

Disclaimer: I own nothing related to or part of Star Trek.

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

I sat on the bridge with only T'Maz waiting with me for news on the mission. Neela having been hardened in the crucible that was the Occupation would understand why I did what I did, but I'm not sure Lauren, Annika, and B'Elanna would understand. A Ferengi warship was a valuable prize in its own right, but its greatest value lay in the message it sent to anyone who tried to take what was mine. My shipping company could grow to be one of my most profitable enterprises, but only if people understood that trying to take what was mine would be met with an overwhelming and permanent response. There would be no cushy Federation penal colony in their future if their attack failed.

Tyr's voice came over the communication system as expected once the life signs we detected slowly faded then disappeared on the pirate's ship. These pirates didn't just go after valuable cargo, they took entire crews and sold them into slavery, sexual and otherwise. These fuckers didn't deserve any of my mercy.

"Mighty Emperor, the mission is complete. By your guidance and strength, we have captured the xeno vessel, and all alien life aboard has been purged. It now flies under your glorious banner, as your will commands," he reported from the vacuum of main engineering. As a robot, he didn't need air to function properly. "This lowly one stands ready for your next directive, ever your faithful servant."

"Tyr, your mission was a success, as I knew it would be. You have proven once again why you are among my chosen. Your deeds today will be remembered, but remember, my enemies are many, and your service is never truly done," I spoke bombastically. "Continue to be my sword, and together, we shall purge the stars."

I paused to allow my words of praise to sink in, knowing how much they likely meant to him.

"Sweep the ship from stem to stern for anybody alive that may be hiding from sensors. There are to be no survivors. Then gather up all the bodies in one place," I ordered. "Once your search is complete, restore life support so that B'Elanna and Neela can beam over. You are to protect them and assist them as needed."

"Your will be done, my God!" Tyr replied, before he rushed to carry out my new orders.

I turned and as expected T'Maz was raising her eyebrow of doom.

"What?" I questioned, feeling a little defensive. "A successful mission like that means I'm happy to tell him 'good work' in whatever way he likes best. I'd do the same for any of you."

T'Maz's eyebrow lowered, and she returned her attention to her console.

Once the convoy's ships were repaired and the Fortune's Fang was fully secured, we'd get back on course for Kessik IV.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 55

The relativistic starscape streaking by at warp came to a stop as the ship dropped out of warp and entered normal space while still under cloak. Kessik IV was a distant blue and green dot that was rapidly getting bigger in my mind's/sensor's eye as the ship moved forward at maximum impulse towards the planet.

Hanging in space in orbit of the planet was the ship I had been expecting, both because my powerful sensors had detected it on route long ago, as well as having been warned by President Moss by subspace days earlier. Say what you will about the design, but it was a very handsome vessel with an even more impressive crew given what I'd seen on my television screen in another life.

Interestingly, there was quite a bit more ship traffic in the system than the last time that I was here. Of course, the last time I was here was both during and after a Collector attack, so not exactly normal circumstances, but I had a strong suspicion that the planet had a few visiting dignitaries that were here specifically to observe the test of the defense net technology.

Sitting to my left was Lauren and to my right was Annika, both of whom were carefully reviewing the testing program and procedures the GODS net would undergo during this test. Of course Jarvis and all of my AI children had already done that, within microseconds of receiving it, but I had no issues with another couple sets of eyes. What might merit more scrutiny for an AI and a flesh and blood being were two very different things, no matter how advanced my AI children were in design and ability.

"T'Maz, is there any indication that they've detected us yet?" I asked curiously, not even turning my head to ask this question, my eyes fixed on the image on the main viewscreen.

"Negative, captain," T'Maz reported. "Sensor activity remains normal. No change in their sensor emission profile, nor have they raised their shields. We appear undetected."

"Excellent," I replied quietly with a mischievous smile.

Annika turned her head to look at me, having obviously picked up on something in my tone that merited the look, but otherwise said nothing. I brought the ship next to the bigger ship in orbit and waited for about ten minutes before decloaking practically right on top of them, the image of my ship coming into visibility with that characteristic mirage shimmering. The other ship's shields came up quickly, but not quickly enough to prevent the ship from being severely damaged or destroyed had that been my true intention. I could have fired a volley of quantum torpedoes even while cloaked and even this ship would have suffered severe damage or outright destruction.

"Captain, we are being urgently hailed by multiple parties," T'Maz reported stoically.

On the main viewscreen appeared President Donna Moss and an annoyed looking Captain Jean Luc Picard, though he was trying his best to hide that fact. The viewscreen showed the familiar

sight of the *Enterprise's* bridge, including Riker and Deanna to either side of Picard, Worf at security, Data in his usual position, and some unnamed redshirt ensign.

“Stand down from red alert,” Picard ordered. The red claxons in the background deactivating.

I locked eyes with each in turn for a moment. Data looked his normal placid self, his head tilting curiously, while Riker wore a slight frown. Worf, on the other hand, had that constipated/angry look on his face, both hands gripping the console in front of him. When our eyes locked I sent a challenging grin at him and bared my teeth a bit more than was normal for humans. The audio pickup sensitive enough to pick up a quiet growl. Deanna, though, looked happy to see me. As a greeting I sent a concentrated burst of lust at her that made her cheeks redden a bit.

Lauren leaned over and whispered in my ear, “You totally fucked her, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” I replied equally quietly, unashamed, turning my head only slightly while keeping my eyes on the viewscreen. “And her mother too. I called her the ‘sex tiger.’”

“Respect,” Lauren replied, her eyebrows raised in disbelief, looking between Deanna and me.

“Not at the same time, Lauren,” I corrected with a grin. “Not that I wouldn’t welcome that wholeheartedly.”

I may not have been as discreet as I had thought because Deanna hid a smile and a giggle behind a hand. She may have had her issues with her mother, but for a species of telepaths, sexuality was a bit more open as a rule. They weren’t quite at the Risian level, not many species were, but they were up there.

“Admiral, was that truly necessary?” Picard asked exasperatedly once I had turned my attention back to him, though it was clear that he was not reacting to my sex talk. “You’ve given my people quite a scare. Just because your ship is capable of cloaking doesn’t mean it needs to be employed at all times and in such a provocative manner.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Captain Picard,” President Moss replied, sounding equally exasperated, but also amused. It was rather fun to see your heroes a bit flustered, after all. It was a nice reminder that they were just people too and that could be comforting.

“I’ve been hanging above your head for nearly ten minutes, Captain. If I was a Romulan warship, you’d be in some trouble,” I replied with a shit eating grin, before turning serious, watching Worf give his console a death grip in the background, visibly grinding his teeth as he looked to the side. “That wasn’t just for my amusement, though, it was also to test my ship’s cloak against the powerful sensors of the flagship of the Federation and your Mr. Data, in particular. How often does someone get the chance to test their cloak in such a low-risk situation?”

I turned my head slightly to look at President Moss.

“I also did it because with the GODS platforms powerful sensors monitoring your space and the complex tachyon grid it can project, a cloaked ship will never be able to go undetected for that long or even get that close to your world ever again,” I assured with a confident smile, though I

didn't share that I had built in an exception for my own ship hidden deep in the programming. "That's the kind of protection I'm offering, Madame President."

"Always the salesman, Admiral," Moss returned pleasantly. "But you're right, that's why both of you are here."

"Quite right, Madame President," Picard joined with a much more composed diplomatic smile now that the tension had dissipated. "Starfleet has ordered the *Enterprise* to provide all the assistance you require to see these tests fully completed to satisfaction. We stand ready to provide that."

That was an interesting choice of words, suggesting that Picard might not exactly be fond of having been ordered to essentially test the efficacy of a weapon system, even if that weapon system was defensive in nature. In my opinion this confirmed yet again my feelings that Starfleet needed a fundamental change in its philosophy and mission. Their primary role should not be exploration, it should be the protection of the Federation with perhaps peaceful exploration a close second priority. Starfleet was still an organization to be admired, they just needed to get their damn priorities straight. Even this war with the Collectors hadn't seemingly shocked them into changing.

"You're providing more than assistance, though, captain. Aren't you?" I asked shrewdly.

Picard looked reluctant to answer, but to his credit he didn't duck the question.

"That's correct, the Federation Council and several Federation member worlds have asked that I serve as an impartial witness to these tests and to provide a comprehensive report at its conclusion to those interested parties," Picard answered. "Several delegations from other Federation worlds and independent allies are here to witness the tests personally and are interested in that report as well."

"I'm extremely confident in my design, Captain, so I invite all the scrutiny you'd like to bring to bear, with the caveat that I will vigorously protect the technical secrets of my proprietary technology, though I do understand I will need to disclose some aspects of its capabilities during the testing process," I said, while also warning him that there were clear limits to my openness. "Your endorsement of my technology at the end of the testing period will go a long way in selling the GODS net to other interested worlds. In fact, I intend to use that endorsement in my marketing materials."

"Your unending confidence is inspiring, Admiral," Moss mocked back good naturedly.

"Thank you, I try."

Picard's grimace at the fact that his report would be used for such base commercial purposes was well hidden, but my eyes didn't miss much these days.

"My report is not intended for such a purpose or to be viewed as an endorsement, but as the designer and owner of this technology, you are free, of course, to disseminate to those parties with the requisite clearance," Picard reluctantly explained.

I gave a magnanimous nod in response before he continued.

“My senior staff and I have reviewed your proposed lease agreement thoroughly,” Picard replied. “There are some...*unusual*...provisions in it that have given us some *pause*.”

President Moss looked sharply at Picard over the viewscreen.

“I certainly hope ‘*pause*’ is all there will be, Captain Picard,” Moss warned seriously. “As a sovereign world in the Federation we are allowed to maintain our own defenses, thus we have every right to accept the contractual terms by which we acquire this defensive technology. I have several formal legal opinions in hand that say exactly the same thing, written by the most preeminent legal minds in the Federation, including the head of Starfleet’s Judge Advocate General’s office.”

Picard looked pained, but conciliatory, the man was a born diplomat.

“My apologies if I seemed to imply otherwise Madame President. That was not my intention,” Picard attempted to soothe. “Your office generously provided us with copies of those opinions by subspace before we even arrived in system. Rest assured that both Starfleet and I respect Kessik IV’s sovereign integrity and will abide by your decision. We merely wish to share our concerns with the parameters of the lease agreement, especially those that could see the defense net fire autonomously upon Federation ships.”

“Just to confirm, Captain Picard, your report’s conclusion is ultimately not about whether Kessik IV can lease my defense net, its whether the defense net meets the Federation and Starfleet’s requirements so that it can be paid for under the Federation President’s new defense initiative,” I asked. “Essentially, if you don’t like what you see and don’t find the technology up to par, Kessik IV will have to pay for it out of its own pocket.”

President Moss focused intently on Picard, though my words did not appear to surprise her. Still, she definitely looked interested in hearing how Picard chose to answer. As a seasoned politician, she knew that whether the defense net was ultimately approved or not would not be decided by Picard. The recommendation of someone as decorated as Picard would carry serious weight, to be sure, but the powers that be on the Federation Council could easily ignore Picard if they wanted to. My detractors like Admiral Pressman could, in turn, put their finger on the scale to change the outcome to whatever they wanted. Section 31 had an interest in seeing this go through, the list of worlds they provided to me told me that clearly, but even their influence had limits, especially since their secret existence put a natural limiter on that influence when it came to Federation policy.

“That is an oversimplification of the report’s purpose, but you are essentially correct,” Picard answered, somewhat reluctantly. “The purpose of the report is to both evaluate and comment on the efficacy of this defensive technology, as well as to determine whether the defense net meets the requirements of the Federation’s new initiative.”

I raised an eyebrow at that.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, captain, but those requirements you mentioned have yet to be created,” I asked in mock confusion. “Am I wrong?”

“You are correct, those requirements are still being developed in committee, but my report will include everything I witness,” Picard assured.

“Now *that* gives *me* pause, Picard,” President Moss sharply interjected. “I will not have the goal posts change after the fact to fit the agenda of whatever faction in the Federation Council has the most influence at the moment. Speak to your superiors. I don’t care how you get it done, but I want a general outline for those requirements, signed by the president, on my desk within 48 hours or else my voting bloc in the Council will exact a very large, very uncomfortable price.”

Picard grimaced, looking pained, but didn’t try to argue the logic behind President Moss’s words.

“I will contact them immediately, Madame President,” Picard promised.

“See that you do, captain,” Moss responded tersely.

In Kessik’s IV’s case, I strongly suspected that they’d lease from me regardless and would pay for the system out of pocket if forced to. They had expressed interest in the system long before the Federation President had announced his new initiative, after all. The Collector attack on their world was a powerful motivator, death and destruction on that level had a way of making things happen, of cutting through the bullshit, and thus they’d be willing to pay out of pocket. Their people would see the value in that and be willing to accept the cost, therefore their elected representatives would feel comfortable making that kind of capital outlay.

That wouldn’t be the case, however, for the other Federation member worlds that hadn’t had such a recent tragedy befall them. Those worlds would happily accept a free orbital defense net--why wouldn’t they? ---but without that recent tragedy they’d simply wait for the Federation to provide one to them for free. So yes, while Kessik IV would almost certainly move forward, assuming a good performance of the defense net, a negative report from Picard would likely mean no one else would buy. The difference could be one customer or dozens. So the stakes were quite high in that regard.

“Admiral, will 48 hours be sufficient for your ships to arrive and begin deployment of the defense net?” Moss asked.

“They’re already here, Madame President,” I answered with a smile and very theatrically snapped my fingers, causing the 5 cloaked cargo ships to become visible in formation around the *Enterprise*. Even from here I could hear the consoles on Picard’s bridge beeping urgently in alarm. As a galaxy-class ship, the *Enterprise* was quite a large vessel, but my five cargo ships each dwarfed it. “The planned platform deployment schedule has been transferred to your planet’s orbital control. Please advise them that we can begin deployment as soon as they’ve cleared the necessary ship traffic. Physical deployment in high orbit and system initialization checks will take approximately 24 hours.”

President Moss rolled her eyes again, probably at the finger snap. I mentally muted the audio pick up and turned to Lauren.

“Was the finger snap too much?” I asked a look of faux concern on my face.

Lauren just grinned back and shook her head. When I turned to Annika, she just shook her head as well, but I could tell that that gesture was more akin to saying, ‘This is the guy I’m sleeping with?’ I could tell that she was amused though, so I un-muted the call.

“Madame President, Admiral, I’d like to invite both you and your respective staffs to a planning meeting aboard the *Enterprise* followed by a reception for any interested parties in our 10 Forward lounge,” Picard invited. “I will send you the schedule of events shortly.”

“I’m looking forward to it, captain,” I replied.

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Main Transporter Room. Aboard *The Flighty Temptress*.

“Why can’t I come?” Lauren whined, somehow making her petulant girl act very sexy as we walked into my ship’s main transporter room.

“Because Lauren, this is a planning meeting for the test program,” I explained for the third time, with a long-suffering sigh. “Are you somehow now an expert on the GODS net?”

“Not for lack of trying,” she continued to whine. “You’ve hidden all the truly fascinating technical stuff away from me.”

I looked at her more seriously now.

“Trust is earned, Lauren, and it certainly isn’t instantaneous, or given automatically because you’re similarly genetically enhanced,” I warned. “I’ve trusted you with several of my secrets already, but you’ll have to do more to *earn* more of them.”

Lauren turned to look at T’Maz who was waiting patiently by my side.

“Why does she get to go?” she asked, complaining, though I could tell most of these complaints weren’t even serious. Lauren enjoyed being a disrupter, she thrived on it, but thankfully she knew when and where it was ok to act out.

“Because T’Maz is my second in command of this ship and has proven herself several times over,” I answered. “She also knows what she needs to keep secret, lest there be *consequences*.”

I had given Section 31 some basic information on the GODS net’s capabilities, but had not shared any of the more secret technical details. That minimum level of disclosure had been necessary to secure their help in pushing this through the upper echelons of the Federation. I had made it very clear, though, per my agreement with Section 31, that T’Maz was not allowed to disclose anything she learned about the GODS net to her former employer and that I would be very displeased if I learned otherwise.

T'Maz, well used to Section 31 consequences, hadn't even batted an eye at my threat and knowing that I would carry it out, even if that would pain me greatly considering how important she was to me. Hermione and Natasha were monitoring her 26/7 these days. I had even injected multiple nanites into her body to ensure that even if she ditched her omnitool and any other technology, she'd still be subject to surveillance. Even now she had no idea that had been 'injected', a euphemism that made me internally chuckle as the nanites had been injected into her body via my *penis*. All my crew had been, with the exception of B'Elanna who I hadn't yet slept with.

"I'll suck your cock under the table, as quietly or as loudly as you want," she offered and wiggled her eyebrows, then moved behind T'Maz, resting her chin on T'Maz's shoulder before one hand began groping the Vulcan's large, perfect breast and the other went into T'Maz's panties to begin fingering the beautiful woman. T'Maz just stoically accepted it, seemingly not at all bothered. "I'll eat her out too or that black haired hottie on the *Enterprise*."

I hesitated for a moment, thinking about how sexy and hilarious that would be given how obvious it'd be in the close confines of the *Enterprise's* main conference room, but ultimately decided against it. Too much was at stake for that kind of shenanigans.

"Tempting, but no," I answered with a grin. "You and the entire crew are invited to the reception though, so why don't you use this time to find a dress in the ship's database."

And just like that, Lauren had a new shiny new ball to chase after. Her face lit up in delight as she pulled her wet fingers out of T'Maz's pussy and began sucking the juices off in front of me. I honestly think she would have preferred T'Maz had fought her off or had some kind of stronger reaction to the casual molestation, but that wasn't T'Maz's style.

"You're right! I must go shopping!" she cried, before she bounced out of the transporter room like a squirrel on a sugar rush.

T'Maz, who had been silent this entire exchange, finally spoke.

"I have never met a human woman with such an exuberant personality, or a more voracious sexual appetite," T'Maz commented.

"I would be surprised if you had," I admitted, gesturing to the transporter pad. "Shall we?"

We stepped up onto the transporter pad.

"*Enterprise*, this is the *Flighty Temptress*, permission for two to beam aboard," I commed to the other ship.

"*Flighty Temptress*, permission granted," came the voice of the *Enterprise's* transporter operator.

With that our bodies were converted into energy and beamed to the other starship.

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We materialized on the *Enterprise's* transporter pad to the blaring of several loud alarms coming from the transporter control console and a forcefield snapping into visibility trapping us on the transporter pad.

“Security team to transporter room 1, on the double,” the transporter operator requested over the ship’s internal comms. “Energy weapons detected in transport. Weapon deactivation protocol has failed. Transport protocol five has also failed.”

I raised an unimpressed eyebrow at the man who glanced at me fearfully before turning back to his console. Whether that was because I was an Augment, my imposing figure, or the fact that I was Admiral in rank, I didn’t know, nor did I particularly care. I remained still anyways, doing nothing to exacerbate the situation, nor either brandish or remove my sidearm from my hip, only gesturing minutely for T’Maz to let me handle this.

Per my ship’s standing orders my entire crew wore at least a sidearm whenever on duty and T’Maz, even though a Federation patriot through and through, favored a Romulan disrupter pistol these days given how disrupter weaponry had proven more effective against Collector armor. While she preferred the sheer versatility of a Federation phaser, she was exceedingly pragmatic like that.

Transport protocol five was a program in every Starfleet vessel’s transporter systems whose purpose was to remove weapons during the transport process. Outside of wartime or in combat, deactivation was favored first, then removal, unless the parties beaming aboard were enemies who were likely to actually use those weapons immediately. As the technology was well known to me, it had not been terribly difficult to design countermeasures that prevented the program from working on my weapons or those of my crew. An alien technology, one that may work on different principles, well, that would be a tossup. I had had to disable my anti-transport field to even allow myself to be transported aboard.

Worf and a team of way too young and nervous looking human security officers, of course, because the Federation was entirely made of human don’t you know, rushed into the transporter room with standard type 2 phasers drawn and ready. The fucking *Enterprise* had just lost over 150 people, including many of their veteran security personnel (minus Worf) and yet they still didn’t come armed with phaser rifles in hand. I felt almost insulted at the lack of firepower being brought to bear against me.

The Klingon growled at me with a fierce look on his face as he pointed his weapon at me and his team did the same in turn, following their superior’s lead. Neither T’Maz or I were in any danger given my armor and personal shield. T’Maz also wore a personal shield device I had created for her and would be able to tank multiple hand phaser shots set to vaporize before she was in any danger, especially since the shield had been enhanced with Husnock technology. Worf and his men, whose weapons were almost certainly set on stun, could probably fire a half dozen times each and her shield would barely flicker, which she well knew.

“You will disarm, now!” Worf shouted. “Comply!!”

“I will not,” I answered back in an extremely calm voice. Nothing pissed off law enforcement or security forces more than calm non-compliance when confronted with angry shouted orders. I had found that to be true in both lives, in two different dimensions and times. T’Maz remained her calm and stoic self, though I could tell that she was readying herself for potential combat, if I decided we’d be fighting them. That was one of the things I loved about her, her trust and loyalty in me.

“Comply or you will be fired upon!” he commanded.

“No, we won’t,” I mockingly assured, the urge to put this fucker in his place by touching the forcefield to sample its frequency than walking right through it was strong, but that was an ace in my hand I had no desire to expose during this pointless dick measuring contest that Worf was playing by himself, especially considering I was legally allowed to carry my weapons onboard, even if he didn’t seemingly know or care about that fact.

“If you do not comply you will be beamed back to your ship,” Word growled out, knowing his probably standard threat to take me to the brig would be a little harder when confronted with an armed man. It may also be sinking into his head that this situation could cause a serious diplomatic incident.

“Go right ahead,” I mocked. “But I was invited here by captain Picard and will be officially lodging a complaint with Kessik IV, Starfleet, and the Federation Council. There will be severe consequences, so why don’t you call your masters and I can get on my way.”

“You will not be allowed on this ship while armed,” Worf stated, getting even more visibly angry.

“I think you’ll find that I am allowed to be armed, even on this ship,” I responded. “I am an Admiral in the Bajoran Defense Forces, an allied military to Starfleet and the Federation, thus allowed to remain armed if I choose to be, even here. Furthermore, per the terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty for the war with the Hur’q, which is still in effect, I am allowed to carry active weapons when invited onboard an allied military vessel.”

“I am this ship’s Chief of Security, you—” Worf tried, before Commander Riker ran into the room.

“What is going on here?!” the man bellowed, his eyes quickly scanning the room to assess the situation.

“Sir, this man beamed aboard with an active weapon that somehow resisted the deactivation and removal protocol,” Worf answered, though not taking his eyes off me, choosing or forgetting that T’Maz was armed as well. An acute fear and distrust of Augments had seemingly been burned deep into the Klingon collective consciousness, which was interesting considering how little time Worf had spent amongst Klingons throughout his life. Could there be something in his DNA itself that was telling him to be wary? “He has refused to disarm, despite my orders.”

“Is this true?” Commander Riker asked me.

“Yes,” I admitted easily and confidently, and without worry. “What Worf has inadvertently left out is that I have informed him that I am legally permitted and authorized to carry active weapons onboard Starfleet ships by both agreement and treaty. Contact the sector JAG officer to confirm, or if you want a quicker answer that won’t see me lodging an official complaint with Starfleet Command for interference with the official business of Bajor and Kessik IV, ask Lieutenant Commander Data.”

I paused to let that sink in for a minute.

“You’ll also find that I possess the highest weapon qualifications and licenses the Federation currently offers,” I added. “They are on file on Earth.”

Riker’s famous poker face revealed nothing, but he did nod in assent.

“Riker to Data, come in,” he said after tapping the comm badge on his chest lightly.

“Yes, sir, go ahead,” Data’s calm voice replied.

“By regulation, law, or treaty, does Admiral Gothic have the legal right to carry active weapons onboard the *Enterprise*?” Riker calmly asked, his eyes locked on me.

“Checking now,” Data said before answering. “Per the agreement permitting Federation administration of space station Deep Space 9, the Bajoran Defense Forces, formerly known as the Bajoran Militia, is a recognized allied military of the Federation and Starfleet. Per section 23, subsection 13, clause 3, allied military officers are permitted to carry their standard duty weapons onboard Starfleet vessels and installations. As an Admiral in the Bajoran defense forces, Admiral Gothic certainly qualifies. Furthermore, the Mutual Defense Treaty to combat the Hur’q invasion, which Bajor is a signatory world to, adds another layer of authority allowing the Admiral to carry weapons aboard all Starfleet vessels while the Treaty remains in effect, barring certain actions in violation of Federation law. As it is unclear whether the Hur’q invasion had ended after the battle over Earth, the Mutual Defense Treaty still remains in effect.”

Riker nodded, looking thoughtful.

“Does it matter that the Admiral is here in his capacity as CEO of the Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, rather than as an Admiral in the Bajoran Defense Forces?”

Data response was delayed for only a moment.

“Both the agreement and the treaty do not offer any differentiation for these particular circumstances,” Data answered. “As the Admiral remains an officer in good standing with the Bajoran Defense Forces, the present circumstances by which he came aboard by the Captain’s invitation are likely irrelevant. Please note that this is only my preliminary analysis and conclusion based on my analysis of relevant law, case law, and precedent. Any official clarification on this point will require a hearing and formal opinion by the Judge Advocate General officer assigned to this sector. Would you like me to make an official inquiry?”

“Not at this time, though I will ask the captain,” he said. “Security, stand down. Chief, deactivate the forcefield.”

The security team and transporter chief immediately complied, though Worf hesitated for a bit before he reluctantly holstered his phaser.

“Admiral Gothic, on behalf of the *Enterprise* and Starfleet, I apologize for this mistake. It should not have happened,” Riker apologized diplomatically, only a hint of well-hidden reluctance in his tone. I nodded, then purposely turned my eyes to Mr. Worf, my intent clear to Riker. “Mr. Worf, please apologize to the Admiral.”

Worf glanced sharply at Riker before turning back to me, grinding his teeth in obvious frustration.

“I...apologize,” Worf stated, the reluctance thick in his tone.

“No worries, Mr. Woof,” I replied with a large smile while throwing my arms wide, deliberately saying his name wrong, just as Mrs. Troi had done in another dimension of the Star Trek reality. “Mistakes can happen.”

I glanced back at T’Maz who nodded that she was ready to proceed.

“Admiral, please allow me to lead you to the meeting,” Riker offered, gesturing to the door.

“Thank you, Commander,” I said.

Given the amount of time I had spent on this ship upon arriving in this dimension, it was entirely unnecessary, but Riker obviously didn’t trust me and it just wasn’t worth the fight. With no forcefield active to bar our way, not that it would have stopped me had I wanted, I gracefully stepped off the transporter and followed Riker to the meeting, T’Maz dutifully following along behind me.

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As we entered the famous main conference room of the *Enterprise*, a set that featured prominently in many episodes of TNG, I saw that Picard had stepped away from President Moss and her advisor and was speaking quietly with someone over the comms. The room was filled with the *Enterprise’s* senior officers, with the exception of Troi or Dr. Crusher who really had no need to participate in a meeting concerning the testing of an orbital defense net.

“I see, please make an *unofficial* inquiry to the sector JAG officer, Mr. Data,” Picard ordered quietly, not realizing that even without my armor’s advanced sensors I’d have probably heard him given my enhanced hearing. “Picard, out.”

It seemed that Picard didn’t want to rock the boat too hard, but he was being cautious. I wasn’t worried, my AI children had long completed their analysis of the situation and felt with a very high degree of certainty that I was in the right. Of course, it didn’t truly matter and was more me being contrary because Worf had so aggressively and rudely demanded I disarm. I knew I was relatively safe on the *Enterprise*, but as TNG had shown numerous times, the ship’s security could be better, and I had many resourceful enemies. If I really had to, I would give up my weapons. My armor itself had numerous onboard weapons that could be brought to bear if necessary, ones that this crew had no idea I even possessed. I had long ago tested my nanites

against Federation style transporters and they were capable of hiding from them with ease given how known the technology was to me.

“Madame President, wonderful to meet in person once again,” I greeted, taking Moss’s hand in mine and placing a lingering kiss on top of it, which wasn’t strictly appropriate.

“Likewise, Admiral,” Moss greeted with a smile and a small blush. Picard now stepping up with a diplomatic smile. I had been given many of those lately. “I hope you’ll make time to visit the planet before we’ve concluded the testing. You’ll find yourself receiving a very warm greeting from my people and many thanks from those you saved.”

“I hope I get that chance too, Madame President,” I agreed, happy at the idea. Saving the people of Kessik IV and that little girl and her mother in particular, had been one of the proudest moments of my life.

“Admiral, on behalf of myself and my ship and crew, I apologize for the unpleasantness you experienced in the transporter room,” Picard offered, and I could tell that he was sincere. “This was *my* oversight. I had not realized or anticipated that you would come aboard with a weapon.”

If there was any condemnation in his tone, it was well hidden, even from my enhanced senses.

“We are at war, captain. Being armed at all times seems only prudent. It is also in accordance with Bajoran military regulations,” I pointed out, to which he hesitantly nodded, knowing that many of their current military allies, like the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Cardassians were always armed. He didn’t have to know that I was the one who drafted that particular regulation. I didn’t state it explicitly, but I had a feeling he also knew what else I was thinking, that many of his lost crew might have survived had they been armed when the Collectors had boarded the *Enterprise*. “And I have many enemies beyond the Collectors. In fact, I don’t believe the Cardassians ever rescinded the bounty they placed on my head from during the Occupation.”

My eyes sparkled with mirth. In fact, I knew they hadn’t, which I was quite proud of, not that the Cardassians had deigned to act on it since the Occupation had ended. That, I suspected, would change in the very near future.

“You seem almost proud of that fact, Admiral. May I ask why?” asked Mr. Data curiously, choosing to join our little group along with Riker and Deanna.

“Mr. Data, a pleasure to see you again. To answer your question, I think two bits of ancient wisdom from Earth are rather fitting,” I answered. “The first, ‘You can always judge a man by the *quality* of his enemies.’”

Data looked thoughtful.

“Oscar Wilde,” Data identified, tilting his head in that characteristic manner of his. “And the second quote?”

“‘You have enemies? Good. That means you’ve stood up for something,’” I answered.

“Hmm, Winston Churchill,” Picard identified.

“And what did you stand up for, Admiral?” Riker asked with a hint of derision, Picard giving him a semi-sharp look. Riker didn’t dislike me as much as Worf did, but there was some prejudice there that the man couldn’t seem to shake. For some reason this question made me angry.

“I stood up for a peaceful people who had their world raped and pillaged for over 50 years while the rest of the galaxy turned a blind eye, and the people of Earth lived their peaceful and fulfilling lives free of want, worry, and horror,” I shot back calmly, but strongly. “I stood up for a people who were systematically raped, starved, tortured, and murdered. Who were forced into so called ‘work camps’ where they were worked to death, experimented upon, exterminated by the millions. Where little girls as young as 5 were gangraped to death by Cardassian soldiers, where the old were literally buried alive when they got too sick or weak to work anymore. I stood up for them and fought for their freedom. What have you done Commander? Have you stood up for anyone to the point where an entire empire called for *your* death? Somehow, I doubt it.”

Picard stepped in with raised his hands in a non-threatening manner, always the peacemaker. President Moss looked on, a sad look on her face, probably not even realizing the Bajorans had been treated that horrifically. Not many in the Federation did.

“Gentlemen, perhaps we should move on from this topic,” Picard offered. “In fact, perhaps we should start the planning meeting.”

“I agree, captain,” I said, and we all moved to our seats at the conference table, Picard taking the head spot as the host for this meeting, choosing to stand for his introductions.

“Our purpose here—” Picard stopped abruptly as I raised a hand to interrupt, to his and everyone else’s surprise.

“Captain, if I may,” I interjected before continuing after his nod of assent. “I would request that this planning meeting be officially recorded, both audio and visual, and officially transcribed and sent to all parties.”

“I am amenable to that request,” Picard answered after a moment of consideration. “Madame President, any objections?”

“None, Captain Picard,” President Moss answered. “In fact, I think it’s a very prudent request. Thank you, Admiral.”

I nodded at her words.

“Computer, begin official recording and transcription of this meeting,” Picard ordered aloud, the computer responding in the affirmative that the recording had begun. “Our purpose here today is to discuss the testing program for the Gothic Orbital Defense System as written by the government of Kessik IV. Before we get into specifics, I’d like to introduce my senior staff and allow for the rest of the key participants to also introduce themselves.”

“To my immediate right is Commander Riker, my first officer,” Picard introduced. “If you have any issues or concerns throughout this process, please speak with either Commander Riker or me.”

Riker nodded to everyone, his eyes glancing at all the meeting participants. Picard continued his introductions a moment later.

“This is Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge, Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Data, my second officer and Chief Operations officer,” Picard gestured to each man. “And finally Lieutenant Worf, Chief of Security.”

Picard took a seat and President Moss stood.

“I am Donnatella Moss, duly elected President of Kessik IV,” she introduced, her world framed beautifully in the observation windows behind her. “With me today is my Chief of Staff Leo McGarry.”

Now that was interesting, yet another West Wing character, but much younger looking. I stood up to introduce myself, for the sake of the official recording of this meeting, if nothing else.

“I am Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Forces, CEO of the Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, head designer of the Gothic Orbital Defense System which is why we’re meeting today,” I said. “To my left is my first officer, T’Maz, Chief Science Officer on my ship.”

“Good, very good,” Picard said with a welcoming smile, gesturing for a no name red shirt ensign to begin passing out PADDs. Both T’Maz and I, as well as President Moss and her Chief of staff declined as we would be using our much more versatile omnitools and its holographic displays. LaForge just looked on forlornly and wistfully, as Starfleet had *still* not approved its use aboard Starfleet vessels during active duty. “If you’ll activate your PADDs you’ll find the testing program as designed by Kessik IV. As requested by Kessik IV and the Federation Council, the *Enterprise* and her crew will both administer the test and evaluate the results of the orbital defense system. A comprehensive report will be prepared based on those results.”

Picard glanced at both me and Moss to ensure that we were following.

“There are nine categories of overall testing we will be performing,” Picard explained, looking down at his PADD. “The first is a test of the defense nets sensors and its orbital control functionality. Admiral, my understanding is that the defense net has both short and long-range sensors.”

“That’s right, the powerful sensors of the GODS net have a range of 10 light years at high resolution and 24 light years in low-to-medium resolution mode,” I shared.

“That is an impressive technical achievement,” Data commented.

“It’s double the range of our long-range sensors,” La Forge pointed out. “How were you able to accomplish that?”

“Unfortunately, that is classified as a proprietary trade secret,” I answered. While LaForge, Riker, and Worf looked annoyed at that answer, that was the best they were going to get from me.

“Understood, Admiral,” Picard interjected, reviewing his PADD’s information, having seemingly already decided to not challenge me when I claimed some bit of technical information was secret. The ‘how’ of the defense net technology would likely always get that same answer. “We have been given access to the sensor readings of all the Starfleet vessels currently in the sector to conduct this portion of the test. The defense net’s sensor output will be compared to those local sensor readings to test its accuracy. Is that acceptable to all parties?”

Both President Moss and I nodded in agreement.

“Very good,” Picard said, likely happy that we had reached our first point of agreement so quickly. Though this wasn’t a mediation between warring parties, or anything so extreme, some of the same principles were applicable. “My understanding is that the defense net has orbital control functionality?”

“That’s correct, captain,” I replied. “It was intended for use while the planetary shielding is active, but it can be used even while the shielding is inactive. The shielding can be active for a prolonged period which necessitated orbital control functions to be included, however I should point out that the current agreement does not contemplate the planetary shielding to be active at all times as this would impede normal ship traffic to and from the planet as well as increase the annual maintenance and repair costs for the system, as the replacement schedule for key system parts would need to be commensurately expedited. Only normal maintenance and repair costs are borne by my company under the proposed lease, a modifier to the bi-annual lease cost would need to be imposed if you wished to keep the shielding active even during non-emergency situations.”

Moss nodded thoughtfully, looking over the relevant lease language T’Maz had helpfully highlighted and brought up on the displays of the meeting’s participants. She knew the proposed lease agreement backwards and forwards.

“We understand and have no plans at this time to keep the shielding active during normal circumstances,” Moss reassured. “What does the orbital control functionality include?”

“Everything your current system can do and more, including an airlock-style entry function in the active shielding, if you understand the term,” I answered. “You’ll find that the system can track, in real-time, over 1 million separate objects and their flight trajectories within the system. There are also predictive algorithms to assist in optimizing the efficiency of both arrivals and departures, as well as other orbital operations.”

Everyone quickly reviewed the relevant bullet point data on the orbital control functionality.

“If there are no further questions on that point, we can segue to testing category 2, planetary shielding, which we’ve already briefly discussed.” Picard directed. “The *Enterprise* has ten standard personnel shuttles, ten cargo shuttles, five special purpose craft, and twelve two-person

shuttlepods for short-range use. In total we will be able to field 37 craft for use in multiple categories of testing. Our current plan is to use *all* of them, including the *Enterprise* itself, to test the orbital control functionality, the planetary shielding, and for the various combat simulations. Mr. LaForge, what is the current status of these craft?"

LaForge leaned forward now that he was called to participate.

"Captain, my teams have been readying the 37 total shuttlecrafts and shuttlepods for active duty in preparation for this test," LaForge answered. "We do not normally keep all these craft flight ready at all times, even wartime regulations simply don't require it, but we should be ready by the proposed start of testing. My only concern is that fielding this many shuttlecraft and pods will require a large number of pilots and co-pilots."

Riker leaned forward.

"Captain, I've called up every crewmember with the requisite pilot qualifications. We should be able to pilot all craft," Riker jumped into the conversation as personnel assignments was within his authority as first officer. "Several may need a refresher on the holodeck prior to flight, but I feel confident we will be ready by the start of testing."

"Excellent, please provide all parties with updates and notify if any delays are anticipated," Picard ordered, tapping on his PADD. "Let's move on to testing category 3, the defense net's cloaking systems. The *Enterprise* and all auxiliary craft will attempt to penetrate the net's cloaking during multiple phases of the testing. Can you please help me understand why such a capability was even necessary?"

"I would be happy to, captain. Thank you for the question," I said. "To put it simply, overcoming the defense net's defensive and offensive capabilities will be much harder while cloaked, and the system is *designed* to be operated continuously under cloak, even under normal circumstances. This prevents enemies from scanning the platforms to develop countermeasures or to identify weaknesses. It also hides the current location of the platforms to prevent them from more easily being disabled, circumvented, or destroyed."

"Doesn't that increase the chance for orbital collisions if the platforms are cloaked?" the President's Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Only marginally. Hence the orbital control functionality that comes standard with the defense net," I pointed out. "The various platforms that comprise the defense net are capable of movement in orbit, in fact they're constantly and randomly moving to make targeting them more difficult or attaching any kind of location beacon to their armored hulls, but they will actively move to avoid any potential collision with ship traffic. However, any ship in danger of collision would have had to *significantly* deviate from their assigned flight path, or for a collision to be their intent from the start."

"But it's still possible," McGarry insisted.

I looked at him like he was a particularly dimwitted child.

“Anything is possible, Mr. McGarry,” I admitted. “My people have run thousands of simulations, and the defense net was able to avoid collision in every instance. Any purposeful intent to collide with a platform would be considered an attack on the defense net itself, and would merit a proportional response.”

“What if we or a third party require access to an individual platform?” he asked.

Now I was definitely looking at him like he was stupid.

“Why would you *need* to access a platform?” I asked slowly in confusion. “And why would a ‘third party’ ever need access to one? I would remind you that the technology is proprietary. Kessik IV is leasing the technology, *not* purchasing it outright, any repair or maintenance required will be performed either by the autonomous repair protocols or by the company itself. As for third party access, you are affirmatively obligated to prevent access to the defense net by any third party, which specifically includes Starfleet or any Federation member. If you fail to meet your lease obligations by defending the system from unauthorized access, the system will act autonomously to defend itself.”

T'Maz gestured in the air and every PADD and omnitool had the relevant lease language displayed on their screens.

“Your system would fire on Federation ships?!” Worf growled out.

“Amongst others, yes, it would, assuming they attempted to illegally access the platform and its technology,” I answered, pointing out that it was not as simple as he was making it out to be. “As Kessik IV’s government and lawmakers are ratifying the lease agreement, the lease agreement has the force of law.”

“You understand that whether it fired autonomously or not, *you* would be held responsible and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, questionable Federation citizenship or not,” Riker warned, proving that he had not read the lease in its entirety.

To be fair, it was nearly 800 pages long and was pedantic as fuck in many ways considering my AI children had authored the first draft which I had later tweaked and ran by multiple legal experts across the quadrant. In my opinion, that had been money well spent since this agreement would be the template by which all other lease agreement for the GODS net would be based.

“I think you’ll find that that is *not* the case,” I pointed out.

I glanced subtly at President Moss, confused at the turn these convivial talks had unexpectedly taken. She already knew all of this, none of it was news to her, in fact she had questioned me on this very point months ago, quoting direct language from the proposed lease agreement. She gave me the slightest and briefest upturning of her lips coupled with a subtle wink and I suddenly realized what was happening. This was some old-fashioned good cop, bad cop stuff, with McGarry playing the role of bad cop on her behalf. She wanted all this out in the open from the start, on the proverbial record with Picard and the Federation, just in case something happened in the future and she needed political cover. She would be able to reasonably point out that all this

was known even before the defense net had been deployed. My respect for her as an effective politician and leader for her world went up several notches.

“You are not above the law, sir,” Riker warned again.

“No, I’m not,” I agreed. “But as this would be happening in Kessik IV’s sovereign space, the planet’s law would control. I will read directly from the lease agreement so as to prevent any confusion or claim of misunderstanding ‘Kessik IV and its President agrees and shall hold harmless, indemnify, and grant official and executive pardon to any employees and/or owner of the Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, for any crimes convicted, if necessary, for any autonomous actions the Defense Net takes per this clause.’”

T'Maz had again caused this clause to be highlighted and displayed on everyone’s device.

“This is outrageous!” Riker exclaimed, standing up, Worf joining him. Data just looked on confused. “The Federation will not stand for this!”

“You’ll find, Commander, that the Federation has absolutely no say in who I grant a pardon to when it comes actions occurring on my world or in its star system,” President Moss pointed out, staring sharply at Riker. “As this would be happening in my space and the party attempting to illegally access the defense net technology would be violating our law, the Federation Constitution would not even allow Admiral Gothic’s prosecution elsewhere in the Federation for these acts. Leo please send the captain the multiple legal opinions we secured confirming what I just said, including from Starfleet’s Judge Advocate General.”

Checkmate, motherfucker, I thought vindictively, though it was now clear to everyone involved that the President had engineered this exact outcome, and Riker had played right into her hands.

“Will, please sit down,” Picard ordered. “We will review these legal opinions, Madame President, but pending contrary information my report will include strong warnings that the defense platforms contain proprietary technology, accessing it would be considered a crime, and the defense net may fire autonomously on *any* party attempting to illegally access it.”

Moss and I both nodded.

“Moving on to testing category four and five, a computer intrusion test and a command-and-control disruption test, where we will attempt to breach the defense net’s computer security in an attempt to suborn its functionality as well as disable or interfere with the planet’s command link to the system itself,” Picard explained. “This includes gaining unauthorized access to the net’s sensor feeds, taking control of the system’s targeting and fire control systems, as well as attempting to deactivate specific functions, like the planetary shields, or shutting down the system entirely. Disrupting the command-and-control link has multiple avenues of potential penetration, which we will test. Mr. Data will take the lead on that aspect of the testing process. Any objections?”

“No objections,” President Moss answered.

“No objections,” I repeated, in fact, I was rather looking forward to it.

My AIs, who were intrinsically linked to the GODS net and provided its adaptive computer security, would probably have a great deal of fun fending off Mr. Data's attempts while also learning from them. While Data was an extremely impressive individual, his total processing power was limited to his android body, whereas my AIs had the continually expanding processing power of my ship, my island, and even the systems in other dimensions to call upon if necessary.

"Excellent. We will now move onto testing categories six, seven, and eight, simulated and live fire testing of the defense net, both upon the system and by the system," Picard went on.

"Category six is on single and multiple targets in Kessik IV's space, probably the most likely scenario for the defense net's usage. Category seven considers a small fleet of ships. Category eight is the system live firing on large asteroids and other miscellaneous safe targets. We will tractor in asteroids from the outskirts of the star system. Madame President, I believe you have selected acceptable target locations on one of your moons. Are the target locations ready for testing?"

President Moss glanced at McGarry who gave a small nod.

"We should be ready in time for the testing," Moss assured.

"Very good," Picard said, tapping on his PADD noting her answer. "Category nine is for any testing any parties wish to conduct but that were not included in any of the other categories. Are there any questions?"

"How will the simulated live fire testing be conducted?" I asked, already suspecting the answer.

"All ships involved, even those without actual weapons, will be outfitted with modified laser-pulse beams," Picard answered. "All hits will be recorded electronically, including damage yields. If the computer registers damage it will act accordingly, shutting down the affected areas for the appropriate repair time, assuming the hit was survivable."

"The same system you used in the battle simulation in the Braslota system against the *Hathaway*," I stated, the *Enterprise* crew looking surprised at my knowledge. "I'd like to review the battle simulation programming. That programming was based on starships with known capabilities and weapon systems, not my defense net."

"A valid concern. Please submit them to Mr. Data and LaForge," Picard nodded, after a few moments thought. "I cannot agree that all your changes will be immediately accepted, especially if they change the testing parameters in ways that give your defense net an unfair advantage, but they will be reviewed and accepted if appropriate."

"Of course, captain," I agreed. "I would recommend conducting the live fire testing on asteroids or one of the planet's moons prior to the simulated battle as the real sensor data of the damage yield from the live-fire testing can be used to adjust the simulation programming."

Picard looked to his experts in Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge.

“A sensible suggestion, Admiral,” Data responded, turning to Captain Picard. “As the Gothic Orbital Defense System has never before been observed in action, I would have to agree with the Admiral’s suggestion. The battle damage assessments from the simulation would be far more accurate if based on live fire datapoints.”

“I completely agree with Data, captain,” LaForge offered next. “A combat simulation like this requires accurate data on the system’s capabilities.”

“I see,” Picard replied, after listening to his officers. “We will follow your suggestion, Admiral. Any objection, Madame President?”

President Moss shook her head.

“If there are no other questions or issues?” Picard asked while pausing and looking around the room, before continuing. “Then this meeting is adjourned. I hope you’ll all join us for the reception tonight in ten forward.”

“My crew and I are looking forward to it,” I said, while standing up.

XXXXX

Main Transporter Room. Aboard *The Flighty Temptress*.

I’ve been spending a lot of time in the transporter room lately, I thought, as I adjusted my sequined mirror panel jacket while waiting for my crew to meet me in the transporter room to beam over to the party. I had been provided with this sparkly jacket by the girls, which was like a futuristic tuxedo, made up of thousands of tiny sequins in mirrored naturally distributed segments separated by a black grid lines. The jacket’s lapels were a solid, shiny black which provided some nice contrast. You wouldn’t think it would look good, but it somehow worked and somehow wasn’t completely over the top. How someone had pulled off tasteful with sequins, I’d never know, but it looked good on me. It helped that I looked like a male supermodel due to my genetic enhancements. Those pretty boys from my old world could make a burlap sack look good.

I glanced at my new watch with a smile as I waited. It was a gift from myself taken/stolen from the *I, Robot* dimension. It was a Jacob & Co. watch, the mystery tourbillon with white gold diamonds on a leather strap. It had a 50mm gold case and had over 350 flawless white diamonds, with 12 blue sapphires for the hour markers and two moving blood red rubies for the hour and minute markers. It was functional art as well as a precision mechanical timepiece and had cost \$1.3 million dollars when first introduced. I had beamed it out of the safe of a Columbian drug cartel boss. It went wonderfully with my tuxedo, in my opinion.

My girls were a half hour late at this point. I had invited Dr. Lanning, but he was in the zone, so to speak, redesigning several of his robotic designs with 24th century technology. As a fellow inventor/designer, you didn’t mess with someone when they were in the zone. No, you quietly provided them with food and drink and silently left the room so that they could get shit done. I had considered bringing Tyr, but I was in little danger on the *Enterprise* and bringing a Breen bodyguard onboard would be a distraction in this context that could overshadow my messaging.

As the transporter room doors opened, the girls walking arm in arm with each other, I decided that the wait had been worth it. I wolf whistled in appreciation at the beautiful sight.

T'Maz, Neela, Lauren and Annika were wearing the same dress, but in different colors. Each wore a sparkly sequined halter neck mesh sheer dress that went to midthigh, with elbow length gloves made of the same material and matching earrings. The mesh was *sheer*, their bodies practically on display underneath, providing a titillating view. B'Elanna had gone in a completely unexpected and uncharacteristic direction, which told me that there was almost certainly a story there.

"Did we really need to go without underwear, Lauren?" Annika asked in complaint. "I feel very exposed. This is not something I'd normally wear."

She wasn't exactly wrong about that, my eyes raking down her body, but peer pressure was a powerful thing, which is probably the only reason that she was wearing it. The dressmakers had probably intended some color matching underwear to be worn underneath, but they'd done without, most likely Lauren's idea. Their full breasts and pussies were nearly visible underneath, with only large costume gems strategically obscuring their nipples and slits. The dresses felt like they were constantly on the verge of a titillating wardrobe malfunction, but somehow it never happened, which suggested some 24th century materials had been used in the dress's construction.

On closer inspection and a discreet sensor scan, I realized that each of them wasn't wearing sparkly sequins and costume gems, like I had originally thought, but *actual* gemstones. Annika wore a dress made entirely of flawless white round and large teardrop diamonds in a diagonal grid pattern. Lauren one made of flawless blood red rubies. T'Maz wore black diamonds, while Neela wore one made of verdant green emeralds.

"Ladies, you look ravishing," I said, taking in the spectacular view. "I'm tempted to say, 'fuck this reception' and just take you back to my quarters."

"You say the sweetest things, Gothic," Lauren said with a smile as she posed for me like a model on the runway, before daringly lifting the hem of her dress to the point where she was just about to flash her bald slit.

"What's the story here?" I said, gesturing widely with a large smile.

"Lauren found this amazing dress design in the database from the *I, Robot* dimension so she replicated them for us all to wear," Neela explained, spinning around to show off the dress. "Isn't it so just so sparkly? I love it!"

"I do too," I said. "You're each probably wearing several million dollars' worth of gemstones, at least by the standards of my time. Isn't it a bit heavy?"

"Totally worth it," Lauren replied instantly, before glancing disappointedly at B'Elanna. "Though not everyone got with the program."

Lauren looked irritated at B'Elanna's non-compliance.

“I have to admit, you’ve surprised me with your dress choice, B’Elanna, but you make it work,” I complimented, fighting a smile. “Very Klingon chic.”

“Gahh!” B’Elanna complained, glancing down at her dress in irritation. “All my clothes somehow disappeared and the replicator for some reason would only make this freaking dress. I practically disassembled the replicator control circuitry to figure out the problem, but nothing worked.”

She glanced murderously at Lauren.

“I had nothing to do with it!” she defended with a ‘who me?’ expression, though it was clear that she was amused.

B’Elanna was wearing a fancier version of the Klingon armor bodice dress the Duras sister favored, scandalous boob window and all. She somehow made it work. I sent a question mentally to Natasha about the disappearing clothes and the replicator malfunction and only got giggles from both Natasha and Hermione, which told me that Lauren had been a convenient scapegoat for my AI children’s little prank on B’Elanna. I rolled my eyes, but let it go. It was all in good fun.

“Shall we ladies?” I said, gesturing to the transporter pad.

XXXXX

We made quite the fashionably late entrance walking into Ten Forward, five stunningly beautiful women on my arms. The men of the *Enterprise* looked on with interest and jealousy which was a soothing balm to my soul.

The reception was already in full swing given how late we’d arrived, with all the expected attendees present and many that I didn’t recognize, probably some of the dignitaries from other worlds here to observe the testing of the defense net. In the corner was a band playing an eclectic mix of music from classical to jazz to some musical forms obviously native to the worlds of some of the people here.

Waiters with trays of very fancy looking food were circulating among the guests, offering food and taking drink orders from the many small clumps of attendees chatting happily with each other.

“Admiral Gothic,” I heard captain Picard call from across the room, gesturing for me to come over to where the female portion of his senior staff were entertaining President Moss. As they hadn’t been in attendance at the planning meeting, this was likely their first introduction to the planetary leader. My girls and I walked over arm-in-arm, clearing a path through the reception.

“Admiral, I’m so happy you were able to attend,” Picard said smiling, playing the dutiful host, glancing at the members of my crew that he hadn’t yet met.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, captain,” I said. “May I introduce my crew. You’ve already met T’Maz. This is B’Elanna Torres, my chief engineer, who interestingly enough, grew up on

Kessik IV with her mother. Neela of Bajor, also of engineering. Lauren Marshall and Annika Hansen of Earth, who have yet to select a permanent role onboard my ship.”

My crew returned the greeting they received.

“May I introduce, President Donatella Moss of Kessik IV,” I introduced, before in turn introducing the *Enterprise* crew near us. “This is Captain Jean Luc Picard, Dr. Beverly Crusher, and counselor Deanna Troi of the *Enterprise*.”

My crew was warmly greeted.

“Welcome home, B’Elanna,” President Moss offered with a smile and a nod.

“Thank you, Madame President,” B’Elanna answered uncertainly, with some mixed feelings in her expression. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been back.”

“I love your dresses, they’re just so sparkly. Wearing the same dress but with complimentary colors really works,” Deanna complimented sincerely, looking my ladies over. They really were sparkling prettily. “You’ll have to send me the replicator pattern.”

In an age of replication that was the equivalent of asking for a recipe you really liked and wanted to make for yourself.

“I’d be happy to, especially if you model it for Gothic and I,” Lauren slowly replied, giving Deanna and Beverly a very thorough look over. “A lemony yellow or plum would go wonderfully with your dark black hair.”

Lauren must have been emoting some very powerful emotions because Deanna’s face had turned red, taking a quick gulp of her drink. President Moss looked on amused. You either loved how brazen Lauren was, viewing her as a breath of fresh air in a stuffy room, or you were supremely irritated by her. There was often no middle ground.

“Admiral, it’s wonderful to see you again,” Beverly warmly greeted, a blush on her cheeks now too. In my peripheral vision I caught the smallest twitch on Picard’s face. “Your ship is visible in my quarter’s windows. I must say, it’s a beautiful design.”

“Thank you, Beverly,” I replied huskily, our eyes locked as I remembered our many times together, including the hilarious times when Wesley had walked in on us. “I was going for both practical and pleasing to the eye. Everything I create follows that design philosophy.”

I’d argue even the sidearm I had in a hidden shoulder holster rig under my jacket was meant to be both functional and handsome. My jacket had been computer tailored to allow for its presence so that the bulge would not be easily noticeable. Of course the *Enterprise* transporter operator had detected it, but this time no alarms went off when I arrived, which told me that they had made an exception for me in the weapon protocols. Given how sheer my girls’ dresses were---they weren’t even wearing underwear---I had relaxed my normal policy and let them come aboard unarmed.

“I wasn’t aware ship design was one of your interests, though perhaps I should have considering you designed the defense net,” Picard observed.

“He even named it after himself,” Neela joked. “He likes naming things after himself.

“I suppose I do. I’m a man of many talents, I’ve found, captain,” I replied. “I’ve jokingly told my crew that I designed *The Flighty Temptress* with the intent to create a luxurious warship.”

“Your ship is quite large for such a small crew, nearly the size of an Intrepid class really,” Picard pointed out. “I’m amazed you’re able to operate it with only 5 crew members. In fact, my staff was quite surprised and impressed when our sensors indicated that your cargo ships are entirely unmanned, yet they are doing a splendid job with the deployment.”

“I have an additional two crew members on the *Temptress* that you haven’t yet met,” I idly corrected, thinking hard on just how much I wanted to rock the boat given my feelings on this subject and how it related to the issues I had with the current Federation. “They couldn’t be here tonight.

Just like at the awards ceremony in Paris, my arrival and our conversation had attracted attention and several dignitaries, including an ambassador from Betazed, were listening to our conversation. This was an opportunity, on several levels. Kessik IV and Betazed, other than both being Federation members, had virtually no ties through trade and were quite distant from each other in spatial terms. A quick query to Hermione confirmed that Betazed didn’t even maintain a consulate on this world, which told me that Betazed might be seriously considering the GODS net to replace their current aging and poorly maintained defense net. It must have been in far worse condition then they realized if they had sent an ambassador in person, this far from their world, to watch the test. The President’s initiative must have changed the calculus entirely if repairing/updating their existing system was no longer making financial sense. Banging the sex tiger mama Troi may be paying off in big ways as I suspected she had vouched for me.

I glanced out the large windows of Ten Forward to the sight of two of my cargo ships deploying the defense platforms. Somebody had had the good idea to reorient the ship to allow for the sight from Ten Forward’s observation windows. Once released from their specially designed interlocking shipping berths, designed to protect them during interstellar transport, each platform’s thrusters then powered on to move it into its pre-selected position in orbit where it immediately began running self-diagnostic checks. The random movement the defense net was programmed to do would not begin until all platforms were deployed and operational, and the system had cloaked. The protective shipping berths, while costly, had saved the day when the ships carrying them were hit by a plasma storm.

“My ships utilize a great deal of advanced automation, holography, and the main computer has a powerful virtual intelligence to assist me with day-to-day operations, which is the only reason my cargo ships can go unmanned, and my ship can operate with such a small crew. Starfleet vessels are capable of far more automation, but for some reason the Federation *chooses* not to take it to its natural limits,” I said, taking a sip from my drink.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Picard said. “Can you elaborate further?”

“Are you sure you want me to, captain?” I asked hesitantly. “I may have...unpopular...opinions.”

Picard looked thoughtful and curious.

“No, please, I welcome your thoughts, even if you believe they would be unpopular,” he said.

This felt like one of those ‘don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to’ situations, but so be it. I suspected I would not be making any friends with this line of conversation, but if I had to get on my soapbox yet again, it would be worth it if Picard and the Federation were even just slightly more prepared for the Dominion War.

“I say *choose* purposely, because I believe the true intent behind that is to limit the number of ships Starfleet can field,” I answered. “Coupled with the frankly ridiculous admittance standards for the Academy, the Federation has never fielded the number of ships it can and should given the immense size of its territory, which has caused a myriad number of problems during this war.”

Picard’s expression became more guarded as I outright questioned Federation policy. Some might even label what I was saying a conspiracy theory. I wondered if he was having second thoughts now.

“You make it sound like a conspiracy, Admiral,” Picard carefully stated.

“Conspiracy is too strong a word,” I corrected carefully. “Concerned self-interest might be a more appropriate way to describe it. I believe that many Federation member worlds have long been *concerned* that if Starfleet becomes too large, too powerful, too militaristic, their sovereignty may be at risk. They fear what Starfleet might become so they have purposely worked to keep the fleet smaller than a polity the size of the Federation can and should field, while slowly and systematically changing Starfleet’s original, primary purpose, to the one it has now, scientific exploration. Which has unfortunately bitten them in the ass in a big way during the war with Hur’q. They’re just now realizing that a weak Starfleet puts them at significant risk, that it puts them in danger.”

Picard looked like he wanted to snap back at me.

“I could not disagree more, Admiral,” Picard replied. “The idea that Federation member worlds would be actively working to weaken Starfleet is simply outrageous. Starfleet is fulfilling its purpose, and has protected the Federation with distinction since its founding.”

“What would legends like Archer, Pike, Kirk, and Sulu say about the current state of Starfleet and the Federation, captain? I personally think they’d be appalled at the weakness that’s been allowed to creep in, a weakness in both overall capability and clarity of purpose,” I argued back. “These were men that understood that Starfleet’s primary role, its primary purpose, was to defend the Federation’s existence from a hostile galaxy that would see it destroyed by its enemies, or by threats known and unknown. The Xindi and the Klingons were existential threats, after all, and the Federation wouldn’t exist today without Starfleet’s diligence and sacrifices in battle. In the current day, I’d argue that Starfleet views the defense of the Federation as a

reluctant and uncomfortable duty at best, something they're forced to deal with, a duty they rather resent, something that takes time away from their true purpose, scientific advancement and exploration. Tell me you haven't felt that way when the *Enterprise* has been forced to fight."

Picard was many things, but he wasn't a liar, therefore he chose not to answer my question, instead posing his own.

"Are you saying that we shouldn't engage in exploration?" Picard asked.

"I'm not saying that at all, but it should not be Starfleet's *primary* purpose, like Starfleet acts like now," I shot right back. "Starfleet has forgotten its origins, its original purpose. Your title is *captain*, a *military* rank, not Chief Diplomat or Chief Explorer or Chief Scientist. You are not the administrator of this ship and its crew of oh so intelligent scientists and its intrepid explorers."

"What support do you have for this...opinion?" Commander Riker asked, having come over to see why so many people had quietly gathered around us. I suspected he wanted to actually say 'bullshit' or something even stronger.

"Look no further than the world we're orbiting and why we're here in the first place. President Moss was interested in acquiring my defense net long before the Federation President announced his new initiative. Why is that? Why did the Federation President propose such a monumental undertaking? Why is the Federation going to spend enormous resources providing member worlds with advanced planetary defenses if Starfleet is doing their jobs with distinction?" I replied and asked rhetorically, gesturing to the world that we were currently orbiting. I knew all this would be considered rather incendiary, but it needed to be said. "The Hur'q attacked this world with only three medium carrier ships. Despite valiantly giving their lives in the defense of this world, forgive me madame President, the Hur'q swept aside this world's antiquated ships and undertrained forces like they were nothing. Where was Starfleet, the Federation's supposed protectors, then?"

I paused briefly for effect.

"I'll tell you. They were a full day away at maximum warp! And not even a small patrol group of ships, a single ship!" I answered my own question. "In the roughly three hours the Hur'q had before I destroyed their ships and killed their landed soldiers, how many of your citizens died while they waited for that distant protection from Starfleet, Madame President?"

"46,252," President Moss quietly and immediately answered, her eyes welling with tears. I was not at all surprised that she knew the exact number. "Most lost in the initial orbital bombardment."

"That is not fair, sir, this is an extraordinary time," Riker argued hotly. "The Hur'q invasion has stretched fleet resources across the quadrant. We cannot be in all places at once."

"Exactly!" I said, pointing at Riker. "The Federation is a vast interstellar polity, with equally vast untapped resources and industrial capacity, yet the Federation fields a fleet perhaps the size of the Klingons or the Romulans who have half or a third the territory. In terms of numbers of shipyards and the personnel it trains to man those ships, the Federation lags behind to an

incredible degree. In terms of shipbuilding capacity, prior to the Hur'q invasion, they were operating at barely 50%. And the Federation has paid for that dearly, shamefully struggling to fight against even a third-rate power like the Cardassians, long before the Hur'q invaded."

I paused for effect, thinking about how hard Section 31 had had to work in the background to make up for Federation's overall weakness.

"The battle over Earth with the number of ships and personnel lost will exacerbate the problem in the short- to mid-term. It's already had an effect; reports of piracy and other criminal activities are up throughout the quadrant as response times get longer and longer and the number of ships on patrol decreases even further and their patrol range increases," I stated, referring to a criminal activity report I was privy to. "The battle was terrible, absolutely, but relatively speaking, it shouldn't have meaningfully affected the whole of the Federation's ability to defend itself. The reason the Federation President was forced to create his planetary defense net initiative is because consciously or unconsciously the people of the Federation have realized that Starfleet is too weak to defend them!"

Riker looked almost look like he wanted to hit me. It was only Picard putting a hand on his arm and shaking his head that calmed him down.

"Admiral, in your opinion, do you think many of my people would have lived had the *Cairo* been able to respond quicker?" President Moss asked. The question took everyone by surprise and worked immediately to cool the tempers of everyone involved, including me.

I visibly deflated and sighed.

"My answer is probably not going to be what you expect, Madame President," I offered softly in warning. "Are you sure you want my opinion? Picard is probably now regretting asking me for mine."

She nodded quickly.

"I'm sorry, but even if the *Cairo* had been minutes away from the planet, instead of a full day away at maximum warp, I think the outcome would have been *exactly* the same for your people."

My audience looked visibly shocked at my answer, so I continued.

"The *Cairo* has a fine crew. It's commanding officer, Captain Jellico, is a highly decorated Starfleet captain who actually has quite a bit of combat experience from the Cardassian war, unlike most Starfleet officers," I answered. "But like so many ships in the Federation's fleet, it is an old ship, of an even older design. The *Cairo* is an Excelsior-class ship, a design that is over 80 years old by this point. One that has gone through five separate major refits. It should have been retired ages ago. There is simply no reason it should still be in service given the newer designs that are available and the excess shipbuilding capacity the Federation has. Against three Hur'q carrier ships, with all the fighters those carriers could bring to bear, which the current design philosophy doesn't really account for, I just don't think it would have survived long enough to make much of a difference, despite their best efforts."

I expected some argument, but Captain Picard and his crew remained silent and thoughtful. Somehow, I suspected they felt the same as I did on this point. Captain Picard's previous command, the *Stargazer*, was a Constellation-class ship and was 10 years older than even the Excelsior-class design, and they were still in service today!

"You can easily verify everything I'm saying. It's all in the public records," I suggested. "The truth is the vast majority of Starfleet is comprised of these old ships of even older designs. Against a peer opponent with newer, more advanced ships designed specifically for combat rather than merely added on as an afterthought, Starfleet would be wholly outmatched, and the Federation has suffered for it recently during the Cardassian war and then again during this latest war."

I gestured around.

"The *Enterprise*, a recent design with much greater firepower, is actually an outlier and even then the ship's not being utilized in the way it was intended. The galaxy-class was intended for long-range, long-term, deep space scientific and exploration assignments far from the Federation's borders, hence the inclusion of family aboard, but it's never been deployed in that way. It's never been allowed to go that far afield, to fulfill that role, in my opinion because Starfleet has faced too many threats that the rest of the antiquated fleet can't handle and its firepower has been desperately needed at home."

"What is the solution, do you think?" President Moss asked, because none of the Starfleet officers present were going to, that was for sure.

"Retire these old ships, build the new designs, create new ship classes meant primarily to defend the Federation, retrain the existing crews for the new designs, relax the requirements for the Academy and expand the class sizes, recruit more general crew, scale back exploration and remind Starfleet that its primary purpose is to protect the Federation," I listed quickly. "But that's going to require the various member planets to get onboard and I don't think there is going to be a better time than right now, while they're still reeling from the attack on Earth, but even that's not going to last long. The citizens of the Federation live in a utopia most of the time and as such they tend to forget quickly, which is why I recommend that you do not delay."

I looked very purposely at President Moss, the Betazoid ambassador, and the representatives of several worlds that were here to observe the tests.

"If any of you are considering leasing my defense net, I strongly suggest that you make the decision as soon as possible after the test, *one way or the other*, while the will is still there for the Federation to pay for it," I advised. "You are far more experienced in politics and government than I am or ever will be, so in your opinion, what are the chances that in a few months' time, the various member worlds start to forget how they're feeling right now and decide that providing these defenses are not necessary or worth the expense."

"Without any new Hur'q attacks, I think the chances are good and will only increase as more and more time passes," President Moss replied sadly, the Betazoid Ambassador nodding thoughtfully in agreement.

“Well, thanks for being such a downer, Gothic,” Lauren complained good naturedly as the conversation had petered out. “Now can you get your girls a drink?”

“HA!” I laughed aloud, glad to be distracted. “Let’s get some food and drink ladies. Please excuse us.”

Thankfully, the rest of the night was far more enjoyable with far less unpopular conversational topics. If the thoughtful looks on many faces throughout the night were any indication, hopefully my words had resonated with some of them.

XXXXX

Holodeck. Orbital Control Administration. Kessik IV.

We made quite the sight walking into the main holodeck of the Orbital Control Administration building of Kessik IV. T’Maz was a stunningly beautiful woman, in my expert opinion, but I had a feeling it was the Breen warrior walking by my side, whose head was constantly scanning for threats in the group of observers who gathered for the testing of the GODS net, rather than her beauty that was the cause.

Not many people had ever seen a Breen warrior in the flesh, or environmental suit, as it were. Of course, Tyr, my newly created NS-5 bodyguard was under that full obscuring armor, but scans weren’t capable of penetrating the material his armor was made of. All Breen warrior armor was designed that way so it wouldn’t raise any suspicions. Their cultural prohibitions also meant most Federation types wouldn’t even try because of it. Yeah, a 7-foot tall heavily armed Breen with a copy of my own rifle in his arms was going to get some second looks.

It was a relatively small group in the holodeck as very few people had the requisite level of security clearance to be present for the testing. We were here because it was a secure facility, and I had recommended this specific venue for the test. Of course, we could have done it on any holodeck, either on the *Enterprise* or my ship, but I had insisted on the testing to be completed while on the planet as that was likely where the net would be controlled from most of the time.

President Moss, Leo McGarry, Captain Picard, Commander LaForge, and Data were present, while Riker and Worf would coordinate activities from the *Enterprise*. In addition to the observers in attendance were several technical people from Moss’s government, but they didn’t merit being introduced, so I quickly dismissed them from my mind.

“Good morning,” I greeted.

“Good morning, Admiral,” President Moss returned my greeting.

“Yes, good morning,” Picard said in turn, glancing at my Breen bodyguard before he approached Tyr and extended his hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met, I’m Captain Jean Luc Picard.”

Tyr performed a quick threat assessment on the man before ultimately dismissing him, his sensors detecting no weapons present in the group besides the ones T’Maz and I wore, leaving Picard’s hand hanging in midair for several awkward moments before it dropped to his side. Tyr

had already identified the armed planetary security folks present outside the holodeck, but as they weren't in the room itself, they had been assigned a low threat priority.

Tyr was also using his sensors to scan for any explosives or other dangerous materials or substances that might be present. If there was a bomb here, depending on the yield, T'Maz and my personal shields should probably protect us, but there was no reason to take the risk. In the event of a detonation, it was a toss-up whether an emergency beam out was even possible, the simulations on that point were inconclusive, but my armor was designed to take autonomous action if the danger was significant enough. That extended to my crew as well.

"This is Tyr, my bodyguard, he doesn't talk much, not that you'd understand without your translator being adjusted beforehand," I joked. "He will not be participating in the testing procedure. Thank you, Tyr, you may resume your duties."

"As you command, my Lord," Tyr replied, bringing his hand to his 'heart' in salute, before he moved into a position that gave him a full view of the room and began scanning, both visually and with the powerful sensors I'd given him. Everyone else only heard that warbling electronic voice the Breen used. Unsurprisingly, Commander Data looked like he had understood Tyr and he looked puzzled at the form of address my bodyguard had used for me. "Tyr is a very traditional individual, Mr. Data, but he is very good at his job."

"Are we ready to begin the testing, Admiral?" Captain Picard asked. "Or do you require more time?"

"We're ready, captain," I assured the man. "However, Madame President, can you confirm all observers currently present are supposed to be here and have the requisite clearance to observe the testing process? They will hear a great deal of classified information about the defense net."

President Moss gestured to an older black man who stepped forward.

"Mr. Fitzwallace is my head of planetary security. He has assured me that that is the case," she reported, the man in question stepping forward.

"That is correct, Madame President," Mr. Fitzwallace assured. "All observers present are on the approved list and have had their identities verified."

Moss looked at me questioningly, as if asking if that was sufficient. I nodded in answer.

"With your permission, Madame President, may I take control of the holodeck controls?" I asked.

"Please do," she replied.

"Computer, run program GODS Net Command and Control testing interface," I commanded, and the holographic environment changed accordingly. Behind the main group of people, tiered and comfortable seating came into existence, as if rising from the floor of the holodeck. As this was meant to be a presentation and not a fictional setting where the artifice needed to be preserved, the holodeck's door remained visible and not hidden by a holographic field.

"Observers, please take your seats."

As the observers took their seats, I explained the control apparatus to President and Picard, the two most important people in the room when it came to the testing process. The command interface and display would be recognizable to anyone who had seen the show *Star Trek: Voyager*. I had essentially ripped off the astrometrics lab layout, however instead of a large 2-dimensional display, the area in front of the command console was meant to display three dimensional images, which was ideal for the operator to understand, utilize, and control the GODS net.

“Computer, begin security identification scan,” I commanded, typing in a verification code.

Immediately multiple scanning beams activated which began the process of verifying that I was both an authorized user and had command authority. While I was being scanned I explained what was happening.

“Right now the system is confirming that I am both an authorized user and what my level of command authority is,” I said. “At the moment, for testing purposes only, I have the command authority of a fully empowered planetary executive, well, actually more akin to an absolute monarch. The system allows for many kinds of planetary governance models.”

“Will you remain an authorized user with that level of command authority even after we should lease?” Moss asked.

“As an authorized user, yes, I will. The lease agreement requires that the company be granted continued access to certain defense net information categories in order to comply with our repair and maintenance obligations. The defense net will also notify my company and I if there has been unauthorized access, any attempts at computer intrusion, or if the defense net’s technology and secrets are at risk,” I answered honestly. “As for command authority, absolutely not. Should you lease the system, your world will maintain control of the system in the manner you decide, which I will talk more about shortly. The lease agreement lays out, in plain language, those circumstances in which the system will act autonomously to defend itself. We also have the right to deactivate the system in the event of non-payment or choose not to renew your lease of the system after the lease term has expired, which has been set at five years given our conversations in the past few months.”

I paused to let that sink in.

“I would not be offended, Captain Picard, if you had Mr. Data confirm that the lease agreement says exactly what I have,” I advised. “The part of the defense net’s software that deals with users and command authority is also available for Mr. Data to review.”

“Thank you, we will do just that,” Picard said in return. “Mr. Data, please verify Admiral Gothic’s explanation after the testing process today is complete.”

“Acknowledged, captain,” Data replied.

“Now, as Kessik IV follows the presidential model with an executive empowered to command its security forces and to defend the planet, if you decided to lease the system, Madame President, you or your duly elected successor would be given the highest level of command

authority over the defense net. The moment your successor becomes invested as President with all the corresponding executive power, or if you were impeached considering your constitution allows for that,” I added and clarified, “your command authority could be set to be automatically rescinded and transitioned to your successor or replacement on the specific date and time your Constitution states.”

“It sounds like the command-and-control system for the defense net is tailored specifically to the leasing planet,” President Moss began slowly. “Can you elaborate more on that point, please? What choices need to be made by the individual planet?”

“The choices and decisions the leasing planet needs to make are extensive, I won’t try to pretend otherwise. I can’t and I won’t make those choices for your world. It’s one of the reasons the lease agreement is over 800 pages long,” I answered. “Some of the more important decisions that need to be made are the exact powers granted or not granted to the planetary executive, including a hierarchical list of positions that can command the system if the planetary executive dies, or is incapacitated, or is off world, etc. What powers the executive has during normal situations versus emergency situations, how those emergency powers are granted or removed, the method of removing the executive or an authorized user or their command authority, and a slew of other important decisions. All of this would need to be formally decided prior to the system being made fully operational, meaning capable of firing on any targets, both in space and on the planet’s surface. The defensive shielding and sensors, however, would be operational from the moment you signed the lease and paid. I would highly recommend, though, that you set the strictest controls for firing on the surface.”

Picard suddenly looked alarmed.

“That is something I had not considered or even thought possible,” Picard shared, his voice filled with alarm and confusion. “Why would the defense net be capable of that, or ever need to fire on the planet itself?”

Now *I* was confused, though on further reflection, I probably shouldn’t have been. This was Picard. A captain like Kirk would have understood instantly.

“The defense net can strike at targets on the ground, though that function can be locked out entirely if the planet makes that decision,” I answered honestly. “As for when the planet may need to fire on the planet, Captain, Hur’q soldiers landed on the planet *recently*. Firing on them from orbit would have been ideal. Yes, I believe the GODS net would have prevented them from reaching the planet’s surface, but no system is perfect or impenetrable and not every enemy is going to arrive in an obviously hostile ship like the Hur’q did in a time of war. Infiltrators could breach the planet’s security on a normal vessel, for example, one that was allowed to land or transport people down from. And not every enemy is necessarily external. There are situations where it might make sense. How the defense net is used or not used, again, is ultimately up to the planet leasing the system.”

“I know I have not seen the efficacy of the defense net in action yet, however, I am becoming increasingly concerned at the possible implications,” Picard said with a frown. “This system

could be misused to a *terrible* degree. What is to prevent a planetary leader from firing on his own people? Or to use the system to hold a world hostage in order to remain in power? Who will you lease this system to?"

"I hope you're not suggesting a Federation member world would do any of those things, captain. If that was a likely possibility they shouldn't be a Federation member in the first place," I lightly admonished.

I was not offended by the question, in fact, I was happy he had brought this topic up as I knew many in the Federation, in particular, had this concern.

"Your concerns are one of the primary reasons I am *leasing* the technology, rather than allowing worlds to purchase the system outright, even though I'd likely make more money by doing it that way," I answered. "Leasing allows me to reclaim the system in the event of extreme misuse, or using the system to subvert the lawful authority of the world in question or the normal transition of power. Again, this is one of those decisions that needs to be decided by the leasing planet and hardcoded into the defense net to prevent its misuse. And that will handle most of the extreme scenarios you can probably think up. To be frank, this exact issue is going to come up with any defense net the Federation provides to its members under the President's new initiative. Even an orbital defense net incapable of firing on the planetary surface could be terrible misused."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," Picard admitted, somewhat reluctantly. "My report will call for additional study on this point to examine how we can mitigate the risks of misuse."

"There is also a morality clause in the lease agreement that outlines various situations in which the system could be deactivated and reclaimed, which would only be possible when leasing the system. None of the acts listed there will be objectionable to a Federation member world and my list of prospective customers is filled with Federation member worlds, so I hope that gives you some level of comfort, captain," I continued. "The Gothic Orbital Defense System is meant to be a defensive system, not a tool of subjugation or war, as such I will *not* lease the system to any planetary dictators or any government that is unstable, no matter how much they offer to pay me. In the event of civil war, for example, the system's ability to fire on the surface or any ship of that world would be deactivated."

I looked at the two people that mattered most in this situation.

"I encourage you to think more on this subject. We can speak more about it once you've gathered your thoughts," I advised. "May we continue?"

"Yes, please do," President Moss agreed.

I gestured to the holographic console in front of us.

"Madame President, Captain Picard, before you is a holographic representation of a command-and-control interface for the Gothic Orbital Defense System currently in orbit and surrounding Kessik IV in an overlapping network of exactly 300 orbital defense platforms," I explained. "It is merely a suggested control layout. To be clear, there is actually no provided hardware connected to the defense net currently on the planet, nor does there ever have to be. The provided system

hardware is entirely in orbit. You can use a holographic control interface or use physical hardware.”

I paused to let that sink in, which I suspected I would be doing a lot of considering the amount of information I was going to be imparting today.

“Is the defense net’s command-and-control software compatible with LCARS?” LaForge asked, Picard nodding in turn, which told me that he had had the same question.

“The defense net command and control software is *fully* compatible with the LCARS operating system so any Federation hardware can be used if you desire physical controls. The command-and-control software is also compatible with most known operating systems,” I added for the benefit of the few independent worlds in attendance. “Regarding the controls you see in front of you, this is the default interface control style, which I designed to make the system more user friendly, but again you can use a standard LCARS control layout common to the Federation or Starfleet if you prefer.”

“Good to know,” Moss replied.

“I am activating the system’s short-range sensors now,” I explained, a rotating image of Kessik IV appearing holographically in front of us, with 300 yellow dots appearing in orbit. I had specifically chosen to not show the platforms in detail. “As you can see, this is an extremely high resolution and detailed real time image of the planet, and the platforms currently deployed around the planet. I should note that this image was created and is being updated in real time with the sensor information provided by the defense net itself, rather than sensor information from my ship or the *Enterprise* or any other system. I am expanding the view now to include surrounding space.”

Immediately the *Enterprise* and the *Flighty Temptress* and many other ships appeared in the space surrounding the planet.

“Captain, can you please have Mr. LaForge and Mr. Data interface with the GODS net data and confirm what I’m saying is true; I have allowed information sharing between their tricorders.”

Picard nodded, before looking at his people, “Gentleman, please go ahead.”

“I confirm,” Mr. Data answered almost immediately.

“I do too,” Mr. LaForge chimed in moments later, both still looking at their tricorders and tapping controls. “The amount of data the net is gathering every second that passes is very impressive. The *Enterprise* would need hours of continuous intensive scans to generate this much data and the sensors only began scanning moments ago. I suppose that is the power of 300 distributed, networked sensors working together to form a single sensor picture.”

I felt quite proud at the high praise from the *Enterprise*’s Chief Engineer.

“I will be engaging the system cloaking momentarily, can I please request the sensor data from the *Enterprise* be relayed down here to see if the *Enterprise*’s sensors can pierce the cloak? I will

also be asking Mr. Data to conduct additional scans using the *Enterprise*'s sensors," I requested. "It may be prudent to keep the comm link open for the rest of the testing."

Picard nodded and tapped his comm badge.

"Picard to *Enterprise*, please relay the ship's sensor data and control to the planet once the defense net cloaks," Picard ordered. "Keep this comm channel open, but muted for the rest of the testing process."

"Understood, captain," Riker acknowledged. "Sending now."

"I am receiving the data," I said, my fingers deftly manipulating the controls. Using manual controls felt awkward and unwieldy after you had gotten used to direct neural control.

"Thank you, Will. Picard out."

"Activating cloaking," I reported. Moments later the 300 platforms began disappearing from the screen one by one, a gray silhouette replacing the yellow dots in order to convey to the operator the current location of the platforms at the same time there was a visual indication of the individual platform's cloaked status."

"As you can see, with my current status in the system I can see the current locations of each platform, the gray silhouette indicates that the platform is currently cloaked," I explained.

"Madame President, you will likely want to delegate some access and control to your orbital control administration personnel and your security chief and his people, but it is your decision whether you will allow any individual user to know the platforms' current locations."

"What do you recommend, Admiral?" President Moss asked.

"Personally, I would limit the number of personnel that have access to the platforms' current locations to only your most senior and trusted officials," I recommended. "Anybody who wishes to learn the defense net's secrets, to scan the platforms, to defeat its protections, will have an advantage if they were given the exact location of individual platforms. If too many people know the platforms' locations, that information can be extracted from them through bribery or manipulation or coercion. Best to limit access to that information."

"How would the orbital control administration do its job then?" LaForge asked. "Ships could collide with the platforms."

"Multiple safe vectors for approach, orbit, or departure, can be provided to Orbital Control without the operator knowing each platforms' current location in orbit," I answered. "The platforms will also move autonomously to prevent a potential collision, even if there is operator error or negligence."

More nods.

"Mr. Data, if you'd like to conduct any additional scans, please feel free, but can you confirm that the *Enterprise* cannot detect the cloaked platforms?" I asked.

Mr. Data looked to Picard briefly for permission and received it immediately. He went to the command console, glancing at it for only a moment to study the control layout, then began conducting multiple additional scans. My AI children were actively monitoring his scanning methods and actively learning from the experience, which is one of the reasons why I suggested it. The lessons we were learning from Mr. Data were also helping us to improve the platform cloaking as minor adjustments to the cloaking field were being made in real time. The *Enterprise* would still not have penetrated the cloaking field, I knew far too much about Federation scanning technologies for that to happen, but it would improve the cloaking system overall.

Data feigned his version of chagrin after several long minutes of scanning.

“Despite my best efforts, I cannot locate the cloaked platforms,” he reported before turning to me. “Admiral, are you using Klingon or Romulan cloaking techniques? Or some combination of the two?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified, Mr. Data,” I replied with a proud smile, choosing not to say anything further on this subject that information could be gleaned from. Picard and any Federation naysayers would have a hard time denying the efficacy of the defense net’s cloaking after allowing Mr. Data to attempt to find my cloaked platforms, platforms that he already knew were there in orbit. “Do you wish to conduct any further tests on the cloaking field, captain?”

“No, Mr. Data is my most capable officer when it comes to such things,” Picard replied. “I am satisfied with the test of the cloaking field.”

“Very good, I am activating the tachyon detection net now, which will interlink all the platforms in a very complex web of faster than light particles designed to discover cloaked ships,” I informed.

The holographic display of the planet and the platforms began showing the formation of a complex web of invisible particle beams crisscrossing between the various platforms.

“The tachyon detection net is forming,” I continued. “As you can see the beams are linking the platforms together—”

I abruptly went silent as there was a small unexplained gap forming in the detection net, as if the particle beams were being interrupted by an invisible object, but there was nothing there on normal sensors. I quickly ran a self-diagnostic on the various platforms whose tachyon beams were being interrupted and all systems came back fully operational. Reaching out with both hands, I grabbed the section of the holographic display showing the gap and pulled them apart to zoom in on that section, directing more tachyon beams at the gap to map the outline of the object. As the image gained definition, it became increasingly clear what that gap was, and my AI children confirmed it. Predictive sensor mapping clearly showed that the gap had a ship-like shape, relatively small though, which had probably provided it with a much greater ability to remain undetected this close to a planetary body. It was well known that it was much easier to cloak a large ship in open space, rather than near a planetary body.

“What is it, Admiral? You stopped speaking abruptly?” President Moss and Picard asked in concern, coming closer to me. “Is there something wrong with the defense net?”

“I am detecting a cloaked ship in high orbit,” I quietly answered, my tone grave.

“What?!” she yelped, then quieted. Picard’s face turned grim. “Are you sure?”

“We don’t have much time; do I have your permission to deal with it how I see fit?” I asked, looking directly at President Moss, my eyes flitting subtly at the observers behind us. The implication was clear. This was her world and her decision, though. Picard looked about ready to protest, but Moss answered too quickly.

“Do anything you deem necessary, Gothic,” Moss gave her permission, hesitating for only a moment. The great service I had provided for her world had obviously earned me a lot of trust.

I quickly turned back to the display, my hands reaching out like a maestro directing an orchestra and took direct control of multiple platforms in weapon’s range of the gap in the detection field. Jarvis gave me a priority alert, for some reason, just as I punched forward with both hands, three platforms in range firing a ruby red continuous phaser beam at the gap in the field on low power. If I had fired on full power I could have destroyed the small ship, but that would mean I likely wouldn’t be able to identify it. My goal was not to destroy the ship, but to disable this ship’s cloaking device.

The cloaking field this ship was using fell within seconds, revealing a small acid green hull, a pointed nose section, and a pair of wing sections that were decorated with scribed detailing which evoked feathers.

“A Romulan scout ship,” Picard whispered in alarm at the sight.

Having been discovered, its shields went up and the Romulan ship attempted to flee, obviously deciding to cut its losses and leave any of their operatives on the ground behind. I reached out with multiple tractor beams stopping the ship in its tracks. Its engines powered to maximum, trying to break the tractor’s hold, but a small ship built primarily for stealth, rather than battle, would never be able to escape my hold.

The threat neutralized for the moment; I quickly examined the priority alert that Jarvis had given me. A moment before I had fired on the cloaked ship, Jarvis had detected an anomalous microburst transmission powerful enough to reach into orbit. Unfortunately, it had been too quick to identify exactly who had sent it, but he was certain that it had come from this very room. Immediately upon Jarvis detecting the transmission and alerting me, Tyr had run forward with his rifle raised in readiness, putting himself between me and the observers, scanning the audience visually and electronically for any irregularities, trying to find who had sent the transmission.

“There was a microburst transmission from inside this room, likely a warning to the ship in orbit that we had discovered them,” I quickly warned to explain Tyr’s actions, my attention split between this room and the threat in space.

Fitzwallace jumped into action.

“Seal the room!” he growled, his security personnel coming in and barring the only way in or out. Tyr had already activated a transport inhibitor field, so there was no leaving that way either.

“Romulan ship, you are in Federation space in violation of the Treaty of Algeron, power down your engines and prepare to be boarded, or you will be destroyed,” I ordered over the comms. The Romulans did have the right to travel in Federation space to battle the Hur’q, but definitely not for something like this. A few more shots could disable the shields, but would likely destroy the ship in the process.

The sensors detected a sudden power spike before the scout ship’s power core exploded, the ship now reduced to floating particles and tiny debris.

“That was not due to damage taken,” I glanced meaningfully at Moss and Picard. “When they realized that there was no escaping my hold they *chose* to self-destruct rather than be captured. That tells me that this was probably a Tal Shiar operation. They’re zealots.”

They looked both surprised and shocked at my words, which honestly surprised me.

“I need to find whoever sent that transmission,” I stated quietly.

“Do whatever you need to,” Moss growled, looking angry as hell. Honestly, it was rather hot.

I turned my attention back to the audience of observers.

‘Tyr, scan them all,’ I ordered mentally. ‘Find them!’

‘They will be found and brought trembling to your feet, my God,’ Tyr angrily replied.

His omnitool began emitting a powerful bright white scanning beam. This was a direct sensor beam using Vidiaan scanning principles, rather than a wide scanning beam. The beam visibly went from one person to the next to the next, individually and methodically scanning each person for a few seconds for anything out of the ordinary, each person so rattled by the situation that no one made a sound of protest at this violation of their bodily privacy, something that the Federation took very, very seriously.

The beam stayed longer than usual on the representative of an independent world in attendance, an independent world in the alpha quadrant Jarvis supplied, and not a world I was familiar with from any Star Trek series I had watched in my old life. Jarvis issued another alert as the Vidiaan scanning technology found the signs of extensive reconstructive surgery and then Romulan DNA.

The Romulan in disguise, realizing that his cover was likely blown, turned his head unnaturally and there was a power spike in the man’s brain, the man sliding to the floor.

“Fuck, that wasn’t a Halkan. His DNA is Romulan,” I swore, waving off the security that jumped into action, Tyr already standing over the man with his rifle pointed down, ready to fire, even though he was getting the same sensor readings that I was, telling me that the man was already

dead. Caution was good as sensor readings could be faked, so I didn't tell him to stop. "He's dead. You know what this means, don't you?"

"My world holds little strategic importance to the Romulans given how far their Empire is from our space. They would have little interest in us under normal circumstances, even with our dilithium deposits," President Moss analyzed pragmatically. "They were here to observe the testing of the defense net."

"That is my guess as well," Picard added, looking saddened at the loss of life, even the lives of the Federation's longtime enemies. "They likely wish to understand how the President's new initiative will change the Federation's defensive readiness."

"And whether or not they need to do everything in their power to prevent it from happening," I added. Somehow I suspected that I had just added myself to their priority 'to kill' list. "More Federation worlds possessing powerful defenses will free up fleet assets, after all."

They might also have been gathering evidence to make a complaint that the Federation was using cloaking technology in violation of the Treaty prohibiting the Federation from using such technology on their ships. Whether my cloaked defense net was a violation of the Treaty was questionable at best and could go either way. If they wanted to make a huge stink about it, the legalities would be almost irrelevant. It would almost certainly come down to political will. Would the Federation stand its ground if the Romulans threatened war over this issue? In my opinion and historically speaking, I wouldn't bet money on it. However, there was no good reason to suggest that that was what they were doing when it would only hurt me.

My mind raced at the implications of all this. Yes, I'd have another powerful empire gunning for me, but this could also be a blessing in disguise on multiple levels, especially since the Romulans hadn't been able to transmit any data back to the Empire as best I could tell. Their mission required a communications blackout and the moment it became clear that a cloaked ship might be present, Natasha had had my ship emit a powerful jamming signal. I sent her a mental pat on the back for her quick thinking.

"This was decidedly more practical than I had intended, but you've got to admit, this was a very successful test," I said with my best used car salesman voice, trying to lighten the mood.

My attempt at levity was met with incredulous looks on not only Picard and Moss's face, but every single person in the room bar Mr. Data. Three dead Romulans spies were that upsetting to them? Bah. They needed to toughen up.

"What? Too soon?" I asked with a straight face.