Federation worlds. Captain, with the leaps forward we've made in propulsion, power generation, transporters, shielding, sensors, hull composition, weapons, you name it... does it make *any* sense to continue fielding starships based on designs from eight plus decades ago?" Tessa posed, with a tangible sense of incredulity.

"The *Cairo* and ships like her serve with distinction across the Federation," Picard countered firmly. "Their crews are among the finest we have—men and women who have dedicated their lives in service to the Federation."

“I don’t doubt their dedication for a second, Captain,” Tessa replied smoothly. “But my question wasn’t about the valor of their crews or their lives of service, doing the best they can with antiquated starships—it was about whether it makes *sense* to send those crews into danger aboard outdated vessels. Ships that, however noble their long, long service history, may not offer the protection Federation citizens *deserve*.”

Picard didn’t flinch, but his jaw tightened slightly.

“The first starship you ever captained, the *USS Stargazer*, was a Constellation-class starship,” she continued. “That design is even older than the Excelsior-class, dating back more than ninety years. Are any Constellation-class vessels still serving on the front lines today?”

“No,” Picard said sharply. “Those ships are now assigned to transport and support roles only—not to active combat duty. The Federation does *not* rely on Constellation-class starships to defend its citizens.”

Tessa arched an eyebrow, her tone innocently curious. “Ah. So, there *is* a line, then. It’s 90-year-old designs, I suppose. Interesting.”

She tapped her PADD, and another table appeared on the screen.

“I was very surprised to hear you say that Starfleet does not rely on the Constellation-class to protect the Federation, since Constellation-class ships have participated in thirteen separate combat engagements during the Hur’q invasion, according to Starfleet records. In eleven of those cases, these very old ships were lost with all hands. Those valorous crews who dedicated their lives in service to the Federation, *gone*, forever.”

Picard’s expression darkened. “That is a mischaracterization of unique circumstances, ma’am. The Hur’q invasion was unprecedented in our history, in both scale and ferocity. Every Starfleet vessel within range was ordered to respond to incursions during this conflict—not just for direct combat, but for evacuation, rescue, or to offer humanitarian aid.”

“Perhaps,” Tessa said, nodding. “But would it surprise you to learn that even *before* the Hur’q Invasion, during the most recent Federation–Cardassian war, Constellation-class ships were deployed in seven documented unclassified combat missions? Who knows how many they went on that we don’t know about it. Was the Cardassian War unprecedented in our history, in both scale and ferocity? That does not feel correct.”

She didn’t even given Picard a chance to respond to her question. New tables were displayed in the feed, each annotated with clickable links for the audience to follow, directing them to Starfleet’s own public records and declassified mission reports—the very sources Tessa and her research team had relied on. It was very solid journalism, actually. Kudos to her and her team.

“Were *those* special circumstances too, Captain?” Tessa asked, her tone steady and direct.

Picard said nothing.

She pressed on. “Is Starfleet’s industrial capacity so limited that we cannot field modern starship designs? That we can’t retire active-duty vessels after, say, thirty years of service like the other powers do? Wouldn’t that better protect the people of the Federation?”

Picard took a breath, his expression carefully neutral. “I am the captain of a single Starfleet vessel, even if it is the flagship. Matters of fleet logistics, design, or shipbuilding fall far outside my official authority.”

That was a weak response to my ears and likely to everyone watching, but what else could he realistically say? Remaining silent for too long would have been far worse.

“I understand, I really do,” Tessa said, nodding with a hint of feigned empathy. “But would it surprise you to learn that the Federation has *fewer* shipyards than both the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire—nations whose territory and resources are significantly smaller than ours? Or that, even with our limited number of shipyards, we’re still operating far below their operational capacities? That prior to the Hur’q invasion, Federation shipyards across the quadrant were averaging just 50% utilization?”

She didn’t pause for Picard’s response, perhaps a kindness on her part. Instead, another chart appeared on the screen, this time highlighting shipyard output and capacity—sourced again from publicly available Federation records.

“Let me ask a much simpler question, Captain, one that I believe you can answer as a longtime Starfleet captain,” she continued, her voice calm but deliberate. “It may sound rhetorical, or perhaps far too general, but in light of the vulnerabilities the Hur’q Invasion exposed, I think it’s necessary.”

She glanced at Picard, holding his gaze for a beat before continuing slowly, with precision.

“Would the security of the Federation be improved if Starfleet retired ships over thirty years old—like the Excelsior and Constellation classes—and instead prioritized building newer vessels, and more of them?”

“It is not that simple,” Picard began, his tone measured. “Such a shift would require enormous political will, sustained public support, redirection of critical resources from other projects, a complete overhaul of operational priorities—not to mention new training standards and a surge in recruitment to crew those ships—”

“Admiral Gothic,” Tessa interjected smoothly, pivoting before Picard could bury the question in the logistical difficulties involved, “Captain Picard clearly prefers to discuss the *difficulty* of change. But I believe I’m asking a question that can be answered in a straightforward fashion. Would the *security of Federation citizens* be improved if Starfleet weren’t relying on aging ships—ships that *could* be replaced, given the excess shipbuilding capacity we already have?”

For some time now, I’d been content to sit back and watch as Picard was carefully—and publicly—held to account, rightly or wrongly, for the failures of Starfleet and the Federation as a whole. Letting the conversation unfold without my direct involvement had its distinct

advantages, especially since any response from me might be colored by the ever-present prejudice against Augments.

But with Tessa's question now pointed squarely in my direction, it was clear my silence had run its course and I'd be forced to involve myself.

Unfortunately.

"I think the short answer is yes—absolutely. The people of the Federation *would* be safer if those changes were made. That much is obvious," I said plainly. "But I also understand why Captain Picard hesitates. It's not a simple issue, and pressing him for a yes or no strips away the historical and institutional context that shaped Starfleet into what it is today."

Picard glanced at me—surprised, perhaps, that I was offering a defense, even as mild as it was.

"Captain Picard and I actually spoke about this not long ago," I continued, turning to Tessa. "And I'll repeat now what I told him then: I believe Starfleet has, in many ways, lost sight of its founding purpose. Somewhere along the way, the protection of the Federation became a burden—something to be done reluctantly, something seen as an interruption to its *real* work of diplomacy, scientific progress, and exploration."

I paused briefly, letting that sink in.

"But the great Starfleet captains of old—Archer, Pike, Kirk, Sulu, Spock—they understood. They knew that defense wasn't some unfortunate necessity, it was the *foundation* upon which everything else was built. Without safety, there is no diplomacy. Without security, there is no science. Without survival, there is no exploration."

I turned my eyes briefly toward Picard before returning to Tessa. "In a galaxy as dangerous and unpredictable as ours—especially with threats like the Hur'q emerging from seemingly nowhere—we cannot afford a Starfleet that treats defense as a secondary concern. Not anymore."

I paused, letting the weight of my words settle, even as Tessa hung on every syllable. Future battles with the Dominion, thousands of starships fighting to the death at one time, flashing through my mind.

"But that gradual shift in purpose—call it attitude, guiding philosophy, whatever you like—didn't happen in a vacuum. Starfleet reflects the culture of the Federation itself. And part of that is the reality that it hasn't faced a true peer adversary threatening its survival in over a century. The Federation-Klingon War required the intervention of a god-like species, the Organians, just to stop it. Even temporarily."

I chose not to mention Section 31's use of a Genesis Device to blow up Praxis—an act that decisively crippled the Klingons and forced them to the negotiating table. Some truths are best left unspoken, especially when diplomacy and a fragile peace hung in the balance. *And* the fact that I would be at risk of being assassinated by Section 31 and/or starting another war the Federation could ill afford right now.

Lord, if that happened the Dominion could just sit back for years, waiting for whoever emerged the victor, then waltz in and take it all over.

“The Federation faced the very real possibility of defeat against the Klingons—unlike the smaller conflicts with species like the Cardassians or the Tzenkethi, where the Federation was never truly at existential risk. It hasn’t seen a war of that scale in over a century, at least until the Hur’q invasion. Without such powerful enemies to contend with, complacency set in. Long-standing fears about giving Starfleet too much power and resources began to influence critical policy decisions once again, including ship replacement schedules and shipbuilding priorities. For the last hundred years, the Federation has never fielded the fleet size it both could and should, given the vastness of its territory.”

Tessa leaned forward, eyes intent. “Why do you think that is, Admiral?”

I hesitated noticeably, aware this interview would have far-reaching consequences—both positive and negative. Sharing such candid thoughts at a private reception in Ten Forward, even amid influential company, was one thing. Broadcasting them here, potentially to hundreds of millions of people, was quite another.

I sighed. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!

“That was by design, and unfortunately, it has caused significant problems in this war,” I said, purposely keeping my response short, noticing Tessa’s shocked expression.

“I don’t understand,” she replied, clearly confused. “Are you saying external parties have manipulated events to weaken the Federation and Starfleet?”

“Tessa, external parties are always working to weaken the Federation and Starfleet—that’s just the nature of the game, something everyone expects as a matter of course,” I explained, resisting the urge to roll my eyes with all my might, not that my answer helped Tessa’s confusion. “But the issues we’re discussing now are mostly self-inflicted.” That only seemed to deepen her confusion.

Picard sighed quietly and leaned back, looking resigned. Already knowing what I was going to say next.

“The Federation isn’t an empire like the Klingons or the Romulans. It’s far from monolithic. It’s an alliance of independent worlds, each maintaining its own sovereignty. When I shared these thoughts with Captain Picard recently, he remarked that what I was describing sounded like a conspiracy. But it’s not. I called it concerned self-interest, because that’s baked into the Federation’s very foundations. Even within an enlightened alliance working largely for the common good, each independent world naturally acts, at least to some extent, in its own self-interest and many times out of fear.”

“You’re saying we did this to ourselves,” Tessa shot back. “Why would we do that?”

“That’s the right question,” I said with a sigh. “From the very beginning, when the Federation was founded, the member worlds feared losing their sovereignty in this new alliance. They

worried that by giving up most of their militaries, Starfleet would eventually grow too large, too powerful, and too militaristic—making it impossible to resist, and that they might be quietly conquered without a fight. Don't just take my word for it—those debates were intense and well documented. It's all in the public record of those worlds around that time.”

“So why did they join?” Tessa asked, clearly surprised that such an ‘old’ question was even relevant.

“Because with threats like the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Xindi around, joining still made sense. It *still* makes sense in the modern day, considering the Klingons would proudly tell you that they are still conquerors. A strong Starfleet to protect everyone outweighed the fears of it becoming too powerful and threatening their sovereignty in the future. Why worry about your sovereignty in the distant future, when your world could be conquered today?” I asked. “Besides, the Federation offered an opportunity for longtime adversaries—like the Vulcans and Andorians—to finally set aside conflicts they couldn't resolve on their own, even when they wanted to.”

“You're saying those old fears about Starfleet becoming too strong resurfaced during the past century, when the Federation didn't face a true existential threat?” President Moss asked softly. “That the member worlds deliberately weakened Starfleet so it wouldn't become too powerful to control or to resist?”

“Exactly, Madame President, though ‘deliberately’ might be too strong a word,” I agreed. “I doubt it was some grand conspiracy with leaders meeting in secret on a distant planet to plot this out. It was more organic—an unintended consequence of self-interest and fear guiding decisions independently. And now, a hundred years later, here we are.”

If they *had* met in some shadowy room to plan out Starfleet and the Federation's systematic weakening, I had no doubt Section 31 would've found out and killed every last fucking one of those people with a slew of transporter accidents, warp core breaches, and spatial anomalies.

“Where are we now, Admiral?” Tessa asked.

“There are a lot of forces working in concert to weaken both Starfleet and the Federation,” I replied. “But at the most basic level, we're looking at a Federation with a fleet that's far smaller than it should be for a polity of its size. And what we *do* have is made up largely of aging designs kept in service decades past their intended service life, with no serious effort to create new designs and replace those old ships by tapping our underused industrial and shipbuilding capacity to fix the problem.”

I let that hang a moment, then added, “Even with a reduced and aging fleet, to its credit, the Federation has managed whether most threats. But in my opinion, the greatest danger we face is the slow, steady drift away from Starfleet's core mission. It needs to remember what it was built to do—and start acting like it. Maybe it's idealistic to think this invasion will serve as a wake-up call. But if it does, maybe we'll finally see the will to root out the weakness that's taken hold.”

“I understand that this philosophical shift in Starfleet is central to your concerns,” Tessa said. “But in practical terms, what do you believe we should *do* to prevent future tragedies like the one here on Kessik IV—and across the Federation? How do we make ourselves stronger, more resilient, against future threats like the Hur’q?”

“I appreciate the question, Tessa,” I replied, exhaling slowly. “But at the end of the day, I’m just a soldier—a man out of time. An admiral in what can’t even be charitably called a third-rate military.”

I glanced toward the camera.

“I imagine many people watching are wondering what gives me the right to speak so bluntly, or why they should even listen to me.”

Tessa leaned forward, her expression unexpectedly soft, and gently touched my hand.

“I want to know what you think we should do,” Tessa said gently but firmly, her hand still resting on mine. “And I suspect many in my audience feel the same. You’re not just a man from another time—or another dimension—you’re an outsider, who has already done so much for the Federation in a very short time. That perspective lets you see things we might be blind to. So please, Admiral, tell us what *you* believe we should do.”

“I want to know as well,” President Moss added, her voice calm but steady. She already knew what I was going to say—we had spoken at the reception—but she understood the importance of this moment.

I let the silence stretch, giving the weight of the question time to settle over the room. Then I answered.

“First, we need to design a new generation of starships—ships built *specifically* to defend the Federation. Not multi-mission platforms, like virtually every ship in Starfleet today. Not science vessels that can be *converted* into warships or fight in a war, if forced to. But vessels created with one purpose: defense. Build them with greater operational automation in mind from the start so they require smaller crews to operate.

Second, we need to build those ships—a *lot* of them—while expanding Starfleet Academy and other training institutions across the Federation. Relax the overly rigid admissions standards and increase class sizes. Recruit more general crew to serve aboard them, so new ships don’t sit idle in drydock waiting for bodies to fill the stations.

Third, once the new fleet is operational, retire the old starships. Recycle them. Or, if they’re still useful and space worthy, turn them over to the control of the member worlds so they can police their own space more effectively without relying on Starfleet. But stop pretending that eighty-year-old ship designs can still carry the burden of the Federation’s defense.”

“The new ships make sense,” Tessa said. “But tell me more about the training side of it.”

“We have the capacity to build more ships—that’s not the issue,” I explained. “But once those ships are built, we need people who can actually operate them. Retraining the crews from

decommissioned vessels will help, but that only goes so far. The goal isn't just to replace one old ship with one new one—a one-to-one exchange—it's to field *more* ships than we've had in a century."

I leaned forward slightly, my voice more pointed now. "But Starfleet's current admittance standards are *ridiculously* high. Not just academically, but in terms of who and how many are even *allowed* to take the entrance exam. That alone puts a hard cap on how many people can serve. It's an artificial bottleneck—self-imposed."

Tessa arched an eyebrow. "You said 'artificially.' You believe one of the ways we've weakened Starfleet is by limiting the number of people who are even *allowed* to serve?"

"Absolutely," I said without hesitation. "We've prioritized prestige over practicality, selectiveness over readiness. And we've done it while simultaneously refusing to implement greater automation aboard our ships—automation that could significantly reduce crew requirements. We've limited the pool of people *and* simultaneously refused to make it easier to stretch those numbers across more ships. It's a self-defeating strategy and a way to justify much smaller fleet sizes than the Federation can field or requires."

"I believe there's been a systematic effort—intentional or not—to do exactly that," I said. "If you discourage automation on starships, subtly dissuade your population from joining Starfleet—which, by the way, is likely why the percentage of humans in Starfleet is so disproportionately high—and simultaneously restrict training slots while raising entrance standards to absurd levels, the result is predictable: you end up with far fewer people available to crew starships."

I let the point settle for a beat before continuing, more measured now. "Starfleet could build new ships tomorrow, there are designs created as academic exercises just sitting in databanks, but even if we built them, without serious changes to Starfleet's training policies and infrastructure, they'd have no one to operate those new ships once they left the shipyards."

I could tell I'd already pushed the audience hard with a lot of uncomfortable truths. Time to ease off this topic—for now.

"I wish I could point to some shadowy enemy or cabal and lay the blame at their feet," I said quietly. "It would be easier—more comfortable—to say the Federation's current weakness was caused by some external enemy. But the truth is harder: this is self-inflicted. And I hate saying that, because when blame is shared by everyone, responsibility becomes so diffuse that no one acts. That's the danger. It's much easier to point to a single external enemy to lay blame, much easier to fight *that* particular enemy."

I let the weight of the words settle before continuing.

"But if we're all to blame, then we all share the duty to fix it," I said firmly. "Whether anyone watching agrees with me or not—whether my words resonate or fall flat—I think Captain Picard would agree on one point without hesitation: the Hur'q Invasion laid bare deep, systemic flaws. Flaws that can't be ignored. Starfleet, and the Federation as a whole, must change. Because we

may not get another miracle next time to save us. And make no mistake—there *will* be a next time.”

I turned my eyes to Picard. He met my gaze and nodded gravely.

“I agree, Admiral,” he said. “We can—and should—do better.”

A heavy silence followed. For once, no one rushed to fill it.

“I noticed you deliberately left out planets adding an advanced orbital defense net—like the one your company provides—as one of your proposed solutions,” Tessa said with a knowing smile.

“I do think it’s a good idea, I believe the Federation President was right about that,” I replied, a hint of humor in my voice. “A system like the GODS net offers constant, local protection—both defensive shielding and offensive capabilities. It will reduce a member world’s reliance on Starfleet for local protection and will allow Starfleet to redistribute fleet assets across entire sectors of space. Given the losses Starfleet experienced during the Hur’q Invasion, that would give them some time and breathing room. But mentioning it myself felt a little too self-serving.”

Tessa smiled wider as I continued.

“Starfleet isn’t what it once was, unfortunately. A lot of worlds could benefit from leasing that kind of protection, which is probably why the Federation President launched the planetary defense initiative. Whether it survives past the next election cycle—or the next news cycle—is anyone’s guess.” I gave a shrug. “People have short memories, even after extreme events.”

“We’ll be right back,” Tessa said to the camera, her expression unreadable.

No dancers rushed the stage this time to jiggle their bits, which I was trying hard not to read into.

The viewership was now at 1.3 billion.

XXXXX

“And we’re back!” Tessa announced brightly, her smile radiant as ever, before turning to President Moss. “Madame President, my understanding is that your interest in an orbital defense net actually predates the Federation President’s recent announcement. Is that true?”

“It is, Tessa,” Moss confirmed with a nod. “When Admiral Gothic saved our people from the Hur’q, I learned that he and his company had developed an orbital defense net—one that, had it been in place, might have prevented the Hur’q invasion altogether.”

Tessa’s brow rose, curiosity and skepticism mingling in her expression. “I’m surprised you can say that so definitively. How can you be sure your world could’ve been saved?”

Moss gave a faint smile and cast an amused glance in my direction. “In addition to his many, many other talents, Admiral Gothic is also a prolific holonovel author. Using sensor logs from our own ships, real-time battle data from his vessel, and the compiled sensor intelligence gathered by all of our allies during the overall invasion of the quadrant, he built a comprehensive simulation of the attack on Kessik IV.”

She paused for effect.

“Then he asked a simple ‘what if.’ What if we’d had the Gothic Orbital Defense System in place that day?”

“What were the results?” Tessa asked, clearly intrigued.

“With the force the Hur’q brought to bear, our world could have easily repelled the invasion,” Moss answered, her voice catching slightly as her eyes welled with emotion.

“That’s... remarkable, Madame President,” Tessa said softly. Then, after a beat, she shifted slightly in her seat, her tone turning gently skeptical. “But how can we trust those results? The Admiral designed the simulation himself. Isn’t it possible he skewed the data—intentionally or not—to produce the outcome you’d want to see? An outcome that would make leasing his defense system seem like the obvious choice?”

As this interview had shown over and over again, Tessa was amazing at playing the Devil’s Advocate.

Moss let out a light laugh. “You sound like half my legislature, Tessa,” she said with a wry smile. “Believe me, they asked the same questions—and then some. We didn’t take the simulation at face value, at least at first. We had it independently audited, torn apart down to the last line of code. Every expert we consulted, both on Kessik IV and off-world, confirmed it was a faithful, rigorous model based on real sensor data and established combat analytics specific to the Hur’q.”

She paused, then added, “In fact, several of those expert analysts concluded the simulation was surprisingly conservative in its approach. The predictive algorithms built into it leaned heavily toward caution, assuming worst-case outcomes at multiple stages. When I asked Admiral Gothic about that, he admitted it was intentional—he wanted it to hold up under the harshest scrutiny.”

When all eyes turned to me for confirmation, I gave a quiet nod and a faint smile—but remained silent.

“The only real unknown after that,” Moss continued, “was whether the GODS net would perform in practice as well as it did on paper. That’s why we’ve conducted such rigorous live testing over the past several days.”

“Madame President,” Tessa asked gently, “when you saw the results of that simulation for the first time... how did it make you *feel*?”

Moss drew a slow, steady breath before answering.

“Hopeful, actually,” she said at last. “And that was a profound relief. Because up to that point, all I had felt for days was a choking mix of despair and rage and self-recrimination.”

She paused, her voice growing quieter.

“After the invasion, I met with family after family—grieving, broken—who had lost loved ones. Some were killed in orbit, others in the first wave of bombardment. Many more were taken. The

Hur'q didn't just invade us, conquer us—they took people and technology back to their ships, and in far too many cases... they ate those people alive. *Including children.*”

The room was silent as her words hung heavy in the air. Being eaten alive was an atavistic fear that virtually all humanoids held.

“I first met Admiral Gothic at a makeshift medical camp,” she continued. “The hospitals that hadn't been destroyed were overflowing, hopelessly overwhelmed, so we were forced to set up emergency triage tents across the countryside. It was under one of those tents, in the open air, that I watched my people performing desperate life-saving surgeries with hands shaking from sleep deprivation, using supplies and equipment much of which came from Admiral Gothic's ship. That's where we began to rebuild—under cloth canopies, in chaos, with his help.”

Moss wasn't looking at anyone now—her eyes had gone distant, fixed on a memory only she (and I) could see.

“Just before I met Admiral Gothic for the first time, I was at one of the aid tents, trying to offer what little comfort I could to so many people whose lives and families had been destroyed. I sat beside a man's bedside and held his hand; his name was Matthew. He'd been horribly wounded—shot with a Hur'q antiproton weapon. A whole section of his torso was simply... gone. And yet, somehow, he was still alive. At least he was for a little while...”

She paused as her words got quieter and quieter at the end, swallowing hard. I hadn't known the man hadn't made it. Perhaps he had welcomed it in the end.

“Matthew had lost everything—his wife and his two young children. They were at home in their apartment when the orbital bombardment began. He survived because he had been at work. The entire building, though, was obliterated.”

Her voice began to tighten.

“I held his hand as he wept, as he asked again and again why he couldn't have died with his family. Saying how he wished he had. Then the grief gave way to rage. He started hitting himself in the face. He said he wanted to pick up a phaser and kill every last one of them. The Hur'q. All of them. Everywhere.”

Moss exhaled sharply, as though purging the memory.

“I made a promise to Matthew that day—and to hundreds of others who suffered similar losses and injuries—that I would do everything in my power to ensure that this never happens again,” she said, her voice resolute now. “If that means making enemies in the Federation or in Starfleet, or with the Romulans, then so be it. I'd happily give my life for my people.”

With my Augment memory, I remembered that day with perfect clarity—every word, every expression, as though it had been recorded in high-definition. She had made that promise. But she had also said something else—something far darker. That if it came to it, she would kill every last one of them. That she would bear that terrible burden so that her people wouldn't have to.

It wasn't something she could ever admit to publicly—not in the Federation, with its culture of tolerance, reconciliation, and carefully curated idealism. If she said it aloud, they'd turn on her, villainize her. They'd call her a warmonger, a relic, a threat to their values. So, she kept that part to herself.

But I remembered.

And truthfully, that might have been the moment Donatella Moss had earned my great respect.

“When I saw the results of that simulation,” she continued, her voice steady but full of emotion, “I felt hope. For the first time since the invasion, I believed I had found a way to keep the promise I'd made—over and over again—to so many of my grieving people in those first terrible days. I threw myself into making it happen. I gathered support. Gathered funds. I instructed my administration to research the legal viability under Federation law, so that I could shut down any attempts to stop me. And we found that we could. There was nothing stopping us.”

“Your interest in the technology—and the research your administration undertook—may have inspired the Federation President's defense initiative,” Tessa suggested.

“Perhaps,” Moss said with a small shrug. “I really can't say for certain.”

“For the past week or so, your world has been conducting live, non-simulated testing of the GODS net,” Tessa continued. “And that testing has now concluded. How do you feel it went?”

“After analyzing all the data, but both my government and my people have been thoroughly impressed,” Moss answered. “While we already believed the simulation Admiral Gothic provided was accurate, this real-world testing confirmed it, beyond a shadow of a doubt. If we had had the GODS net in place that terrible day, we could have repelled the Hur'q forces.”

President Moss' smile was bittersweet, so Tessa reached out to take the other woman's hand, offering some modicum of comfort.

“We pushed the system hard—really hard—with the help of Captain Picard and the *Enterprise*, Captain Jellico and the *Cairo*, and even Admiral Martok aboard the *Emperor's Wrath*. The GODS net didn't just meet expectations—it exceeded them.”

“The testing hasn't exactly been without its difficulties, though, has it?” Tessa asked.

“No,” Moss replied, her tone sharpening. “We've faced multiple delays, interferences—most notably due to the Romulans. They violated our space with a cloaked scout ship, deployed operatives to illegally observe the tests, and even went so far as to intercept, murder, and impersonate the Halkan ambassador and his diplomatic party. Of course, they claim that that was all the work of rogue agents.”

“And then someone tried to bomb the memorial event honoring Admiral Gothic and those who died in the invasion.”

Moss nodded grimly. “Yes. We can't say with absolute certainty who was behind the bombing attempt, but all signs point to the Romulans, given the timing and prior actions. My head of

security and Captain Picard's team have both been investigating, but so far, we haven't identified the individual or individuals who planted the device."

Tessa turned toward me. "Admiral Gothic, is it true that you saved everyone—again?"

"I also saved myself, Tessa," I said with a wry smile.

She gave a quick chuckle, then pressed on. "How exactly did you save everyone? The official report says the bomb *did* detonate."

"It did," I confirmed. "It was a very sophisticated device—with advanced sensor-masking technology designed to foil Federation sensors even while cobbled together from scavenged Federation components collected from across the capital. No one detected it until it began powering up, not even me. At that point, there was less than a minute left before it would explode."

"What did you do?"

"You could say I have a fair bit of experience with improvised explosives," I said with a touch of humor—ironic, really, considering my service in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "Back in the Resistance on Bajor, I learned a lot about what bombmakers typically include—or more importantly, what they leave out. Movement-based detonation triggers are notoriously unreliable, under even the best of circumstances. With improvised devices, like this one was, they're practically suicidal. They tend to go off early, killing the bombmaker or their allies, so most avoid using them entirely."

Tessa leaned in, eyes wide.

"Knowing I couldn't defuse it in time, I activated my personal shield emitter, wrapped it around the bomb, picked it up, and hurled it into the air. It detonated midair—safely above the crowd—with the shield absorbing most of the blast."

"You picked it up and *threw* it into the air?" Tessa repeated, incredulous.

"I did," I admitted, a bit sheepishly. The knowing smiles around me made it clear my embarrassment hadn't gone unnoticed. "Thankfully, I'm strong enough that I could throw it high enough that the reduced blast didn't kill or injure anyone."

"Interesting," Tessa said, her tone thoughtful. "Your genetically enhanced strength was used to save lives... not take them."

Then her eyes widened slightly with realization.

"But you said movement-based triggers are *usually* left out—not *always*. That means that there was still a chance. You could've died," she said, more insistently now.

"That was a risk I was willing to take," I replied simply.

President Moss leaned forward. "Tessa, we had just enough time to realize we were about to die—just enough to *know*—but not enough to *do* anything to prevent it," she said quietly, Tessa

unconsciously wincing. “I knew what Admiral Gothic was capable of physically, as an Augment. I told him to run, to save himself, to get clear of the blast zone. He could’ve done it. Easily. But he didn’t. He stayed. He risked his life and saved us all, thousands of my people and myself—*again*.”

Her voice grew firmer.

“That’s why I will vigorously argue with anyone who tries to compare Admiral Gothic to Khan and his kind. My people and I owe him a debt that we can never fully repay. And that’s why I’ve told him, more than once, that he will always have a home here on Kessik IV.”

Our eyes met and I nodded in quiet thanks for her kind words.

“President Moss,” Tessa continued, “the Romulans illegally observed the testing, violated your planet’s space, and may have even tried to kill you and thousands of your people. Why continue the testing after that? Didn’t you consider that, with so many powerful parties pushing to shut it down, it might not be worth the risk? That it wasn’t worth further damaging relations between the Federation and the Romulan government? You could have died, Madame President.”

“Not for a second, Tessa,” Moss replied firmly. “If anything, it strengthened my resolve. It made me absolutely certain that we were on the right path—for my people, and to keep the promise I made to them after the invasion so many times over.”

She glanced toward the camera, her expression unflinching.

“If the Romulans wanted the testing stopped, it certainly wasn’t for our benefit—or the Federation’s. And no one, not even the Romulans, is claiming the Treaty of Algeron prohibits the Federation from deploying orbital defense systems in general. In time, I believe the courts will agree that the Treaty also doesn’t prevent those systems from incorporating cloaking technology either.”

“Captain Picard, I understand you’ve been tasked with preparing a report on the GODS net, specifically on whether or not it is a viable option for the Federation President’s defense initiative, and thus something the Federation government will pay for,” Tessa said, turning toward him. “Can you share any impressions or preliminary thoughts on the testing?”

“I was likewise impressed by the technology,” Picard replied. “However, as I’m still in the process of drafting my report, I’m not prepared to comment further at this time.”

A surprisingly curt response, especially for someone as eloquent and forthcoming as Picard. Clearly, the earlier pointed questioning had worn thin his patience, and he wasn’t eager to reignite the fire.

Tessa’s expression briefly flickered with disappointment, but to her credit, she pivoted with grace.

“Madame President, will Captain Picard’s report to Starfleet and the Federation influence your government’s decision to lease the technology?” Tessa asked.

“Not in the slightest, Tessa,” Moss replied firmly. “Our interest in the GODS net began long before the Federation President announced his initiative—or offered to foot the bill, for that matter. My people endured a tragedy, and they are determined to ensure nothing like it ever happens again. Even if we have to fund it ourselves, we are still prepared to move forward.”

She continued, “That’s why, with Admiral Gothic’s permission, we shared a portion of the testing data and the proposed lease agreement with our citizens. Yesterday, they voted on whether or not we should lease the technology.”

Tessa nodded her head. “Yes, many observers were surprised you held a vote on a matter of planetary defense and security. That’s not something many planetary leaders would have done. Why call for a vote instead of simply making the decision yourself?”

“There’s a proverb from ancient Earth that guided my thinking,” Moss said. “It says, ‘The voice of the people is the voice of God.’ My administration and I deliberated carefully, and we decided the most legitimate, transparent path forward was to place the decision directly in the hands of the people themselves. Yes, this technology offers substantial protection—but it also comes with a substantial cost and let’s be honest, no small amount of political controversy, both internal and external to the Federation.”

She paused briefly before concluding, “We wanted the decision to be beyond reproach, unassailable—and to send a clear message to the galaxy: the citizens of Kessik IV have chosen to take their security largely back into their own hands.”

“The vote ended last night. Any hints for us on the outcome?” Tessa asked playfully, clearly not expecting a real answer.

“I can do better than a hint, Tessa,” President Moss replied with a proud smile, catching us all off guard. Until that moment, the results had been a closely guarded secret—neither Moss nor her administration had given any indication on how the vote had gone.

“For the first time in our planet’s history, nearly the entire eligible voting population participated. And after a careful, transparent, and audited tabulation, 98% voted in favor of leasing the Gothic Orbital Defense System.”

She turned to me, her smile widening.

“Congratulations, Admiral,” she said warmly. “There’s still work to be done—finalizing the lease terms, agreeing on operational protocols and policies—but we’re ready to move forward. As of this morning, I’ve signed a Letter of Intent as President.”

This was monumental. Kessik IV might just be the first domino to fall—especially combined with Betazed’s potential decision to lease the system—which could spark a chain reaction across the Federation and beyond.

Picard looked resigned, yet not unhappy at the news. Like all member worlds in the Federation, Kessik IV maintained its own sovereignty and this was ultimately their decision if they were willing to pay for it themselves.

His forthcoming recommendation still carried significant weight, however, since worlds willing and able to fund the system themselves—like Kessik IV and Betazed—would likely be rare, especially if they had escaped serious losses during the Hur’q invasion. Kessik IV was actually a bit of an outlier, with a rather low population, relatively speaking, yet rich in valuable resources like dilithium.

Kessik IV’s choice placed considerable pressure on the Federation to approve both me and my technology or have a very strong and defensible reason why not. There was simply no other design like the GODS net currently available, nor any provider capable of delivering a fully operational system in a short timeframe. Current projections suggested it could be years before any comparable defense system—with even a fraction of the GODS net’s offensive and defensive power—could be developed, much less deployed.

In preparing for the Dominion War ahead of time, not knowing the Hur’q Invasion would happen, I had (somewhat) accidentally cornered the market when it came to defense technology.

Tessa, by contrast, seemed on the verge of bursting with excitement at breaking this news on her show, but I caught the precise moment she chose to wrap things up on a triumphant note.

“Thank you to my guests—President Moss, Captain Picard, and Admiral Gothic—for joining us today,” she said warmly. “That concludes the show. Tune in tomorrow to *Open Hailing Frequencies!* where we’ll be interviewing many residents of Kessik IV, hearing their stories in the aftermath of the invasion.”

Jarvis moved his report to the center of my vision. Viewership now stood at 2.1 billion people across the galaxy.

Fuck me.