

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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

"Perhaps," I said, glancing at her. "Thank you for inviting the Risians to witness the testing."

"Of course," she replied with a smile—before it turned mischievous. "Risa is one of my favorite places to visit in the Federation. They are a wonderful people. There aren't many opportunities for a President to let loose a little. Men tend to find me and my position, intimidating."

I arched an eyebrow at the charged words.

"I don't intimidate easily," I shot back, my tone deliberately flirtatious. "Maybe I can help you cut loose."

Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Perhaps," she said, her voice light, but inviting. "After we sign the lease and our business is concluded."

If she added an extra sway to her hips as she walked away, I wasn't about to complain. I'd always found Donna Moss from West Wing incredibly attractive—the girl next door trope exists for a reason.

"If you're quite finished flirting with every beautiful woman that enters your visual range, sir, perhaps we can begin the testing?" T'Maz mocked, but in that very polite Vulcan manner, the one which made it hard to tell if you were actually being mocked.

"Yes, let's do that," I replied.

It was time to demonstrate just how awesome my technology was. Better protected worlds meant Starfleet could redeploy their much-reduced fleet assets far more efficiently, allowing the Federation to rebuild after the devastation left behind after the Hur'q Invasion.

The fact that it would make me fantastically rich and establish me as a major power broker in this quadrant of the galaxy for years to come was almost incidental.

Almost.

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 60

Holodeck. Orbital Control Administration. Kessik IV.

Standing at the holographic control console for the GODS net, I waited as the last of the test's observers trickled in, slowed by the heightened security measures now in place. Tyr's paranoia about my safety wasn't helping matters—each attendee was being scrutinized with almost excessive caution.

The number of observers had nearly tripled since our last attempt. The recent exposure of Romulan spies and the attempted assassination of Kessik IV's leadership had dominated Federation news for days, drawing even more attention to the testing of the GODS net and ultimately the value of the defense net like I was offering. If even the scary and duplicitous Romulans were concerned enough about it to try to sabotage the testing and kill a bunch of people, including planetary leaders, then maybe this was something their worlds should have.

As the old saying went, any press was good press, and this attention had done wonders for me and the number of inquiries my AI children, Annika, and Lauren were fielding had quadrupled. So, while I wasn't ready to thank the Romulans for their bullshit, including almost killing me, I wasn't going to try to kill every Romulan I saw in the future either.

The delay had also given previously unavailable parties time to travel to Kessik IV to watch the testing in-person, ensuring a larger in-person audience than before. Again, to my benefit.

Several influential factions within the Federation government, along with representatives from a dozen member worlds, had requested to watch the test via real-time subspace transmission. I had refused outright. A prolonged simultaneous broadcast to so many distant recipients would create a security risk that I wasn't willing to bear. A peer-to-peer transmission was far less vulnerable—fewer relay points, fewer weak links, fewer chances for intrusion and interception.

Fortunately, President Moss had backed me up.

Naturally, anyone with the requisite security clearance would have access to the recording of the test. That was far easier to secure than a galaxy-spanning real-time transmission. It also served my interests—those considering leasing the GODS net could watch the test and make their decisions without needing further involvement from me. In other words, I put in the time now so that they could make their decision based on the recording, rather than a personal visit and time out of my day.

There would still be follow-up questions and inquiries, of course. But with Annika proving to be an exceptional assistant and Jarvis augmenting her capabilities, the workload would be manageable.

I had no illusions, though. The Romulans—and other major galactic power players—would eventually get their hands on the recording. But at least they'd have to work for it. This method forced them to invest real resources—money, personnel, tradecraft, and decryption efforts—rather than simply snatching it from the ether.

A live transmission, on the other hand, would have been a hacker's dream and required far less resources, allowing the riff raff of the galaxy a much easier shot at acquiring the data. Even

compromising a single deep-space subspace relay could grant unauthorized access, though the encrypted transmission would still need to be decrypted. I was fairly certain there was a *Next Generation* episode showing that very scenario.

Lost in thought, as often happened these days, I barely registered T'Maz running final diagnostics on the GODS net. This test had to go well—frankly, too much depended on it.

T'Maz, accustomed to my occasional mental detours, waited for my focus to return before speaking.

“All diagnostics have been completed, both self and external,” she reported in that familiar, stoic, and undeniably alluring voice. “All systems report fully operational.”

“Good, good,” I replied, scanning the reports via my neural interface. I pulled up a few displays on the holographic console—not because I needed to, but to mask how I was processing the data.

I doubted I'd find anything T'Maz or my AI children had missed, but old habits die hard. Double- and triple-checking equipment before a mission had been ingrained in me since my first deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan and had saved my life before.

T'Maz cast a glance toward Admiral Pressman and Captain Jellico, who had finally made it through security. Pressman stood stiff, arms crossed, his frown etched deep enough to make his displeasure practically radiate across the room. Beside him, Ambassador Vel of Betazed smirked, clearly amused by his discomfort, probably feeling it telepathically whether she wanted to or not.

Tyr had, with great enthusiasm, requested permission to conduct a deep cavity search on Pressman. I had reluctantly denied it—though not without laughing at the very thought, imagining that bit of silliness in my mind. While the idea of Pressman's rectum suffering through Tyr's, no doubt *thorough*, examination was hilarious, modern sensor technology made the investigative value of such an invasive search somewhat dubious and hard to justify.

Pressing the issue, even a little just to tweak the man's nose, would have been an unnecessary distraction today, though I'm sure Ambassador Synne of Risa would have had no issues whatsoever. Hell, she might have even happily volunteered for such a search. ‘Butt stuff’ was laughably common on that world.

The Risians would look at you funny if you acted like anal sex wasn't, *of course*, on the table.

“Admiral, may I ask why you chose to train Lauren on the ship's neural interface at that time?” T'Maz inquired, raising a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “Given our detractors—and those actively wishing for this test to fail—it seemed an illogical and imprudent decision.”

Like any good assistant, Jarvis activated a privacy field around us without me even needing to ask. No known surveillance or sensor technology would be able to pick up our conversation now.

Smirking, I answered, “I can see why you'd think that. Even with Lauren's enhanced mind, no one looks competent trying to pilot a starship with their thoughts for the first time.”

“Then why do it?” she pressed. “That training could have taken place at any point during our return journey to Bajor, perhaps at a time when so many unfriendly eyes were not trained on us.”

My smirk faded, replaced by something far more serious.

“In the battle over Earth, I was forced to reveal a lot of my ship’s advanced capabilities,” I began. “Even an allegedly ‘experimental’ warp drive. Then, out of nowhere, a small fleet of heavily armed cargo ships—ones no one knew I possessed, of an unknown design, all equipped with cloaking technology—arrived to deliver the GODS net. And then, to top it all off, the GODS net successfully detected a cloaked Romulan scout ship. Which is not an easy thing.”

I let that sink in. T’Maz gave a small nod of understanding.

“How many ships does the *evil Augment* have? Where did he get them? What are their capabilities? *Gasp!* Does he have his own hidden shipyard somewhere?” I rattled off the inevitable questions. “That’s a dangerous amount of curiosity. And curiosity like that invites intense scrutiny. Even your former employer is asking those questions.”

I trusted the privacy field surrounding us, but it wasn’t worth the risk to say the name *Section 31* out loud.

“There are a lot of very nervous people watching me right now, both inside and outside the Federation,” I continued. “So yeah, I let Lauren almost fly us into a planet while Pressman, the *Cairo*, the *Enterprise*, half of Starfleet’s top brass, and Q knows how many else, probably watched over subspace. Let them see my crew stumble. Let them watch us make mistakes. Let them believe we’re inexperienced—because, honestly, we *are*, at least in comparison to the veterans out there. Let them underestimate us, despite the evidence to the contrary. Let them dismiss my ragtag team of civilians and Academy dropouts as amateurs. Nothing to worry about there.”

“My former... employer... will not be fooled by such a simple deception,” T’Maz warned.

I scoffed. “Of course not. But *they* weren’t my target. The lie you *want* to believe is always the most convincing. My real audience is the Federation Council, the admirals who don’t specialize in intelligence or counterintelligence, the civilian leaders of various governments. Those are the people I need rolling their eyes at the inevitable conspiracy theories about the scary smartass Augment with too much money to spend.”

T’Maz considered this. “I see. Even the Romulan Tal Shiar answers to their Senate—at least to a degree.”

“Yes. We all answer to someone,” I said. “Even your former employer—well, *probably*.”

That last part was a guess, at best. Section 31 had connections to Starfleet, maybe even the Federation Council or the President’s office, but with all my knowledge—both from my time working for them and from the out-of-context information from multiple television shows—I still *really* didn’t know.

They were mysterious as fuck like that.

My proximity sensors alerted me to President Moss and Captain Picard approaching. I pretended not to notice, again, let people underestimate you as much as possible, in ways big and small. If that forced me to swallow my pride at times, then fine, it was worth it.

“Admiral Gothic, I believe all expected parties have arrived,” Picard began. “Are you ready to begin the testing?”

“Most definitely, Captain,” I replied, glancing at the front row where the true VIPs sat—Pressman, Jellico, and the Betazoid and Risian ambassadors. Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge were also present, seated next to Picard to provide technical verification during the test. “Eager to, in fact.”

“Very good.” Picard offered his diplomatic smile before turning to the audience, who instinctively quieted. “If everyone will please take their seats, Admiral Gothic will now begin the testing.”

President Moss gave me a nod and a smile before she and Picard returned to their seats.

I stepped forward, adopting a relaxed posture. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to part two of the Gothic Orbital Defense System’s testing,” I said with a chuckle, hoping to lighten the mood. “With any luck, today’s excitement will be of the far more predictable variety—the kind that comes from being thoroughly impressed by my system’s capabilities—and perhaps feeling a strong desire to lease it for yourselves.”

A ripple of good-natured laughter passed through the crowd. I had just addressed the Romulan-shaped elephant in the room without saying a direct word about it.

Turning back to the control console, I found T’Maz standing ready at my shoulder.

“Computer, begin security identification scan,” I commanded, entering my verification code with a heaping of mischief. “Recognize Gothic, *High King and Ruler of all of Kessik IV!!*”

I glanced at President Moss as I shouted my new title bombastically, throwing a smirk and highly over-the-top wink at the planetary leader as I usurped her position. She rolled her eyes good naturedly as she immediately realized that I was tweaking Pressman’s nose.

Most everyone in the room genuinely chuckled at my joke as they too realized I was playing up the despotic megalomaniac augment stereotype. Pressman wasn’t among them.

Immediately, multiple scanning beams activated, verifying both my authorization and the level of command authority I held over the system. As the scans commenced, I addressed the audience.

“Many of you witnessed this process during the previous test, so I beg your indulgence as I explain it again,” I said, my voice amplified as I continued working at the console.

This was a holographic interface—I could have easily reoriented the layout to face the audience directly. But I had made a strategic choice. I wanted their focus on the GODS net itself, and not on me.

Despite whatever lingering fears or prejudices my Federation audience might hold about Augments, my goal was to showcase the sheer defensive value of this system in an increasingly dangerous galaxy. Any bias against *me* would only be a distraction from that message, so better to keep the focus off me directly.

“At this moment, the system is verifying both my identity as an authorized user and the level of command authority I hold,” I explained. “Even if someone managed to create a perfect clone of me and somehow obtained my authentication codes, the system would still detect the subtle errors that all known cloning technologies inevitably produce.”

I continued working at the console as I spoke. “For testing purposes only, I currently hold the highest possible level of command authority—that of an absolute monarch. The system is designed to accommodate various planetary governance models, allowing customization to fit each client’s needs.”

Though my eyes remained on the interface, my armor’s sensors had no trouble detecting Pressman’s reaction. His already deep frown contorted into something truly unpleasant. The mere idea of me playing King, even for the day, even as a *very* obvious joke, clearly didn’t sit well with him, which was the whole point.

“For those who weren’t present at the previous test,” I continued as the identity scans neared completion, “President Moss and Captain Picard raised an important question at this stage—would I retain this level of authority if the system is leased?” I glanced at the audience. “The short answer is no. However, I would remain an authorized user for the sole purpose of fulfilling repair and maintenance obligations.”

I gestured subtly, and a notification appeared on the audience’s PADDs. “A full transcript of that discussion has been sent to your devices. It’s fully searchable and cross-referenced with the relevant draft lease language in the contract for easy reference and study.”

“Identity confirmed,” the system announced for all to hear.

I allowed myself a small nod. “The system has recognized me,” I narrated, perhaps unnecessarily, but it was always a good idea in this kind of presentation to do a bit of good old-fashioned hand-holding, leading your audience to the information and conclusions you wanted them to have.

A massive holographic real-time projection of Kessik IV in all its majesty materialized in front of me, hovering high above the control console for maximum visibility. The display showcased the 300 large, pyramidal defense platforms encircling the planet—imposing and undeniably formidable. They were modeled after the AG-3 satellites from the *Stargate* universe. Not that anyone in this room would recognize that. Well... maybe the other super Gods of this universe could, but my audience certainly wouldn’t.

Because the question of whether the platforms’ cloaking capabilities violated the Treaty of Algeron remained an ongoing controversy, they were fully visible and detailed, forming a protective sphere around the planet.

“Madame President, while we originally planned to begin with the orbital control functionality, I’d like your permission to skip ahead and test the defense net’s planetary shielding,” I requested respectfully. As I spoke, I made a deliberate glance toward the Betazoid and Risian ambassadors. The latter also represented the Halkans, who were solely interested in the shielding aspects of the defense net—something Moss was well aware of.

She met Picard’s gaze briefly, silently checking for any objections. He gave none.

“You have my permission, Admiral,” President Moss confirmed.

I nodded in appreciation. “Activating planetary shielding now.”

Multiple live feeds appeared alongside the holographic image of Kessik IV, displaying real-time views from the *Enterprise*, the *Cairo*, and the *Flighty Temptress*.

One by one, each of the 300 defense platforms pulsed with energy. A moment later, massive octagonal shield segments expanded from each platform, extending outward until they met and interlocked with neighboring segments. The effect was mesmerizing—a seamless, interwoven barrier of dark blue energy, cocooning the entire planet in a hazy, protective shell, though the planet itself was still visible through the haze of dark blue transparent energy.

Gasps rippled through the audience as they took in the sight. I said nothing, letting the moment speak for itself.

Pressman’s reaction, however, was the real spectacle. His jaw hung open, his complexion pale as he stared at the planetary shield in stunned disbelief.

Had he thought I was full of shit?

No civilization in the Federation—or among its peers—had ever fielded planetary shielding on this scale. And yet, I was certain they *could* have, if they truly wanted to.

Was it a lack of technical capability? Not really. It was doable in my opinion.

A lack of will, then? A refusal to commit to something so complex, so expensive? Much more likely.

Perhaps they hadn’t seen the need for such a thing? Or believed their fleets would stop an aggressor long before they were in range of striking their planets?

Overreliance on that combat doctrine could explain it, but most galactic powers saw an incredible amount of daily ship traffic in trade, in travel, etc. There were very few powers or worlds that had entirely closed systems.

I remained silent, watching them process what they were seeing. Watching them question their own assumptions on what was truly possible.

And that, more than anything, was the true power of this demonstration.

I had watched all of *Star Trek: Enterprise*, *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager*, and at no point had there been even a hint that the Federation possessed planetary shields.

Which made no damn sense, considering millions had died when the Xindi attacked Earth two centuries ago.

Even that attack made little sense.

Was the value in confirming that the weapon could travel to Earth and that Earth did not possess the means to stop the weapon, worth giving up the element of surprise??

The only time I'd seen a planetary shield in use was in a one-off *TNG* episode—Aldea. That legendary world had not only a planetary shield but also the ability to cloak their entire planet. *An entire planet.*

That level of technology was absurd when you thought about it. And yet, they had somehow forgotten how it all worked. Their society had turned entirely to art, culture, and self-improvement, abandoning science and engineering so completely that their hyper-advanced technology became nothing more than a convenience to them that they no longer understood and certainly didn't improve upon anymore.

That premise, too, made little sense.

A civilization capable of building such advanced technology would have developed equally advanced automated maintenance systems. And even if, by some stretch of the imagination, those systems failed, their (almost certainly) AI 'Caretaker' would surely have been sophisticated enough to *tell* them exactly what was wrong, exactly how it was harming them, and request their help to resolve the issue, guiding them through the repairs.

You didn't need to be an engineering genius or intimately understand how something worked if someone gave you a step-by-step guide to doing it. With enough detail you could make that practically idiot proof.

The Caretaker was charged with protecting them. Keeping its charges from going extinct should have been its highest priority.

Maybe they just forgot they could *ask* the Caretaker what the problem was? Or maybe its creators feared it going rogue and had put shackles on it, like I had done? Maybe they had predicted that their people would regress technologically and sought to protect them from a rogue AI? That made a lot more sense to me.

Brushing aside the ridiculousness of both Aldea and *Star Trek* canon's technological inconsistencies that only someone like me could recognize, I refocused on the moment.

"It took 5.6 seconds from activation to full shield envelopment," I reported, allowing a touch of pride into my voice. "This shielding will stop physical impacts, energy weapons, and torpedoes of multiple types. It will also prevent ships or transporter beams from reaching the surface."

Picard remained focused on the planetary shield, his thoughtful expression betraying the awe he tried to temper. Reading about the GODS net's capabilities and seeing them in action were two entirely different experiences.

"Can the shielding be partially deployed, rather than a full planetary shield?" Moss asked.

"Yes, absolutely," I answered. "Shielding can be deployed selectively over large cities and population centers, over key installations or resource centers, whatever you wish. As the shielding is deployed from the individual platforms connecting to each other, you would merely select fewer platforms."

I paused to clarify a point. "However, if you wished to prevent ships from reaching the surface or leaving, or to prevent transporter activity from the same, you'd want to err on the side of more comprehensive shielding."

"Admiral, with your permission, I'd like Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge to conduct scans using the *Enterprise's* and *Cairo's* sensors," Picard requested.

It was an unnecessary formality—we had already agreed to this beforehand. The request was for the benefit of the audience, a way to emphasize the transparency of the demonstration and to offer outside confirmation on the defense net's capabilities. In an age of advanced holography and simulations, outside confirmation was always a necessity.

"Of course, Captain," I answered smoothly. "T'Maz, please provide them with their own consoles."

Next to ours, additional stations materialized, each designed with the familiar LCARS interface straight from the *Enterprise-D*.

Now, it was time to see how the GODS net would stand up to Starfleet's scrutiny.

Seated at their consoles, Data's hands moved in a blur over the LCARS panel, running multiple sensor scans in real time. LaForge, knowing Data could conduct the scans exponentially faster, focused instead on interpreting the scan output.

"Impressive," LaForge murmured, his voice filled with quiet admiration. "Captain, an electromagnetic shield now completely surrounds Kessik IV. It's... unlike anything I've ever seen before."

I resisted the urge to smirk.

Of course, he hadn't seen anything like it—the shielding was a fusion of Minosian and Husnock technology, neither of which the Federation had ever seen, though some minor examples of Minosian technology had been purchased by independent worlds the Federation *had* interacted with.

"Without further testing, I can't be certain," LaForge continued, "but based on the energy output alone, I'd bet the *Enterprise* and *Cairo* could fire every photon torpedo we have at the planet, and this shield wouldn't even flinch."

A ripple of conversation spread through the audience as they absorbed the weight of that statement.

“Admiral,” Data said, his voice calm yet probing, “the power and computational requirements to generate a shield of this scale must be extraordinary. Are the 300 defense platforms in orbit handling this independently, or are external resources supplementing the system?”

I hesitated—visibly.

The easy response would be to declare that information classified. But it was a fair question, one any planet considering a lease would demand an answer to. If the shield relied on external resources of any kind, then a determined enemy could sever the system’s connection to my company or any resources on the ground, and thus cripple the defense net’s effectiveness.

The lease contract had been explicit: while my company maintained an active link for maintenance and security, we retained the ability to deactivate the system entirely for non-payment or failure to protect the technical secrets of the system. That much I had already disclosed, both in the previous test and today. It was all spelled out clearly in the lease agreement.

I met Data’s unwavering gaze.

“As discussed during our prior testing, the defense net’s hardware exists solely within the orbital platforms,” I said slowly and deliberately. “The control consoles before me are holographic—convenient visual interfaces, nothing more. No power or computational processing requirements for full functionality is required from the planet or any external source.”

I paused, debating whether to reveal that external resources *could* be brought to bear if necessary. In the end, I chose not to.

“Mr. Data, you’ll have the opportunity to confirm this firsthand during the command-and-control link disruption phase of testing,” I continued. “When Kessik IV is cut off from the larger subspace communications network, you’ll see for yourself.”

Data inclined his head. “I see. Thank you, Admiral.”

“Before we move on to the more energetic phase of testing the planetary shielding, I want to highlight an additional benefit—one that goes beyond the obvious,” I said, my tone measured but confident. “The science is complex, but the planetary shields significantly enhance the GODS net’s maximum sensor range, including expanding the reach of the tachyon detection network.”

Intrigued, Data tilted his head slightly. “How was this accomplished, Admiral?”

I allowed myself a small, proud smile. “Think of it this way—the shield and the planet itself act as an enormous amplifier, similar to a starship’s deflector dish, but on a planetary scale. The result? A threefold increase in maximum sensor range.”

That was a very conservative estimate. In reality, the amplification effect was far greater, but I had deliberately imposed limiters on what the leasing planet could actually see.

This phenomenon had been an unexpected but welcome discovery when we first field-tested the GODS net over a world in the Minosian system. It had taken time to pinpoint the cause, but inspiration had come from a certain species encountered in *Voyager*—a species that could transport themselves across 40,000 light-years in an instant. Their technology had provided a critical insight into the subtle subspace mechanics at work.

My people and I still didn't fully understand the intricacies of the process, but that didn't mean we couldn't harness its benefits. Even with our limited grasp of the underlying science, the results spoke for themselves. Because we didn't fully understand the subspace amplification effect, the increase in sensor range was probably ridiculously inefficient and could be easily improved, but it was still a huge advantage that the leasing planet could benefit from.

"The shielding can also be configured to control or prevent transporter activity to or from the planet," I continued. "The same applies to subspace communications—it can restrict or permit transmissions as needed. Ultimately, it depends on what you want or the situation requires and whether the planetary executive has the legal authority to implement such restrictions."

President Moss considered this. "So, this is another instance where the leasing planet can modify the lease agreement to suit its needs?"

"Exactly, Madame President," I replied. "Certain actions—like severing your world's connection to the larger subspace communications network—would likely be barred by your planet's Constitution or other governing laws under normal circumstances. However, like most Federation worlds, your executive authority is significantly expanded during a declared planetary emergency. Things you would not normally be permitted by law to do, are now part of your powers during an emergency."

Moss nodded in understanding.

"That's why the GODS net is designed with an extensive array of customizations, options, and safeguards," I continued. "Every world has its own governance model and the defense net can be tailored accordingly. Of course, that level of flexibility is also why the lease agreement is over 800 pages long." I let out a small chuckle.

A few amused smiles flickered through the room, but no one raised any questions.

"Good," I said, turning back to the console. "Now, let me demonstrate the enhanced sensor range."

With a few precise taps, I activated the system, and instantly, the long-range sensors extended to three times their usual range.

"Mr. Data, Mr. LaForge," I said, looking toward them. "Can you confirm, at least in part, that these readings align with any Federation assets in the sector?"

Both men focused on their consoles, fingers moving swiftly across the LCARS interface.

"The USS *Saratoga* has partially confirmed your sensor readings with her own," Data reported.

A ripple of murmurs spread through the audience—excitement, curiosity, and perhaps a hint of disbelief.

I turned to face them, allowing myself a small, satisfied smile.

“You mentioned that the range of the tachyon detection net—used to detect cloaked ships—has been expanded as well?” Ambassador Vel began. “There are several Federation member worlds near the borders of the Romulan and Klingon Empires that would be very interested in such a capability, given the prevalence of cloaking technology in those sectors. Can you elaborate on that?”

“Of course, Madame Ambassador. Thank you for your question.” I offered a polite nod and a small smile before continuing.

“The tachyon detection net’s range is indeed extended, but there are some important caveats. First, this enhanced detection is only possible when the full planetary shielding is deployed. Few worlds are likely to maintain full shielding at all times, for a myriad number of valid reasons, most notably as it would greatly restrict travel to and from those planets. It would also significantly accelerate wear on critical components. As I mentioned in previous testing, the lease price would need to reflect the increased maintenance and replacement schedule if the system were used in that manner.”

I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts before continuing.

“Second, due to the limitation inherent in how this technology functions and how the defense platforms are positioned, the increased detection range primarily applies to the orbital space around the leasing planet. It does not extend deep into the system.”

I let that point sink in before addressing the final consideration.

“Third, while the amplifying effect of the planetary shielding is substantial, expanding both general sensor range and cloak detection, this comes at a power cost. The more energy allocated to long-range detection, the less energy remains for maintaining shield integrity. In other words, while the shield can still absorb significant damage, prolonged exposure to high-energy assaults would degrade its effectiveness faster than it would under normal operation.”

I let my gaze sweep across the room, allowing the audience a moment to absorb the implications before continuing.

“Power that would otherwise be used to maintain shield integrity and resist damage would instead be redirected to the sensors or the tachyon detection net,” Ambassador Vel observed, surprising me with her technical insight.

“Exactly right,” I replied with an approving nod. “Since the full planetary shielding is active and we are, thankfully, not under attack, I’ll now expand the cloak detection net. You’ll see the increased range reflected in the hologram of Kessik IV. As a reminder, this hologram is being generated in real-time based on data from the defense net.”

With a few taps on my console, the defense platforms began weaving the tachyon detection net, leveraging the shield envelope itself to extend its range using the amplifying effect.

“As you can see,” I gestured toward the large holographic display of the planet above us, “the net is forming, utilizing the shield’s structure to reflect and direct the tachyon beams in predictable ways but at a longer range.”

Of course, tachyons—being faster-than-light particles—were entirely invisible, but for the sake of presentation, I had taken some creative liberties with the visual depiction.

“There are limitations,” I continued, “but for worlds near Romulan and Klingon space, this represents a significant tactical advantage—an expanded and more effective early warning system against cloaked incursions. It’s a valuable—”

I cut myself off mid-sentence as yet again there was a gap forming in the tachyon detection net—this time much farther away from the planet, but still technically in orbital space. My eyes snapped to my console, ignoring the presentation as I rapidly redirected more beams toward the anomaly.

A gap that was now moving!

What the fuck?! Was this seriously happening again?!

“T’Maz, run a Level 1 diagnostic on all systems,” I ordered quietly, my voice sharp with urgency.

From the corner of the room, Tyr bolted forward, rifle raised, scanning the audience for threats. A ripple of alarm spread through the crowd as he searched for any sign of anomalous transmissions.

Noticing my abrupt silence, President Moss and Picard stepped swiftly to my side, their expressions tense.

“Is it a cloaked ship? The Romulans again?” Moss growled, her eyes burning with fury.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, keeping my voice low. “There’s a moving gap in the detection net, and it’s a hell of a lot bigger than before. But sensors show *nothing* is there.”

Moss’s jaw tightened. “Do whatever you need to stop whoever this is.”

Her clipped tone left no room for argument. It seemed Donna was still harboring some resentment about nearly being assassinated—not that I could blame her.

I gave a firm nod, my mind already racing through options.

“Do you require assistance from the *Enterprise* or the *Cairo*?” Picard asked.

“Not sure yet—stand by,” I answered tersely, ordering Natasha to prepare the *Temptress* for battle. “If this is a Romulan warbird, things are about to escalate *fast*.”

I reached out, spreading my hands apart to zoom in on the rapidly moving gap in the detection net. Locking sensors onto the anomaly, I raised my hands over my head, fingers splayed—almost claw-like—before I struck, hands snapping forward like a striking serpent.

Multiple tractor beams lashed out at full power, grasping at the void, trapping *something* unseen.

Beneath my fingertips, the tactile feedback from the control interface let me *feel* the resistance. The unseen ship fought against the tractor beams, twisting violently against the tractor beams' grip. The tortional stress climbed higher and higher.

I was milliseconds away from opening fire to force the cloak to drop when the struggle I could feel in the multiple tractor beams...just *stopped*.

And then, like a mirage fading under a brutal sun, the ship shimmered into view.

A collective gasp swept through the room.

“A *Vor'cha*-class attack cruiser,” Picard murmured in surprise.

“What the hell are the Klingons doing here?” Moss demanded.

Behind us, Admiral Pressman had practically leapt from his seat, looking as if he wanted to take control of the situation—but something held him back.

Whatever President Moss had done had put the fear of Jesus into the man.

“I’m receiving a hail from the ship, Madame President,” I reported, my eyes flicking meaningfully toward the gathered audience behind us. “Do you want to take it here?”

“Open the channel,” she ordered, shifting fully into *presidential mode*. “Right here.”

A new display flickered to life before us, revealing the dimly lit bridge of a Klingon warship—and an all-too-familiar face.

“I am General Martok of the Klingon Empire, here on a mission from the High Council itself,” Martok declared. His voice was a deep, gravelly growl, edged with restrained impatience. “I would ask that you release my ship. We mean you no harm.”

Moss didn’t so much as blink.

“You are far from home, *General*—and in orbit of *my* world, aboard a cloaked *Vor'cha*-class attack cruiser,” she replied coolly. “You have much to answer for.”

Martok chuckled at her bluntness, likely appreciating the direct approach.

Moss, however, wasn’t done. Without turning her gaze from the screen—because a Klingon *would* take that as a sign of weakness and even potentially as an insult—she asked, “Are their weapons powered?”

“No, ma’am,” I replied immediately—I had already confirmed it.

Moss didn’t hesitate.

“If you seek to harm my world or its people, we will *destroy* you,” she growled. “There will be *no* glorious battle. There will be *no* songs sung of this day. You will simply be *dead*—and I will be the one to send you on your journey to *Gre’thor*!”

Martok’s response was some unholy mix of a smile, a growl, and a bloodthirsty chuckle of appreciation.

“You have my word, Madame President,” he rumbled. “We will only defend ourselves if attacked.” A beat passed before he added, “I request a formal meeting at your earliest convenience.”

If it were anyone else, I’d have questioned the value of that promise. But Martok was one of the few Klingons I genuinely respected from the shows.

“Release the tractor beams,” Moss ordered.

A moment later, my hold on the *Vor’cha*-class cruiser dissipated.

“You and two others may beam down to my world,” she continued. “Stand by for instructions.”

Martok nodded sharply, and the transmission cut out.

For a moment, the room seemed to collectively exhale. The Klingons might be allies, but this had been a *very* tense and unexpected encounter.

“You handled that remarkably well, Madame President,” Picard said, his admiration unmistakable. “I had no idea you were so well-versed in Klingon culture.”

Moss grinned devilishly.

“I’m not,” Moss admitted with a grin, now that the tension had eased. “I got all of that from a Klingon dinner menu and a subtitled Klingon opera I once saw on a class field trip.”

Picard arched an eyebrow in amusement, but said nothing.

“I’ll meet with General Martok,” she continued, “but I want you and Admiral Gothic present.”

Picard cast a wary glance back at Admiral Pressman, who looked like he had several *very* strong opinions but wisely kept them to himself.

“Happy to be there, Madame President,” I said with a grin. “May I bring Tyr?”

Moss didn’t hesitate. “Given the Klingons’ history with Augments *and* the Breen? Hell yes.”

She turned back to me. “Can you lower a single shield segment just long enough for transport, then immediately restore full shielding?”

“Easily,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Good. Plan for a meeting in an hour.”

She turned to the assembled audience. “Due to this unexpected arrival, we’ll be pausing the testing for now. Please proceed to the reception lounge for lunch and refreshments.”

As people began filtering out, I exhaled, running a hand through my hair.

Well, *that* just happened, I thought, before my thoughts froze in startled realization.

I had always been a huge Star Trek fan, but I wasn’t one for memorizing every little detail in the shows, like planet or system names, or things that the writers only made a one-off vague reference to, but I distinctly remembered something.

At some point—*early on*, before the Dominion War truly began—Martok had been *kidnapped* and replaced by a Changeling infiltrator.

My thoughts scrambled for details, but my memory was failing to dredge anything up to narrow it down more.

When had it happened?

And more importantly—

Was the man we’d just spoken to *really* Martok?

This wasn’t the prime Star Trek universe, the Collector war was abundant proof of that, so there were major differences.

He may or may not be a changeling infiltrator at this point.

I could easily see the Founders wanting to do everything in their power to keep the Collectors from realizing they even existed and staying far the fuck away until they had no choice but to deal with it.

Fuck me, but what if he was a changeling???

If he was, I was once again being thrust into the fire and would have to make an impossible choice.

Did I leave things as they were? Letting this changeling remain in place and keeping things mostly as they were in the timeline I remembered, at least as much as was possible at this point.

Or did I do something?

I’m not even sure what *that would be* considering I wasn’t sure if the quadrant had even heard of the Dominion yet.

Exposing them now could very well accelerate whatever plans the Dominion had for the alpha quadrant and it needed every freaking minute they had to recover from the Collector invasion to rebuild their forces.

But what if exposing them now got everyone off their collective asses? A little pain now, to prevent a whole lot of pain later?

Fuck, what a dilemma.

Unfortunately, the Dominion might decide on their own that there was no better time to strike than now, after all, while the quadrant was still reeling from the devastation the Collectors had caused.

‘No! No!’ I yelled in the privacy of my mind.

This was a classic example of decision paralysis. Everything hinged on whether Martok had already been replaced and I just didn’t know.

Fuck. My. Life.

I needed a blood sample.

XXXXX

Office of the President. Kessik IV.

Captain Picard, President Moss, and I waited for General Martok’s arrival. The atmosphere wasn’t exactly tense, but the Klingons’ sudden appearance had certainly been unexpected.

In the corner, Tyr stood like a statue—silent, imposing, his rifle held at the ready. A living weapon, poised to strike down anyone foolish enough to try harming me.

Picard, for his part, was visibly uneasy. His gaze flicked toward my Breen bodyguard every so often, as if trying to reconcile the presence of a seven-foot-tall armored warrior standing motionless in the room. Tyr exuded menace effortlessly, his very stillness a silent dare to anyone who might test him.

I found it amusing. If his presence unsettled the Klingons as well, all the better.

“I’ve received word from the Federation Council that the Klingons have formally requested to observe the testing,” Moss said at last, breaking the silence. “The final decision is mine, but I was *strongly* encouraged to allow them to stay unless I have a compelling reason to say otherwise.”

“Violating your sovereign space by parking a cloaked battle cruiser about the planet wasn’t enough?” I joked.

Moss let out a sigh, looking thoroughly exasperated—but not without amusement.

“I’m not thrilled about it, especially given recent events,” she admitted. “But unlike the Romulans, the Klingons *do* have travel rights in Federation space by treaty. Sitting cloaked in high orbit was impolite, maybe even a little insulting, but not worth causing a diplomatic incident over.”

I nodded. “I’m not surprised they’re interested. What *does* surprise me is that they showed up in person—and sent someone as senior and competent as Martok. He’s no spoiled noble from a Great House. He clawed his way up the ranks the hard way. I expected the Klingons to do what

every other power is going to do—just steal a copy of Picard’s final report and the sensor logs from the test.”

Picard looked genuinely surprised by that. Moss, however, took it in stride.

“Of *course* they’re going to steal it, Captain—just like every other power,” I said incredulously, resisting the urge to roll my eyes at Picard’s naivety. For all his years in Starfleet, he had a habit of being surprisingly idealistic at the strangest times. His naivety showed up in unexpected ways and at unexpected times.

“Depending on which Federation worlds lease my technology, entire fleet deployments may need to be adjusted. Even allies of 80-plus years—*especially* the Klingons—are going to want to know how that affects them, for better or worse.”

Picard studied me intently. “There’s another possibility we haven’t considered,” he said. “They may wish to lease the technology themselves. Would you be open to that, Admiral?”

That caught me off guard.

“I admit, I hadn’t thought of that,” I said, considering the idea. “I’ve made it clear I’m open to leasing the technology to independent worlds friendly with the Federation, and the Klingons *are* allies. But I can’t imagine they’d agree to the restrictions I put on its use.”

“We may find out soon, gentlemen,” Moss said, glancing at her omnitool. “It’s time, Admiral.”

“Understood.” I tapped a command into my own omnitool, more for the benefit of my audience than any real necessity. “Dropping the shield now—five seconds.”

A heartbeat later, General Martok and two Klingon guards materialized in a flash of crimson energy, the signature of Klingon transporters. True to their warrior nature, the Klingon system was designed for speed—faster than Starfleet’s, allowing them to engage in battle the moment they fully materialized. This also meant that their transporters lacked several redundancies and safety protocols that Starfleet would balk at not having in place.

At least they were punctual.

“Welcome to Kessik IV, General Martok,” Moss said, inclining her head slightly in greeting.

“Allow me to introduce Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the *USS Enterprise* and Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Forces—owner of Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, and the creator of the Gothic Orbital Defense System.”

Martok nodded in greeting, his gaze sweeping over each of us in turn—until his eyes landed on me. His body tensed, subtle but unmistakable; I was expected, someone he knew would be present. Yet his reaction to me was nothing compared to what came next.

The moment he and his men spotted Tyr lurking in the shadowed corner, their expressions darkened. Given the history between the Klingons and the Breen, I understood the reaction.

“A *Breen*?” Martok barked, his voice laced with both surprise and distaste, his hand instinctively going to his weapon. His men reacted even faster, reaching for their disruptor sidearms—

—only to freeze mid-motion as Tyr’s rifle snapped up, already primed to fire. The weapon’s deadly whine filled the silence, a stark reminder that if this had been a real fight, the Klingons would already be dead.

Martok’s eyes narrowed, fully aware of what had just happened.

“What is a Breen doing here?!” he demanded.

“Peace, General,” Picard interjected, raising his hands in a calming gesture. His tone was urgent, trying to defuse the moment before it escalated.

Moss and I, on the other hand, merely exchanged amused glances.

“The Breen Confederacy is not a formal observer in these tests,” Picard continued. “Tyr is Admiral Gothic’s bodyguard, nothing more. He has no ties to their military or government and will not be participating in these discussions beyond his protective role.”

Martok growled under his breath, grinding his teeth as if weighing whether to protest the very presence of a Breen. A few muttered curses—low and guttural—escaped him, but in the end, he relented, gesturing for his men to holster their weapons fully.

Even so, I could see the regret flicker across his face. He was likely wishing he had brought heavier arms, especially as his gaze flicked between Tyr and me—the only visibly armed individuals in the room.

Then came the wary respect.

His eyes lingered noticeably on our unfamiliar weapons, studying them with the keen curiosity of a seasoned warrior. He didn’t know what they were capable of, but he was certain of one thing—no self-respecting weapons designer would carry anything subpar for personal defense.

After a beat, he shifted his stance, adjusting to diplomacy with the ease of a veteran.

“Madame President,” he said, inclining his head slightly. “Thank you for welcoming us to your world and for allowing us to observe the testing.”

His tone was measured, his Klingon bluntness tempered—just enough to be palatable to human sensibilities.

That was something I rather respected.

“That remains to be seen, General Martok,” Moss replied, her tone cold as ice. “I have yet to decide whether to allow the Klingon Empire to observe the testing—considering you only revealed yourself when caught, skulking cloaked in our space. That is not the behavior of allies or friends. Explain yourself.”

Martok let out a low growl, but there was something else beneath it—something I could almost call guilt. A rare thing for a Klingon, rarer still for a man like Martok, one of the few truly honorable warriors left in the Empire.

“I was ordered by the High Council to determine whether your defense net could detect our most sophisticated cloaking technology—just as it did the Romulans,” Martok admitted, his voice steady. “I meant no disrespect to you or your people, Madame President.”

“To prove it wasn’t a fluke, you mean,” I said, my tone quiet but pointed. A challenge wrapped in steel. My eyes locked onto his. “Did you mean disrespect to me, General?”

Martok scowled. “No, I did not.”

“Hmm.” I kept my expression unreadable. “And now that you know your cloak is useless against my system... do you have any further orders from the High Council? Perhaps something more drastic? An assassination attempt on me? Or on President Moss, like the Romulans attempted?” I let the silence stretch just long enough before adding, my voice quiet but razor-edged, “I assure you, General, I am far, far more dangerous than the Augments your people once faced.”

Martok and his men bristled at the implied threat, but he—at least—had the wisdom to understand that my question was not an insult, reasonable even, given recent events. With a sharp gesture, he ordered his men to stand down. To his credit, they obeyed, though their hands lingered near their weapons, their eyes flicking between me and Tyr warily.

Tyr, for his part, played his role perfectly. At key moments, the charged whine of his antiproton rifle broke the silence, a subtle but deliberate reminder of just how quickly things could turn, ready to fire with enough provocation or threat to me.

If I actually paid Tyr, I’d be giving him a raise for that one. Martok was off his game, and he knew it.

What I hadn’t told anyone was that the *whine* wasn’t even necessary for the weapon’s operation. I had designed it that way *on purpose*—not for function, but for intimidation. A real battlefield weapon wouldn’t make a sound when primed. Stealth would be out the window otherwise.

Picard, surprisingly, held his tongue. Maybe because Martok had been reasonable despite my slight provocation—and Tyr’s little performance. I was playing this exactly as I’d seen in the shows, and I felt comfortable in my read on the man. Martok would respect me *more* if I was blunt, if I didn’t dance around the issue.

“On my honor, I give you my word that I have no such orders—against you or President Moss,” Martok stated solemnly. Then, after a beat, he added, “And even if I had, I would disobey them.”

Interesting. He *meant* that.

“Then you have my gratitude and my respect, General Martok,” I said, nodding with genuine acknowledgment. “Honorable warriors like you are rare these days.”

I paused, studying him closely, then continued, my voice quieter, more personal. “I think you and I have much in common. I wasn’t always an Augment. Once, I was just a soldier in my nation’s military—a common soldier, like my ancestors before me. I wasn’t born into a family of wealth, power, or influence. Like you, I didn’t come from nobility. We both climbed to our positions the hard way—the old-fashioned way. We earned them through grit, through being

better, more ruthless, more cunning, more competent than those pampered sons of privilege who had everything handed to them.”

I let the words settle between us, locking eyes in a brief but intense moment of understanding and maybe even comradeship. Two common soldiers.

“We had to be that way,” I added, my voice tinged with the weight of experience. “Especially when so many tried to hold us back, to make us feel undeserving, to hold us back,” Martok nodded, a flicker of recognition in his eyes, as if some painful memory stirred. “But we succeeded despite them. We proved ourselves worthy, and that’s what counts.”

Of course, I was referring semi-subtly to how Kor, the Dahar master, blocked Martok from becoming an officer, a grudge he carried practically his entire adult life, something he hated the man for.

It had set Martok’s career back by years and his father hadn’t lived long enough to see his son become an officer, a dream the man had held all his life.

Martok’s gaze sharpened, suspicion flickering across his features as he asked, “You know me?”

I could see I’d struck closer to the truth than I had intended, but I wasn’t about to back down. Time to go all in.

“Even with fifteen generations of your family serving the Empire as warriors, those noble houses still couldn’t let you forget your humble beginnings in the Ketha lowlands. They never let me forget mine, either.” I paused, the bitterness seeping into my voice. “And fuck those petaQs!”

Martok and his men froze for a moment, clearly taken aback by my swearing. Then, as if a dam had broken, they erupted into laughter, the tension that had been building evaporating in an instant.

“Well said,” Martok boomed, still chuckling. “I like you, human. It would be an honor to fight and kill you. A battle worthy of song.”

I grinned back, unbothered. “Likewise. When I fight and kill you, I’ll make sure to tell everyone—and their mothers—how glorious my victory was.”

Martok’s grin widened, and he clasped my forearm in a warrior’s handshake. “I’d expect nothing less.”

I nodded in agreement, then continued with a sly smile. “Of course, now it’s not my humble origins being used against me, but my status as an Augment. The Federation has only a few prejudices left, but I think that’s one of the few left. Though, President Moss doesn’t seem to share that view.” I winked at Moss, who looked thoroughly entertained by the unexpected turn the conversation had taken.

“The jury is still out on Picard here,” I added with a playful look, giving a conspiratorial thumb gesture toward the captain.

Picard sputtered in shocked indignation, his eyebrows shooting up comically, though the room was filled with laughter, Klingons included, who were laughing uproariously at the playful jab.

“Have you eaten?” I asked, the grin still lingering on my face. “Discussions like this are best had over a shared meal. I’ve prepared a small feast for you and your men.”

“We would be honored,” Martok replied, his voice carrying the tone of a soldier who had seen the horrors of war and wasn’t sure when he’d get to eat next, or what quality that food would even be.

“Madame President, may I?” I asked, gesturing to a clear space where the furniture had been pushed aside.

She nodded in response, her amusement evident.

With a tap on my omnitool, I summoned a large table laden with food and bloodwine, the scents of prime rib and ribs slathered in barbecue sauce filling the room almost immediately.

Moss and Picard both stared at the impressive spread, their eyes widening slightly at the sight of the abundant meal.

Picard carefully masked his look of distaste, though it was obvious he was struggling.

“Is that blood, Admiral?” he asked cautiously, gesturing at the racks of ribs. It was almost comical how hard he was trying to maintain his composure, though his discomfort was palpable.

Martok, his men, and I all shared a laugh at Picard’s transparent attempt to keep his unease hidden. The Klingon sense of smell, being what it was, probably knew instantly that it wasn’t actual blood.

“That’s barbecue sauce, Captain,” I corrected with a roll of my eyes. “Not blood.”

Martok’s expression shifted to one of curiosity as he surveyed the platters of meat, a grin slowly forming on his lips. “What manner of beast is this?” he asked, his voice filled with interest. “It smells... good.”

"This is an Earth creature called a cow," I said, smiling as I watched their reactions. "A large, hornless quadruped, bred by humans specifically for consumption. It lacks the cunning of a targ or the ferocity of a kradge, but it provides a mighty source of sustenance. For millennia, it has fed humans, grazing slowly in fields, blissfully unaware that its fate is to serve warriors at the feast. Humans used to raise vast herds of them, ensuring a constant supply of meat and milk for humanity."

Martok grunted in acknowledgment.

"Replicated, I assume?" he asked, his distaste barely concealed.

"No," I replied, and to Picard and Moss' surprise, both of whom shot me sharp looks, I added, "I selected this cow myself, slaughtered and butchered it, then stored the meat in stasis, specifically for a day like this."

Martok regarded me with a mix of surprise and respect, clearly impressed by the effort.

In the 24th century, most humans in this galaxy no longer raised cows and other livestock for meat, aside from a few Amish and Mennonite communities that had managed to preserve their way of life, or some distant agrarian or retro colonies that rejected modern technology for various philosophical or religious reasons.

There were wild cows on Earth, roaming here and there in various places, so Picard and Moss' surprise was understandable.

I had actually purchased this cow from a farmer and slaughtered it when I had been in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe, so it was closer to what I remembered from my old world.

Martok's voice held a note of surprise and intrigue. "I was not aware humans slaughtered their own meat."

"Very few do in this era," I replied, my tone reflective. "But I'm not from this time, and I wanted something as fresh as possible—a taste of home."

"Yes, I've heard tale of this," Martok replied, his voice steady. "A human Augment from another time and dimension, but still from Earth."

"I wasn't an Augment on my Earth," I corrected, my tone firm. "I only became one when I was brought here. Otherwise, I would've faced an even colder reception on the *Enterprise*."

Martok nodded, his understanding evident. He knew well of the Eugenics Wars and the lingering prejudice against Augments in the Federation—especially among the humans.

I gestured toward the platter of perfectly cooked prime rib I had prepared earlier, using a replicated wood burning grill. "Care for a taste?"

"This is prime rib, a cut of Earth cattle taken from the beast's most prized and well-marbled flesh. It is a warrior's feast—thick, rich, and dripping with its own juices. Unlike the weak who consume overcooked meat, true humans prepare this cut so that the center remains red, warm, and nearly pulsing with life. It is seared on the outside, trapping the essence of the beast within, then slowly roasted over fire until it reaches the perfect balance of tenderness and strength," I explained bombastically. "And while everything on this table is human derived, I thought the meat paired well with bloodwine, vintage 2309."

"Hmmm..." Martok mused, studying the prime rib with newfound interest now that it had been explained in a way that appealed to his Klingon sensibilities. "A very good year for bloodwine. You know your spirits."

I gave a nod of appreciation, inwardly smirking. I was *definitely* cheating with my extradimensional knowledge of Marok, but it seemed to be working perfectly.

"When prime rib is served, it is often accompanied by its own blood—reduced into a rich *au jus*—or coated in a fiery paste called *horseradish*, which burns the throat like a victorious battle cry! The best way to consume it is with a blade, slicing off thick portions and devouring them

while the juices still run. It is not as raw as *gagh*, of course, but it is a meal that commands respect. A warrior who eats prime rib does not merely consume; he conquers with each bite!"

While all this might've been a bit over the top, it was clearly striking the right chord with my Klingon guests.

"You speak as if you were Klingon yourself!" Martok roared, genuinely delighted.

Grinning, I served each of them a very thick slab of very rare prime rib, the juices still steaming from the cut.

Martok pointed. "And those?"

"Barbecue ribs," I answered. "Taken from the cow's sides—where the meat clings tight to the bone. They're slow-cooked over open flame so the fat and juices melt into the flesh, making it tender but rich, layered with flavor. I coated them in a spiced barbecue sauce of my own design—bold, smoky, with just the right amount of heat."

I picked one up, holding it like a blade.

"The proper way to eat them is to seize the rib with your hands, bite into the meat, and tear it from the bone—just as a victorious warrior feasts on the spoils of battle. It's cooked, of course—so not as bloody as *gagh*—but trust me, it belongs on a warrior's table."

I gave a small shrug, tone lightening just a bit.

"Baseline human physiology doesn't handle raw meat quite as well as the Klingon constitution."

"There is no shame in this!" Martok bellowed, jabbing a half-eaten rib toward me for emphasis, his fingers and lips gleaming with blood-red barbecue sauce. His warriors, equally sauced and grinning, growled their agreement through mouths full of meat. From the laughter and glint in their eyes, my culinary diplomacy had landed better than any treaty.

Across the table, Moss and Picard had opted for the smallest, most well-done cuts of prime rib, cautiously dissecting them with knife and fork, summoning every ounce of diplomatic finesse to avoid looking squeamish.

Steak and other meats were still very much part of human food culture and weren't unheard of in 24th century Star Trek, of course, but my tale of actually slaughtering and butchering a real, living cow had obviously changed the tenor of this meal for them, I thought with amusement.

The Klingons and I tore into the feast with gusto. At one point, I replicated a steaming, fresh French baguette, sliced it open, and piled thick slabs of prime rib inside, letting the au jus soak the bread until it nearly fell apart in my hands. I took a bite, groaned in satisfaction—and the Klingons, looking intrigued, quickly followed my lead.

Within minutes, a new frontier had been breached: Klingons were devouring prime rib sandwiches like warriors discovering a new form of conquest. Today was a day for firsts, and I was apparently responsible for launching the Federation's messiest culinary alliance.

“I—and many in the Empire—would gladly enjoy more of this cow meat of yours,” Martok declared, leaning back in his chair with a deep, satisfied sigh. His hands rested atop his overstuffed belly, and his warriors echoed their agreement with low, contented grunts. Judging by the carnage on their plates, each had put away at least five pounds of meat and nearly a full bottle of bloodwine.

“When you return to your ship, General, you’ll find a hundred pounds of freshly cut, raw meat waiting for you—enough to share with your crew,” I said smoothly, while my AI children were already drafting plans to acquire breeding pairs of cattle and explore a new export line to the Klingon Empire.

Martok inclined his head, the amusement in his eyes fading slightly as he brought the conversation back to its heart. “You honor us with your hospitality... despite our unexpected arrival.”

I returned his nod, my expression hardening as the weight of the moment settled in. A quick glance at President Moss earned me a subtle nod—permission granted.

“We are both warriors,” I said, my voice steady. “Leaders, not politicians. So, I’ll speak plainly. I assume that’s your preference?”

“I greatly prefer it,” Martok replied without hesitation, nodding solemnly.

“Then let’s be blunt.” I leaned forward slightly. “You tested your cloaking device against my technology and were defeated. Now that you’ve seen what it can do... what comes next?”

Martok didn’t flinch. “If I am permitted, I am to observe the testing more closely—and assess whether the Empire might acquire the defense net for our own use.”

Picard had been right. But did they fully understand the restrictions I was imposing? From the brief glance President Moss shot me, I suspected she was wondering the same thing.

“I’m not sure what you’ve been told about the defense net or the terms of its use,” I began carefully, “but I need to clarify a misunderstanding. The GODS net is not for sale—it’s being *leased*.”

Martok frowned. “Explain this... lease,” he said, the word foreign on his tongue. Whether it was confusion about the concept itself or just its application here, I couldn’t tell.

Then again, maybe it *was* unfamiliar in general.

The Klingon economy wasn’t exactly my area of expertise. Most of my dealings with the Empire had been straightforward—selling tech, holoprograms, and physical goods. Trade with them was often more honor-based than market-driven, and business negotiations rarely involved long-term contracts, let alone structured, complex licensing agreements. Martok, as head of his House, had people to handle the economic realities of his house. He was, and always had been, a warrior first.

Among the Great Houses, it was often the women—the Ladies—who truly managed things when their Lords were off at war. While they didn't officially lead their Houses, they understood the value of commerce, influence, and wealth. It was they who nurtured the fortunes of their families and bloodlines, even as their kin fought and bled across the stars.

"This lease," I began, turning to Martok, "is a contract between my company and the world seeking protection. In exchange for a set payment, I provide the defense system for a fixed period—five years, in Kessik IV's case. At the end of that five-year term, the lease can be renewed, or it can end. If they choose not to renew, I deactivate the system and recover all my technology."

I paused, giving him time to absorb it before continuing. "The system always remains the property of my company, before, during, and after the lease period. That means we assume full responsibility for its maintenance and repair needs during the lease period. This also means you would not have any access to the platforms themselves and the defense net would act autonomously, if you do not, to preserve its technical secrets."

Martok turned sharply to Moss, his expression a mix of disbelief and disapproval. "You would allow weapon platforms of such power to orbit above your world—under another's control?" he asked, voice tinged with incredulity, as if questioning her sanity.

"My government retains full control of the defense net, even while it is deployed and under lease," Moss corrected firmly.

Martok tilted his head slightly, his gaze narrowing with thought. "I see," he said slowly. "Still, this requires an immense amount of trust, does it not? Who is to say that Admiral Gothic could not turn these weapons against you? These platforms are not manned, correct?"

"They're not," Moss confirmed, her expression serious. "And you're right—this is not a decision made lightly. It demands a great deal of trust. That is not lost on me or my government." She paused, her tone softening as she spoke with conviction. "But I trust Admiral Gothic. He is a hero to my people. When the Hur'q attacked Kessik IV, the nearest Starfleet vessel was more than twenty-four hours away at maximum warp. Gothic had no obligation to our world, yet he came, risking himself and his crew. He fought above our skies, decimating the enemy fleet. Then he fought on the ground, killing the invaders who captured and ate my people."

"The Hur'q have no honor!" Martok spat with a growl, his voice thick with disdain and hatred. "Their vile race should be wiped from the stars."

"I don't share the hesitation of many of my fellow humans who would recoil at your call for genocide," I replied, my voice steady and unflinching. I met Martok's gaze with the intensity of two warriors who had seen the horrors of war firsthand. "I agree with you completely. Coexistence may be possible for many, and in time, even the most bitter of enemies can become allies. The Federation and the Klingon Empire are proof of that—a testament to how even the fiercest of foes can find common ground, even becoming long-time allies. But sometimes, the choice is simple. It's them or us. And I'll always choose us. It was an honor to fight that battle for the people of this world."

Martok growled, his eyes narrowing in a way that spoke volumes. The sound was not just a growl—it was a mark of respect.

“How many ships were in orbit?” he asked, his voice low and deliberate.

“Three medium-sized carrier ships, 105 fighter craft,” I answered without hesitation, anticipating the question as if I had relived that moment a thousand times.

Martok raised both eyebrows in shocked surprise, before cautiously asking another question.

“That many? And your ship alone destroyed them?”

“It did,” I replied firmly. “I destroyed them in space, and then I hunted them down and killed them on the ground to the last fucking bug.”

The silence that followed spoke more than words could. Martok and his warriors exchanged glances, their eyes now regarding me with a new respect—something far deeper than before.

“Your warship is powerful,” Martok acknowledged, his voice laced with genuine admiration.

“You’re right, it is, I designed it myself, just like I designed the GODS net. But a ship, like any weapon, is only as strong as the warrior who wields it. In the hands of a true warrior the knife you use to butter your bread can be more deadly than the sharpest and most perfectly forged bat’leth in the hands of another. My ship and crew won that battle in space, sending the hideous bugs to the nothingness that they sprung from.”

Martok’s eyes gleamed with a mixture of respect and anticipation, clearly eager to hear more of the story.

“And their forces on the ground?” he asked, his voice tinged with the same warrior’s hunger for battle, even in just the retelling of a story.

“Three large dropships, standard complements—75 soldiers in total,” I replied, my tone steady as I recounted the numbers.

“Your crew must be filled with great warriors to defeat that many!” he exclaimed.

I shook my head. “My crew is small—only three others at that time. I fought them alone.”

Martok’s jaw dropped, his expression shifting from surprise to wariness. He paused, clearly struggling to process what I’d just said.

“You killed 75 Hur’q soldiers on the ground, by yourself?” he asked quietly, his voice laced with disbelief, as though unsure whether to believe me.

I nodded solemnly. “I did.”

Martok’s eyes searched mine, lingering for a long moment. He was looking for any sign of exaggeration or falsehood, but when he found none, his gaze softened into something more—wary respect.

“We Klingons have long memories, especially when it comes to our defeats,” Martok said slowly, his tone unexpectedly candid. “Perhaps our ancestors were right to fear your kind.” He paused, as though the admission itself caused him pain. “It must have been a glorious battle! How I envy you!”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his words. “When fighting for a just cause, against truly terrible enemies who deserve nothing but death, there is no victory sweeter,” I replied with unwavering conviction.

Martok smiled a bloodthirsty smile, the expression one of genuine approval. “Well said. Well said, indeed.”

A comfortable silence fell between us, but something in me stirred, a need to press further into this moment of shared understanding.

“I will continue to speak candidly, as you have,” I said, my voice steady. “The Klingons are still a race of conquerors, are they not?”

Martok looked momentarily confused, but nodded slowly, clearly unsure where I was going with this.

“Should you and the Empire be interested, I’m willing to lease my defense net technology to you,” I said, my voice steady but pointed. “However, I will not allow it to be deployed over military-controlled or conquered worlds—even those that fall within the Empire’s borders.”

As the words left my mouth, Martok’s expression hardened, the frown returning to his face, while Picard’s own features tightened with a sharp, almost imperceptible shift. I could feel the discomfort radiating from him, though it was masked beneath his usual diplomatic veneer.

“Explain,” Martok said, his voice low and commanding, demanding even.

The air in the room thickened. This was the unspoken truth, the uncomfortable reality woven throughout the Star Trek universe—one that was often hinted at, but rarely confronted directly. Yet here, it was laid bare for all to see.

The Klingon Empire conquered whole worlds and races as their borders continually expanded, even pre-warp civilizations who had no hope of defending against the Klingon’s technological superiority, oftentimes slaughtering huge percentages of their populations and all but enslaving the native populations of those worlds afterwards.

Technically, after they were conquered, they were Klingon citizens, at least on paper, but everyone knew that they were second-class citizens at best and their lives were cheap.

In a way, the Federation owed much of their growth and recruitment success to the Klingons and their insatiable drive to conquer—a stark reminder of what the Federation was built to resist.

Voluntarily join the Federation as a member or risk the Klingons conquering you in the future.

The Federation offered many benefits to its members, but fear and pain often drove the bus. Not that Picard or others would admit to that cold, ruthless, pragmatic truth, that much of the

Federation's success, why so many worlds joined the Federation, was a direct result of an acute fear of the Klingons conquering them if they didn't.

There was only one episode in TNG, which hinted at this, where the planet Krios, which had been conquered or subjugated by the Klingons, sought independence from the Klingons and a rebellion had formed to rise up against their Klingon oppressors.

The Federation/Klingon alliance had certainly and greatly slowed down the Klingon Empire's territorial expansion through conquest, but it still happened and the Federation mostly turned a blind eye to it, not wanting to rock the boat and reignite hostilities with the Klingon Empire. There were whole sections of the Khitomer Accords that dealt with this very topic and forced the Federation to not interfere in any way.

No one in the shows wanted to point out this extremely uncomfortable truth.

It was hard to look like the good guy when you turned a willful blind eye to pre-warp, pre-contact worlds being conquered by the Klingons.

"The Empire does not truly need, nor will I allow my defense net to aid in the continued subjugation of a conquered race," I calmly complied with his demand, a touch of manipulation in the statement that everyone with ears could hear.

"What *will* you *allow* your defense net to protect in the Empire then?" Martok ground out.

"High value resource or mining worlds that does not use conquered races as a labor force, or Klingon colony worlds made exclusively of a Klingon population," I calmly answered. "My defense net would offer potent protection to those worlds, allowing you to shift your fleet and all other military assets away from protecting those same worlds."

The fact that this would also free up military assets to potentially expand the Empire's borders through conquest was something I was carefully not thinking or choosing to say aloud.

On the other hand, it would also free up military assets to better fight the Dominion in the years ahead and that was extremely valuable.

Regardless, I had no intention of selling many defense nets to the Klingon Empire. My focus would be on offering protection to the Federation and other important independent worlds that Section 31 had already given me a priority list of.

Even leasing one or two planetary defense nets to the Klingons would be extremely valuable as it would greatly increase my influence in the Empire as I would now be an important military defense technology supplier. They'd have no right to protest if I prioritized the Federation, as I was still human, after all.

In fact, it might even increase my sales to the Federation as they would have a vested interest in sucking up my entire manufacturing capacity by leasing everything I produced in order to prevent the Klingon Empire from being able to do the same.

The more I thought about it, the better this sounded for me overall.

Martok grumbled as he visibly considered my words.

“That...may be acceptable to my people,” he admitted. “But high value resource worlds are important to my people, we would need to trust you and your company. I am not sure that is possible given what you are.”

Ah, the elephant in the room.

“Is there anything I can do to earn that trust? Or put me on the path to trust?” I asked plainly.

Martok searched my eyes again, like he was trying to search my soul.

“They may be,” he admitted. “But I will need to test your heart.”

“How?”

“In battle, of course.”

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Martok swung the blunted bat’leth in a wide arc, the metal whistling as it cut through the air despite its dulled edge.

He paused, taking in the rugged beauty of the valley around him. Admiral Gothic had chosen this location well—remote, untouched, far from any population center on this sparsely settled world. Even the air of Kessik IV smelled clean and crisp, refreshing in a way that reminded him of the wild places of Qo’noS he remembered from his youth, before industry had claimed even those.

Klingons excelled at many things, but the thoughtful and long-term stewardship of their worlds was not always among them. Too often, his people prioritized warcraft and expansion over preservation. It was a truth few in the Empire wanted to hear, but Martok had never been one to shy away from uncomfortable truths and pragmatic realities. That stance had earned him many enemies among the elite—but just as many allies.

As he moved through the motions of the sword form, his gaze settled on Admiral Gothic. The man stood motionless, a statue clad in chrome-like armor of a kind Martok had never seen. His eyes were closed, weapons outstretched, he radiated an eerie stillness—as if meditating before battle, waiting for the moment to strike, to kill.

Did the man not even need to stretch before battle?

If Martok didn’t know better, he would have mistaken him for a true statue—so unnaturally still was his form. Was this yet another genetic enhancement at work? Some refinement of muscle density and elasticity, allowing him to remain loose and battle-ready even at rest? Even while his muscles were cold?

In one hand, the Augment wielded a simple short sword—one of Martok’s men had identified it as a Roman gladius. Just over two feet of blunted steel, double-edged and unadorned. A practical weapon of conquest and death, built for efficiency rather than display. It was a warrior’s blade, not a showpiece for decoration.

In his other hand, held in a reverse grip, was a short, blunted combat knife.

Many warriors would scoff at such small, unassuming weapons, especially when pitted against the reach and weight of a bat'leth. But Martok was no fool. The weapons Admiral Gothic had chosen were compact, built for speed and precision—deadly in the hands of someone with the strength, reflexes, and enhanced speed of a human Augment. Weapons of death and destruction in the hands of someone who truly knew how to wield them.

An Augment.

Klingons had long memories. They never forgot their enemies—especially not demons like those.

Human Augments were the monsters whispered about around campfires at night, the shadows lurking in warriors' nightmares. Tales of their terrible strength and skill were told to frighten the young and to remind even the boldest Klingons of an uncomfortable truth: for all their might, for all their warrior spirit, they were not invincible.

It had taken only two of these creatures to seize a Bird-of-Prey and slaughter its entire crew.

And when the Empire sought to claim that strength for itself—to unlock the power hidden within that cursed DNA—it had nearly destroyed them as a people.

A mutated strain of the very same genetic material had ravaged entire worlds, twisted their people, and shamed them beyond measure. Klingons bore the price of their hubris in the mirror, their foreheads shamefully stripped of their ridges, their proud lineage marked by disgrace.

For the next 150 years, tens of billions of their people had been *disfigured* before they found a solution.

That shame was a wound that had never fully healed. It was not something his people would ever forget.

It was one of the Empire's most closely guarded secrets—a truth known only to the High Council and a handful of top officials in the military and in the medical establishment. To speak of it without authorization was punishable by the death of the perpetrator and their entire bloodline.

That terrible secret was that the Klingon people had been irrevocably altered by human Augments.

A trace of their DNA lived in every Klingon alive today, woven into the very fabric of their species.

Their species' very genome had been changed forever.

Even now, geneticists struggled to understand the full extent of its effects—if that sliver of Augment DNA had subtly changed them, if it could ever be safely removed. But no one dared take chances. The Empire had learned its lesson in that regard. That volatile DNA had once

plunged entire worlds into chaos, put their very species at risk, and no one wished to risk history repeating itself.

It was an existential crisis, the kind of uncertainty Klingons did not handle well.

In the hearts of those who knew the shameful truth, a quiet fear took root.

Had their long peace with the Federation been shaped by that subtle genetic change? Had the Empire's slowed expansion—once unthinkable—been the result of something deeper, a fundamental shift in their very nature? Their very heart? Their personalities?

Were they no longer the conquerors they once were? Did they now have fear in their hearts?

These questions haunted them. The possible answers terrified them even more. Thus, it was decided to classify this truth at the highest level, lest it risk panic and the possible collapse of their great empire.

And yet, despite their well-earned fear of the long-gone Augments, even the most hardened Klingon could respect a warrior like Admiral Gothic. He was no mere human—he was a blooded warrior, a victor of countless battles, a hero to multiple worlds. A man worthy of honor and respect.

Martok's thoughts were interrupted as Picard, ever the diplomat, tried once again to stop them.

"You try my patience, Picard," Martok growled. "I will know his heart through battle—as only true warriors can. Begone!"

Hopefully, the Starfleet captain was not so dense as to miss the insult woven into his words. Martok spared him no further attention, watching as Picard wordlessly turned away to rejoin President Moss—a leader wise enough not to interfere.

At Martok's challenge, Admiral Gothic's eyes snapped open. The sudden motion jolted him, like witnessing a statue of cold, unfeeling stone come to life, its gaze piercing straight into his soul.

A primal fear shot down Martok's spine. Expected. Familiar. But no less unsettling. Adrenaline surged through his veins, sharpening his senses.

The battle was about to begin. He could feel it in the very air.

Those were the eyes of an apex predator. Every instinct in Martok's warrior heart screamed—fight for your life or flee before the gaze of this killer.

He ignored the primal urge and spoke plainly. "Are you ready to begin, Admiral Gothic?"

Gothic gave a silent nod.

Martok's voice carried across the battlefield. "This fight is not to the death, but until one of us can no longer fight or yields." A final reminder to all present.

He began the countdown. "Three. Two. One."

At the last syllable, Martok surged forward, his footwork crisp, precise—small steps keeping him balanced, powerful but controlled.

His bat'leth flicked out, its many blunted tips stabbing in quick, probing thrusts and feints, testing Gothic's defenses and sword style. There would be no wasted movement, no reckless overextension. Martok had an old warrior's patience, honed by a lifetime of battle, of victory and survival.

Let the Augment show his skill. Let him prove himself in the only way that mattered.

Martok's blood pounded in his ears as Gothic moved, effortlessly slipping past each probing strike with nothing but the precision of his body. There was no wasted motion, no unnecessary flair—only the ruthless efficiency Martok had seen in the deadliest of warriors. Those who killed quickly, then moved on to the next battle. Those who fought not for personal glory, but to ensure their comrades lived.

There were no flashy, unnecessary flourishes. No arrogance. No showmanship born of inexperience or ego or the privilege of noble birth, as he had seen so many times before. To his shame, something he'd seen even in his son.

Admiral Gothic was a consummate warrior—one who fought to end battles, not prolong them. And yet, Martok could tell that he was holding back.

The signs were subtle, but undeniable. The minuscule shifts in weight. The slight repositioning of his blades—movements that, if fully committed, would have already severed arteries, shattered bones, or taken Martok's head. The calculated adjustments, guiding Martok into disadvantageous positions, setting traps the Augment could exploit in an instant with his admittedly superior strength and speed.

He wasn't just fighting. He was studying. Testing.

Holding back—for now.

Deadly efficiency—this was the human warrior's philosophy. Martok could see it in every movement. No wasted words, no taunts, no arrogance. Just calm, ruthless precision. A fighter who would end an opponent with multiple killing blows, just in case, ensuring death without hesitation, then moving on.

Against anyone else, Martok might have felt like he was being toyed with, disrespected even. But this hesitation—this restraint—felt different. It was measured. Respectful. As if the Augment was allowing him time to test his skill, to take his measure, to preserve his honor.

Martok adjusted. His probing strikes widened, sweeping in broader arcs. He altered his footwork, his speed, his angles, his overall sword style—throwing every variation he could into his assault, drawing on decades of hard-earned battle wisdom.

It truly made no difference.

As if a switch had been flipped, Gothic stopped dodging. Instead, he met the bat'leth head-on, catching it edge to edge with his sword.

In the same instant, his off-hand combat knife flashed—stabbing deep and dragging across Martok's belly, then sweeping low in a blur, tracing the main arteries in his legs, opening and severing, the movement graceful somehow, allowing the sharpness of the blade to separate flesh, if only the blade had been truly sharp. It was a move meant to quickly bleed out your enemy, to see their lifeblood leave the body by the liter in seconds.

Before Martok could react, a brutal front kick slammed into his chest.

He was airborne before he even registered the impact. Thrown away ten feet. Maybe more.

By the hand of Kahless, it felt like he had been struck by a shuttlecraft.

And yet—Martok knew the Augment had held back. Had he used his full strength, the Klingon's body might have been broken. Or even dead.

Just how strong was this man?

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.

"Do you yield, General Martok?" Gothic's voice came from above him, calm and certain. "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 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.