

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

As Martok struggled to take the breath that had been so forcibly stolen from his lungs and rise, a shadow fell over him. The crushing weight of a foot pressed down on his chest, and he felt the cold bite of steel—two feet of it—embedded itself deep in the dirt beside his head. The edge of the blade cut his cheek semi-deeply, its cold steel sinking into his skin, his purple blood staining its surface from the precise cut he'd received. A brutal reminder of Admiral Gothic's mastery with a blade.

The Augment's eyes stayed on Martok's blood for a long moment, as if studying it, instead of the small new scar that had been given with ruthless precision, a permanent message and reminder of this day, written upon his body

It was fitting. Martok would wear that scar with honor from this day forward and freely share the name and story of the warrior who had given it to him.

"Do you yield, General Martok?" Gothic's voice came from above him, calm and certain and cold. "Or should I separate your head from your shoulders?"

Martok grunted, a grim smile of amusement tugging at his lips despite the most one-sided defeat he'd experienced in decades. "Thank you, Admiral, but I prefer my head to stay where it is, if only to allow me to continue enjoying your BBQ'd cow meat." His amusement barely masked the respect he now held for the man. "I yield."

Without a word, Gothic extended his hand, effortlessly lifting Martok to his feet as if by a starship's tractor beam.

"I have the measure of your warrior's heart, Admiral," Martok said, grasping Gothic's arm in the traditional greeting of warriors, his voice heavy with approval. "It makes my heart beat faster in joy. I no longer doubt the tales of your victory over the wretched Hur'q. I will tell stories of you in the Empire."

"Call me Gothic, General," the Augment offered with a smirk.

Now that battle was over he could tell that the apex predator had been hidden away, waiting, lurking, ready to be brought out to dispense death to his enemies.

"Then you must call me Martok, Gothic," the Klingon replied, his voice filled with genuine respect. "Having felt the bite of your steel, I'm eager to see the defense net you've created."

“Thank you, Martok. Kahless willing, we’ll resume the testing soon,” Gothic said, his tone hopeful before it shifted to frustration. “But at this point, I’m half-expecting the Gorn, or the Tholians, or hell—maybe even the Organians—to show up and delay things again.”

Martok’s eyebrows shot up, his expression a mix of surprise and stunned disbelief before he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 61

Holodeck. Orbital Control Administration. Kessik IV.

“Back again, T’Maz—for the third freaking time,” I said tersely, though a hint of amusement crept into my voice as I took in the even larger crowd. The Klingon delegation, now front and center, led by none other than General Martok himself, seated alongside President Moss, the Risian and Betazoid ambassadors, and Captain Picard with some of his crew. Admiral Pressman, I noted with no small satisfaction, had been demoted to the second row. Moss never missed an opportunity to make her displeasure known.

“Think we’ll actually get through it this time?”

“Previous experiences suggest otherwise,” T’Maz replied evenly, eyes never leaving her console as she ran the same diagnostics she had during the last two failed tests.

“Fair point,” I murmured, amused by her ever-dry delivery.

If interest in the tests had been high after the Romulan debacle, the arrival of the Klingons had turned it into a diplomatic spectacle. Trade between the Federation and the Empire was one thing, but this—defense technology—was another matter entirely. The two powers rarely shared that sort of hardware. That my work had drawn their attention spoke volumes.

‘If the Klingons were interested, maybe we should be too?’

Technically, I wasn’t even a Federation citizen, despite being born on Earth—just not this Earth. But that nuance was lost on the Federation News Service and every other outlet now broadcasting across half the quadrant.

With so much attention on these tests, even the Ferengi had gotten in on the frenzy—odds-makers across their gambling houses were taking bets on who might crash the party next. The current favorite, unsurprisingly, was another Romulan incursion—hence the shortest odds. Personally, I found that unlikely, given the quiet backchannel communications between Section 31 (masquerading as Starfleet Intelligence) and the Tal Shiar.

Then again, the Romulans weren’t exactly known for predictability.

“All diagnostics complete,” T’Maz reported. “All systems are fully operational.”

Déjà vu, indeed.

“Thank you, T’Maz,” I said, just as I caught Picard’s eye. He gave a small nod—indicating I could proceed when ready. I returned the gesture.

“Let’s get this show on the road, T’Maz. If I stay away from Bajor much longer, I think the First Minister might finally lose his mind,” I quipped.

T’Maz arched an eyebrow with the Vulcan equivalent of wicked amusement. On her, that meant both eyebrows stayed firmly in place—but the angle shifted just enough to qualify as sass.

“I’m surprised he hasn’t relieved you of duty already,” she replied coolly.

I glanced back toward the audience, smirking. “When you’re the golden goose, you get a bit more latitude. And he knows full well he needs me far more than I need him.”

And it was true. Without my support—technical, tactical, and financial—Bajor’s recovery would be much less further along than now. I had seen it in canon DS9.

I’d practically built their military infrastructure from the ground up. I had built it and funded the Bajoran military with my two hands, which made the planet that much more desirable to outside investment and tourism. Many recovery and rebuilding projects were also being supplied by my replicators and paid for with my donations.

At this rate, they were running out of things *not* named after me: the Admiral Gothic Naval Academy, the Gothic Institute of Learning, the Gothic Center for the Performing Arts. It was almost absurd. *Almost*. But I wasn’t complaining. Every building with my name on it helped wash away the legacy my augment forebears had left behind. The Federation loved symbols of redemption—and I was more than happy to play the part.

My recent victories had cast a flattering spotlight on Bajor. Worlds that once knew it only as “the planet near the wormhole” were now weighing investments and considering the establishment of diplomatic missions. Not bad for a world still scarred by the horrors of the Occupation.

“Let’s get started, T’Maz. Computer, initiate security identification scan,” I said, keeping my tone low—and mischievous—as I keyed in my verification code. “Recognize Gothic.”

A chorus of scanning beams lit up, casting bright, colorful streaks of light across the chamber. Predictably, the audience hushed, all eyes turning toward me as the system did its work.

So much for a subtle start.

“Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen, to yet another thrilling round of the Gothic Orbital Defense System testing,” I began with a wide, indulgent smile—just enough exasperation to earn a chuckle, even as the scanners swept over me down to the chromosome to prove that I was who I claimed to be. “Third time’s the charm, perhaps?” I added, raising my hands in mock surrender. That got the laugh I was aiming for.

“As the Romulans are, regrettably, unavailable to receive your grievances regarding last time’s... interruption, General Martok of the Klingon Empire has graciously volunteered to hear all

complaints regarding the second delay,” I continued, letting the humor build. “He assures me he’ll handle them with the full diplomatic subtlety for which his people are universally renowned. Personally, I’m looking forward to the show.”

That earned a louder laugh, and Martok, ever the good sport, shot an exaggerated glare at anyone who dared meet his gaze, drawing more amusement from the crowd.

“I joked to General Martok that, at this rate, I was half-expecting the Gorn, the Tholians, or maybe even the Organians to show up and delay us again,” I said with a laugh, joined by the crowd at the sheer absurdity of the idea. Those races hadn’t been encountered in centuries. “The Ferengi betting houses have the Organians listed at 10,000 to 1—mostly because no one’s heard from them in over a century and they’re practically Gods. Personally, I think—”

Naturally, because this is *my* life, I didn’t get to finish the sentence.

With a flash of brilliant white light, a smoking red envelope materialized mid-air, styled like something out of an ancient Earth wizarding school. It hovered ominously for a beat, parchment curling at the edges, radiating heat and drama in equal measure before it came to me.

Picard’s eyes widened in recognition—he’d seen this before. Not the letter, specifically, but the theatrical flair.

“Q,” he growled, like someone who’d just spotted an ex at a diplomatic gala.

I, for my part, recognized it instantly too—a Howler from the *Harry Potter* franchise. It wasn’t even scheduled to appear until the next installment in the holo-series, *Chamber of Secrets*, was released.

Given recent events, people freaked the fuck out—understandably—thinking someone had just beamed a bomb or some other nightmare into the room. I quickly signaled Tyr to stand down before he vaporized the envelope *and* the nearest dignitary.

“Calm down, everyone!” I shouted, my voice booming through the room via amplification.

“You’re not in any danger—I know exactly what this is.”

Anyone familiar with *Harry Potter* knew ignoring a Howler was a terrible fucking idea. So I reached out and carefully took the thing from the air. The envelope was thick parchment, the kind that smelled faintly of ink and old libraries, sealed with a blood-red ribbon and a heavy gold wax crest.

I cracked the seal.

The envelope tore itself from my fingers and hovered midair, opening wide. Then came that unmistakable, theatrical voice, echoing through the chamber with all the smug self-satisfaction of a god on vacation.

“The Organians have asked that I convey their appreciation for your generous invitation to observe,” Q’s voice rang out, each word laced with that familiar, galactic condescension.

“However, they find your three-dimensional reality a bit... *claustrophobic*.”

A pause, theatrical and deliberate.

“They send their regards from the fifth hyper-spatial fold, where time is optional, entropy is recreational, and causality is more of a *hobby*. They wish you well... and the best of luck with your adorably linear mortal endeavors.”

The voice lingered for one last flourish.

“Oh—and Gothic, they said they *loved* the statue. Very lifelike. They’re having it re-created in dark matter for their foyer.”

A brief chuckle.

“And Jean-Luc... still bald, I see. Consistency is so *comforting*.”

The Howler burst into flames, then vanished with a puff of glittering cosmic dust.

Silence. Heavy. Absolute.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Jarvis, ever the dutiful assistant, informed me that after I had made that joke with Martok, having seen the ridiculous chaos that was my life, he had used some of the discretionary funds available to them for spontaneous investment based on the sensor net data to place a 100 bars of latinum bet on the Gorn, Tholians, and Organians showing up. And, of course, I’d just won 1 million bars of latinum as a result.

The Ferengi, unsurprisingly, were furious. They’d already accused me of some sort of *cheating* to avoid paying out the winnings, as if the universe conspired to give me a windfall every time chaos erupted around me, or that I had some power over a God-like species like the Organians.

T’Maz shot me a look that could only be described as a Vulcan “told you so,” so I materialized a reclining chair and collapsed into it with a dramatic sigh. I braced myself for the next wave of pandemonium, but at least this time, I’d come out ahead and made some money from it.

Priorities, am I right?

XXXXX

“Are you in contact with the entity known as Q or the Organians?!” Pressman growled, clearly out of patience.

If I was going to be interrogated like a suspect in a holonovel, I was at least going to be comfortable. I’d already materialized my favorite recliner from my inventory into the secure meeting room we’d relocated to after the message. When he asked *this* time, I kicked up the footrest with theatrical defiance. Pressman correctly interpreted that for what it was: utter disrespect.

“I’ll say this again, slowly,” I replied, voice flat with fatigue. “I had *no* idea Q or the Organians were going to send that message. I have no secret hotline to omnipotent beings. No subspace frequency that dials into Mount Olympus.”

I waved vaguely at the ceiling.

“Like any sentient, I could shout their names into the air and *maybe* get a response. Are god-like beings always listening to us lowly mortals? Can they hear us when we stub our toe and curse their names? Who the hell knows?!”

President Moss and Captain Picard both fought back smiles—lips twitching at a question that veered more into theology and metaphysics than anything remotely actionable.

“Yet you stated you *expected* the Gorn, the Tholians, and the Organians to interrupt the testing,” Pressman continued, voice sharp, eyes gleaming with courtroom zeal. He was like a terrier with a scent, convinced he had found his ‘gotcha’ moment, like there was a jury in the room he was pandering to. “Sounds to me like you *did* know. Did you instruct them to involve themselves in our affairs?”

At that, General Martok, who had been lost in some brooding thought, perked up. Given the Klingon Empire’s long and complicated history with the Organians, he was probably wondering if the ancient near omnipotent meddlers were about to impose another pacifist decree on the Empire.

“Bah!” Martok finally barked, rising just slightly in his seat. “It was obvious to *anyone* with ears that Admiral Gothic was making a jest. A Klingon child could’ve recognized the tone. These Q and Organians are as close to gods as we are ever likely to meet—but to think Gothic could *command* them? That is more absurd than a targ learning diplomacy!”

While I was in semi-regular contact with Q, I had *no* freaking clue the Organians had overheard my little joke—nor did I get the sense Q was making it up wholesale. Embellishing, yes, colorful commentary, you betcha, outright lying, no, not likely. That just wasn’t his style. If the truth would sow just as much chaos as a lie, he’d take the honest route every time. Supposedly, that was his cosmic purpose: stirring the pot to keep the universe “healthy and strong.”

Assuming the Organians actually *had* sent a message, I was almost certain Q had sprinkled in some personal flair. The Organians I’d seen in *TOS* and *Enterprise* were cold, serious, and so detached from humanoid emotion that the idea of them wishing me luck with “my mortal endeavors” felt... off. That had Q’s smug fingerprints all over it.

Still, the bigger question gnawed at me: Did my role as Q’s so-called “champion of chaos” now mean I was officially on the radar of other god-tier entities? Were beings like the Organians—and the Prophets, who already watched me—really tuning in every time I opened my damn mouth?

If so... Lord help me. And Lord help the galaxy.

I might need to start watching what I said in the bedroom, too—just in case the Organians enjoy eavesdropping on pillow talk.

And honestly, I could *almost* understand Pressman's paranoia. After all, no one had heard a peep from the Organians in over a century. The last time they'd revealed themselves, it was to unilaterally end the Federation-Klingon War in 2267, freezing entire fleets in place with a snap of their omnipotent fingers. That war concluded with the Treaty of Organia—an agreement upheld not by diplomacy, but by divine fiat. It wasn't until the Khitomer Accords in 2293 that either side felt like they were back in charge of their own damn relations with the other.

Since then? Radio silence. No manifestations. No glowing energy beings descending from on high. Not a single trace of their presence anywhere in the quadrant. Even their homeworld had kind of *disappeared*, or been made inaccessible to us lowly mortals.

And yet here they were—kind of—making a whimsical cameo at my weapons test? What the serious fuck.

I was a kid of the '80s. *The Original Series* was never my thing, but even *I* knew about the Organians. I'd seen the old episode where they ended the war like cosmic hall monitors. It always baffled me. Why interfere just once, deliver a heavy-handed lecture on peace, and then disappear for a hundred years? They even claimed they'd "seen the future" and knew the Federation and Klingons would one day be allies.

But then... where the hell were they during the Dominion War, when billions died across the galaxy? They didn't lift a finger—not a whisper, not a sign. Granted, the Prophets *did* make an entire Dominion fleet vanish into the Celestial ether, so maybe the Organians figured their peers had it handled.

Or maybe the Prophets told them to back off—this was their war, *their* ancient feud with the Pah Wraiths bleeding into our reality. Who knows how these godlike beings coordinate... or if they even need to?

The only explanation that made any sense at all was some kind of temporal interference—meddling from the future during the Temporal Cold War, perhaps by other high-level entities and they were nudging history back onto the rails, course-correcting a future only they could see and us mortals couldn't prevent on our own. Because we sure as hell weren't getting it right on our own.

And when gods are involved, "cosmic course correction" is probably the most comforting and understandable explanation you're going to get.

"If it was just a joke, then why did you place a bet on the Organians with the Ferengi?" Pressman pressed with a self-satisfied smirk, like he'd just caught me red-handed. "A bet that paid out *one million* bars of latinum, I might add?"

I let out a sigh—because, yeah, that was harder to explain. Especially without revealing the fact that I had multiple AIs quietly handling things behind the scenes.

“I actually didn’t know the bet had been placed until *after* the Organian message,” I said honestly, spreading my hands.

That earned a ripple of surprise. Picard’s eyebrows rose, and several others exchanged confused glances.

“Could you help us understand how that’s even possible, Admiral?” Picard asked, his voice measured and diplomatic as always—intervening just in time to head off whatever indignant tirade Pressman was gearing up for.

“I use a virtual intelligence assistant for investment purposes,” I began, keeping my tone as even as possible. “It’s essentially a highly advanced predictive algorithm that monitors galactic events and analyzes patterns in real time to identify sensitive financial opportunities.”

Of course, that barely scratched the surface of what Jarvis—and all my AI ‘kids’—were capable of, but there was no need to open that can of warp eels just yet.

“I’ve authorized it to use a discretionary fund for autonomous investments. That includes gambling bets, apparently,” I added with a dry smile. “It can act without direct input from me, because it can synthesize and react to incoming data at speeds no organic mind—not even mine—could hope to match.”

Those kind of systems had existed in a crude form even back in my time, so I hoped it wasn’t too far-fetched for them to grasp.

Unsurprisingly, Martok looked completely baffled. Moss, Picard, and Pressman—citizens of a post-scarcity society that had largely abandoned the concept of currency or making money—weren’t faring much better.

“I’d suggest speaking with Mr. Data if you’d like a clearer explanation,” I said with a diplomatic shrug, unwilling to give this group a lecture on economics. “He can walk you through the mechanics. For the record, my VI also placed bets on the Gorn and the Tholians. Neither showed up, of course—but the odds were absurdly high, and the algorithm calculated the risk as worth the gamble.”

“Given your track record, sir, they haven’t shown up *yet*,” Pressman growled.

I was about to give a snarky reply when the truth hit me in the face like a bludger from Harry Potter. “Yes, well, honestly...that actually might be accurate. I’ve got to give you that one given the absurdity that rules my life at times.”

Pressman wasn’t amused. “100 bars of latinum is a significant sum. Are we really supposed to believe you’d risk that much on some throwaway joke?”

I fixed him with a cold look and let the sarcasm drip. “That might be a large sum *to you*, Admiral, but my VI doesn’t make bets based on punchlines. It performs real-time, high-frequency risk/benefit analysis. In this case, the massive payout potential skewed the model enough to justify risking 300 bars total. That’s not reckless—it’s math.”

“You’re a liar, sir, I will—” Pressman began shouting.

I put down the footrest and stood abruptly.

The sound of my chair scraping back was like a thunderclap in the silent room. Pressman recoiled, eyes wide, the rest of the room frozen.

“Admiral,” I said, my voice dropping to a chill as biting as an Andorian winter, “when the Romulans or Klingons interfered with the testing, we had options, actions we could take in response, things that we could realistically do. But when entities like the Q or the Organians involve themselves, there’s nothing we can do. Frankly, don’t tell the Ferengi—but I wouldn’t even call this an interruption. Everyone’s treating it like one, but it wasn’t. Your reaction to it was the interruption.”

I let the silence hang before continuing.

“Unless President Moss or Captain Picard has a direct comm link to the Q Continuum or the Organians, there’s no rational reason not to proceed. The test resumes in one hour, unless one of them says otherwise. Show up or don’t. I no longer give a damn.”

And with that, I turned and walked out, Tyr shadowing me without a word. Pressman’s furious shouting faded behind me, swallowed by the corridor.

XXXXX

My audience had dwindled a bit, I noticed as my gaze swept the room once again—a perfectly understandable reaction, given recent events. Honestly, I couldn’t blame them. If *I* were in their shoes, confronted with everything that had just happened, I’d be halfway to the door myself. Not the Organian thing, in particular, but the cumulative events. I was made of stronger stuff than that.

“If there are no objections, President Moss, Captain Picard, I’d like to proceed directly to the testing—before anything else bizarre and absurd has a chance to occur,” I quipped with a self-deprecating smile, hoping to cut the tension. Thankfully, the joke landed.

“I welcome that wholeheartedly, Admiral,” President Moss replied, her tone betraying the same weary exasperation we all felt.

Turning back to the control console, I expanded the holographic display of Kessik IV in all its majesty, zooming out to include the orbital testing platforms and the various ships in-system—my own vessel, the *Enterprise*, the *Cairo*, and Martok’s flagship, the *Emperor’s Wrath*.

“Activating full planetary shielding now,” I announced.

Within seconds, Kessik IV was encased in a shell of translucent blue—interlocking octagonal segments snapping into place across the stratosphere like a crystalline puzzle. The sight was nothing short of breathtaking. Even for those who had witnessed it before, the effect wasn’t lost on them; murmurs of appreciation rippled through the room.

Martok leaned in slightly, issuing a low, thoughtful “hmmm,” his eyes narrowing as he studied the fully enveloping shield.

“A shield isn’t meant to simply be beautiful,” I said quietly, letting the hush stretch a moment longer. “Though I imagine we can all agree—it is. But more than that, its primary purpose is singular: to protect the lives of the leasing world’s people. And no test would be complete without proving how well it fulfills that primary purpose.”

The holographic display rotated and zoomed in on a stark, shadowed region of the planet’s surface.

“This expanse is known as the Black Flats,” I began, my voice calm and measured. “A vast obsidian plain scorched by ancient volcanic upheaval—jagged, sharp, and utterly lifeless. It stretches for over a hundred miles in every direction, uninhabited and unwanted. The terrain is too hostile for settlement, and the sub-surface deposits hold little of value.”

The camera lingered on the razor-edged landscape, shimmering faintly under the system’s magnification. Obsidian was rather beautiful like that.

“Perfect for weapons testing,” I added. “And just so there’s no doubt—my defense net will shield this desolate region just as thoroughly as it would the heart of the capital.”

With a single command, I activated the communications array.

“Gothic to *Enterprise* and all ships—are you ready to proceed?” I asked, keeping the channel audio-only to preserve the gravity of the moment.

“We’re ready, Admiral,” came the crisp reply of Commander Riker. “Awaiting your command.”

“Then, Commander,” I said, locking my gaze on the holographic display above, “you have it. Fire.”

A moment later, a brilliant crimson beam lanced from the *Enterprise*, streaking through the void to strike the planetary shield above the Black Flats. The impact lit up the octagonal shield matrix like a constellation, each segment flaring to life in a dazzling burst of energy.

But the shield held.

It didn’t flicker. It didn’t crack. It didn’t even flex.

The only sound in the room was a collective breath, released in murmurs of awe.

“That phaser beam was fired at full power by a *Galaxy*-class starship,” I said, pride creeping into my voice. “As you can see, there was no penetration. Had it broken through, an area a dozen miles wide would’ve been turned to molten slag.”

I nodded to the hologram above. “Commander Riker, please initiate sustained fire—three, five, then ten-second bursts, full power—as previously arranged.”

“Aye, Admiral,” came Riker’s voice over comms.

The *Enterprise* responded immediately. Crimson energy lanced down in rhythmic waves—first a quick three-second burst, then five, then ten. The shield flared again with each impact, the interlocking segments glowing with intensity... but they held. No breach. No degradation.

“Impressive, Admiral,” Martok rumbled, the corner of his mouth twitching into something resembling a grin. There was a rare gleam in both his eyes. “But this is a pre-selected target area. How can we be sure the shield performs just as well elsewhere?”

I nodded respectfully at Martok.

“A fair question, General—and an important one,” I replied. “The short answer is yes: the shield will perform just as well no matter where it’s struck.”

I gestured toward the display. “The Black Flats was chosen strictly for safety. If the shielding had failed—or if the weapons fire had penetrated in some unexpected way—President Moss understandably didn’t want anyone harmed or the planet’s ecology disrupted. But let’s be honest: an enemy won’t be so considerate. They’ll aim for population centers, government facilities, military installations, and critical infrastructure. And that’s exactly what the Hur’q targeted when they invaded.”

I let that reality settle over the room before continuing.

“It would make no difference, though. The platforms generating the shielding are largely uniform. That particular shield segment is just as strong as anywhere else currently being protected by the GODS net shielding,” I answered. “You don’t have to take my word for it, General, please feel free to confirm with your officers aboard your ship that the detectable shield strength is uniform throughout. This means that the performance you saw here, would be the same even if a different shield segment was targeted.”

Martok seemed satisfied with my answer, nodding slightly before speaking quietly into a portable communicator for several seconds.

“My crew has verified your statements using our own sensors,” he reported with a grunt of approval.

“Mr. Data,” I said, turning slightly, “can you confirm the same using the *Enterprise*’s readings?”

Data responded immediately, as though he had anticipated the request.

“Confirmed, Admiral. The readings are consistent across all sensor arrays.”

“As many of you know, many shield systems are more effective against continuous energy beams than against pulse fire,” I explained. “The Klingon Bird-of-Prey design exploits that common vulnerability with its wing-mounted disruptor cannons, which fire exclusively in pulse or intermittent mode. However, it makes no difference to the GODS Net shielding.”

“Commander Riker, begin pulse fire mode. Full power. You may select the fire pattern.”

The *Enterprise* began firing bursts of phaser energy—short, rapid pulses rather than sustained beams—striking different locations across the shield grid with varying timing and intensity. When the barrage stopped, the result was the same: no visible damage.

“A unique feature of the GODS Net is its adaptability, even in its shielding,” I said, gesturing to the hologram with both hands. “The defense platforms are equipped with powerful sensors and a database of the quadrant’s most frequently encountered weapon systems. The shield frequencies and harmonics are dynamic, adjusting in real time to better resist incoming fire. When the system recognized the *Enterprise*, the shield automatically optimized itself to better counter Federation and Starfleet weapon signatures.”

“Wouldn’t that weaken the shield’s protection if an enemy used multiple weapon?” Commander LaForge asked, leaning in with clear interest. “Not every enemy fields ships of the same type—pirates and criminal syndicates often deploy vessels from many different species.”

“Another great question,” I said, nodding. It was always wise to compliment the questioner—it helped prime them to receive your answer more favorably. In this case, though, the compliment was well deserved. It was a great question, and I was glad he had asked it.

“While the shield dynamically adjusted to better resist Starfleet weaponry in this case, it still provides robust, comprehensive protection—even against multiple or varied attack types. Just as the GODS Net adapts to Federation-based designs, it can also shift to a generalized shielding configuration, offering broad-spectrum defense effective against widely different weapon technologies.”

I glanced over at General Martok—and an idea began to form.

“General Martok, the original test parameters didn’t account for a Klingon presence,” I said, adjusting my plans on the fly as a good salesman did. “But your ship and its disruptor weaponry present an excellent opportunity to broaden the scope of our testing. Assuming President Moss has no objection, would you be willing to participate by targeting the designated test coordinates?”

Martok glanced toward President Moss, silently seeking her approval. She paused for a moment, clearly weighing the implications, then gave a single, deliberate nod.

“We would be honored,” Martok replied. “Relay your instructions, and I will see that my crew carries them out.”

“Excellent. T’Maz, please transmit the targeting coordinates to the *Emperor’s Wrath*,” I ordered.

“The *Emperor’s Wrath* is a *Vor’cha*-class attack cruiser—one of the Klingon Empire’s newest, largest, and most powerful warships. Its arsenal is formidable enough to reduce Kessik IV to ash from orbit, even rendering the planet uninhabitable for centuries to come. It boasts a forward disruptor cannon capable of firing both continuous and pulsed beams, along with an array of torpedoes. It is, without question, a triumph of Klingon starship design.”

I paused, then added with theatrical flair, “Unfortunately, as powerful as it is, it’s still no match for the GODS Net. No offense, General.”

Martok responded with a booming laugh. “Some offense taken, sir!”

That was one of the reasons I liked Martok—unlike Worf, he hadn’t lost his sense of humor.

“General, since we haven’t pre-selected any firing patterns, please instruct your crew to engage their disruptors at will,” I said.

“Jey!” Martok barked into his communicator.

After a brief pause as the *Emperor’s Wrath* repositioned, it opened fire.

Lances of neon-green disruptor energy erupted from the ship’s main cannon and auxiliary batteries. True to Klingon doctrine, they didn’t ease into the assault—they launched into full bombardment from the start. For thirty unrelenting seconds, the ship rained fire on the shield grid. They even targeted the defense platforms themselves—a tactically sound choice.

Whoever was in charge on Martok’s ship got a little too trigger happy as they also fired photon torpedoes at the planet, which was not supposed to happen.

Martok looked furious and was just about to shout into his communicator when I raised a hand, signaling him to stand down and let the test continue.

First came a barrage of disruptor beams—rapid, precise, and relentless. Then a single photon torpedo streaked toward the shield grid. Moments later, a full spread followed, detonating in concert with renewed disruptor fire.

No one would be able to say this wasn’t a full-throated trial of the system’s resilience.

I sent a quick signal to the *Enterprise*, instructing them to fire their own torpedoes ahead of schedule. Crimson bolts joined the chaos, striking the grid in synchronized precision.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the weapons fire ceased. Within thirty seconds, the barrage was over—though the weapon ports on Martok’s ship still glowed faintly with residual energy.

Silence followed. Absolute, reverent silence.

Picard looked stunned, Pressman had gone pale, and President Moss wore the relieved expression of someone who’d just received confirmation that she hadn’t staked her career on a fraud. No matter how much she liked me, she had put a lot on the line for me. With this she’d be able to shutdown any naysayers in her government.

But Martok—Martok was grinning ear to ear, a deep, hearty laugh rumbling from his chest.

“Well,” I said, turning slightly to glance at the Betazoid and Risian ambassadors. Both were laser-focused on the shield demonstration—especially the Risian, who was also representing the pacifist Halkans, a people interested in the GODS net solely for its defensive promise, which I

had just proven. “That was a bit more... spirited than I intended, but I think the results speak for themselves.”

Picard collected himself quickly, rising with a diplomatic smile.

“Yes, well,” he said, adjusting his uniform, smoothing out the wrinkles, “perhaps now would be a good time to break for some light refreshments.”

XXXXX

The short break for refreshments had the intended effect. My sensors picked up dozens of animated conversations—delegates now genuinely intrigued by the defense net. The enthusiasm wasn’t surprising; if Picard’s report came back favorable, the Federation would foot the bill, not the individual planets.

Post-scarcity society or not, planetary governments still made decisions a hell of a lot faster when someone else was paying. Funny how some things hadn’t changed, despite their sanctimonious attitude about money in the Federation.

When everyone returned to their seats, a quiet buzz of anticipation lingered in the air. Eyes were brighter, postures more engaged—they were eager to see what came next.

“Planetary shielding is just one facet of the GODS net,” I began as the lights dimmed again. “It also possesses powerful offensive capabilities. They go hand-in-hand.”

As expected, General Martok visibly perked up at that.

I zoomed in on the massive rock drifting near the planet.

“This is the asteroid Eros,” I began. “We tractored it into position from the outer edge of the star system. It’s approximately 4.5 billion years old—roughly the same age as this star system and its planets. Composed of silicate rock and dense nickel-iron metal, it spans 20.5 by 8 by 8 miles and weighs over 70 trillion tons. It likely formed during the early stages of planetary accretion.”

I reached out to activate the holographic interface, causing the slowly rotating model of Eros to spin gently before the audience, to convey just how large it was.

“Unfortunately for Eros, its long cosmic journey ends today. It has been selected to demonstrate the offensive capabilities of the GODS net. Later, we’ll conduct a live combat simulation using nearby ships firing laser-based weaponry calibrated to simulate various energy yields. But for the demonstration to be credible, we need to establish a baseline with actual firepower.”

I halted the hologram’s rotation, transitioning smoothly to a real-time feed of the planet and the asteroid, then zoomed in on one of the defense platforms.

“The protrusions along the sides of each platform house shield emitters, sensors, propulsion systems, cloaking devices, and other classified technologies,” I explained, as the relevant section of the platform illuminated within the hologram. “But at the very tip of the pyramid-like structure is its primary weapon: a powerful beam emitter.”

As I spoke, the apex of the platform's pyramid shape lit up to highlight the area in question.

"When preparing to fire, armored plating retracts to reveal the weapon's firing aperture—designed to shield it from micro-meteorites and other debris. While this protection may seem redundant, since each platform operates with navigational shielding similar to that of a starship, I believe strongly in redundancy and, frankly, overkill when it comes to defensive and offensive systems."

I paused just long enough for the weight of that statement to settle, then gestured toward the asteroid.

"As I will now demonstrate."

A bright crimson targeting reticule appeared on the surface of Eros.

"T'Maz, fire."

The firing aperture of one of the platforms oriented toward Eros glowed intensely before unleashing a thick crimson beam of energy. It lanced through the vacuum of space and slammed into the asteroid's surface with brutal precision. A massive crater—several miles across and nearly a mile deep—was instantly carved into the rock.

Sensor overlays shimmered to life above the hologram, displaying real-time data: crater dimensions, material displacement, particle dispersion, and thermal yield.

"Impressive," Martok said, narrowing his eyes, pointing at Eros. "But the asteroid is unshielded."

"True," I acknowledged with a knowing smile. "Which is why that shot was only at twenty-five percent power."

Before anyone could respond, the same platform fired again—this time the beam blazed even brighter, more intense. It struck Eros with overwhelming force, vaporizing rock and gouging out an even deeper and wider crater.

"Sir, the *Enterprise* confirms the blast yields reported," LaForge informed Picard, his voice steady with the technical data. "At full power, the energy yields are five times higher than what the *Enterprise* itself can generate, even at maximum power—and that was with a single platform."

I nodded, anticipating the question. "Correct. Now, while not every platform will be in position to fire on an enemy at all times, the distribution pattern ensures that at least eight platforms are within firing range, no matter where the enemy is located. You'll see why that's important later. Rest assured, the platforms are strategically placed in orbit, surrounding the specific leasing planet for maximum coverage taking into account defensive priorities and likely high-value enemy targets."

I gestured to the hologram as T'Maz highlighted the platforms, showing their positions in relation to enemy ships in various locations. "For higher-value targets—those likely to be prioritized by an enemy—coverage is increased. We minimize redundant coverage over areas

like the Black Flats, which are highly unlikely to see specific targeting, and instead focus on those more vulnerable regions with higher populations or critical infrastructure.”

“I see you’ve chosen to field phaser energy weapons,” Martok remarked, his tone carefully measured. “We Klingons, of course, favor disruptor-based weapons. Each technology, however, has its own strengths and weaknesses.”

“You’re absolutely right, General. And that’s big of you to admit,” I acknowledged with a small joke. “Each technology has its advantages. For instance, disruptor weapons proved far more effective against the Hur’q, both their soldiers and their ships, which relied on advanced armor rather than electromagnetic shielding.”

I paused, looking directly at Martok. “That’s why I opted to purchase handheld disruptor weaponry for the Bajoran Defense Forces—it was the better fit for that specific enemy. But when it comes to the choice you’re referring to, I didn’t go down that path and limit myself, at least not in the way you’re assuming.”

Martok raised an eyebrow. “I don’t understand.”

“Allow me to show you,” I said, gesturing to T’Maz.

The platform’s firing aperture flared to life in green this time, sending a beam of disruptor energy crashing into the surface of Eros, carving even more devastation into the asteroid. Disruptor energy, as always, proved far more effective against unshielded targets. The choice of color for the energy type was purposeful because that’s what people would expect.

A moment later, the aperture glowed bright orange before another shot erupted from the platform.

Martok’s jaw dropped in astonishment as he realized what I had just happened.

“The Gothic Orbital Defense platforms are equipped with multiple firing modes—phaser, disruptor, or forced plasma beam. You can choose whichever is most effective in the moment,” I explained to the now-silent room. “Madame President, imagine those Hur’q ships back in orbit. The Hur’q primarily relied on armor to protect their vessels. Now picture being able to switch to disruptors dynamically, counteracting their armor far more efficiently than phasers could. Envision a fleet of modern starships, caught in a crossfire from multiple platforms, each using different weapon energy types.”

I turned toward LaForge. “Mr. LaForge, what do you think the most likely outcome would be in that scenario?”

LaForge was lost in thought, his gaze fixed on the platform display. It took him a moment to snap back to the present before he responded.

"Nothing good," LaForge muttered, his eyes still glued to the platform. It seemed I had either sparked a new train of thought or a bit of professional jealousy. "Most shield systems take a 'jack of all trades' approach—effective against a wide range of weapon types, but never really exceptional at defending against any one of them. The alternative is a more specialized shield,

tailored to counter a particular enemy who likely field ships with common technologies. Races with long-standing foes often prefer the latter, focusing on the weapons they most often encounter."

"Admiral, how did you manage to create a multi-mode weapon system?" Data inquired, his voice brimming with curiosity. "That's quite a remarkable technical feat."

"That, Mr. Data, is 100 classified," I said, my tone firm. "It's one of the reasons I'm leasing the technology rather than selling it outright."

Though my answer didn't satisfy anyone, they seemed to grasp the reasoning behind it.

"Blast yields are important, certainly," I continued, "but as I recently shared with General Martok, in the hands of a skilled warrior, even a butter knife can be more lethal than the sharpest, most perfectly forged bat'leth in the hands of a novice." I paused for effect. "In many ways, it's not just the weapon itself but the targeting systems that make all the difference, the laser scalpel, rather than the hammer. After all, even a hand phaser can destroy a shuttlecraft if you hit the right spot. And I believe the targeting programs in the GODS net are what truly set it apart. Allow me to demonstrate."

I gestured to T'Maz, and immediately, multiple platforms within range of Eros began firing continuous beams. As each beam shot out, the platforms' micro-reaction control thrusters made tiny, almost imperceptible adjustments, subtly altering each energy beam's path. Despite the complex firing pattern, not a single beam crossed. It was a perfect division of labor and precision that would be near impossible for an organic being to match.

In the distance, my name, "Gothic," appeared in towering letters—half a kilometer tall—written in bold, striking font, visible from an incredible distance.

"System-assisted targeting is available, whether targets are selected manually or the auto-defense mode is engaged," I said, my tone heavy with purpose as I glanced meaningfully at the Risian ambassador. "Whether you're a seasoned weapons officer with years of training and experience or a child with no formal experience, the GODS net can defend your world from any threat. With auto-defense mode, for instance, the system itself would divide up and prioritize targets, coordinate firing patterns for each individual platform, and adjust shielding and weapon types to counter the enemy's strengths as efficiently and ruthlessly as possible. The system's targeting program has been honed over tens of thousands of simulated battles, drawing from centuries of sensor data and combat history. And the more sensor data it gathers while deployed in orbit, the better it will understand how to best defend your worlds. It is both an impenetrable shield and a devastating sword."

I paused, letting the weight of my words hang in the air.

"But I'm a firm believer in the philosophy of overkill," I said solemnly. "Sure, you can take down a giant with a laser scalpel—but it's an uphill battle, one that relies on precision, luck, and more than a little desperation. For threats of truly staggering power, I decided not to depend on luck. I decided to make my own."

I allowed a moment's silence before continuing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce: collaborative fire mode.”

Most of the audience stared at me, expressions ranging from curiosity to confusion. Clearly, the concept didn't land—yet.

Unable to help myself, I grinned and threw my arms slightly wide.

“Now witness the firepower of this fully armed and operational battle station!” I proclaimed, before coughing sheepishly. “Er... I mean, orbital defense net.”

I turned back toward the hologram, resisting the urge to wink, seemingly to the air. Somewhere, in some higher dimension, I felt certain Q was applauding.

On the display, eight GODS platforms moved with eerie precision—seven forming a perfect ring around a central eighth, all orienting as one toward Eros.

The seven surrounding platforms began charging, energy intensifying as they built toward a seeming overload. Then, in synchronized precision, each one fired a beam of pure power into the central platform. The hub platform absorbed the incoming energy, its capacitors glowing ominously—before releasing a single, colossal lance of green disruptor energy that tore across space and struck Eros dead center.

For a moment, the asteroid held, absorbing the beam as its shimmered red-hot under the surface—until, in a sudden and cataclysmic flash, it ruptured from within. The ancient rock exploded, hurling glowing fragments in every direction like sparks from a dying star.

I watched proudly, wordlessly, as the demonstration unfolded in all its terrible elegance.

“Collaborative fire mode can be executed in clusters of four, six, or eight platforms,” I said at last, eyes still fixed on the glowing debris cloud. “Most targets wouldn't justify using eight—committing that many platforms at once introduces strategic vulnerabilities, and it's not something I recommend lightly. But for a stationary target like Eros, something that won't dodge or counterattack, it made for a fitting demonstration.”

I let the silence hang a beat before continuing.

“A ship the size of a *Vor'cha*, or any slow-moving battleship, would be an ideal real-world application. The charge-up sequence takes time, and the energy buildup is hard to miss—so this mode is best used when you're sure the enemy won't, or can't, move.”

The spreading debris haloed the planet, fragments trailing faint energy signatures. It was, in its own way, almost beautiful.

“Any questions?” I asked, not turning around.

Silence answered me.

When I finally turned, I saw it plainly on their faces: awe, shock, and just a hint of fear.

Mission accomplished.

At least Martok looked like a kid on his birthday.

XXXXX

Captain Picard, President Moss, and Admiral Pressman approached. The Admiral, unsurprisingly, wore a smug expression and walked like he had something to prove.

“Your little stunt with the asteroid has created a navigational hazard that’ll disrupt ship traffic in this system for years,” Pressman said, clearly savoring the moment. “I fully intend to file a complaint with the Federation Council—demanding that you be assessed fines for cleanup and for the impact on this world’s interstellar trade. And beyond that, I can’t in good conscience allow further testing. It poses an unacceptable risk to passing ships and the support craft slated for later phases.”

President Moss blinked in surprise, clearly caught off guard. She took a slow breath, likely preparing to remind Pressman that every test had been conducted with her full approval.

Picard, for his part, merely glanced at Pressman with mild confusion—clearly not privy to whatever stunt the Admiral had just tried to pull. It was obvious Pressman hadn’t bothered to loop either of them in before making his move.

It didn’t come as a surprise, of course. That’s the benefit of monitoring unprotected conversations with technology that—truthfully—wasn’t even all that advanced. Parsing through dozens of simultaneous chats for actionable intel might take both time and effort, but that’s exactly what Jarvis and other AIs excel at.

I gave President Moss a subtle glance and the faintest shake of my head. She caught the signal and wisely chose to hold her tongue.

Facing the now-curious audience, I summoned a wide, easy smile while silently dispatching instructions to Jarvis and T’Maz.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I began smoothly, “Admiral Pressman has just raised a concern that the destruction of Eros has created a navigational hazard within this system.”

There were a few murmurs in the crowd.

“Fortunately, due to how closely we tractored Eros into planetary orbit, the vast majority of the debris will naturally fall into the planet’s gravity well and harmlessly burn up in the atmosphere. That said—this is a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the precision of the Gothic Orbital Defense System’s targeting algorithms.”

I gestured toward the holographic projection of Kessik IV. Thousands of orange rings lit up in orbit, each one representing a fragment of the destroyed asteroid. Dotted trajectories traced their projected courses—most arcing back toward the planet because gravity was pulling them back.

“I respectfully disagree with Admiral Pressman’s assessment,” I said calmly. “The smaller fragments pose no threat at all; any standard navigational deflector could handle them. The larger ones? Easily avoided by even a half-decent pilot.”

I let the implication settle in before flashing a grin and glancing at Pressman. “But really—who wants to rely on luck and reflexes when there’s a better way?”

I turned back to the audience, voice rising with energy. “And thanks to the Admiral’s timely objection, we now have the perfect opportunity to demonstrate just how precise the GODS net really is.”

I looked back at Pressman and gave him a cheeky wink.

“Thank you, Admiral, for giving me the opportunity to show off. T’Maz—fire.”

At my command, every platform on that side of the planet reoriented in eerily perfect synchrony. A moment later, they opened fire—pulse-firing thousands of bolts of energy into the void with breathtaking speed and precision. Each fragment of debris was hit multiple times, ensuring complete vaporization before the platforms made micro adjustments to target the next piece of debris with mechanical efficiency no living being could match.

One by one, the orange-highlighted fragments on the hologram began to vanish, each flash marking the vaporization of another hazard. The GODS net didn’t miss. It didn’t hesitate. It executed its task with ruthless precision.

“I think we can all agree,” I said quietly, watching the spectacle unfold, “this level of precision is well beyond the reach of even the most seasoned of weapon officers.”

No one responded. No one needed to. They weren’t looking at me—they were too focused on the system at work.

Five minutes later, the last fragment blinked out of existence. The demonstration was complete.

XXXXX

"President Moss, I believe this group might appreciate a demonstration that’s a little less... energetic," I said. "With your permission, I’d like to begin the computer intrusion and command-link disruption test."

"I quite agree, Admiral. Please proceed," Moss replied with a nod.

"Lieutenant Commander Data is uniquely suited to test this aspect of the defense net’s security protocols," I continued, turning to Picard and Data. "Given his nature, there’s no better candidate to attempt an intrusion. He’ll be assisted remotely by officers aboard both the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo*. The GODS net’s power is great, and the potential for misuse, by any party, is equally great, which is why the security protocols the system uses are far beyond what is required by Federation law. Mr. Data will now attempt to breach those security protocols and safeguards—and we’ll narrate his progress as he does."

I took a seat beside President Moss as Mr. Data stepped up to the console.

"Still think I was full of it?" I whispered to her with a grin.

"Not for a second," she whispered back, smirking.

I raised an eyebrow. "Uh huh."

Data began, holding a tricorder in one hand: "The most likely point of intrusion is the planet-based command-and-control hardware. I will begin my attempt there."

He glanced around the room, addressing the crowd with his usual calm precision. "Since Admiral Gothic is currently the only authorized user in the system, I have— with his permission—utilized medical and sensor scans taken during our time together. I've cross-referenced his DNA and biometric data stored in the *Enterprise's* computer to use in attempting to bypass the identity verification protocols. This reflects a likely vector of attack, as a determined intruder would most likely attempt to impersonate an authorized user."

"I agree. The 'human' element—if you'll pardon the term—is almost always the weakest link in any security system," I added. "If a group as capable as the Tal Shiar decided to compromise a high-level user, acquiring DNA and medical scans would be trivial. And that's assuming they didn't simply bribe or coerce the user directly—by perhaps threatening their families. I won't go into detail about the countermeasures in place to prevent those scenarios, but I will say this: the identity verification includes real-time biometric analysis, monitoring for stress levels and other physiological markers that would be inconsistent with normal user behavior."

"Computer, recognize Gothic," Data said aloud.

But it was *my* voice that he used. He continued working the tricorder as the system initiated its series of identity scans.

"I am using my tricorder to transmit biometric data that matches Admiral Gothic's physiological profile," Data reported, eyes focused intently on the device in his hands.

The system's sensor beams swept over him for several seconds. His tricorder returned simulated readings mimicking mine—DNA, vitals, neural patterns. Then, without warning, the scan ceased and the entire holographic control interface vanished.

"Identity not verified. Unauthorized access. Intrusion detected," the computer announced in Natasha's voice, calm but unmistakably final.

A containment field snapped into place around Data, a glowing shield bubble locking him in.

"I admit, I am uncertain how my attempt was detected, and so quickly," Data said, tilting his head slightly in thought.

I hadn't even needed to cheat. The security protocols—designed by me and refined by my AI children—had done exactly what they were meant to: detect the intrusion and respond appropriately.

"As you can see," I said, gesturing toward the containment field, "Mr. Data has been confined within a containment and dampening field, which has disabled his tricorder and all the

technology on his person. Simultaneously, an alert was sent to the designated authorities of the leasing world—parameters set by them, of course.”

I let that sink in for a beat before continuing. “This is the mildest possible response. The leasing planet can customize the defense net’s reaction to unauthorized access. Some may prefer... more decisive measures.”

The shield bubble deactivated, releasing Mr. Data. The holographic interface reappeared—only now, it had transformed into familiar Starfleet-style LCARS consoles.

“The previous consoles were purely holographic—a visual link to the GODS platforms in orbit,” I explained. “But for this next phase, Mr. Data will interface directly with the system.”

I turned to the audience. “While Mr. Data is obviously exceptional, he serves as a proxy for a real-world threat. Neural interfaces, cranial implants, black-market cybernetic enhancements—these tools are increasingly common among sophisticated hackers and hostile operatives. The GODS net must be secure against them all.”

Mr. Data took a seat at the console as Mr. LaForge stepped forward, carefully opening an access port on Data’s skull, raising a flap of hair to expose Data’s internal circuitry. He connected what amounted to the 24th century’s version of a USB cable, linking Data’s internal systems directly to an ODN access terminal wired into the GODS network. Across the room, General Martok gave a low, disapproving growl at the sight.

“Beginning attempt to bypass security protocols,” Data announced calmly. The lights around the port in his head flickered to life, pulsing with the unmistakable rhythm of intense computational effort.

“Unauthorized access detected,” Natasha’s voice stated coolly. “Deploying countermeasures.”

A split second later, a surge of energy snapped down the access line. Data stiffened, his body jerking sharply as the current coursed through him. He nearly toppled from the chair.

“Mr. Data!” Captain Picard was instantly on his feet, alarmed.

“Don’t worry, Captain,” LaForge said, already scanning his friend with a tricorder. “Data and I anticipated this outcome. Admiral Gothic intentionally reduced the countermeasure’s energy output to avoid causing permanent damage. His systems should reboot momentarily.”

As if on cue, Data suddenly sat upright in his chair, blinking once as his systems came back online.

“A curious sensation,” he said evenly. “Captain, I was unable to penetrate even the outermost layer of the security protocols, despite my best efforts, utilizing all available methods.”

“That was only a few seconds, Mr. Data,” Picard replied, brows furrowed. “Surely that’s not enough time to fully assess the system’s security.”

Data shook his head. “In this case, it was. I could not even establish a foothold. The system architecture appears to actively adapt and reconfigures in response to intrusion attempts, rendering each new approach obsolete before it can take effect.”

Data tilted his head in that familiar, analytical way.

“For an android, sir, a few seconds in the digital realm can be the equivalent of an eternity,” he replied, before turning to me. “Admiral, based on both my attempts and the ongoing efforts of my colleagues in orbit, I am prepared to certify that your security protocols exceed the standards mandated by Federation law for a system of this type. In fact, this exercise has revealed several intriguing possibilities that Mr. LaForge and I may wish to incorporate into the *Enterprise*’s own systems.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Mr. Data,” I said, grinning.

Behind the scenes, Natasha and Hermione had been monitoring his intrusion attempts closely. While they hadn’t needed to intervene—Data had never even breached the outer defenses—they’d gleaned valuable insights from the attempt. By the time he finished his verbal report, they had already implemented several incremental improvements to the system’s defenses.

That was the beauty of a learning system: each intrusion attempt, even a failed one, was another opportunity to evolve and improve. As the GODS network rolled out to other worlds, more attempts were inevitable. But with every challenge, the system would adapt—and grow stronger.

Of course, if someone were to bring the technology of an ancient, hyper-advanced elder civilization to bear—a scenario I considered extremely unlikely—then yes, the system might not hold up nearly as well. We’d all have much bigger problems if they possessed that kind of tech. But in such a case, my AIs would respond with every ounce of processing power available in this galaxy... and a few others in the other dimensions I’d visited.

“Admiral, I’m impressed,” President Moss said, her expression thoughtful. “But no security is perfect. Given the potential devastation this system could cause if compromised, how do we stop it?”

A fair question—and one the entire audience was likely asking themselves.

“A great question, Madame President,” I replied with a nod. “And the answer is twofold. First, there are embedded failsafes. If the system detects an intrusion it cannot contain—or receives an order to take extreme actions, such as targeting your own ships or citizens without appropriate justification—it will automatically sever its connection to your command-and-control infrastructure. That decision is made internally, without outside input.”

I gestured toward the holographic display behind me.

“From there, it can either switch into an autonomous defense mode based on pre-established parameters—for example, engaging hostile fleets—or it can be programmed to shut down entirely, handing protection of your world back to the systems you had in place before adopting

ours. Either way, the leasing government retains ultimate authority over how conservative or aggressive the system should be when failsafes activate.”

“Why couldn’t I, as the planet’s president, reestablish control myself in that kind of scenario?” Moss asked, brows furrowed in thought.

“In that scenario,” I said with a grimace, “you’ve likely already lost full control—through rebellion, insurrection, infiltration... or worse. You may have been captured, coerced, or even killed. These are, of course, extreme cases—rare outside of full-scale war.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “And the second part of your answer?”

“If the legitimate government has fallen,” I said, “and hostile forces—whether foreign or domestic—have seized control, and if the safeguards that the leasing planet have put in place prevent an appropriate response, then the GODS net is programmed to self-destruct rather than risk being used against your people.”

I tapped my omnitool, sending the transmission. “I’ve just delivered a classified report to your office. It outlines several extreme-case scenarios and provides recommendations on how to configure your lease agreement to minimize those risks. The guidance is tailored to your planetary infrastructure and current threat landscape.”

“Thank you for the information, Admiral,” Moss replied, her tone pensive. “Each new detail I learn about your technology only reinforces how thoroughly you’ve considered every aspect of it.”

“It will take some time to prepare the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* for the combat simulation,” Picard interjected, glancing around the room. “I suggest a break for lunch, unless there are any objections?”

No one voiced any dissent.

So far, so good, I thought.

XXXXX

At the so-called “VIP” table sat the Betazoid and Risian ambassadors, General Martok, President Moss, Captain Picard—flanked by LaForge and Data—Admiral Pressman, Captain Jellico, T’Maz, and myself.

Commander Riker and Commander Wong had been invited to join us for lunch but had declined, remaining aboard their ships to oversee the deployment preparations for the upcoming combat simulation. Understandably so—while a starship like the *Enterprise* always carried numerous support craft, only a fraction were typically flight-ready at a moment’s notice. This was likely the first time since its launch that the *Enterprise* would deploy its entire contingent simultaneously for a single mission. Both ships had spent a lot of time preparing in their holodecks for this very scenario.

As guests helped themselves to the well-appointed buffet—featuring many dishes from the worlds of the audience in attendance—I turned to Captain Picard.

“Captain, I’m curious,” I began, “do you have any impressions of the testing so far that you’re willing to share?”

As you might have guessed, General Martok was the only one who’d touched the replicated gagh, bregit lung, roast targ, and pipius claw. Under different circumstances, I might have been tempted to sample a few of those Klingon foods myself—but today, I had a job to do.

“The testing isn’t even complete! Picard can’t—” Pressman began, but President Moss silenced him with a raised hand.

“I’m curious as well, Captain,” she said, turning to Picard.

Picard dabbed his lips with a cloth napkin, taking a moment to compose his thoughts. It was a small gesture—but a clever one. A subtle way to buy time without saying a word.

“You understand, of course, that I’ve not yet begun drafting my official report to Starfleet or the Federation Council,” Picard said, his gaze steady on President Moss. “What I offer now are merely preliminary impressions.”

She nodded in acknowledgment, but I suspected—like me—she valued these unfiltered insights even more than the polished version that would eventually follow.

“Thus far, I’ve been thoroughly impressed,” Picard continued. “My officers have expressed similar sentiments. The planetary shielding system alone is a remarkable technical achievement—one that could redefine planetary defense for generations across this quadrant.”

He paused, his tone shifting slightly. “That said, the offensive capabilities of the Gothic Orbital Defense System give me reason for concern. The destruction of the Eros asteroid was... sobering.”

“Bah, it was a lifeless rock,” Martok growled around a mouthful of food, waving one hand dismissively in the air. “A purely defensive system is the first step to surrender. Without the strength to strike back, you invite defeat, especially if you come to overly rely on a shield alone.”

“I’ll admit, Captain,” Moss began, her voice low, reflective, “if I had witnessed this demonstration even a few months ago, I might have seen it as excessive—unnecessary, dangerous, perhaps even provocatively overpowered for a world like mine.”

She paused, and in that breath her demeanor shifted—her aura hardening into something steel-edged and commanding. The change was so palpable, it drew every eye at the table.

“But that was before.” Her voice was colder now. “Before my world was invaded. Before my people were slaughtered, brutalized... eaten.”

The silence that followed was absolute. No one dared speak. They all sensed she wasn’t finished.

“For the entirety of my presidency, I took solace and comfort in the fact that while my world, my home, is the greatest and most important in all the universe to me, it is objectively, strategically, unimportant in many ways to the Federation and to the greater galaxy. My people, while great, are few in number compared to the older, more settled member worlds. We have never needed to maintain a substantial military. Our role in galactic trade has mostly revolved around our dilithium deposits. And we believed—naïvely, perhaps—that Starfleet’s protection would always be sufficient.”

She cast a sharp glance at Pressman, who had opened his mouth to interject. The look alone was enough to silence him.

“When the Hur’q invaded, the *Cairo* was more than twenty-four hours away,” she said, her voice steady but laced with pain. “And as I’ve come to understand all too well—twenty-four hours is more than enough time for all manners of horrors.”

She paused, letting the weight of those words settle.

“I would not wish what my people endured on even our worst enemies. Not even the Romulans, who almost certainly tried to assassinate me—and my people. The only reason it wasn’t worse, the only reason there’s still a world to defend, is because Admiral Gothic chose to act. He owed us nothing. But he came anyway.”

She looked at me with such gratitude in her eyes, it moved me. The Betazoid ambassador, who could likely hear President Moss’ thoughts, was moved to tears herself.

“I made a promise—to myself and to my people—that I would never allow such a thing to happen again,” she said firmly. “Once, I might have shared your unease, Captain, at the sheer destructive potential of the GODS net. But not anymore. When I saw it in action today, I wasn’t horrified. I was relieved. For the first time since the invasion, I saw a path forward—a way to protect my world even if Starfleet is days away at maximum warp.”

She paused, her voice softer but no less resolute. “My perspective on such things has changed forever.”

Silence followed. Heavy, reflective silence. Even Martok, who was never one to temper his opinions, offered only a solemn nod.

“I once would have felt as you did as well, Madame President,” said Ambassador Synne of Risa, her voice quiet but unwavering. “The Hur’q war has stripped away many illusions. On Risa, we see the galaxy’s wounds in the hearts of our visitors—tourists who arrive smiling but carry trauma in their eyes. And we felt that pain directly when our dear friends, the Halkans, were so callously and uncaringly killed by the Romulans just to gain access to this very test.”

Moss nodded slowly, her expression one of shared sorrow and renewed resolve.

“Yes,” Moss said quietly, “our eyes were opened—to just how vulnerable we were, and how much we had come to rely on the distant strength of others.”

Picard listened, visibly pained at several points in the conversation, but he refrained from offering another defense of Starfleet's performance under the dire circumstances of the Hur'q war.

"The Hur'q invasion has been a brutal awakening, opening many eyes in the Federation," he finally said, his voice somber. "It has laid bare many of the Federation's vulnerabilities... systemic shortcomings that we can no longer afford to ignore." He hesitated, then added, "Including my own failures, as difficult as that is to admit."

His eyes found mine—perhaps recalling our earlier conversation, where I had pointed out the Federation's vast, untapped shipbuilding capacity, and its continued reliance on century-old starship designs, fielded in numbers far too small for a polity of its scale.

"I would fully support the widespread adoption of planetary shielding throughout the Federation," Picard continued. "My concern lies with the offensive capabilities of the GODS system—its sheer power, its potential for misuse, and the inevitable escalating arms race it could ignite across the quadrant."

That escalation, might be exactly what the quadrant needs if it had any chance to survive the Dominion War, I thought, especially with all the butterflies I had introduced.

"Bah!" Martok growled. "The Federation is far too concerned with the feelings of its enemies. Choosing to remain weak when you have the power to be strong—whether from lack of will or some misguided idealism—is a provocation in itself. It invites challenge. It is a call to action, to be challenged, to have your resolve tested by your enemies. It emboldens those who would strike against you."

His gaze settled on me—perhaps remembering similar arguments I'd made in the past.

"The recent Federation-Cardassian war is an example of that," Martok stated. "The Cardassians are a third-rate power at best, possessing limited resources, technology, and worlds, yet the Federation's half measures and half-hearted prosecution of the war emboldened them. They began that war knowing there would be limited consequences for what they ultimately gained from it, *and they were right*."

Martok leaned forward, his voice as sharp as a blade.

"How much quicker could that war have been won if the Federation had struck back with overwhelming force from the beginning? Could the certainty of devastating consequences have prevented the war from starting in the first place?" he asked the group. "In the terms that you Federation care about, how many lives could have been saved by decisive action at the beginning instead of halfhearted measures and eventual appeasement by giving up worlds in the demilitarized zone?"

The so-called appeasement Martok referred to had, in time, given rise to the Maquis—a rebellion that would fester into a decades-long wound in the Federation's side. Entire worlds eventually renounced their Federation citizenship in protest. People abandoning *utopia*... it was a damning image.

In the grand scale of the Federation, these losses were minor, practically inconsequential. But symbolically? They were a dangerous precedent and symbol. Visible cracks in the idealistic story of the Federation. Like so many self-inflicted wounds throughout the history of great civilizations, it had been entirely avoidable.

The truth was, the Federation–Cardassian War had only ended as swiftly and cleanly as it had thanks to Section 31’s covert operations—efforts I had played no small part in. Picard would be apoplectic if he ever discovered that fact. That the Federation had only prevailed because of actions taken in direct violation of its most sacred principles.

My gaze shifted to Captain Jellico—a man who had fought viciously on the frontlines during the Federation–Cardassian War, who had faced down their fleets time and again, and who had lost more than his share of good people in the process. When our eyes met, I could see the truth in his expression: he agreed with Martok.

In preparing for his arrival on Kessik IV, I had reviewed his service record. Jellico had been a vocal advocate for a far more aggressive strategy during the war, repeatedly urging Starfleet Command to act decisively. Each time, his proposals had been dismissed—buried beneath layers of political caution and bureaucratic paralysis.

“I have to agree with General Martok, Captain,” Jellico said, speaking for the first time. His voice was steady, but carried the weight of experience. “In my view, the advantages of the GODS net—especially after the staggering losses we’ve suffered in the Hur’q invasion—far outweigh the risks of misuse or escalation. If worlds like Kessik IV, Betazed, or Risa had permanent defensive coverage from a system like this, they wouldn’t be reliant on a weakened Starfleet to protect them. And Starfleet could focus its limited resources where they’re needed most while we rebuild.”

I offered him a respectful nod. Jellico and I had clashed before, but in this moment, we were aligned. Across the table, Pressman’s expression faltered—he looked momentarily betrayed, though he said nothing.

“In many ways, your report is ultimately irrelevant to us, Captain,” President Moss said calmly. “Assuming the next phase of testing proves just as successful as everything we’ve seen so far, my people will proceed—regardless of whether the Federation government agrees to fund it.”

There it was—the unspoken truth laid bare. Kessik IV didn’t need the Federation’s permission, or its credits, if it was willing to foot the bill itself. Still, that didn’t make Picard’s report meaningless. Far from it.

“We too are prepared to pay for the system independently, should it prove viable,” said Ambassador Vel of Betazed, her eyes settling on me with pointed significance.

I knew exactly what she was referring to. She had recently shared a newly completed internal report on the state and readiness of Betazed’s planetary defense grid—an aging relic from the time of the Federation–Klingon War over a century ago. No one knew, as far I could tell, that

Lwaxana's request to evaluate the system's readiness (with the Hur'q invasion used as a justification) had been because of my provocative words said mid-orgy with her.

A race of telepaths could be really shameless and freaky given how freely they shared thoughts, I learned.

Betazed's planetary defense system, according to the report, was not just obsolete—it had been neglected to the point of dysfunction. Years of mismanagement, budget cuts, outright fraud, and redirected funding had left the system barely functional. One government after another had either slashed allocations intended for upgrades and maintenance, or had siphoned the funds off to support other initiatives. The result was a defense grid that was not only out of date but also riddled with staffing issues and maintenance failures. In fact, it was only partially operational, at best.

To make matters worse, the planetary defense grid posting had somehow devolved into a dumping ground for problematic personnel—something like a Siberian or Alaskan posting in old Earth militaries: remote, forgotten, and resented.

The report's conclusion was blunt. Restoring the system would take more time, effort, and credits than simply scrapping the whole thing and starting from scratch.

In other words, it was a perfect opportunity—for me, for the GODS net, and for Section 31. Betazed was already on their list, which meant a bonus for me.

"You've all given me much to consider," Picard said at last, once the conversation had run its course. "Thank you for your candor and insight."

And just like that, lunch was over.

XXXXX

I stood before the group, ready to explain the next—and arguably most critical—phase of the testing.

"We will now conduct a battle simulation," I began. "The *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* will be assisting by deploying thirty additional support craft, including shuttlecraft, shuttlepods, work bees, and maintenance drones. They're currently stationed at the edge of the system, awaiting our go-ahead."

I tapped a control, bringing up a holographic representation of the incoming ships.

"Using Zakdorn battle simulation protocols, each craft will be equipped with modified laser emitters to simulate weapon fire and shielding. At President Moss' suggestion, every simulated vessel will take the form of Hur'q ships—fighters, troop carriers, and carrier ships—to ensure a more meaningful and demonstrative test."

Martok let out a grunt, his voice thick with disdain.

"All this... simulation," he growled. "Tell me, how will we know who actually wins? A battle without risk, without blood, without consequence—what does that prove?"

“I promise you, General, the results will be unmistakable,” I replied. “The *Enterprise*’s computer will track simulated weapons fire and calculate damage based on each craft’s assigned capabilities. A Hur’q carrier, for example, will have significantly more firepower and shielding than a fighter. And unlike the early Hur’q vessels—which only gained shields after reverse-engineering captured tech—this simulation will assume they possess modern shielding to better simulate a wider range of targets the defense net may encounter.”

I paused, letting the weight of that settle.

“And because I know you’d be bored otherwise,” I added with a wink toward Martok, “we’ve made the simulation more... theatrical. The *Enterprise*’s systems will scale for size and threat level accordingly when calculating damage or whether a target is actually struck as there is a significant difference between a Hur’q fighter and the actual size of a work bee, for example. The *Enterprise* and *Cairo* themselves will play the part of Hur’q carrier ships.”

Martok gave a barking laugh. “I approve! I *would* have been bored.” Then his eyes narrowed slightly. “But I’m curious—why haven’t you invited *the Emperor’s Wrath* to join this battle simulation?”

Picard stepped in before I could respond, sparing me the awkwardness of answering Martok’s challenge directly.

“We gave it serious consideration, General,” he said. “But the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* have been preparing for this simulation for some time. Introducing your vessel at this late stage could jeopardize the safety of the exercise, especially for the pilots flying smaller craft.”

Martok gave a low, grudging grunt. He clearly didn’t like the answer, but he saw the logic in it. We had already involved him in earlier shield integrity tests, which had seemed to satisfy his thirst for participation—at least for now.

“I also briefly entertained the idea of adding some drama to the scenario,” I continued, addressing the group again. “Something like a bit of roleplay—threats from the attacking force, a demand for surrender, some ominous posturing. But that wouldn’t be true to form. The Hur’q didn’t negotiate. They didn’t communicate. They struck fast, hard, and without warning, with no communications shared between the attacking fleet and the planet. So that’s what this simulation will reflect—an immediate and unrelenting attack.”

I turned to President Moss. “Ideally, we’d have her own people at the controls of the GODS net for this test, but there just wasn’t enough time to train them properly. Instead, she’ll be activating the automated defense protocols to defend her world.”

“That raises a question,” Ambassador Vel interjected smoothly. “If Betazed were to lease your technology, Admiral, what sort of training would your company provide to our personnel?”

Picard and Pressman both looked visibly taken aback by her phrasing. It clearly signaled far more than casual interest—Betazed was clearly considering leasing the technology if she was asking about training personnel to use the system day-to-day, rather than its overall capabilities.

For many good reasons, Betazed was a very important member world in the Federation, in a way that Kessik IV just wasn't. Being the evolutionary homeworld of an entire species put you in a bit of a higher tier in the Federation member world hierarchy, not that many would admit that openly. A colony world of humans could attain Federation membership, like Kessik IV had, but the planet was not the birthplace of a unique race, and a telepathic one at that.

"An excellent question, Ambassador," I replied, smiling. "In addition to my... other roles, I'm also a holonovel author. So naturally, we've developed a fully immersive, interactive holographic training suite tailored for this system. It covers every aspect of the GODS net—from basic sensor operations to strategic system-level command."

I let that land before continuing. "Training is modular and adaptable. A sensor technician can receive a hands-on simulation for their station, while a planetary leader can walk through high-level command protocols and crisis scenarios. At a minimum, any world leasing the system must ensure that the planetary executive and those tasked with day-to-day operation are certified. Without that certification, the system limits their command authority to the most basic functions—like returning fire when attacked or initiating standard scans."

"That sounds like a prudent approach, Admiral. Thank you for the thorough answer," Ambassador Vel said with a courteous nod. "Though I do have one more question."

I gestured for her to continue.

"What happens if the leasing planet's command link to the defense net is disrupted or blocked—either from the ground or from orbit?" she asked. "Would the system simply shut down? Because from what we've seen, attacking the network directly would be extremely difficult and costly. Cutting the command link might offer the greatest chance for success and at the least cost."

"A fair point—and one we anticipated," I replied. "You're absolutely right: taking out or disabling 300 defense platforms, each with heavy shielding and powerful weaponry, would be a very costly endeavor when there are easier ways to accomplish the same result. So in the event of a disrupted command link, the system automatically shifts into auto-defense mode."

I gave her a moment to absorb that before continuing.

"That mode can be customized to each world's preferences. It could be set to raise planetary shielding immediately, cutting off all travel to and from the surface—including transporters—or engage and destroy any ships that attack the planet or loiter in the system without authorization. That's why every leasing planet must carefully consider how the defense net should behave in different scenarios."

I paused to give space for a follow-up. None came.

"One more point of clarification," I added. "While these simulation consoles are impressive, they are not essential to system control. If this facility were taken, it wouldn't compromise the network's command integrity. For instance, President Moss can operate the entire defense net from her omnitool if necessary. No elaborate command center required."

I glanced at the audience, then back to Vel.

“Of course, that introduces its own security risks—but those can be mitigated or limited to extreme scenarios. And since those aren’t easily simulated, I’d be happy to discuss them privately with you and explore how tailored planning can address those risks.”

Then I turned back to the President.

“President Moss, while this simulated enemy won’t issue threats or demands, your role as planetary leader is still central to this exercise. Are you ready to take command?”

“I am,” Moss said firmly, her voice edged with quiet steel.

“Computer,” I instructed, “recognize President Donatella Moss as an authorized user for the duration of this battle simulation. All orders issued by her are to be executed within battle simulation testing parameters.”

A soft chime confirmed the system had accepted the command.

Maybe it was a little manipulative to involve her this way—facing the Hur’q, even in simulation—but she’d chosen the enemy herself. Part of her had to be wondering *what if?* And if that question helped push her and her government toward the right decision, I wasn’t above fanning that flame.

I gave Picard a small nod.

“Picard to *Enterprise* and *Cairo*,” he said crisply, “initiate the battle simulation.”

“Understood, captain,” came the prompt responses from Commanders Riker and Wong.

The system sprang to life, registering the simulated ships as they entered the designated combat zone.

“Hur’q vessels detected,” Natasha announced to President Moss. “They are on direct approach to Kessik IV.”

She stepped forward, her gaze fixed on the control console as the holographic projection of Kessik IV flickered before her. I took a step back, ready to narrate as needed, my focus now on the unfolding simulation.

“On screen,” she commanded. “Magnify,” she added, her voice steady.

The sensor scan appeared immediately, and according to the testing parameters, it revealed two massive Hur’q carrier vessels, approaching at high impulse speeds.

“Raise the planetary shield,” Moss ordered, and the system complied without delay. A sphere of dark, translucent energy enveloped the planet, shimmering as it activated.

On the screen, the Hur’q carriers began deploying their fighters—thirty in total. They shot out from the ships at high velocity, their formations spreading quickly. While Hur’q carriers could

normally deploy far more than that, the *Enterprise* and *Cairo* could only simulate a fraction of the full assault between them, but it was enough.

While it was entirely possible to simulate the battle using only holographic projections, it lacked the realism that only real ships could provide, even with the liberties we were taking. Doing this as “real” as possible, would also prevent detractors from claiming the system was incapable of performing as well in the real world as it had holographically.

The Hur'q carriers and their fighters opened fire, targeting platforms it had correctly determined were the source of the planetary shielding in a bid to destroy them. The shield held effortlessly, an unyielding barrier against the assault.

President Moss stood motionless, her expression cold and unwavering, her eyes fixed on the unfolding simulation.

Consistent with Hur'q battle strategy, a few of the smaller craft veered toward suicidal kamikaze runs once they realized their weapons were ineffective at bringing down the shield, their pilots aiming to crash directly into the platforms at maximum speed.

The *Enterprise's* computer quickly calculated the hypothetical kinetic damage of a Hur'q fighter slamming into the shield at full impulse, assigning a damage score based on impact severity, location of the impact, effect on the shield based on the sensor readings taken when the *Enterprise* and the *Emperor's Wrath* had fired on the shield.

Of course, no one actually flew their craft into the shield and died. The ‘fighter’ simply veered off when close to the shield perimeter and flew off to a designated area, marked for destroyed vessels, to await the completion of the simulation.

The damage score—disturbingly high, unfortunately—was derived from the painful lessons learned during the Hur'q invasion, their relentless tactics and the toll they had taken on the Alpha Quadrant's defenders.

The shield held firm, unshaken by the barrage.

"Engage auto-defense mode. Destroy all enemy ships," President Moss commanded, her voice sharp and resolute.

At her order, the platforms in range became far more menacing as they retracted their armor from their firing apertures. One by one, they began firing simulated bolts and energy beams into the void. Each blast struck its target with deadly accuracy, the holographic enemy ships flickering out of existence and moving off to the side of the battle zone to wait with the other ‘destroyed’ ships.

While some platforms continued their relentless assault on the two massive carrier ships, two groups of four platforms—three forming a tight perimeter around a central fourth—began charging energy. The gathered power converged and shot toward the central platform in the formation. A heartbeat later, a brilliant, thick beam of orange energy tore through the void, its intensity overwhelming.

The Hur'q carrier ships—the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* in disguise—tried desperately to evade, but the beam tracked them with unnerving precision, specifically targeting the Hur'q power core to ensure its destruction. In seconds, it pierced through their shields as if they were made of paper, ripping into the heart of the vessels and swiftly destroying them. The computer had tallied the damage according to the test data recorded during the earlier trial on Eros, and the ships exploded once the damage total exceeded the ship's tolerance.

“Simulation complete. All enemy ships destroyed,” the system reported in Natasha's voice—a tone that usually had a certain sultriness, but now carried an ominous edge.

From the first shot to the last, the entire enemy fleet had been obliterated in a mere 48 seconds.

The room fell into a heavy, reverent silence. President Moss stood at the console, her hands gripping it with white knuckles, her head bowed as if in quiet prayer for those lost during the Hur'q invasion of her world.

Her posture seemed to carry a great weight, a terrible burden, but when she finally lifted her gaze, there was a newfound determination in her eyes—a clarity, a sense of purpose that I had never seen in her before.

Before the moment could stretch into something profound, General Martok abruptly rose to his feet and, without hesitation, began clapping along with most others.

I couldn't help but grin. I always knew I liked that guy.

Picard, however, remained quiet and thoughtful, head bowed.