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Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 66

4 Days, 3 hours, 23 minutes remaining.

Holodeck. Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. In orbit of Kessik IV.

My gaze drifted, almost against my will, drawn to a slender ribbon of multicolored light unfurling before me—a narrow path suspended in the void, unsupported, shimmering through the starfield. It curved away into endless black, a luminous trail twisting among drifting asteroids and distant nebulae that burned in impossible hues. *Rainbow Road*, I thought, the name rising with a quiet, involuntary smile.

Nostalgia was a powerful thing when you were taken from the dimension and time that you knew, despite how awesome my new life was in the Star Trek universe. Bringing a little of that old life to this one, while making money and gaining cultural influence, made it even better.

The scene was pure fantasy: a racetrack engineered from pure nostalgia, floating high above Earth's blue curve. All of the others had already been designed and were ready to be played.

"Jarvis, use the homeworld of at least one of the players as a default," I ordered. "If they want something different, they can make the change manually."

"Change logged," Jarvis dutifully replied.

Stars wheeled slowly overhead; a vast, swirling nebula hung in elsewhere in the background like a painted backdrop. Every familiar hazard was there—the sheer drops into nothing, the sharp banking turns that punished hesitation, the long straightaways where you could almost feel the controller vibrating in your hands.

I'd poured countless hours into this track as a kid, crammed onto a sagging couch in the suburbs of Cleveland with my brothers and friends, the Nintendo 64 humming, cartridges swapped late into the night. Blowing into them just we did for the Nintendo 8-bit.

Later—far later—history had repeated itself in sandy plywood hooches in Afghanistan, a battered Wii hooked to a small LED TV, the same crew of brothers-in-arms sprawled on cots and ammo crates, laughing through the same wipeouts, the same triumphant last second comebacks

to clinch first place. Drinking straight from bottles of shitty beer and communal bottles of cheap booze.

Those deployments taught me something movies never capture: *real* war stories, the ones actual soldiers remembered the most fondly, rarely involved explosions or battles. They were quieter. They lived in the spaces between missions, in the dumb jokes that cut the tension, the rampant sexual innuendo and dirty jokes, the shared silence when someone didn't come back due to an IED, the small rituals that kept you human. Mario Kart on a flickering screen wasn't heroic. It was just us—alive, together, stealing a slice of normalcy from the suck, never knowing if tomorrow's duty would be your last. And in those moments, racing a cartoon plumber through the stars felt more real than anything outside the wire.

The Holodeck held the memory perfectly, every pixel and polygon intact. I smiled wider, feeling the old thrill rise again. For a little while, at least, the galaxy and its many dangers could wait.

I'd griped plenty about warp travel's glacial pace—especially knowing my ship's slipstream drive could shave this jaunt down to minutes instead of hours or days, even at its slowest speeds. But the slow crawl had its perks. It bought me quiet pockets of time to tinker with the fun stuff: half-finished holoprograms, absurd personal projects, to-do list items I could make some progress on without the galaxy screaming for my immediate attention.

"Father?"

Hermione's voice cut through the haze. I blinked, refocusing to where she, Natasha, and T'Maz stood waiting with the patient expressions of people who'd grown used to my mental detours. While I would have welcomed their input, B'Elanna and Neela were elbow-deep in Pressman's shuttle, tools in hand as they disassembled it to divine all its secrets.

"Sorry, Hermione. Drifted off into some good memories," I apologized. "What were we on?"

"Data compression algorithms," she said, unfazed.

"Right. Right." I leaned forward. "What's the issue?"

Natasha stepped in, serious, arms crossed, her tone crisp but not impatient. "The base game is simple for a modern holoprogram—simple environmental interactions, no sentient NPCs with branching personalities or the need for adaptive responses, no complex narrative or interaction with the story. But the online multiplayer mode is hitting walls. Locally—same planet, or even within a dozen light-years—the subspace uplink and local net handle everything with near-zero latency. Feels instantaneous, like all players are in the same room. Push the distance farther than that, though, and the lag creeps in. Packet delays, desyncs, rubber-banding on the track. At galactic scales it turns a clean race into a frustrating slideshow."

T'Maz nodded, her Vulcan calm edged with faint curiosity. "Subspace propagation is effectively real-time between closely located Federation member worlds, thanks to relay chains and boosted carriers. Beyond that, the signal attenuation and routing overhead introduce measurable delay. We are experiencing more significant latency issues that interfere with gameplay."

I exhaled, picturing the Rainbow Road again: that perfect, lag-free fantasy where physics bent to fun, not comms protocols. “So we’re bottlenecked by subspace dynamics we can’t easily beat.”

Hermione tilted her head. “We could explore adaptive predictive compression. Anticipate player inputs based on behavioral models, pre-send probable states. Or shard the simulation across local nodes with eventual consistency for non-critical elements.”

Natasha smirked. “Or we just limit cross-galactic lobbies and call it a feature: ‘regional racing leagues only.’ Keeps the immersion intact.”

I chuckled. “Tempting. But I didn’t drag a Mario Kart clone into the 24th century to settle for regional servers; I want to bring together even very distant worlds.” I glanced at the viewport, the stars steady and patient. “Let’s crack this. We’ve got warp-slow hours ahead—plenty of time to outsmart data transfer over long distances.”

T’Maz inclined her head, ever the voice of measured logic. “The civilian subspace bands are not optimized for high-volume holographic data streams. Bandwidth constraints and signal attenuation over interstellar distances make synchronous multiplayer unreliable beyond core relay coverage. Removing the online functionality would eliminate the issue entirely.”

I shook my head, “Online play isn’t a feature—it’s the heart of it. Racing against strangers light-years away, trash-talking in real time, building rivalries and friendships across planets and great interstellar distances... that’s what turns a solo game into a living community. People keep coming back because they’re not just playing a game, they’re playing with others; they’re part of something bigger. We can create a vibrant community, even in a single region, or on a single world, or in a single sector, but I wanted to make this even bigger.”

Hermione glanced up from her padd, her expression thoughtful. “The omnitool version already supports seamless multiplayer locally or even across long-range subspace links. For most users, that’s sufficient.”

“It is,” I admitted, “and for now, maybe it has to be. But I’m not settling for ‘sufficient’ or ‘good enough.’ This isn’t just about one game. I want an introduction—something broad-appeal, practically zero violence, no psychological hazards the Federation could clutch pearls over and ban. No phasers, no gore, just pure, silly fun that anyone from a kid on Earth to a Bolian freighter pilot can pick up. If we nail the community aspect, it becomes self-sustaining. Players recruit players. And this Mario Kart knockoff? It’s only the opener. I’ve got a whole library queued up from my childhood—classics that translated beautifully to the I Robot dimension’s tech stack. Simple, addictive, omnitool-native: processing power’s there, peer-to-peer connectivity’s baked in. We build the ecosystem right, and we’ll have quadrant-spanning gaming nights before the year’s out, which will drive sales of the omnitool itself to new heights. One product will support the growth of the other.”

Natasha crossed her arms, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. “Ambitious. But if we’re bottlenecked by civilian-grade subspace, we could look at deploying our own dedicated micro-relays—piggyback on existing buoys—or compress the hell out of state data with predictive algorithms.”

T'Maz raised an eyebrow. "A non-trivial engineering challenge. Yet feasible, given sufficient resources."

I rolled my eyes at T'Maz's calm suggestion of "sufficient resources." As if creating and deploying a proprietary subspace network spanning even a fraction of the quadrant was a weekend project. Dedicated relays, boosted carriers, priority routing—high-value sectors only would still drown us in Federation bureaucracy: endless requisitions, Starfleet oversight boards, treaties with every allied world that might catch a signal bounce. We'd be buried in pads of red tape before the first buoy even launched. That could take years and years and more money and resources than I was willing to give for something like this.

"If Gothic Games grows big enough," I said, cutting back in, "yeah, someday dedicated distributed servers or custom subspace infrastructure might make sense. Private relays piggybacking on existing buoys, maybe even micro-nodes for high-traffic zones. But not yet. We're nowhere near that scale. For now, we work with what we've got: civilian subspace bands, omnitool peer-to-peer where it's viable, and smart compression to squeeze every last bit through the cracks."

The omnitools were revolutionary—portable pocket supercomputers with built-in subspace transceivers—but like the smartphones of my era, real magic happened only after you built the ecosystem though. Back on Earth, Solitaire shipped with the first Windows because it was simple, universal, instantly accessible. Gothic Kart would be my Solitaire: the gateway drug to get normal people—civilians, kids, bored colonists—hooked on the idea of quadrant-spanning play. No phasers, no body count, just chaotic fun that even the most pacifist Federation counselor couldn't object to with a straight face.

I'd originally wanted to keep the classic name—Mario Kart had nostalgia baked in for me—but Annika talked me out of it. "It'll soften your image," she'd said with that knowing smile. "You're the warrior now, the weapons guy, the big bad scary augment that can bend a rod of steel. A fun, harmless racing game branded under your name? That's how you remind people there's more to you than energy weapons and combat sims and genetic engineering." She was right. Gothic Games wasn't just entertainment; it was rebranding. A way to build community, one banana-peel wipeout at a time.

I glanced at the others—Hermione tapping notes on her padd, Natasha smirking like she already saw the endgame, T'Maz patiently awaiting logical next steps. "Let's optimize what exists," I said. "Predictive state syncing, delta compression, local extrapolation for the wild stuff like shell spam. Make the lag feel like part of the chaos instead of a bug. We start small, grow the player base, prove the demand. Then we talk about bending subspace to our will with dedicated infrastructure."

The stars outside the viewport drifted slow and steady. Plenty of time yet. Warp might crawl, but ideas? Those moved at the speed of enthusiasm.

Natasha leaned forward, eyes sharp. “We could repurpose the compression suite from the GODS Net. It’s brutal on latency—squeezes holographic state data down to almost nothing. We’ve used it for secure communications across the quadrant.”

I shook my head hard. “No. Absolutely not. Those algorithms are built on tech I pulled from... sources no one else has access to. Alien-derived, proprietary, and staying that way. I’m not handing over that edge for faster kart racing, no matter how much money or convenience it buys.”

Hermione brightened, padd already glowing with fresh calculations. “Then the cloaked sensor network? We could route through those instead of civilian subspace bands.”

The suggestion hit like a cold splash of water. I fought the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose—classic AI move: laser-focused on the immediate problem, offering a solution with zero regard for the strategic landmine that would go off under our feet.

“You mean the cloaked sensor grid we’ve secretly and illegally placed across key sectors?” I asked, keeping my voice even. “The one using quantum-entangled pairs for instantaneous, undetectable comms? The network that—if discovered—would have half the quadrant screaming ‘illegal surveillance’ and the other half trying to steal the technology or sabotage it?”

She nodded, enthusiasm undimmed. “Exactly. Zero propagation delay, negligible bandwidth throttling. Perfect for synchronous multiplayer.”

I exhaled slowly, softening my tone as her expression started to dim. “Hermione, I get why it looks elegant on paper. But that grid is a strategic asset—emergency intel during hot conflicts, black-ops overwatch, contingencies against enemies we haven’t even met yet. Using it to fix lag in a racing game? That’s putting a strategic asset at risk for pocket change. Appreciate the creativity, though. Really.”

She looked down at her padd, processing the gentle rebuff, holographic cheeks faintly flushed in a simulation of embarrassment.

I straightened. “We need real-world data. Let’s see how bad the civilian subspace actually is. Hermione, Natasha—set up a test sim. One player here, on Kessik IV. Second player on Deep Space Nine—use only standard civilian channels, no shortcuts, no priority queuing, no technology or capabilities that a civilian on a Federation member world would not have access to. Run a few races, log every desync, rubber-band, and delay spike. I want to see what happens.”

Natasha smirked, already tapping commands. “On it. Should only take a few minutes to spin up the instances.”

We’d optimize what we could control. The rest—the secret edges, the hidden grids—stayed locked away until the galaxy gave us no other choice.

At my command, the simulation snapped to life. Two familiar figures materialized at the starting grid: Wario in his chunky yellow-and-purple kart, Luigi in green, both controlled by my

daughters—Hermione's precise inputs guiding Wario's aggressive stance, Natasha's more playful style keeping Luigi bouncing with anticipation. The Rainbow Road stretched out before them: a glittering ribbon of multicolored light suspended in starry void, asteroids drifting lazily past, the distant curve of Earth glowing blue below. No rails, no physics—just pure, impossible fantasy.

“Add in the computer-controlled players too,” I ordered, new racers appearing in orderly rows.

The music kicked in right on cue. That unmistakable Rainbow Road theme—high-octane synths layering over a driving bassline, urgent strings swelling into triumphant chords, all wordless and relentlessly upbeat. It hit like a shot of adrenaline: infectious, nostalgic, engineered to make your pulse race even before the countdown started. I'd debated swapping it for something more "mature" or Federation-appropriate, but in the end I kept it faithful. No lyrics meant universal appeal—no cultural barriers, no awkward universal translator translations—just light, chaotic joy that held up through hours of play.

"Begin observation mode," I said aloud.

A screen opened up, one feed tracking each kart, overlaying latency graphs, input logs, physics ticks. T'Maz stared at the display with that unmistakable Vulcan blend of curiosity and mild disapproval, her head tilted as if dissecting a flawed theorem.

"Something wrong, T'Maz?" I asked, already grinning.

She gestured at the holographic track. "This... racetrack...lacks any discernible means of support. In zero gravity, there is no explanation for its positional stability in space, structural integrity, or how the vehicles remain adhered to the 'road' surface. Atmosphere is inexplicably present to sustain life support, yet no containment field is evident. Atmospheric pressure, thermal regulation—"

"It's called suspension of disbelief, T'Maz," I interrupted, chuckling. "This is a game, not a structural engineering simulation."

She raised an eyebrow. "The program appears entirely frivolous. It imparts no lessons on natural phenomena, orbital mechanics, or scientific principles. If you permit, I could design an alternative simulation utilizing authentic spacecraft handling, realistic instrumentation, and Newtonian physics—"

"Fucking Flotter," I muttered under my breath, the groan slipping out before I could catch it. The Adventures of Flotter T. Water III—every kid's mandatory "educational" holoprogram, full of moral fables and gentle physics lessons wrapped in pastel forests and whimsy. I'd endured enough of that saccharine Federation edutainment when I'd first arrived in this dimension as part of my cultural studies.

"There's a time and place for that kind of thing," I said more evenly, "but not here. Not every kids' program has to double as a classroom. Flight sims exist. Science modules exist. This?" I nodded at the screen where the lights flashed green and the karts roared off the line, shells flying, music pounding. "This is just supposed to be fun. Pure, stupid, exhilarating fun. No deeper meaning required."

T'Maz considered that in silence for a moment, then inclined her head slightly. "Understood. I will observe without further commentary on physical implausibility."

Right across the glowing start line floated a massive holographic sign: **Gothic Kart**. I had to admit—the name was growing on me in a way none of the buildings and other things named after me had. This wasn't just a program; it was an introduction. An entire galaxy about to discover the chaotic joy of Mario Kart—excuse me, *Gothic Kart*—banana peels, blue shells, and all. My little piece of 20th-century absurdity, scaled to the stars.

A goggle-eyed yellow alien—Lakitu, faithful to the original—hovered on his fluffy white cloud, dangling a traffic-light box from a fishing pole. The countdown lights pulsed red-yellow-green.

"That entity is floating on a cloud," T'Maz observed dryly. "We are in vacuum. Precipitation-based suspension is inherently illogical."

Well, that hadn't lasted long. What happened to not commenting any further on physical implausibility?

"He's adorable, isn't he?" I shot back, grin widening as the synth-heavy Rainbow Road theme thumped louder, adrenaline kicking in. "Let the chaos begin."

The lights flashed green. Wario (Hermione's precise aggression) and Luigi (Natasha's gleeful recklessness) rocketed forward, tires screeching on impossible light. Arches whooshed past, granting speed boosts; a floating question-mark cube granted a yellow, partially peeled banana that Natasha promptly dropped behind her like a tactical mine.

T'Maz's eyebrow climbed. "These arches are somehow imparting unexplainable velocity increases. The fruit—a Terran banana?—has been deployed as a road hazard. At these velocities and the probable mass of the vehicles, surface friction loss would be negligible. Why include nonsensical elements?"

"Items give special effects," I explained, eyes on the telemetry. "A banana makes you slip—slows you down, spins you out. Pure fun sabotage. The goal is to win the race and that means messing with your fellow players."

"Illogical," she murmured. "Momentum conservation—"

"Yep," I interrupted absently, pulling up the data stream. Already the Bajor proxy feed showed glitches: Luigi's kart stuttering, Wario's shell throw desyncing by frames. "Girls—play organically. Boisterous. Make mistakes. Bump, ram, try to shove each other off into the void. Real players aren't perfect. Be unpredictable."

"That would eject them from the track," T'Maz noted.

"They respawn safe and sound—Lakitu fishes them back up—just way behind. A delay penalty, not death."

The music looped flawlessly (local audio sync was trivial), but visuals fractured: karts rubber-banding, items lagging mid-flight. Latency graphs spiked on the long-haul subspace link.

"Great distance and civilian-band limitations," T'Maz confirmed. "Bandwidth insufficient for full holographic state sync."

I frowned. "Should be plenty—this program is lightweight compared to sensor feeds. The player's local holodeck handles all the rendering. Let's see the data flows."

A holographic diagram bloomed: upload/download streams bloated far beyond expectation. Raw player models, every limb twitch, facial micro-expression streamed in real time.

"Why so much data?" I asked.

T'Maz tilted her head. "The players are dynamic entities. Their physical forms and decisions evolve continuously. All must transfer for accurate synchronization."

I facepalmed. "Their *bodies* don't change much race-to-race. Send the base avatar once at the start, build in subtle delays to allow more time for data transfer—then send only deltas: inputs, pose adjustments, expressions if they're visible. Essential only. Civilian subspace isn't post-scarcity bandwidth paradise like between Starfleet vessels. We optimize or die."

"But all the transmitted data is essential," she insisted, genuinely puzzled.

"Not for a game," I sighed. "This is the gap between my era and yours. Back then, internet speeds varied wildly from person to person and region to region—the cost, the available infrastructure, the local geography, all of it had an effect. Developers had to optimize every byte. Federation? Everything's assumed infinite, perfect. But out here, on civilian channels? We hide the cracks."

I pulled up archived docs from the I Robot dimension—old multiplayer networking papers I'd hoarded like gold. They laughed when I insisted on grabbing everything, even this historical stuff. Who was laughing now?

"T'Maz, girls—implement these:

1. Aggressive compression—small delta packets only, no full video streams.
2. Lower tick rate—throttle non-critical updates.
3. Delta encoding—send changes, not whole states.
4. Client-side prediction—move immediately on input, reconcile later.
5. Snapshot interpolation—buffer incoming data, smooth between positions.
6. Lag compensation—server rewinds briefly to check hits where you aimed, not where the target is now."

Their expressions shifted: confusion, mild discomfort, Vulcan unease at anything less than perfect fidelity.

"Captain," T'Maz said carefully, "these conceal the latency and bandwidth constraints rather than resolve them. The underlying issues persist; the visible displayed gameplay will be... disingenuous."

I closed my eyes, mentally begging Q for patience. "I have a feeling I'll repeat this today: This. Is. A. Game. We're not transmitting sensor logs that map out a new star system or a scientific experiment. Precision errors don't kill anyone—they just make a banana slip feel off. Goal: seamless fun. Stuttering pisses people off more than a tiny false desync ever could."

Hermione visibly hesitated. "You want to obfuscate technical limits—even take shortcuts—so distant players have a seamless game experience even if perfect fidelity is actually lost?"

"Exactly. We're selling joy, not technical data that needs to be perfect or else people die. This program is not meant to convey a lesson on subspace communications, or data management, or how the game functions across lightyears of space. It's just supposed to be fun."

Natasha nodded slowly. "Understood, father. Implementing now."

Finally.

I stayed quiet about the deeper layer I'd baked into the game: a Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment system I'd stolen wholesale, Nintendo-style rubber-banding evolved for the 24th century. The system monitored performance—boosting stragglers with better items/speed, toning down the leader's play subtly, adapting AI aggression to skill (frequent drifters got tougher opponents). It kept races nail-bitingly close, even if you sucked. Losing by a hair hurt more than getting lapped; that sting was manageable and kept players hooked, coming back for more because of how close they had come to winning. Psychology 101.

And I'd gone further: omnitool/holodeck sensors scanned age, species traits, skill history—matching kids with kids, prodigies with equals. Fair play, hidden under the hood. If they balked at "disingenuous" lag fixes, they'd *hate* the idea of the game quietly helping the player in last place and handicapping the one in first through 'underhanded manipulation' of how the game fundamentally worked.

"All changes deployed," Natasha reported.

"Simulation ready for re-test?" Hermione asked.

I grinned at the screen—karts lined up again, Lakitu's lights pulsing. "Let's race."

The green flashed. Engines roared. This time, the galaxy might just keep up.

XXXXX

3 Days, 22 hours, 10 minutes remaining.

Bridge. Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. In orbit of Gagarin IV.

"We are in standard orbit, Captain," T'Maz reported from tactical, her voice level as always.

“Disengage cloak,” I ordered.

The faint shimmer of the cloaking field faded from the viewscreen. I had every right to be here—official clearance from Starfleet Medical, a direct request from the Darwin Station director—but broadcasting our destination felt like painting a target on this system and Darwin Station itself. Better to slip in quiet, do the job, slip out. No fanfare, no logs screaming “augment expert on site.”

The moment the cloak dropped, the comm chirped.

“Warning: The Gagarin system is under full quarantine by order of Starfleet Command. Only authorized vessels and personnel are permitted to approach or land on Gagarin IV. Unauthorized approach will be met with force. This is a repeating transmission.”

The automated voice looped, cold and mechanical, underscoring the invisible line we’d just crossed.

I leaned back in the captain’s chair, brow furrowing. “Interesting they quarantined the entire system, not just the station.”

Lauren, seated to my right in the observer’s chair, kept her gaze locked on the viewscreen. Gagarin IV turned slowly below us—barren, ochre plains scarred by ancient craters, a thin atmosphere barely clinging to life. No cities, no outposts, just the isolated dome cluster of Darwin Station tucked into an equatorial valley. Her expression was hard to read: a mix of protectiveness, old grief, and something sharper—hope, maybe, or dread.

“The Federation established the outpost twenty-one years ago,” she said quietly, almost to herself. “The planet’s been empty except for the station personnel ever since. No colonists, no mining claims, no standard Federation patrols or ships except for those transporting needed supplies for the station, like the *Lantry*, no scientific outposts anywhere else in the entire system, deep in Federation space far from any of the other powers’ territorial claims or borders.”

She paused for a long moment, her voice trailing off, getting quieter and quieter, “No, they did not wish others to know what they were doing here or to stumble upon it by accident. The Federation’s dirty little secret.”

She had lived her whole life carrying the stigma of being genetically enhanced, forever watched, institutionalized (aka imprisoned) for most of her life, for her parents breaking the law. These kids on the surface—young adults now—were her people in a way most couldn’t understand, even me to some extent. Products of the same illegal science that had seen her committed to isolation and distrust, yet these children were created by the very government that had imprisoned her. Talk about hypocrisy.

I glanced at her profile, the way her jaw tightened when the quarantine warning looped again.

This wasn’t just another mission. It was personal—for her, and in a way, for me too. I’d spent years navigating the galaxy’s suspicion of anything “genetically enhanced.” Now we were about to walk into the heart of it.

“T’Maz,” I said, straightening, “open a channel to Darwin Station.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The viewscreen flickered as the hail went out. Below, the quarantined world waited—silent, watchful, holding secrets the Federation had buried for decades.

Lauren exhaled softly, fingers brushing my armrest as if seeking comfort or grounding. Whatever came next, we were in it together.

“The station is responding,” T’Maz reported.

“On screen.”

The viewscreen resolved to show a blond woman with sharp features and a small, hopeful smile. The Section 31 dossier pegged her at mid-40s, but she had that classic Starfleet-medical look—polished, composed, appearing a solid decade younger than any equivalent civilian from my era at the same age. The same poised professionalism I’d seen on TNG: Dr. Sara Kingsley, director of Darwin Genetic Research Station, the woman who’d once overseen the most ambitious, successful, and disastrous human genetic enhancement program in Federation history.

I rose from the captain’s chair to greet her properly.

“Admiral Gothic,” she said, enthusiasm warming her voice, “welcome to Gagarin IV. I’m Dr. Kingsley. We’re incredibly grateful you agreed to help us.”

I inclined my head. “I’m sorry it’s taken so long to clear my schedule, Doctor. Circumstances kept getting in the way.”

That was the polite version. The truth was more layered: I’d dragged my feet for a long time on this one. Part of it was logistics—hostile occupying forces to kill, crises, the endless grind of running Bajor’s military and a ship like the *Temptress*. But mostly it was caution. The moment I’d materialized on the *Enterprise* all those years ago, they’d scanned me down to the quantum level. Dr. Crusher had given her word—fiercely—that my medical file was locked tighter than a vault, accessible only on strict need-to-know. I’d believed *her* sincerity. I didn’t believe in the system’s infallibility.

Romulans, Klingons, Cardassians, Breen—hell, even some Federation black-ops factions—had likely acquired fragments by now. Section 31 had intercepted plenty of attempts, quietly funneling me a finder’s fee each time they discovered a leak, a system vulnerability, or flipped a spy. Section 31 was an extremely competent organization, no question. But my metaknowledge of Star Trek history proved even the best shadows had blind spots and they had certainly failed on numerous occasions. The failure to detect Admiral Pressman’s replacement by a changeling, while excusable given the unknowns involved, was yet another example.

My distrust in the system was why I’d poured so much time and effort into creating my own personal medical doctors: Mark I EMHs rebuilt from the ground up, loyalty hardcoded to me alone, no external overrides, no shared databases. It was an opt out of Federation medicine entirely. No more strangers probing my biology for “scientific curiosity” or worse.

Dr. Kingsley's expression softened at my offer, the lines of long-term strain easing just a fraction.

"Of course, we understand the delay," she said, voice steady but warm. "We may be cut off here—isolated by our work and the quarantine—but we're not blind to what's happened out in the wider galaxy. The Hur'q invasion reached every corner of the Federation. We know the cost. Many of us have friends, family, colleagues at Starfleet Medical in Paris who are alive today only because of what you did. The accolades, the rewards—they're more than earned. From all of us here at Darwin Station... thank you, Admiral. You are a hero."

I dipped my head, managing a small, genuine smile, even while feeling uncomfortable at the title I'd been given so often lately.

"You're welcome, Doctor," I replied quietly. She had no idea a clock was ticking and if I could not find a solution, she, her fellow researchers, and her children would soon all be dead. "Let me offer my help again—this time for your children. Helping them leave quarantine to hopefully live full lives beyond these walls... that's why I'm here."

Relief flickered across her face, raw and unguarded for the first time, though there was something else hidden in her expression. "That is our greatest hope. Our children have been in strict isolation for years now—confined to their own small group, interacting only with each other and the medical staff through barriers and screens. No visitors, no outsiders, no end date in sight. They've never known anything else but this station. If there's a way to stabilize them, to prove they're no longer a vector risk..."

She trailed off, the weight of years of guilt and responsibility settling back onto her shoulders.

I nodded once. "With your permission, I'll beam down shortly."

"You have it, of course," she said immediately.

The channel lingered a heartbeat longer.

Lauren's hand brushed my arm—light, deliberate. I turned to her. Her eyes were bright, intense, the kind of focused she got when something mattered more than protocol.

"May I come with you to the surface?" she asked, voice low but firm. "I want to meet them."

I'd seen this coming the moment we dropped out of warp. Lauren didn't need to say it aloud; I could read it in the way she'd stared at the planet since orbit, in the quiet tension she'd carried through every briefing. These weren't abstract patients to her. They were mirrors—genetically engineered like she was, marked by the same science, the same suspicion, the same long shadow of fear. Now she wanted to look the next generation in the eye and show them it was possible to live a full life.

I held Lauren's gaze for a beat—long enough to read the quiet plea behind her eyes—then gave a small nod and turned back to the viewscreen.

“Dr. Kingsley,” I said evenly, “one of my crew members, Lauren—she’s also genetically enhanced—would like to accompany me to the surface. May she join?”

Dr. Kingsley shifted her attention to Lauren, her smile warm and immediate, almost familial.

“I’m very familiar with Miss Lauren and her medical history,” she replied without hesitation. “The Institute on Earth has consulted me many times over the years regarding her case. She is more than welcome to come down. In fact, it may be... beneficial for the young adults here to meet someone who has lived a full life beyond these walls.”

While Dr. Kingsley likely meant that Lauren was an adult woman in her 30s who was now working for me and traveling between the stars, the words landed like a stone in still water.

My face stayed neutral—years of practice—but inside I winced. Lauren, beside me, managed even less: her jaw tightened, a flicker of something raw crossing her features before she locked it down.

The Institute. The place that had held Lauren captive for most of her life, under the guise of “study” and “protection” and “treatment.” For her own good. No surprise, then, that Dr. Kingsley had consulted on cases like hers—had likely pored over Lauren’s scans, psych evaluations, behavioral logs, the whole invasive catalog. Every datapoint harvested from Lauren and the others at the Institute had fed directly into the Federation’s genetic knowledge base. And that knowledge had almost certainly shaped and refined the very work that had been done here at Darwin Station.

The same Federation that had locked Lauren away, curtailed her freedoms, and branded her a risk had quietly mined her biology for every scrap of knowledge it could yield. They imprisoned her, limited her life, then turned around and built on the very genetic engineering they claimed to fear. The hypocrisy wasn’t even hidden all that well—it was policy.

Lauren stood beside me, silent, but I could feel the shift in her posture: shoulders squared, chin lifted just enough to mask the old wound reopening. She’d carried this truth for decades. Hearing it spoken aloud—even in Kingsley’s well-meaning words—still cut.

I kept my expression neutral, but inside my anger and frustration simmered low and steady. My purpose here was not to point out the many hypocracies and flaws in the Federation façade. I’d done plenty of that recently. We were here to change the ending for the kids on the surface. But gods, the Federation never made it easy, did they?

It was shit like this that Starfleet officers seemed utterly incapable of seeing, even when you drew a map to the issue and shined a bright spotlight on it.

Lauren recovered first, dipping her head in polite acknowledgment, though her voice was strained. “Thank you, Doctor.”

I kept my voice level. “We’ll beam down shortly, then. Two signatures.”

“Coordinates and quarantine protocols are standing by,” Kingsley said, her relief palpable.

The channel closed with a soft chime.

Lauren exhaled through her nose, shoulders dropping the tiniest fraction. A ghost of a smile touched her lips—grateful, determined, but edged with something sharper now. Awareness. Exposure.

I turned to the bridge.

“T’Maz, coordinate with the station for two beam-downs: Lauren and myself. Full medical lockdown protocols on our end until we’re cleared on theirs.”

“Aye, Captain,” T’Maz replied, already tapping commands into the console.

I glanced back at the viewscreen one last time. Gagarin IV rotated in silence below us—barren rock and dust, hosting the single station where a generation of engineered children had grown up knowing only filtered air, monitored interactions, and the constant hum of quarantine fields. No playgrounds. No visitors. No horizon beyond the duranium walls. Just each other, and the weight of what they were made to be.

Lauren stepped closer, close enough that I could feel the quiet heat of her resolve.

“Let’s go give them a future,” I said, low enough for only her to hear.

She met my eyes, the earlier flicker gone, replaced by steel.

“Yes,” she answered simply.

The turbolift doors hissed open behind us. We stepped inside together, the doors sealing with a soft pneumatic sigh. The lift began its descent toward the transporter room—and whatever waited on the other side of the quarantine line.

XXXXX

3 Days, 21 hours, 57 minutes remaining.

Darwin Genetic Research Station. Gagarin IV.

After the station dropped its shields and initiated transport, Lauren and I materialized in the main research bay of Darwin Station. The beam took noticeably longer than usual—the station’s transporters handling the full sequence, just as they requested, running us through a heavily customized, multi-layered biofilter engineered specifically for this nightmare quarantine scenario. Ever since the *Enterprise* crew’s desperate solution decades ago the facility had upgraded its transporter systems year after year, turning them into something specifically very different from the standard hardware in order to implement the solution or cure the *Enterprise* had created.

The filter probed us ruthlessly: scanning for pathogens, viral fragments, even dormant bacterial colonies that might slip past conventional medical checks. The station’s overriding terror wasn’t just the risk of releasing the children’s antibodies into the wider galaxy. Worse—far worse—was the possibility that exposing the children to a new disease organism could push those antibodies

to evolve further: deadlier, more virulent, more unpredictable. If the system detected anything active in our systems that it couldn't remove, the transport would abort mid-stream, dumping us back to the ship in a haze of red containment fields. We were clean, though. Perfect health. The beam resolved without interruption, depositing us in the sterile white glow of the research bay.

Dr. Kingsley stood waiting with three of her senior staff, their white lab coats crisp against the muted grays and blues of the station interior. The moment the transporter hum faded, she hurried forward, extending both hands.

"Admiral Gothic, Lauren—we are so honored to have you here," she said, voice bright with genuine excitement as she shook our hands in turn, grip firm and warm.

I returned the nod, polite but already impatient, the weight of the moment pressing harder than any quarantine protocol.

Lauren spoke before I could. Her voice trembled just enough to betray the depth beneath her composure.

"Can we meet them?"

"Of course—right this way!"

Kingsley led us across the bay, past humming diagnostic consoles and sealed sample lockers, up a short flight of metal stairs to a wide circular observation window framed in reinforced duranium. Thick transparent aluminum and layered electromagnetic shielding separated us from the other side—my suit's passive sensors confirmed the full isolation suite: independent life support, redundant power, zero atmospheric exchange. They had gone all out.

Beyond the window lay the communal recreation area, exactly as it had looked in the season 2 TNG episode: sparse, clinical, almost painfully austere by 24th-century standards. A holographic game table flickered idly in the back of the room; a low circular crystal table held a three-dimensional chess set, its pieces positioned mid-game.

As we took in the sight, Lauren and I shared a brief glance loaded with meaning. While the information we were given was comprehensive as to the medical side of all this, details were sparse on the children's living conditions and day-to-day life here at the station.

Directly in front of the window—close enough that their breath would have fogged the inner surface of a regular glass window—stood three young women. Two blondes and a brunette, all strikingly beautiful in that unnaturally symmetrical way genetic optimization could produce. In fact, to my shock, they looked like a young Megan Fox, Alexandra Daddario, and Natalie Dormer, which told me Q might have been messing with me yet again because what were the chances?

They wore simple tunics and loose pants in soft pastels—clothing clearly intended for adolescents, not the adults they had become. At twenty-one or twenty-two chronological years, the accelerated aging had left them physically in their late teens, but the mismatch only

underscored how trapped in time they'd been. Or how little control they had over even their own clothing choices.

They pressed their palms meaningfully to the transparent aluminum, wide eyes shining with tears, bright and welcoming, smiles radiant and unguarded. Their gazes locked on us—first Lauren, then me—and held. There was no shyness, no wariness. Just intense, almost reverent curiosity. They studied me the way teenagers back on Earth had once stared at rock stars or movie stars: awe mixed with recognition, like they'd seen my face in grainy holo-footage and never thought they'd get the chance to see me in real life.

Lauren and I stepped closer until we stood shoulder to shoulder, inches from the barrier, placing our hands on top of theirs. Our reflections overlaid theirs in the glass—faces mirrored across an unbreakable divide. Eye contact held steady, wordless. In that moment something unspoken passed between us: recognition, kinship, the shared scar of being engineered, of carrying potential that the galaxy both coveted and feared.

These were our people.

Lauren's hand found mine, fingers threading through in a quiet, steady grip. I squeezed back once. Of course, the girls noticed. A soft chorus of silent giggles rippled from behind the transparent aluminum—high, delighted, unmistakably youthful—like young women in any century who'd just caught the scent of gossip confirmed. They exchanged quick conspiratorial glances, eyes sparkling with shared mischief.

Behind the window, one of the blondes, tilted her head slightly, her smile widening as if she'd caught the exact same joke.

Lauren gasped, a small, surprised sound. Her eyes widened, flicking between me and the three faces pressed to the glass. I looked at her, brow furrowing, before the realization hit.

"The honor is ours, ladies," Lauren said aloud, voice bright with sudden laughter—clear, unrestrained, ringing off the sterile walls. "Yes, Gothic and I are lovers. But even my hypersexuality isn't enough for him. He has many more women who eagerly share his bed."

The three young women turned their attention back to me in perfect unison, expressions shifting from playful to intrigued, almost appraising. Their wide, beautiful eyes studied me with open curiosity, as though weighing rumors against the man standing before them.

"Ladies, please behave!" Dr. Kingsley interjected, cheeks flushing in that universal parental embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, Admiral—"

"No need, Doctor," I cut in gently but firmly. "They are adults under Federation law. They're free to express their sexuality. And given recent history, I will fight anyone in the Federation—with every resource and bit of power that I have—to ensure my fellow genetically enhanced can live their lives freely, as they choose. Free of restriction... or this quarantine."

Lauren's gaze darted between the window and me, listening to thoughts I couldn't hear. "They're asking me to thank you for your words, Gothic," she relayed softly. "They're grateful you're

even trying, no matter how this turns out.” A small pause, then: “They wish they could tell you themselves, but your mind is... unreachable by their telepathy, it seems.”

“Yes,” I said. “Many Betazoids have reported the same.”

“As we suspected,” Dr. Kingsley murmured. “We used Betazoid DNA as the template when we designed them.”

I forced a slow breath, reminding myself she was a scientist first. Precision was her native language; empathy, politeness, the softer edges of human speech—they often came second, or not at all, when she was deep in the work. She likely hadn’t even meant to sound callous. She probably hadn’t even heard how the single syllable landed—how it reduced living, breathing young women to lab notes, blueprints, intellectual property. To her, “designed” was simply accurate: factual, clinical, devoid of judgment.

To me, it was a gut-punch reminder of everything these girls had never been allowed to be: accidental, organic, loved without qualification. Born of intent instead of chance. Engineered instead of hoped for.

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat and kept my face neutral. She didn’t need to know how deeply the word cut. Not yet.

But I did.

“Is there an intercom function we can activate?” I asked. “So we can speak normally?”

Kingsley looked genuinely chagrined. “Unfortunately, no. When the initial outbreak occurred, we hastily converted the children’s living quarters into full quarantine isolation. Over the years we’ve made many improvements—life support, medical monitoring, shielding—but there was never a pressing need for an intercom. They are all highly telepathic, allowing two-way communication even with non-telepaths. At first they could not communicate with us any other way, now it’s become habit.”

Interesting.

Even full Betazoids leaned heavily on shared thought when among their own—spoken words almost secondary, a fallback for outsiders or formality. I remembered Lwaxana Troi’s gentle scolding of her daughter during one of her visits to the *Enterprise*: the way she’d tilted her head, voice rich with maternal exasperation, chiding Deanna for using spoken language with her, after so many years surrounded by non-telepaths.

These children, though, raised in isolation, spoke mind-to-mind with each other from a very young age, probably even earlier than a Betazoid would due to their enhancements. Telepathy wasn’t just a skill they practiced; it was their native tongue. No wonder the absence of an intercom hadn’t mattered to them. Words were the clumsy afterthought.

I glanced back at the window, at three sets of eyes that saw far more than expressions or posture. They didn’t need to hear me speak to know what I was thinking.

And that, more than anything, made the silence between us feel louder than ever.

“No worries, Doctor,” I said. “Lauren, I hope you don’t mind acting as our communication bridge.”

“Not at all, Gothic.”

I turned back to the window, meeting three pairs of expectant eyes. “May I ask your names?”

Lauren listened, then smiled faintly, pointing at each in turn. “Megan, Alexandra, and Natalie.”

Fucking Q and his chaos bullshit. The urge to facepalm was nearly overwhelming. Subtle, he was not. I swallowed it down and moved on.

“It is our honor to meet you, Megan, Alexandra, Natalie,” I said, voice steady and warm. “Would it be all right to meet your brothers as well? I understand there are four more of you.”

Lauren’s breath caught and nearly collapsed under the emotional feedback. The girls’ faces visibly crumpled—smiles vanishing, eyes filling with tear. They reached for each other instinctively, arms wrapping tight, bodies pressing together as though bracing against a fresh wound.

Dr. Kingsley spoke quietly beside me. “Their brothers... passed away.”

My face closed off. The air in the observation corridor suddenly felt thinner.

“I see,” I said. I turned fully to the window, looking directly at the three young women clinging to one another. “I’m so sorry for your loss, ladies.”

They nodded, tears streaming freely now, silent and shimmering against their cheeks. Their world had been so small—four brothers, three sisters, the same faces day after day, the same voices in their minds, the only people that truly understood. Losing more than half their family must have felt like the universe tearing itself in half.

“Perhaps we can discuss this further in my office,” Dr. Kingsley offered gently.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Perhaps that would be better.” I looked back at the girls, holding their gaze through the barrier. “Megan, Alexandra, Natalie—I promise you, I will do everything in my power to help you. Everything.”

They nodded again, small and fragile, but something in their eyes shifted—grief still raw, but threaded now with the faintest thread of hope. I felt ashamed at the lie I may have just told them.

Lauren’s fingers tightened in mine once more.

We turned away from the window together, following Dr. Kingsley down the corridor. Behind us, three genetically enhanced young women watched us go—telepathic, quarantined, cut off and orphaned from virtually the entire universe of humanoid races—yet still reaching, still hoping.

I felt the weight of that gaze on my back long after the door hissed shut. It was a heavy burden but one that I would weather with grace.

XXXXX

3 Days, 20 hours, 37 minutes remaining.

“What happened, doctor?” I asked with a clipped tone. Lauren having chosen to continue having a conversation with the girls. They were young adults and women, by every measure, but given their sheltered existence, ‘girls’ just fit better in my opinion.

Dr. Kingsley sat behind her desk, her shoulders slumped. She sighed before she replied.

“Since the initial outbreak, the children have been in quarantined isolation for nearly 9 years. Physically isolated from everyone, but each other. We interacted with them through quarantine suits, but it’s just not the same,” she began. “We have made many improvements over the years to the quarantine we hastily implemented all those years ago, but there have been two containment breaches in the years since. Power failures, malfunctions, accidents. In one of those breaches five of our people were infected and subsequently died, the biological parents of some of the boys.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “As I understand it, the *Enterprise* came up with a solution utilizing the transporter. They healed you and your people.”

She nodded, as if frustrated at what she was about to tell me.

“The people of the *Enterprise* came up with an ingenious solution, but for obvious reasons we never implemented that solution with our own systems. Chief O’Brien, as we have come to realize, is a very skilled transporter chief. We simulated it virtually many times, but when it came time to actually implement that transporter solution, we failed. The transporter killed three of the five infected when we tried to cure them. Their patterns became warped and distorted. We desperately tried to fix the problem, but we simply ran out of time. What Chief O’Brien managed to do was half science, half art, we found out.”

She paused as if reliving those painful memories.

“The boys blamed themselves for the deaths. We tried over and over again to tell them it was not their faults, but the loss, coupled with years of isolation, potentially a lifetime more if it with no end in sight, they...they took their own lives.”

I let her collect herself, jaw tight. My thoughts raced behind the calm mask I kept in place. How had this been buried so deeply? The Federation had classified it at the highest levels, no doubt—too embarrassing, too damning. A public relations disaster wrapped in biohazard protocols. I couldn’t even blame them for the secrecy. But I could blame them for the failure. For letting children bear the weight of adult mistakes.

I couldn’t judge the boys’ choice, either. I’d seen it before—during the Occupation, friends and strangers alike choosing a quick end over endless suffering. Despair had driven them, yes, but so had dignity. A final act of agency in a life stripped of every other freedom. Breathing had become a weapon they never asked for. Ending it was, in their minds, mercy—for themselves, for everyone else.

May the Prophets, Q, or whatever gods they believed in grant them peace in the next life, I prayed silently, the words as familiar as breathing.

“The girls were devastated,” she said quietly. “We feared we’d lose them too. Then... something changed. You happened.”

I raised an eyebrow, waiting.

“You were found. You began making a name for yourself—out there, in the galaxy. Suddenly they weren’t alone. Another genetically engineered person—an Augment—using superior abilities to make things better, not worse. You became a hero to the Bajorans... and to them. With your recent accomplishments these last few months, they’ve been downright smug about it. Like they were the first to see your greatness and everyone else was late to the party.”

I blinked, genuinely surprised. “Well... I’m glad—I’m happy to hear I became someone they looked up to.”

“You have. Truly.” She looked down at her hands. “Even to me. Your interviews forced me—and my researchers—to rethink a lot of things. Including our own work.”

I leaned forward slightly. “If you’ve watched those interviews, Doctor, you can probably guess my mixed feelings about this place. About what you’ve done here.”

She nodded once, slow and weary.

“Genetic enhancement—beyond curing disease or repairing defects—is a crime in the Federation,” I continued. “Most people like Lauren were engineered as children by their parents. The parents face prison time. The children—who had no say—carry the stigma for life. Limited careers, constant surveillance, sometimes outright imprisonment. Institutionalization.”

The word tasted bitter.

“Our research is sanctioned and supported by the Federation,” she pointed out, almost reflexively.

I gave a short, humorless laugh. “The oldest justification in the book: illegal for everyone else, but not for the government. Sentients have been using that excuse since the first cave council decided the rules didn’t apply to them.”

Kingsley’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t interrupt.

“I don’t support the ban on genetic engineering,” she said finally. “I never have. But I’m just a researcher. We’re not a geneticist on some backwater world with only a passing understanding of the complexities of the human genome. We’re doing it right—methodically, ethically within our framework. If the law ever changes, we’ll have the science and the methodology ready to guide humanity’s next step. To shepherd in the next evolution of humanity.”

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. I had been doing a lot of that lately.

“Part of me agrees with the ambition, Doctor. I’m not Khan. I don’t want a new Eugenics War or an über-class lording superiority over baselines, though that’s what a lot of people fear. But set aside the immune-system catastrophe you ‘designed’—your word—that’s indirectly killing everyone around them. Let’s assume we fix that. What future do your children have in the Federation? Do they stay here forever as research subjects? What if they want to leave, will the Federation even allow it? Have you thought that far ahead?”

She looked away, conflicted, silent.

I pressed gently. “I know you might not have answers. But recent history doesn’t inspire confidence. The Federation’s track record with the genetically enhanced is abysmal. A byproduct of Lauren’s enhancements made her hypersexual from a very young age. When she reached adulthood, her institutionalization should have ended. It didn’t. I had to fight—hard—to get her released. What kind of life waits for telepathic, telekinetic young women? Even if the Federation lets them go, what about the Klingons? The Romulans? The Cardassians? The Ferengi?”

“I’m just a scientist,” she said softly. “I don’t know the answers to those questions. They’re our children, though. We want the best for them. If they wished to leave, we would never stop them. We’d do everything in our power to help them succeed. Like any good parent.”

“That makes me happy to hear and I hope you’ll remember that if we are successful,” I said, before the Star Trek fan in me demanded an answer. “Just out of curiosity, when you say you’re their ‘parents’, what do you mean? Is that just you were their creators, therefore you consider yourself their parents, or the more traditional kind of parents?”

“Our research team provided the sperm and the eggs necessary to create them. The genetic engineering we provided was done in a controlled setting, eggs were fertilized, and then implanted. I carried Megan naturally to term, for example.”

“Why do that?” I asked with intense curiosity. “You could have better controlled the test conditions without all that.”

“Regardless of how they were created, they are still our children, and we wished to bring them to term naturally,” she answered. “They are the best of us, but they are still our children and we love them.”

“That’s the right answer, doctor. Thank you for indulging me,” I said, my concerns largely alleviated despite her poor choice of words at times. I shifted gears, leaning in. “Let’s focus on the immediate problem. I know you’ve lived with this for years, but due to events I can’t share, there is extreme urgency. We need to do everything—everything—we’ve been afraid to try before. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Kingsley searched my eyes, alarm flickering behind the exhaustion.

“What’s the cause of this urgency? You have to give me something. Is it the Hur’q? I’ve read the reports on their genetic experiments.”

“I can’t say more than this: it’s life and death. You and your children are at grave risk. The only way to eliminate that risk is to succeed. Now.”

She swallowed, then nodded slowly.

“I have three Emergency Medical Holograms aboard my ship,” I continued. “They have full access to my physiology—every scan, every sample. My vessel’s research capabilities rival anything on a Federation starbase and my technology often exceeds that which is available even in the Federation. We’re going to combine everything we have and find a solution together. Whatever it takes.”

Her eyes filled, gratitude warring with fear. “Thank you, Admiral. Thank you.”

I stood, offering a small, tired smile. “Don’t thank me yet. We haven’t won.”

But as I turned toward the door, the weight in my chest shifted—just a fraction. Not hope, exactly. Determination.

And that would have to be enough for now.

XXXXX

3 Days, 13 hours, 16 minutes remaining.

The infirmary aboard *Temptress* hummed with the low, steady pulse of medical equipment—consoles flickering, hyposprays hissing in the background. I sat in Dr. Gadot’s office, T’Maz to my left, Lauren close on my right, her arms crossed tight with barely contained urgency.

“It’s been six hours, Doctor,” I said. “What can you tell me from your preliminary review of Dr. Kingsley’s work?”

Dr. Gadot—my preferred spokesperson among the EMH cadre, her light Israeli accent intact from the original template because, yes, it was super sexy—turned from the holographic display where she’d been conferring remotely with Kingsley’s team before our meeting. Darwin Station’s holomitters couldn’t handle the full complexity of our Mark I variants, so remote work it was. We’d offered to beam them aboard; they’d politely declined, preferring to work with their own familiar systems.

“Dr. Kingsley and her team are extraordinarily skilled geneticists,” Gadot began, voice warm but precise. “What they accomplished with these children is remarkable—borderline miraculous. If their work weren’t buried under layers of classification, they would be shoe ins for the Daystrom Prize. Multiple times over.”

“Wonderful. Good for them,” I cut in, impatience edging my tone. “Now what?”

Gadot didn’t flinch. “Sir, the background is necessary to grasp the full scope—and the path to a solution. These enhancements were engineered over two decades ago. Even by today’s standards—after twenty years of progress in genetic engineering—their techniques remain decades ahead of their time, perhaps more. Many of the methodologies are unknown to mainstream Federation science. They almost certainly derive from recovered technology or the

genome of a far more advanced species. From our discussions with Dr. Kingsley's people, it's clear their own understanding of the underlying principles is incomplete. They didn't arrive at this knowledge through natural, measured discovery."

I glanced at T'Maz. She met my eyes with that calm, unflinching Vulcan steadiness. Could this be more Section 31 bullshit? Most likely.

"Color me not even a little surprised, Doctor," I muttered.

So many Star Trek episodes preached Federation enlightenment: find ancient, godlike tech from a long-dead race, then nobly refuse to touch it or study it or reverse engineer it. Then keep it locked away from everyone, even destroy it. Yet here we were—some shadowy factions of the Federation government perfectly willing to plunder ultra-advanced alien science in pursuit of illegal genetic supremacy. Hypocrisy wasn't a bug; it was policy.

Lauren shifted beside me, voice low and sharp. "Federation hypocrisy aside, I'm more concerned with finding a solution to the problem at hand, Doctor."

Gadot nodded, gesturing to the holo-display where genetic sequences spiraled in luminous blue. "The children were designed with an extraordinarily aggressive immune system. Much of that capability stems from the alien-derived science and the genetic template they accessed. A standard immune response—passive, natural—would generate antibodies after exposure to the Thelusian flu, inoculating *the individual* permanently against future infection, assuming they survived the initial infection. That alone would be remarkable on its own, our bodies are miraculous."

She paused, letting the data scroll. "But Dr. Kingsley's team pushed further. Their engineered response was active, predatory. The antibodies didn't merely protect the host—they sought out and altered the virus in the environment itself. Not destruction in the literal sense, but a precise rewriting of the pathogen's genetic code to render it harmless. The result: permanent immunity not just for the individual, but for all others of their kind—here, their siblings. The antibodies are shared in the air itself, each new individual passing along the immunity to the others of their race."

Lauren leaned forward. "So one exposure, one person generating the antibodies, would eradicate the airborne threat and confer immunity to the entire group given time and exposure."

"Exactly," Gadot said, eyes alight. "Fascinating, isn't it? The template race—whether by natural evolution or deliberate genetic engineering themselves—possessed an immune system so advanced that their entire species functioned as a collective biological firewall. Every new pathogen encountered by even a single member of their race triggered novel antibodies, which were then disseminated to the whole population like a genetic patch update. In time, a species-wide immunity, forever. Normal humans—and we suspect most known humanoid species—are genetically too primitive to interface safely with these antibodies. Instead of protection, the altered antibodies rewrite human DNA in unintended ways: inoculating against Thelusian flu, yes, but also triggering runaway acceleration of the aging process. Humanoid DNA is self-

replicating, so in some ways, our DNA already contains the mechanism by which this species-wide immunity would function.”

Q, help me. Had Dr. Kingsley and her people been given Progenitor DNA to study?

I exhaled slowly, the pieces settling into a disturbing pattern. “A race like that would be an existential threat to other races—or a god—to anyone not on their level. That implies isolation of some kind or there being no other races around.”

Gadot inclined her head. “Precisely. And if the Federation has been tampering with Progenitor DNA without realizing it... well. That would explain a great many things.”

I didn’t respond aloud. Section 31 had used me for plenty of dirty work, but there were depths even they didn’t share. Progenitors? Ancient seeding races? If Kingsley’s team had stumbled onto or been given that kind of genome, knowingly or not, the quarantine wasn’t just about public safety. It was containment of something that could rewrite what it meant to be human. It also somewhat explained why every humanoid race was at risk as the Progenitors had been the start of them all.

Lauren’s voice cut through my thoughts. “So how do we fix it? How do we neutralize the antibodies without killing the children or turning the rest of us into octogenarians overnight?”

The doctor sat opposite me, hologram steady but eyes troubled. T’Maz remained at my left, a silent sentinel; Lauren sat rigid beside me, hands clenched in her lap.

Gadot’s expression sobered. “That is the question we’re trying to answer, but luckily we have some idea how to go about it. The good news: the mechanism is understood, at least in principle. The bad news: reversal demands threading an impossibly fine needle—suppressing the aggressive rewrite function while preserving protective immunity...and not killing them. Simulations are running now. The irony is profound: if these children represented an entire species rather than a subspecies derived from just seven individuals, their DNA would represent the pinnacle of the human genome as we currently envision it—still recognizably human, yet vastly superior. A race virtually free of disease if at least one member of it survived the initial exposure.”

“You mentioned ideas, Doctor,” I pressed.

“Dr. Kingsley’s team has been slowly groping toward a solution for almost a decade—essentially regressing the immune system to a passive state—but without a viable target genetic template. They risk killing the children in the attempt. Your DNA, however...” She paused, choosing her words. “Your DNA might be the template that they have been blindly groping for in the dark. A robust immune system that doesn’t harm others, which only protects the person. An evolutionary sidestep, rather than an outright regression that would almost certainly kill them.”

It sounded promising. Too promising. The countdown in my HUD mocked me: 3 days, 12 hours. Not nearly enough time.

“I know you’ve had limited time to study this or collaborate with Kingsley,” I said. “I’m sorry to demand it, but I need a time estimate. How long to make that...*sidestep*?”

Gadot leaned back, frustration etching her features—rare for an EMH, especially one I’d coded for absolute loyalty. “Captain, it’s not just identifying the target to reach, which we believe is your DNA, though calling it a guess would be more accurate, it’s how to safely get there in the first place. How do we change them at the genetic level and yet keep them alive?” she replied. “We simply don’t know enough yet.”

I raised my hand. “I ask again, based on the imperfect knowledge you have right now, assuming your ‘guesses’ are correct, how long do you believe it would take to render the children safe to interact freely with other humanoids?” I asked. “I know what I’m asking is unfair. What is your best guess?”

“With unlimited resources, a dedicated specialist team, and direct continued access to your genome for refined modeling... optimistically, ten to fifteen years. We are talking about fundamentally changing a new subspecies of humanity, into yet another new subspecies of humanity, both of which are future iterations of the human genome we are unlikely to ever reach naturally and barely understand.”

I closed my eyes, exhaled fully. The number landed like a death sentence.

“Thank you for your candor,” I said quietly. “We do *not* have ten to fifteen years.”

I glanced meaningfully at T’Maz. She returned the look without expression—aware of the Section 31 deadline counting down inexorably. Lauren opened her mouth to protest; I raised a hand, silencing her. She subsided, jaw tight.

“Let me pose a hypothetical, Doctor. How would my body—and my immune system—respond to direct exposure to the children’s antibodies?”

Gadot’s mouth fell open. “Captain, I must strongly advise against—”

“I appreciate your concern for me. Your best guess,” I demanded. “That’s an order.”

She nodded sharply before her holographic form froze—unnaturally still, a marble statue caught mid-breath. Natasha’s urgent ping flashed across my HUD: sickbay’s utilization of the ship’s total processing capacity had spiked exponentially and was only increasing, requesting more and more processing power from my assets throughout this universe then reaching into the other dimensions I had computer processing power. I authorized the draw without hesitation.

Minutes stretched. The infirmary air grew warmer, life support stuttering as the ship’s total computational power was being fully utilized.

Dr. Gadot’s eyes refocused. Her posture eased, voice measured but uncertain. “Your genome—altered by anaphasic exposure in the *Walking Dead* universe—actively incorporates beneficial adaptations while rejecting the rest. Simulations indicate it would accept the antibodies as useful: incorporating them to confer permanent immunity against the Thelusian flu and close derivatives. An acute onset of accelerated aging appears highly unlikely. What we cannot predict

is whether your adaptive DNA would view the children's antibody-induced changes as compatible—perhaps it would integrate the changes fully and stop, perhaps it would effectively remake you into a new member of their subspecies with the same aggressive immune system template that is already baked into the antibodies. We just don't know and every simulation I've run is inconclusive at best.”

“In which case I would be a carrier and would need to quarantine for the rest of my life.”

“At a minimum,” she continued, grimly. “Given how many more pathogens you have been exposed to over your life in multiple dimensions and time periods, the inoculations and vaccines you've been given, there is no way to tell what your immune system might do or what cocktail of antibodies you would release if your immune system was changed into this more aggressive variant. Accelerated aging might be a kindness compared with the slow unraveling of someone's entire genetic structure.”

I closed my eyes again. My thoughts raced in tight circles.

Unlike the children, my DNA hadn't been sculpted by scientists groping in the dark as they played with advanced alien science and an even more dangerous alien genome they barely understood. God-like beings had rewritten me—and not in the scientific way. I had long suspected that beings of a certain power level could simply impose their will directly on reality itself, goal-first rather than step-by-step instructions and reality simply complied, making it happen. That was the traditional definition of a God's power, omnipotence. That made my adaptations more holistic, more forgiving, superior, even if this was Progenitor DNA. Or so I hoped. Would my genome recognize the children's antibodies as a strength worth keeping then stop? Or would it go further? Was the risk to myself worth it—for strangers I'd met only hours ago?

I just didn't know. And that terrified me more than the deadline. That uncertainty didn't make me a bad person, just a person.

“Lauren,” I said softly, “I'd like to speak to Doctor Gadot privately. Please excuse us.”

“Gothic, no—”

“Please.”

She searched my face only to see my unwavering resolve, eyes fierce with worry, then nodded once and left. The door hissed shut behind her.

I turned to Gadot. “Doctor, you are not to share this with anyone outside your sisters. In a little over three days and twelve hours, Section 31 will lock down this station, sever all external communications, and then overload the station's fusion reactor. Everyone aboard will die. That is the hard deadline we're facing—not ten to fifteen years, but three days and twelve hours. I need radical, out-of-the-box solutions. I want to try to save these children. Do you understand?”

Her holographic eyes widened fractionally. “I do, Captain.”

“Good. Whatever it takes, whatever resources you need, you’ll have it. Even the alien science and technology I have been keeping close to my chest. Go.”

The infirmary lights dipped as another simulation cycle kicked in, drawing more processing power. Six hours in, and the shape of the monster was finally clear.

But we would fight it.

For the children behind the glass, faces pressed to the barrier, hoping.

For Lauren, who carried the same scars.

For every augment who’d ever been told their existence was a mistake.

We would fight. And we would win.

XXXXX

Main Shuttle Bay.

“Huh,” B’Elanna Torres, chief engineer of the *Flighty Temptress* eloquently uttered, sounding bewildered, as she stared up into the guts of the Danube-class Runabout she was studying on the orders of her boss.

“What ‘huh’?” Neela asked distractedly and perhaps nearly as eloquently as her friend, as she lied on her back right next to B’Elanna, working side-by-side in narrow confines in the guts of the ship. A signal pathway diagnostic tool in hand, not even pausing as she continued her work with the happy little smile of an engineer enjoying her work, a person doing what they loved to do.

“The power transfer conduits, the way the ship’s electromagnetic emissions are hidden by the cloaking device, and a hundred other little ways the cloaking device is integrating with this ship’s systems,” she answered.

“So, a very skilled engineer in Starfleet Intelligence did the work,” Neela stated. “Good for them.”

“No, no! It’s a thousand times worse than that!” B’Elanna replied hotly, her tone filled with frustration. “This is not a case of this ship just having a Klingon cloaking device shoehorned into the Runabout, this ship is essentially an entirely new Danube-class variant designed from the fucking start with a cloaking device in mind. There is just no other way the integration would be this seamless, this perfect, otherwise. In fact, this cloaking device is practically Klingon in name only, made to look like their technology, but it’s been significantly improved with Federation scientific principles and fabrication methods that make it probably 30% more effective than the original Klingon design. The original design team of the Danube-class had to be involved.”

“Why does that surprise you?” Neela asked, as her tool continued to hum.

“Why? What do you mean why?!” B’Elanna asked. “The Treaty of Algeron specifically prohibits the Federation from using cloaking technology in their ships and this cloaking device

and this ship itself were seemingly purpose built with cloaking in mind! It's practically got a Federation flag printed on the side of it!"

Now that caused Neela to stop her work as she turned to stare at B'Elanna for a long moment, before she practically exploded with laughter.

"Oh, Prophets, your face!" Neela gasped and wheezed in laughter, wiping at her eyes with the back of her wrist. "You're going to make me pee myself!"

"This isn't funny, Neela!" B'Elanna hissed, cheeks flushing darker. "You don't build an entire class variant around a cloaking device for a one-off prototype. You do it because you intend to produce them. Hundreds of them. Thousands maybe, given the smaller size and lower resource demands to build them. And they're probably out there right now, running black ops in direct violation of the treaty that's supposed to keep the peace with the Romulans."

Neela's laughter tapered off slowly. She sat up as much as the confined space allowed, shoulders still shaking, but her expression sobered as she met B'Elanna's eyes.

"Sometimes I forget you were raised in the Federation. Maybe it's the cranial ridges," she joked quietly. "Starfleet Academy dropout or not, you still wear those rose-colored glasses. Of course they have cloaked ships. Probably less than a hundred, probably not thousands; that would be much harder to hide. Of course they violate the treaty, probably daily, if they can get away with it. The Federation is a multi-system, multi-species polity that's lasted for centuries. No great power survives that long without bending—or breaking—the rules when survival demands it. Ideals are beautiful. They're also a luxury, especially when your enemies only pay lip service to the Treaty they signed. The Romulans probably know all about it because it's *exactly* what they'd do in our place."

"That's not the Federation," B'Elanna said, voice low, almost pleading.

"Of course it is, B'Elanna," Neela replied, no malice, just tired certainty. "If Federation ideals were unbreakable, my people wouldn't have endured fifty years of Cardassian occupation. Chancellor Gorkon wouldn't have been assassinated with Federation complicity. Dozens of species wouldn't have been left to die under the Prime Directive while Starfleet watched from orbit. And the Federation wouldn't have created genetically engineered children of their own either. They do it better than most—cleaner, quieter, with more paperwork and moral debate—but they still do it. That's why Gothic aligns with them more than anyone else. They're better than most, they try at least. He sees the Federation for what it is and helps anyway. But he doesn't pretend they're saints or that everything they do is perfect and right."

B'Elanna stared at the deck plating between them, the hum of the runabout's idling systems filling the silence.

"I just... always thought we were better than that," she said finally, almost to herself. "Better than the Klingons and all the rest."

Neela studied her friend's face, then reached out and squeezed B'Elanna's shoulder—firm, grounding.

“Maybe that’s the problem,” she said gently. “You Federation types wear those rose-colored glasses so long they start to feel like reality. Gothic’s got a bunch of weird old-Earth idioms, doesn’t he, but that one’s dead-on. Take them off from time-to-time. You’ll see that things look a little different than you thought. Doesn’t mean the Federation’s evil or full of liars and murderers, or as bad as the Cardassians because they don’t fully live up to their ideals. It just means they’re people—flawed, pragmatic, and yet still worth fighting for. Maybe next time Gothic does something you think is illegal or wrong, you’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe you’ll see he’s willing to help, even while being selfish at times and more focused on his own life and happiness. He wouldn’t have come to Kessik IV’s aid or Earth’s or Bajor’s aid if he was fully uncaring of others and only concerned with having amazing group sex and orgies and getting rich.”

B’Elanna exhaled, a small, shaky sound, laughing despite herself. “He’s got such strange idioms, doesn’t he?”

Neela grinned. “He really does. But he’s a great man. And maybe this ship—this beautiful, treaty-breaking, artfully engineered ship—is the thing that finally cracked your glasses a little.”

B’Elanna managed a half-smile, wry and reluctant. “Maybe it did.”

Neela gave her shoulder another squeeze, then settled back onto her back, probe humming to life again. “If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here. Okay?”

“Thanks, Neela. You’re a good friend.”

“And an even better engineer,” Neela shot back with a wink. “Now let’s get back to work before this ship decides to suddenly self-destruct to protect its illegal secrets.”

B’Elanna snorted, the tension easing from her shoulders. She rolled back into position, tricorder stylus already moving again.

The runabout’s systems thrummed around them—quiet, efficient, ridiculously illegal.

And for the first time, B’Elanna wasn’t entirely sure she minded.

XXXXX

0 Days, 12 Hours Remaining.

Sickbay.

The infirmary felt smaller than it had earlier—air thick with recycled ozone and the low, constant thrum of medical equipment. I sat slumped on the edge of the biobed, perhaps a little paler than normal. Gadot stood across from me, hologram flickering ever so slightly under the strain of continuous high-priority processing.

“Doctor, you’ve taken liters of blood, spinal fluid, and bone marrow. I’ve spent hours lying on a biobed while being poked and prodded within an inch of my life,” I said. “We’ve run out of time. What do you have for me?”

Gadot's expression fractured—frustration, guilt, and something deeper warring across her features. She clasped her hands in front of her, “There's just no way to find a solution this quickly. They've worked themselves to collapse based on your vague warning; half are asleep at their consoles right now. There are too many unknowns, too many cascading variables. The antibody interaction with your physiology is adaptive in ways we can't fully model yet. If we had months—years, even—I believe we could isolate a safe epigenetic trigger. But days? Captain... we've failed you.”

I sighed, the sound loud in the room.

“Would Section 31 be willing to grant us more time?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” I answered tiredly. “They're committed to this course given the infiltration. Not even my relationship with them—or my usefulness—is going to buy us any more time.”

I rubbed my face in defeat, the weight of it settling over me.

“I'm sorry, Captain,” Dr. Gadot whispered, voice cracking in a way no hologram should manage. “I'm sorry we couldn't find a way. We exist to serve you, and we—”

She couldn't meet my eyes. I imagined that was the face you made when your Creator asked you for help and you failed him.

I reached across the space between us and took her hand. The haptic emitters made it feel real—warm, silky soft yet solid, trembling just slightly. She looked up, startled, eyes shimmering with unshed tears that couldn't fall.

“There is nothing to apologize for,” I said gently. “You and your sisters were given an impossible task on an impossible deadline. Dr. Kingsley and her people had nearly a decade and barely scratched the surface. You've made more progress in a handful of days than they managed in years. Be proud of that. I know I am.”

A single tear tracked down her cheek—perfect, holographic, heartbreaking. She smiled through it, wide and genuine, the kind of smile that belonged to someone who'd just been given absolution by her God.

“We exist to serve the Creator in all things,” she said softly, reverently.

I nodded in acceptance, even as her words surprised me. They had never expressed such a sentiment before. Had Tyr been speaking to my other creations?

The words landed like a quiet thunderclap. I blinked, surprised. They'd never framed their loyalty in those terms before—never called me Creator so openly. Had Tyr been speaking to them? Or had the weight of this moment simply stripped away the last layer of programmed restraint?

I squeezed her hand once, then let go. “I have some bad news to deliver then,” I said, already dreading the next conversation.

Gadot straightened, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand—a human gesture she’d learned from observation. Her voice steadied, though the shine in her eyes remained.

“Whatever you decide... we will stand with you. All of us.”

The biobed monitors beeped softly in the background, indifferent to the moment. Outside the infirmary doors, the station waited—children behind glass, Section 31’s clock ticking down, and one exhausted man trying to decide how many more impossible choices he could make before the galaxy made one for him.

I stood slowly, joints protesting. “Let’s go find Lauren. She deserves to hear this from me.”

Gadot nodded once, hologram flickering back to full brightness.

“Lead on, Creator.”

The word hung between us—quiet, loaded, and strangely comforting in the face of everything we were about to lose.

XXXXX

The transporter beam released us onto the sterile platform directly outside the observation window. Lauren materialized a half-step behind me, her posture straight but her breathing still quick from the last few days. Through the wide circular window ahead, three familiar faces waited—the familiar faces of Megan Fox, Alexandra Daddario, and Natalie Dormer—pressed close to the transparent aluminum, their smiles bright and unguarded. They looked almost luminous under the soft quarantine lighting, eyes wide with anticipation, as though they’d been counting the seconds until we returned.

I stopped short, pulse kicking up a notch. What was the exact range of their telepathy? Had they sensed my intention to beam back the moment T’Maz initiated the transport cycle? Or earlier—when I’d made the decision in the infirmary? How much had they already plucked from the edges of unprotected minds?

Section 31 operatives like T’Maz received years of specialized resistance training to telepathy—mental shields, cognitive misdirection, compartmentalization drills designed to blunt even strong Betazoid-level intrusion. It wasn’t foolproof, but it was comprehensive enough to safeguard operational secrets. Lauren had no such conditioning. Her thoughts were an open channel—raw, emotional, unguarded. If the girls had brushed against her mind during our last visit, they could have caught fragments: worry, determination, flashes of the deadline ticking down. Worse—they might have glimpsed the reactor overload contingency from T’Maz, the quiet certainty that Section 31 would destroy this station rather than let the augment “problem” escape containment or fall into the hands of its enemies.

I hadn’t wanted Lauren in the room when I briefed Gadot about what was coming precisely because of this vulnerability. One stray thought, one unguarded surge of fear or hope, and the children could know everything. They were already isolated, already grieving their brothers—

giving them foreknowledge of their own execution by the same Federation that had created them would be cruelty on top of cruelty.

I needed to fix that. T'Maz would have to start basic telepathic resistance drills with Lauren and Neela immediately—nothing advanced, just enough to shield surface thoughts and build mental walls. It was impractical and dangerous to keep my crew completely in the dark forever, about all things; the future was accelerating toward us. The Founders were already gathering intelligence. The Dominion War loomed closer every day—closer than the official canon timeline suggested—and secrets like this would only grow more dangerous as the galaxy edged toward open conflict.

Lauren stepped up beside me, close enough that her shoulder brushed mine. She didn't speak, but her presence was steady, grounding. Behind the glass, Megan tilted her head slightly, smile softening as if she'd caught the edge of my concern. Alexandra's eyes flicked between us, curious and warm. Natalie pressed her palm flat to the barrier, a silent welcome.

I forced my expression neutral and stepped forward, meeting their gazes through the unbreakable divide.

Whatever they knew—or thought they knew—we were here now.

“Ladies,” I said, stepping closer to the observation window, “you are as beautiful as ever. A feast for these tired eyes.”

And I meant every word. The three young women—Megan, Alexandra, Natalie—stood shoulder to shoulder behind the transparent aluminum, radiant under the soft quarantine lights. Lauren had clearly replicated age-appropriate clothing for them: simple but flattering tunics and pants in soft jewel tones that actually fit their twenty-something bodies instead of the adolescent hand-me-downs they'd been given by these socially awkward and conservative scientists. The effect was striking—elegant, confident, and undeniably sexy, like the hottest actresses of my old Earth era had stepped out of a red-carpet archive and into a Star Trek quarantine ward.

Somewhere in the ether, I could practically hear the ghosts of my old squad—roughneck soldiers I'd fought and bled with in another dimension—hooting and hollering like a pack of rowdy frat brothers at a strip club. Their phantom catcalls echoed in my skull, equal parts nostalgia and mortification.

My gaze flicked to Lauren. She was already giggling, shoulders shaking, clearly in the middle of a telepathic conversation with the girls on the other side of the glass.

“I know, right?” she said aloud, voice bright with mischief. “It's just not fair. He's the total package for us genetically engineered girls.” She shot me a wink that sent a cold spike of alarm straight down my spine. “In fact... I've got a little gift for you three.”

A heartbeat. Two.

The girls practically swooned in unison—knees softening, hands fluttering to their chests or pressing against the barrier for support. Their faces flushed vivid crimson, blushes climbing from

collarbones to hairlines. They couldn't hold my gaze for more than a second at a time now—darting little glances, then looking away, lips parted, breathing heavier, eyes wide with a mix of delight, embarrassment, and something dangerously close to awe.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed, long and tired.

“Lauren,” I said, voice flat with resignation, “what in the actual hell did you just share with them?”

She turned back to the window, grin unrepentant, looking proud even. “They were curious. So I showed them how I lost my virginity to you.” She shrugged one shoulder, casual as if she'd just described a favorite holonovel. “Epic, right?”

The girls' blushes deepened to near-scarlet. One—Megan—covered her mouth with both hands, shoulders shaking with silent laughter. Alexandra bit her lip hard enough to leave a mark. Natalie pressed her forehead to the glass, eyes squeezed shut, still smiling like she'd been handed the galaxy's best secret.

I cleared my throat. Twice.

“Right,” I managed, forcing my expression neutral while every fiber of my being screamed for a temporal reset button. “We're... definitely going to talk about boundaries later.”

Lauren laughed outright—bright, delighted, utterly shameless.

Behind the window, three genetically enhanced young women who'd spent their entire lives in isolation stared at me with new, wide-eyed fascination.

And somewhere, in whatever dimension my old squad was haunting, I swear I heard them start a slow clap.

The observation corridor felt colder than before, though I knew that was only in my head. I stepped forward until I was inches from the transparent aluminum, Lauren silent at my side. Through the window, Megan, Alexandra, and Natalie watched me—smiles fading as they read something in my posture, my eyes.

“Ladies,” I began, voice low, “I have some bad news.”

I paused, letting the words settle. Their expressions shifted—hope dimming, replaced by quiet understanding.

“We've made some, but not meaningful progress on a solution to end your quarantine. I've given Dr. Kingsley and her team all the time I could—offered my own body for tests, scans, samples, the resources of my ship and my personal doctors—but it's going to take far longer than we have. I've been away from Bajor too long already. I have to return.” I swallowed. “I'm hopeful a breakthrough will come in time, even without my direct involvement. I promise you—I will do everything in my power to make it happen.”

Part of me wanted to look away, ashamed of the half-truth, of the selfishness that kept me from saying the rest: that in twelve hours this station would become a fireball, and they with it.

Another part—the soldier part—knew I owed them this much. I had held dying friends in my arms before, stared unblinkingly into eyes that knew the end was coming. Being present for the truth was the least I could give them.

I'd been called a hero a lot lately. I'd smiled and accepted the praise, but I knew better. Heroes were Picard walking into certain death to save strangers, or the men and women of Kessik IV facing the Hur'q knowing they couldn't possibly win, only delay them, and only for a handful of minutes at best.

Heroes, true heroes, died for others without hesitation. Me? I'd rather vaporize myself in an instant than spend a lifetime locked in quarantine—even if that lifetime had only hours left before the same explosion took me anyway from this great adventure in the stars. I wasn't ready for this all to end.

From the moment I awoke in this universe, I had accepted that I might die in the wars to come—Klingon blades, Dominion Jem'Hadar, whatever fresh hell the timeline threw at me. That acceptance was cold, pragmatic, almost comforting in its certainty. But it had never extended to reckless choices I made myself. Never to gambling my freedom, my future, my very breath on a long-shot hope that might chain me irrevocably and worse than any enemy ever could.

Lauren stood very still beside me. Her face changed—listening, receiving. My gaze stayed locked on Megan's.

“We appreciate you trying, Gothic,” Lauren said softly, repeating their words. “We appreciate everything you and your crew have done. Your life—your contributions to this galaxy—have been an inspiration to my sisters and me. You gave us hope that we too could live a life worth living... even if our own kind, the very people who created us, feared and hated us for sins committed centuries before we were even born.”

Something in her tone—sadness, regret, resigned peace—made me search each of their faces. I'd seen that look too many times: dying soldiers who welcomed a miracle but knew none was coming. The look of men who had made their peace with the inevitable.

“You know, don't you?” I asked quietly.

Three small, synchronized nods.

I'd thought I'd been careful—careful with my words, my posture, the careful blankness I kept on my face as much as I could. But perhaps I shouldn't have warned Dr. Kingsley. Lauren's mind was also wide open, unguarded, and her non-telepathic siblings back at the Institute had always been annoyingly perceptive: reading volumes from a single micro-expression, a hesitation in breath, the slightest shift in tone, an ill-chosen word or turn of phrase. They'd leap to the right conclusion from the smallest breadcrumb.

These three had an entirely new dimension to draw from. Telepathy wasn't just insight; it was intimacy—raw, unfiltered access to thought, intent, and process. They didn't need breadcrumbs. They felt the shape of the truth before the words even formed. Of course they knew.

The realization settled like cold lead in my gut. I'd underestimated them. And now the truth hung between us, unspoken but heavier than any barrier of transparent aluminum.

"I'm truly sorry," I said. "I wish I could have done more."

Megan's voice came through Lauren, soft and steady. "You have nothing to be sorry for. But if it brings you comfort... we forgive you. We only ask that you keep living as you have. Show the galaxy what we could have contributed, had we been allowed to truly live. Perhaps in the next life we'll experience the joys of living that were denied us to us in this one."

The words landed like an old prayer I'd whispered too many times—for soldiers bleeding out in alien dirt, for innocents caught in crossfires, for anyone whose suffering in life was so great that death had been a release. My mind flickered to that silent bedroom in the *Walking Dead* universe: a young family tucked beneath a faded, dusty comforter—mother, father, infant—curled together in final, deliberate peace. They had chosen the end on their own terms rather than let the world tear them apart. These girls hadn't endured that same raw, apocalyptic horror, but their cage was no less real, no less cruel: years of isolation, watched like specimens, lives measured in sterile days instead of lived ones.

And unlike every other time—unlike those faces I could only mourn after the fact—these three weren't beyond my reach. Not yet.

The realization settled heavy in my chest: possibility laced with dread. I could walk away. I could preserve my freedom, my future, my life. Or I could step through the barrier and gamble everything on the faint, flickering chance that my altered genome might hold the key to theirs.

I met their eyes through the glass—Megan's steady sorrow, Alexandra's quiet hope, Natalie's resigned grace—and felt the decision lock into place.

Not yet.

Legally, ethically, morally—I had no obligation to go further. The risk was catastrophic: exposure, quarantine, the potential loss of everything I'd built. There were a dozen rational compelling arguments saying I should walk away.

Mind made up, I hoped Q would approve of the chaos I was about to unleash and might even place his finger on the scale to save his favorite champion.

"Gothic to all hands," I said, after activating my comms. "I'm about to do something crazy. Apologies in advance."

I turned to Lauren, pulled her close, and dipped her into a deep, lingering kiss. She moaned softly against my lips, surprised but delighted at my sudden affection.

"Jarvis," I murmured when we broke apart, "disable automated emergency response protocols. Authorization code: omicron-omicron-alpha-yellow-daystar-two-seven."

The irony of using that code—at this moment—wasn't lost on me. Star Trek fans, eat your heart out.

“Authorization accepted,” Jarvis replied instantly. “Automated emergency protocols disabled. Sir, I must strongly advise against—”

“I never wanted to be the hero,” I cut in, “yet here I am, being an idiot. Life’s funny like that.”

I triggered the site-to-site transporter embedded in my armor—just in case my daughters tried to override me.

Reality folded. I reappeared on the other side of the window.

The girls recoiled, alarmed—hands flying to mouths, eyes wide with dismay at what I’d just done. I forced slow, even breaths. My HUD lit up with cascading stacked alerts: airborne pathogen detected, aggressive antibody markers confirmed, immune response initiating. If the automated emergency response protocols had still been active, my armor would have slammed into full isolation mode in microseconds, before I could even realize the danger—sealing me off from the danger, flooding me with filtered air, cutting me off from their world before taking in the airborne antibodies.

It had taken Dr. Pulaski eighteen minutes from first exposure to show symptoms. She’d been baseline human. I figured it would happen faster for someone like me.

Megan spoke first, voice hesitant, almost childlike—the careful enunciation of someone unused to speaking aloud, looking slightly surprised at the sound of her own voice. “We did not want this.”

“I know,” I said, offering a soft smile even as my legs began to tremble.

The weakness clawed deeper—muscles locking, vision tunneling, insects crawled beneath my skin. The room tilted. I swayed, until the ceiling filled my vision.

Strong arms caught me—three sets, gentle but sure. They lowered me to the floor. Three beautiful, concerned faces hovered above me, hands stroking my cheeks, my hair, my shoulders.

Megan’s fingers brushed my lips. Alexandra cradled my head. Natalie pressed her forehead to mine.

“Worth it,” I managed.

I went down like a man who’d finally chosen his own ending.

And somewhere, in the ether, I swear I heard the old squad laughing—proud, rowdy, and raising a drink to the crazy bastard who’d just bet everything on three pretty girls behind glass.

Then darkness swallowed everything.
