

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

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

Riker closed his eyes as the interview concluded, his mind turning to the political shockwaves Kessik IV’s decision to lease the Gothic Orbital Defense System would unleash across the quadrant. It was no passing storm, no localized disturbance—it was a class-five plasma storm that would sweep through the whole quadrant, affecting all in its path, indiscriminate and impossible to contain, something not to fight but to merely get out of the way of.

Whatever Admiral Gothic’s true objectives for the interview had been at the outset, Riker suspected they had been achieved and then some. The way he had handled this interview was a master class in persuasion and public relations. Tessa, the host, had been predisposed to favor Gothic and his company, that was clear, yet he hadn’t seized upon it to deliver the obvious sales pitch that everyone watching had expected. Instead, he had held back. The GODS net was presented almost as an afterthought—making his words and message all the more credible.

The true brilliance lay in shifting the focus of the conversation. The interview wasn’t about a new defense system; it was about the systemic failures and weaknesses the Hur’q invasion had laid bare in the Federation and in Starfleet.

Gothic spoke of a Starfleet stretched thin, overmatched, an organization that seemed unwilling and reluctant—perhaps even incapable—of fulfilling its founding promise. Facts and figures about an aging, undersized fleet were recast as evidence of decline and weakness, of institutions faltering under pressure, weakened from within by fear and mission drift. Against that backdrop, Gothic offered his solution not as a triumph of innovation, but as a practical stopgap—a safeguard until Starfleet could right itself and return to taking seriously the reason it had been created in the first place.

And all of it had all been wrapped up in a neat little bow with the timing of President Moss’ announcement. Had they coordinated the timing of it? Everyone now knew Kessik IV would lease the technology regardless of Federation endorsement, transforming itself into one of the best-defended planets in the entire Federation—second perhaps only to the core worlds of Earth, Vulcan, and Andoria. The first domino had fallen, and countless more would soon follow—regardless of Captain Picard’s report—as other worlds inevitably sought the same protection, even if they had to pay for it themselves. And it would be Kessik IV—an obscure, lightly populated, and strategically unimportant world—that had altered the course of galactic history and policy for decades to come.

Riker let his gaze travel across the quiet room. Each person was adrift in their own thoughts, just as he had been, shaken by the same realizations. This “watch party,” as frustrating and disheartening and maddening as it had been at times, had also proven profoundly illuminating. He suspected it was a small glimpse into innumerable similar conversations now likely taking place throughout the Federation and beyond—from private homes to the centers of galactic power—sparked by this single interview.

And at the center of it all was Admiral Gothic, a polarizing figure, a human augment, and a man outside of his own time and dimension. By holding the keys to this new defense, he had made himself indispensable and potentially untouchable—and dangerously so. He was no longer just a soldier or a savior, an augment and a curiosity. He was on his way to becoming a power broker, in time perhaps the most influential man in the entire quadrant.

What the future held for Starfleet, for the Federation, and for the galaxy itself was no longer a matter of careful planning. It was a leap headfirst into the unknown.

The Federation Council would have to act.

Starfleet would have to adapt.

Allies and adversaries alike would begin drawing their own conclusions and reordering the balance of power to accommodate this new reality.

The galaxy had just shifted on its axis, and no one—not even Riker—could predict where the pieces would fall.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 64

Main Conference Room. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress*. In orbit of Kessik IV

“You’ve received ninety-six verified requests for interviews from news organizations both inside and outside the Federation,” Annika reported dutifully, fingers dancing across her omnitool’s holographic interface. She looked genuinely pleased with herself—clearly proud that my messaging campaign had gained traction. Lately, she’d been leaning hard into the role of ultra-professional executive assistant role on the business-side of my operations, and I was perfectly fine with that. The demand on my time from my businesses was only going to increase from here on out.

“How would you like me to respond?” she asked.

I couldn’t help the smug smile that tugged at my lips as I looked around the room. The entire crew was present—everyone except Dr. Lanning, who had become something of a recluse. The genius inventor, now surrounded by centuries of accumulated scientific knowledge and alien methodologies, had entered a state of pure, blissful discovery. His creative output was

staggering—new inventions, improvements, refinements—and frankly, I was happy to let the man tinker to his heart’s content.

My AI children were, as always, quietly standing by, though none had chosen to manifest holographically.

“Oh, how the tables have turned,” I said, rubbing my hands together like a cartoon villain. “From zero interest to ninety-six interview requests.”

B’Elanna rolled her eyes. “Who *talks* like that? You sound like an Augment villain from a Eugenics War drama.”

With long practice, I ignored the haters in the room. Hate the game, not the player.

“Reorder the interview requests by priority,” I instructed, “taking into account their average audience size, whether their governments or homeworlds have asked for more information on the GODS Net, and so on. Give a little extra weight to non-Federation outlets.”

Neela tilted her head. “Why do you want that, Gothic?”

“For several reasons,” I answered honestly. “I’m human—there’s no escaping that—and my preference for the Federation is pretty obvious by now. But for the sake of my company and my influence across the galaxy, it’s better if I don’t so blatantly look like a brown-nosed Federation patsy. In fact, showing a bit of healthy dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Federation culture might actually help me attract more non-Federation clients.”

“Admiral Pressman’s bigotry and vitriol have been good for something, at least,” Lauren joked, pointing at me with a smirk.

“True,” I admitted with a grin. “Even if most of our GODS Net customers are within the Federation, I’d like a solid number of leasing worlds outside it—places a little more insulated from whatever political winds are blowing through the Council chambers. If the Federation or its next president decides to end funding, cave to Romulan pressure, or declare the tech illegal—or whatever other bureaucratic nonsense they come up with—I’d rather not have all my eggs in one galactic basket.”

That was also why I planned to keep my control of Minos a secret for as long as possible, ideally forever. It would be my hidden fallback world—my *get-the-hell-out-of-Dodge* contingency plan.

“More non-Federation worlds leasing the tech also means you’ll have greater influence in broader galactic politics,” Lauren noted. “And it’ll make it a lot harder for the Federation—your likely biggest single customer—to strong-arm you later on.”

My eyebrows comically shot up and wiggled in alarm.

“Careful talking like that, Lauren, or this one here will start calling you an Augment villain next,” I stage-whispered, shielding my mouth with one hand and jerking my thumb faux-discreetly toward B’Elanna, who immediately sputtered in protest.

“I wear my Augment villain status with pride in my heart and a skip in my step!” Lauren fired back, grinning—then her voice softened. “At least... I do now.”

I gave her a gentle smile and a small nod. I understood. She’d come a long way since I first met her at the Institute—or, to be more precise, since I first *saw* her on the show, where she’d been written as little more than a two-dimensional side character. To be fair, she’d only appeared in a couple of episodes. Not much time for real character development.

My omnitool beeped, interrupting the moment—a new file had just come through.

“Good work, Annika,” I said, scanning the list and the accompanying dossiers—each a complete profile on the news organization, the proposed interviewer, and a multi-hundred-page analysis of their reach, tone, and reputation. The files were still being updated in real time, which only confirmed my suspicion that my AI children had done most of the heavy lifting.

That wasn’t a knock-on Annika’s competence, of course. My children simply possessed capabilities no organic being could match. They knew their lanes and stuck to them.

“Thank you, children,” I added.

Annika nodded, looking quite pleased with herself.

“I’ll review the list and get back to you with my selections,” I said, then turned to the next report. “B’Elanna, your report, please.”

“Despite the shipping delays on some critical materials, we’re still mostly on schedule,” B’Elanna said, her tone bright. Give an engineer a problem squarely in their wheelhouse, and they’ll be happy all day. “We’ve completed three of the six drones the ship can support and keep in transporter suspension. By the time we’re back at Bajor, all six should be ready. That’s the goal, anyway.”

I nodded thoughtfully as Carl and the others sent over a more detailed report. When it came to anything weapons-related, Carl was always *Johnny-on-the-spot*—more so than any of my other AI children. That kind of precision was exactly why the Minosians had created him in the first place. Specialization like that could produce incredible results, assuming the task was within their specialty.

“Good work, B’Elanna,” I said. “I don’t expect we’ll be going into battle again on the way back to Bajor—Q willing—but this whole cruise has been one long parade of unexpected shit, both good and bad.”

“Overall, quite positive, at least in the final outcome,” T’Maz observed dryly. “Your profile in the Alpha Quadrant has risen considerably following your actions during the Hur’q Invasion, creating a number of unique opportunities you have been quite adept at capitalizing on.”

“She’s got you there, Gothic,” Lauren quipped, then drew in a dramatic, exaggerated breath before launching into her mock speech, fingers counting with each point she made.

“First, you save Kessik IV and become its big damn hero—a world Starfleet was too far away and too thinly spread to help in time. That opened the door for you to build a relationship with President Moss, who just so happened to be receptive to your pitch for the GODS Net. Then *she’s* the one who digs up the legal precedent proving that every Federation member world has the right to purchase and deploy its own planetary defense system. *Then* you save Paris. *Then* the Federation President announces his shiny new defense initiative. And finally, Kessik IV becomes the first world to lease the GODS Net—kicking open the door for half the Alpha Quadrant to line up and say, ‘We’ll take one too!’”

Lauren ended with an exaggerated gasp, taking huge, comical gulps of air.

“Very lucky, actually,” B’Elanna remarked dryly, clearly amused by the performance.

Well, when she put it like that, it *did* sound pretty unbelievable.

“The universe handed me a series of opportunities, and I just happened to both recognize and be in a position to take advantage of them,” I said sagely. “Let’s not forget it also nearly killed me—and all of you—more times than I can count. Ship-to-ship battles, forced dimensional jumps, hundreds of Hur’q warriors boarding the ship, assassination attempts... take your pick.”

“True,” Neela agreed, her expression thoughtful. “It’s been a very eventful shakedown cruise, hasn’t it? I, for one, am eager to return home to Bajor.”

“Annika and I have never been to Bajor or Deep Space Nine,” Lauren said brightly. “So we’re looking forward to it too. Well, technically, I’ve never been anywhere but Earth that I can *remember*.”

“The station’s a masterpiece of Cardassian architecture,” I said dryly. “Brutalist, joyless, and thoroughly uninspired. But my island on Bajor? Beautiful—and always clothing optional.”

B’Elanna, predictably, rolled her eyes.

“And the near-palace you built on it is the *height* of humility,” she snarked.

I waved a hand airily. “Humility is highly overrated.”

Honestly, the number of fools who found themselves dropped into their favorite fictional universes only to live humbly and modestly could go fuck themselves. That was *never* going to be me. Besides being absurd, did they really think the ROB’s who tossed them into new realities wanted *that* kind of story? Invite your patron to throw a pebble (at least in their opinion) in the dimensional pond at your peril.

“Don’t let this act fool you, B’Elanna,” Neela said with a smirk. “Gothic has donated more money and resources to Bajor’s reconstruction than any single person—almost rivaling the Federation itself. And he’s a private citizen, not a government. Bajor wouldn’t be what it is right now without his help and generosity.”

She glanced my way, eyes glinting with amusement. “No one on Bajor begrudges Gothic for living like an unrepentant hedonist—or for surrounding himself with beautiful women. The

Prophets teach us to live fully, to take joy in our bodies and our experiences. There's no shame in pleasure."

B'Elanna, despite herself, looked amused.

"Well, *this* woman has successfully resisted his wicked ways," she said, lifting her chin proudly.

"For now," T'Maz, Neela, Lauren, and Annika replied in perfect unison—so flawlessly timed it seemed rehearsed.

B'Elanna blinked, caught completely off guard.

I cleared my throat, seizing the opening in the sudden, awkward silence. "Carl, where do we stand on cargo ship production? I have a feeling we'll be getting a few more lease requests soon."

Right on cue, Carl's hologram shimmered into existence—wild hair and all. I still hadn't changed his default avatar. It was just too damn funny.

"My Lord, cargo ship production is proceeding slightly ahead of schedule," Carl reported, gesturing as a color-coded production chart materialized in the air. "Newly available resources have accelerated assembly timelines. Based on revised sales projections following your recent interview, all indicators suggest we'll be able to meet anticipated demand on schedule. However, if your pitch proves highly successful, we may see a waiting list develop unless additional resources are allocated to expand our manufacturing and mining capacities."

"Excellent work, Carl," I said, studying the holographic data. "A waiting list might actually work to our advantage—builds interest, adds a little urgency." I looked up from the display. "Is this timeline based on current resource levels, or does it factor in the dilithium we're expecting from Kessik IV's lease payment?"

"It includes it, my Lord," Carl replied. "I've assumed the dilithium shipment will return with the cargo vessels currently in-system."

"You assumed correctly," I said absently. "They'll cloak and take a meandering route through the sector to obscure their true destination, but the dilithium will be available to you. Not all five cargo ships will be needed for transport, but the extras will serve as escorts until they're closer to the drop-off point."

I was careful not to mention *Minos* by name—even in front of my own crew. Unlike my AI children, whose loyalty was literally written into their foundational code, my organic crew still possessed free will. They could be coerced, manipulated, or simply make a mistake. In a way, keeping them in the dark was a kindness; no one could reveal what they didn't know.

"Understood, my Lord," Carl said with a nod and a faint smile. "I'll mark the return date as tentative and subject to change."

"How many cargo ships are currently available," I asked, "and what's our remaining inventory of defense nets?"

“Fifteen cargo ships are available. Three defense nets are ready for deployment at any time, my Lord,” Carl reported proudly.

“Excellent work, Carl,” I said, genuinely impressed.

When the five cargo ships had first been dispatched to Kessik IV to deliver the GODS Net for testing, only six additional vessels had been completed. Since then, Carl had produced nine more—a remarkable pace, though not surprising. I’d deliberately prioritized shipbuilding over defense net production. After all, the services of a high-value shipping company was far easier to sell than a revolutionary orbital defense system that no one in this galaxy had any real context for—especially one available only through leasing, not purchase. No, shipping was a well understood and mature business and there was plenty of need for high-security interstellar transport of cargo being unmet.

At the time of Kessik IV’s installation, there had been just one spare defense net in reserve. Having three now was ideal—barely—but it wouldn’t be enough if the interview generated the level of interest I expected. Each standard net required five cargo ships for transport, which meant that with fifteen ships total, I had *just* enough to deploy three full systems.

“Ready the three defense nets for interstellar transport,” I ordered. “Load them onto the cargo ships currently in system. Once I provide the destinations, I want them sent underway immediately. Run full diagnostics to ensure they’re prepared for extended high-warp travel.”

“All three, my Lord?” Carl asked, eyebrows lifting. “If I know their probable destinations, I can better prepare for the journeys—technically and legally.”

The crew exchanged curious glances.

“The planets of Betazed, Risa, and Halka,” I replied, allowing myself a small, knowing smile.

Carl’s expression brightened, while Annika leaned forward. “Do we have lease commitments from them?” she asked, her tone both skeptical and intrigued.

“Not yet,” I said, a hint of amusement in my voice. “But I have a good feeling.”

“Both Betazed and Risa would be huge wins for us,” Annika said thoughtfully. “Betazed carries influence across the Federation, and Risa sees billions of visitors every year. Just having one of our defense nets in orbit of Risa there would be priceless marketing—at zero cost to us.”

“It will be done, my Lord!” Carl replied with unrestrained enthusiasm.

I adjusted the holographic data before me, running a quick projection to confirm a suspicion.

“Prioritize production of ten additional cargo ships and two defense nets,” I ordered. “Reallocate resources and shift the schedule to complete them as fast as possible—without compromising quality. Once they’re finished, return production and resource allocations to standard levels.”

Carl’s face went still as the intricate dance of production and resources required to feed that production wildly shifted visually in the floating holographic depiction. It was a newly created symphony of production efficiency brought to life by the order I had just given.

Even with my enhanced mind, I could not perceive the full breadth and scope of what had just happened. I could feel that thousands of new orders and priorities had just been issued across the galaxy to everything connected to my quantum communications network.

“It is done, my Lord,” Carl reported. His holographic features came back to life as intense computational burden eased. “Do you require anything further?”

“No, Carl. Thank you for all your hard work,” I said.

“I exist to serve you in all things, my Lord.” He bowed deeply before his hologram dissolved into light.

“Does anyone else have anything to report?” I asked.

Silence.

“Very good. That’s all, everyone—thank you.”

Chairs slid back and footsteps faded as the others filed out, leaving only Lauren behind.

“Did you need something, Lauren?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, arms crossed. “Our Romulan guest. She’s holding something back from me—I can feel it. But you may be able to get it out of her.”

XXXXX

Main Holodeck. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress*.

I paused before the main holodeck doors twenty minutes after the staff meeting, not sure what I would find inside. Tyr fell into step at my side, silent and watchful—he wouldn’t let me anywhere near the prisoner without him being close enough to intervene and protect me. When Lauren asked for my help she’d specifically asked that I wait; she wanted time to ready the subject for my arrival.

I drew a measured breath and braced myself for whatever waited beyond those doors. I’d stayed deliberately ignorant of the details of Lauren’s interrogation—what methods she’d used, what she’d learned. Call it cowardice if you like; I preferred to think of it as trust. I’d given her a job I hadn’t wanted to do myself.

Given the many horrors this Romulan operative had committed on others, either directly or indirectly, I had been prepared to do all kinds of terrible things to the woman, but part of me had been very relieved when Lauren had stepped up to do the interrogation, especially with the sexual bent she had chosen to take over traditional torture.

In hindsight, it was a solid idea. Tal Shiar agents were built to endure pain and coercion in ways most people couldn’t imagine. Tal Shiar operatives had likely been trained and conditioned to handle pain far better than pleasure. However, I found myself far more willing to torture with pain than I was to torture with pleasure, especially with a woman. Lauren’s methods had leaned away from brute force and toward something more targeted—something she believed would

crack the operative without causing irreversible damage that could prevent her from speaking at all.

I didn't envy her the choices she'd had to make. And while I could steel myself for violence when necessary, even like this, I found other forms of manipulation—those that blurred lines of ethical intimacy with a woman—far harder to reconcile.

My life in this dimension was undeniably hedonistic—though, in my view, never to the point of excess. Still, I couldn't help but wonder what mixing sex and pleasure with deliberate torment might do to me. There was a line between indulgence and corruption, and I could feel how thin it was here, how easy it would be to go over it, even accidentally, especially with a beautiful female prisoner. The risk wasn't losing control in the moment—it was getting used to it. Maybe even enjoying it.

Given the strength that ran through my body, and the intensity that sometimes ruled my emotions, the thought of growing comfortable with that kind of power unsettled me. I didn't want the darkness I could wield in interrogation to slip, unbidden, into the tenderness I shared with the women I actually loved.

I exhaled, tapped the holodeck controls, and the reinforced duranium doors parted with a heavy mechanical hiss.

Inside, V'Ren was enclosed in a sensory dampening field, her body confined, spread eagle at a 45-degree angle, legs agape, arms to the side, her pussy open, wet, and engorged, various bliss baton technology on her nipples and clit lighting up with blue light intermittently. Her intermittent moans telling me exactly when they activated.

It was not lost on me that she had been positioned perfectly for me, if I wanted, to comfortably position myself between her spread open thighs and fuck her freely. She still looked beautiful, but wrung out, 'fucked stupid' came to mind, like she was exhausted and overwhelmed, not quite all there anymore.

Lauren was looking over a bank of holographic displays, cross-referencing data across multiple screens when she turned to greet me. Tyr stepped aside like a silent, vigilant sentinel, his attention never leaving V'Ren—though the prisoner didn't look like much of a threat in that moment.

"Gothic," Lauren said, offering a small, tentative smile that suggested she was wary of my reaction to the sight of V'Ren.

I returned the smile, warm and reassuring.

"Lauren—you said you were ready to share your findings and wanted my help?" I added, careful to let my expression convey that whatever she'd done, I still cared for her, that nothing had changed between us. Her face relaxed and her smile widened.

"I did. Take a look." She swept a hand across the displays, which unfolded into organized panels, each labeled and sorted by topic. "When I planned the interrogation, I started with a list of

baseline areas any Tal Shiar operative would likely know—regardless of specialty—questions to put her in the right frame of mind before moving to the big ones. What training do they receive? How are operatives selected? What protocols govern different mission types, and which applied here? What tradecraft was used to plant the bomb at the event, and what methods were used to avoid detection afterward? I cross-checked her answers against known doctrine and mission patterns.”

As she asked each question, relevant sections of the holographic displays lit up. Much of it was probably already known to Section 31 or Starfleet Intelligence, but to me it was all new information. Even a quick review of the executive summaries answered several questions I hadn’t yet considered. A lot of the material was not only informative but would also be valuable for my crew’s ongoing training.

“This is an impressive amount of data, Lauren,” I said, scanning the summaries she had thoughtfully prepared. I flagged several points for Jarvis to review immediately and follow up on. “Well done.”

“Thank you!” she replied, a hint of pride in her voice. “Even extracting this basic information took days of careful work—gradually edging her, reinforcing answers with specific rewards, and slowly conditioning her to respond to my questions.”

She paused, drawing a breath before continuing.

“This was basic information about the organization—things any Tal Shiar operative would know from their training, plus general knowledge about the organization as a whole,” she explained. “Once we received her file, I could refine and expand the list, because I now had details specific to this operative and her specialties.”

“An engineering and ordnance specialist,” I said, confirming.

“Yes,” Lauren replied. “A highly technical field. And as I’ve learned, she’s a senior operative within the Tal Shiar. Her assignment was to evaluate the GODS Net and determine how this technology would affect the Romulan Empire’s ability to counter the Federation militarily. That required an intimate understanding of Romulan military technology. The Tal Shiar likely provided only limited information after the failed bombing because they wanted us to locate and neutralize her—not knowing that we had already captured her alive. If they knew the timeline, I’m sure they’d regret sharing her file at all.”

Lauren gestured at a new screen that came up.

“I next asked what an engineering and ordnance specialist would be able to tell me,” Lauren continued. “V’Ren wasn’t a Tal’Shiar officer stationed on a warbird, but she served on several Tal’Shiar-owned vessels that employed the same weapons technology as the frontline fleet.”

A wealth of information on the Romulan plasma torpedo appeared across the holographic displays. Much of the technical detail came from other sources, but multiple corrections and annotations reflected what Lauren had extracted from V’Ren—including the optimal shield adjustments to better withstand the weapon. Lauren had gone further, tasking my AI children

with running simulations to see how the *Flighty Temptress*' shields would fare against Romulan plasma torpedoes.

The results were positive and encouraging. Despite my shields being an amalgam of several species' technology, though heavily influenced by Husnock designs, they performed admirably. Even so, the AIs suggested minor modifications that would improve effectiveness specifically against Romulan weapons. A 10% increase in shield performance might seem modest, but in combat it could mean the difference between minor damage and catastrophic failure. With my AI children assisting to dynamically adjust shield harmonics, the *Flighty Temptress* could adjust its defenses in real time against any Romulan aggressor.

"Good work, Lauren. This is very useful," I said. "Do you have anything on Romulan disruptor weaponry or the micro-singularity power cores they use in their warbirds?"

"V'Ren was primarily a disposable munitions expert," Lauren replied, shaking her head. "Her knowledge of shipboard disruptors was basic at best—though she did provide some minor technical insights that intersected somewhat with her actual specialty. As for their power cores, she knew very little. That technology is one of the Romulan Empire's major advantages over its peers, and the Romulans guard it fiercely. Engineers who truly understand how to build a Romulan power core are never allowed to leave the Romulus system. Even the engineers stationed on warbirds only know enough to maintain them and make basic repairs. It's a fascinating example of operational security—paranoid to the extreme—but entirely consistent with Romulan culture."

"Disappointing, but not surprising," I muttered, scanning the technical data V'Ren had supplied on shipboard Romulan disruptors. Her notes were interesting—there were useful tweaks and corrections—but much of the theory boiled down to Klingon-style disruptor principles, likely a reflection of their brief alliance.

"Our micro-singularity core on the *Temptress* is almost certainly superior," I continued, "but it would have been useful to know more about the Romulan design—if only to plausibly obscure the origin of our own improvements we made to harnessing a Collector ship power core."

Section 31 probably already suspected—or outright knew—that I had stolen Collector technology and adapted it to enhance the *Temptress*. My hope, based on countless Starfleet precedents—and the many Star Trek episodes I had watched in my old world—that despite so much advanced tech floating around, they'd follow the usual pattern: hoard it, maybe study it, and never actually use it themselves. That was the way of the Star Trek universe and it suited me just fine to keep those technological advantages to myself.

Oh, a Ferengi scientist invents metaphasic shielding that lets the *Enterprise* survive plunging into a star's corona? Brilliant. Let's never implement it or even mention it again—because clearly, integrating it across the Federation would be *too smart*. Typical.

Lauren brought up another schematic, this one far more intricate.

“This is the bomb collar she designed almost entirely herself,” she said, her tone grim. “It’s the device the Tal Shiar uses to enforce obedience in the sentients they capture, enslave, and sell across the galaxy. It’s also how they ensure their customers continue to pay and do what they’re told.”

Even as I processed the horror of its purpose, my designer’s eye couldn’t ignore the ingenuity. Everything had been accomplished in an incredibly compact package—a terrifyingly clever piece of engineering.

“Interesting,” I murmured. “This collar can deliver pain on par with a Klingon painstik. The Romulans love to mock Klingon engineering, yet here they’ve wholesale copied it. Why reproduce the wheel, right?” I gave a wry chuckle. “And it can utilize multiple detonation types...huh.”

“What?” Lauren asked.

“‘Detonation’ isn’t even the right word once you can see the schematic,” I said, leaning in. “The primary killing method is vaporization — cleaner, erases evidence by turning both the collar and body to gas, works on everyone. But there’s a chemical explosive as a backup if vaporization fails.”

“Why would they do that?” Lauren asked. “Why even a collar rather than an implanted device?”

“Practicality and ease of use, I suspect,” I said flatly. “Someone they once enslaved probably realized a broad-spectrum dampening field could disable a collar, which forced an evolution in the design,” I speculated grimly, imagining the design evolution this thing had likely gone through, an evolution paid with misery and despair, blood and lost lives. “Implants bring complexity: they require medical skill to insert safely, different species require different placements, and they make transferring ownership—selling slaves, for example—far more difficult. Etc., etc., etc. No, a collar is semi-universal, noninvasive, and is easily removed or transferred. Vaporization as a killing method works on everyone; the explosive is a fail-safe. The ol’ head exploding method is an oldie but a goodie. Most of the humanoid races can’t live without their heads, after all. When evil is systemic, pragmatism often drives cruelty.”

Lauren and I both chuckled at my dark humor. She got me.

“See here, here, here, and here?” I said, gesturing as I expanded sections of the schematic with my hands. “This is a proximity trigger. Leave the ‘approved’ area—probably a designated work zone or prison—for even a moment or some other set period, and death is immediate. This one is for remote activation at close range, likely a handheld device—again, death. But this,” I continued, pointing to a more complex section, “is the really interesting part: a subspace trigger. The owner—and/or the Tal Shiar—can activate it from virtually anywhere. Maybe they are at risk being caught, or maybe they just want to erase all evidence of their crimes. The device is packed with anti-tampering protections; once it’s on and armed, only the Romulans can remove it... probably for a very large fee. Easier to just transfer ownership of the slave through the collar itself.”

I expanded another portion of the design, letting my finger pass through the hologram to highlight the internal mechanisms.

“Too small for a transmitter with any real range,” I said, studying the schematic. “It’s just a basic subspace receiver and transmitter—standard tech, the kind hundreds of species use in everything from PADDs to comm badges. Nothing here screams ‘Romulan design.’” I frowned, cross-referencing what Lauren had gotten from V’Ren’s interrogation. “V’Ren claimed it could be triggered from anywhere in the galaxy, but how? The Tal Shiar sold enslaved sentients to unaffiliated third parties—no official oversight, no official state sanction. I can’t imagine them handing out genuine Romulan communications hardware to a bunch of duplicitous criminals and slavers.”

Then the pieces clicked. My eyes widened—followed by a burst of laughter I couldn’t contain.

“What?” Lauren asked, half-concerned, half-curious. “What did you just realize?”

“They’re using the galactic subspace communications network,” I said, eyes narrowing. “Which violates half a dozen centuries-old treaties. Honestly, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised—enslaving people from countless worlds and polities, including pre-warp civilizations. Hard to hide the Romulan connection when your slaves’ collars are piggybacking on the Romulan communications infrastructure.”

For a community of spacefaring civilizations, coordinated subspace communication was essential. The network was tightly regulated, with strict treaties and severe penalties designed to prevent misuse by any power. While the restrictions were primarily aimed at military applications, these collars had effectively weaponized the network, turning it into a tool for remotely controlling and executing enslaved individuals.

No one wanted to risk being cut off from galactic communications—or face the imposition of severe economic or travel sanctions by the wider interstellar community. It was far safer—and fully legal—to deploy your own communications hardware or rely solely on a local network under your complete control. Once your signals crossed into the shared galactic network, however, you were subject to the full weight of those strict treaties.

A few minor worlds had attempted something similar a century ago, and the consequences were catastrophic. Their governments collapsed, and their populations suffered immensely, as their planets were effectively severed from the wider galactic community they had come to rely on—a diseased limb amputated from the body of galactic civilization. They had been made an example of and it had kept most worlds on the straight and narrow ever since.

“V’Ren and the Romulans—or whoever they sold these slaves to—built a system capable of vaporizing the people they enslaved, whether under direct control or not,” I said. “From a cold, pragmatic, diabolical and evil perspective, it’s... clever.” I paused, then added, “I have a suspicion. Can you wake her up?”

“Of course,” Lauren said, nodding quickly. She grabbed a hypospray with a stimulant and pressed it to the prisoner’s neck.

V'Ren stirred immediately, a low moan escaping her lips as the bliss technology cycled through the program Lauren had meticulously crafted—tuned to her physiological responses, recorded over days of sexual interrogation. There was none of the previous feigned unconsciousness; she was too thoroughly exhausted and overwhelmed to pretend now.

“My Lord has questions for you, *slut*,” Lauren growled. “I think you’re holding something back, and he will get it out of you.”

For a moment, fear cut through the arousal—but it was quickly drowned out as the bliss technology around her breasts and cunt and along her spine pulsed in bright aqua-blue light. The edging program was relentless, bringing her to the brink of orgasm and then pulling back, again and again, never letting her reach release. The neural splint itself prevented even an accidental orgasm.

“We’ve been admiring your handiwork, *slut*,” I said, deliberately echoing Lauren’s word. Dehumanizing a prisoner by stripping away their name and identity was a tactic as old as interrogation itself. “From one designer to another, congratulations on a remarkably clever design. So much is happening in such a compact device. Even with the schematics, I’m still not certain how I could safely remove or deactivate it once activated—not without killing them—even with a transporter or a broad-spectrum dampening field.”

Professional pride flared in her eyes for a moment—before she was rudely reminded of where she was, a fresh edging cycle igniting, her lips parting in a filthy moan, eyes fluttering shut in bliss. An engineer’s pride was a powerful thing.

“The subspace trigger is fascinating,” I said, slowly circling her. “With this design, you could vaporize someone wearing the collar from virtually anywhere in the galaxy—anyone within range of the subspace network, or a Romulan ship or asset acting as a relay. Naughty, naughty. Countless galactic treaties trampled, with penalties far worse to whole worlds and *Empires* than even the crime of outright slavery.”

I let my gaze sweep over her. “You’ve given up so much, *slut*. So many secrets. If your superiors in the Tal Shiar knew even a fraction of what you’ve told us, they would torture you for years—and execute your entire bloodline right in front of you.”

Fear surged, only to be drowned by pleasure, leaving behind a grim resignation. She understood the truth: there was no coming back from this.

“Lauren thinks you’re still holding something back,” I said evenly. “And I’m inclined to agree. She’s brilliant—genetically enhanced like me—but experience counts for more than raw intellect. You and I, we share certain... sensibilities, experiences. So let me share a suspicion.”

As I moved, my hand slid through her hair and down the line of her body, tracing the faint tremors under her skin.

“We’re weapon designers, you and I—devilishly clever, always pushing boundaries others wouldn’t dare. But I know what you fear, because it’s something I’ve feared as well. People like us don’t lose sleep over the chaos we unleash on others—some of us couldn’t care less about the

misery we cause,” I paused, lowering my voice. “No, what we fear is our own genius turned against us, our own creations turned upon us by our lessers. That the thing we created to give us power could be the very thing that destroys us. That has a way of birthing a very well-defined sense of self-interest.”

I smiled faintly. “Which is why I’ve poured time, energy, and a small fortune into building failsafes into all my designs—to make damn sure nothing I build, not even the GODS net, can ever be turned against me or mine.”

Because I’d tasked Jarvis with monitoring every physiological response of hers, he quietly flagged something fascinating—her body’s involuntary reactions spiking at my words. I was onto something.

“So,” I continued, “let me put on my *evil, paranoid Romulan Tal Shiar operative* hat—someone who deals with deception and betrayal daily as a fact of life. I ask myself: what would a brilliant, self-interested engineer like you do to protect herself from ending up with one of her own collars around her pretty neck? Or a link to be removed in the chain that leads to proving the Tal Shiar’s many terrible crimes.”

I circled slowly behind her, letting the question hang in the air. “If it were me, I’d build in a backdoor. A hidden failsafe. Something that lets me deactivate the collar anytime I please.”

Another pulse of data flashed across my retinal HUD—heart rate spike, muscle tension, pupil dilation. Another confirmation.

“But that felt too small for someone like you—someone who has managed to survive the Tal Shiar’s cutthroat culture for this long,” I said, leaning in. “Yes, you could deactivate your own collar. But what does that buy you in peacetime? How do you stay useful? How do you make yourself too valuable to eliminate in the next inevitable political purge and there is *always* another purge? What’s the thing you keep hidden in your back pocket, the leverage that makes disposing of you more trouble than it’s worth?”

A larger spike on Jarvis’s readout answered before she did.

“Yes, I think I’m onto something. The Tal Shiar have been so very, very naughty,” I said softly. “You’d need more than a personal fail-safe. You’d need leverage—something systemic, provable, something that threatens to drag the many horrific crimes of the Tal Shiar into the light if anyone tried to silence you forever.”

I let the implication hang between us. “If the truth came out—that they’d enslaved beings from dozens of worlds and polities—that wouldn’t just be scandal. It would be war. The Romulan Senate would disavow them and cut off the Tal Shiar like a diseased limb rather than risk the major powers uniting against them.”

I stopped directly in front of her.

“Now *that* is some very, very valuable leverage,” I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. “But how would an ambitious Tal Shiar operative make sure that leverage was real—something that

actually had teeth? You'd need indisputable proof. And the subspace receiver in each collar... I wonder."

Jarvis's alert cut through my thoughts—*the largest spike yet* in V'Ren's physiological readouts. Her eyes remained tightly shut, but her body's responses betrayed everything.

"Being able to kill from hundreds of light-years away is useful," I said, pacing slowly as I spoke, "but how do you do it selectively—kill only the slaves you want, or coerce payment from a buyer who balks? You can't very well take these people to court, and you can't safely send Romulan assets without exposing the connection to the slavery in the first place; mercenaries are expensive and loyal only to the highest bidder. Any trace back to the Tal Shiar has to be erased."

"Imagine a customer threatening to expose them. What would the Tal Shiar do? They're criminals—brutal and pragmatic. To eliminate betrayal and to erase proof of their crimes, the kill signal has to reach the target. That means you'd have to be able to locate your 'product' anywhere it is moved. If a buyer secreted the slaves away to an unknown place, could you still cover your tracks?"

I stepped between her legs and took my hard cock out, her eyes going wide at the sight of it, but I could tell it was out of anticipation and desire, rather than fear.

"Remember, I've got my evil and paranoid Romulan operative hat on," I joked. "If I were the oh so very clever designer of the collar that allows all of this to be possible, I know what I'd do to ensure I could never be eliminated."

I thrust inside her and she howled with pleasure. Of course, while my girls told me regularly that my cock was magical, even I knew this level of reaction wasn't just from thrusting inside of her. While Lauren had purposely withheld anything penetrative, the strength of this reaction was mostly due to the very intense program of pleasure interspersed with pain every time I pulled out of her.

"I'd build a backdoor into the collars' subspace control network," I said, my voice low and deliberate. After ten minutes of the program, she was barely coherent—all the edges of her thought melted away. "A system to locate every slave and to make that information undeniable to anyone who tried to silence me."

Then I cut the stimulation completely. The programmed bliss died in an instant; the air in the holodeck felt colder. Her body collapsed into the shock of sudden deprivation—not from physical harm but from the abrupt loss of the stimulus she'd been fed. Muscles tensed, breath shortened, and her hands clawed at the straps as if searching for a comfort that no longer existed. Jarvis's readouts flared with the spike of withdrawal.

At this point she was a drug addict and I had caused a sudden, intense withdrawal, compressed into moments.

Silence pressed in. The room smelled faintly of ozone and adrenaline. I watched her struggle for a long moment, cataloguing every involuntary reaction as proof—if any more proof were needed—that the system worked exactly as I had said.

“Noooo! No, no, no, no, no, please, please don’t!” V’Ren screamed in despair. “Please, please, please don’t stop! Let me cum!!”

“Tell me how to access the collar control network, slut, and I’ll give you the biggest orgasm of your life,” I whispered like the devil in her ears. “I promise you that.”

She tossed her head side-to-side to resist, but I could tell that she was failing.

“Tell me, and I will give you everything you want and more,” I promised with the voice of the devil himself, seductive and compelling. “You can be reborn, never having to return to your old masters. Your new life can begin once you tell me everything I want to know. I’ll keep you as my little sex pet in the corner of my bedroom, protected, yet always ready to receive her new master’s cock. Doesn’t that sound good? No more worries, no more fear, no more responsibilities anymore.”

I glanced to the side and saw Lauren had created a holographic chair. She was fingering herself vigorously as she watched, thrusting multiple fingers inside of her gushing cunt in time with my thrusts into V’Ren, completely unashamed.

‘Who was in the ‘cuck chair’ now?’ I thought with amusement.

“The collar uses a hidden communications subchannel the Tal Shiar created within the wider network,” she admitted reluctantly, even now trying to thrust her hips forward so that she could feel me fully inside her once again.

“What’s the subspace frequency?” I asked calmly, almost conversationally.

She rattled off a complex sequence from memory.

Jarvis and my AI children immediately locked onto it, probing the signal with gently precision. Thousands of brief status updates pinged across the galaxy—no, tens of thousands—barely distinguishable from the background subspace noise unless you knew exactly what to look for.

“You promised, you promised!” she cried, as the withdrawal racked her body with shivers.

“And I keep my promises,” I reassured calmly, my tone meant to soothe rather than inflame.

“Now—how do I send commands to the collar controls?”

At this point the proud, confident, and deadly operative was gone and only a newborn submissive was left in her place.

“A copy of the control cipher was on a data chip I kept inside me,” she wailed.

“My Lord! She must not be allowed access--” Tyr tried, but I knew what he was going to say so I waved a hand to cut him off.

“Lauren,” I called out, stopping her self-pleasure.

She immediately went to the sealed case containing everything Tyr had removed from V’Ren upon her capture.

“We didn’t find anything like that, Gothic,” Lauren said, frustrated. “We studied everything she had on her.”

“Where is it, V’Ren?” I asked gently, keeping my tone calm.

“It’s coded at the molecular level in the casing itself—in the arrangement of the atoms and material changes,” she admitted, clearly overwhelmed.

“You really are clever,” I said, nodding in acknowledgment, rubbing her hair gently and activating the bliss energy one again while thrusting gently inside her, giving her just a taste of what I was offering, to alleviate the withdrawal symptoms just for a few moments.

Lauren began running multiple high-resolution molecular scans, cross-referencing the transporter logs and the material records from V’Ren’s capture.

It was ingenious—hidden in plain sight. Even with Hermione, Natasha, Carl, and Jarvis pooling their formidable processing power, it took over a minute to parse the control program correctly—and that was only with prior knowledge of its existence and using the subspace frequency to confirm that we had assembled it properly. Without both pieces of information, the program would have been useless.

“You’ve done exceptionally well,” I said, admiration clear in my voice. “Truly impressive work. Now it’s time for your reward.”

Then I began to truly fuck her vigorously, activating the bliss program and turning it up to max while deactivating the neural splint which had been preventing her from coming.

Within moments she came undone, howling until her throat was hoarse, her insides going crazy as I came inside her and my cum began healing her too.

The pleasure proved too much because she soon passed out.

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Looking at the collar network’s communication frequency, the sheer volume of data was staggering.

“What have we learned?” I asked aloud, unconcerned whether my AI children or Lauren responded. I had asked Hermione and Natasha to appear in their holographic avatars to facilitate communication.

“We’re receiving thousands of passive status pings from the collars scattered across the quadrant,” Hermione reported. “The timing is random. They indicate the devices are active, but they reveal no location data.”

“Why is that?” I asked, though I already had a strong suspicion of the answer.

“It has to appear random,” Hermione speculated. “All of this is designed to blend into the cosmic background noise. Unless the Romulans deliberately activate the collars—either to locate or

vaporize their wearers—the transmissions remain passive and indistinguishable from natural subspace chatter. Only a direct command changes that behavior.”

She glanced at me, her expression grave. “Now that we have the control cipher, we could force the collars to transmit their locations—but doing so would almost certainly alert the Tal Shiar that someone else has accessed their network and has some nominal control over it. There is just no way to force the output to only come to us, not with the way this network was designed. That’s both a strength and a weakness.”

I shook my head immediately to signal that I did not want to do that.

“This is why they wanted us to kill her,” I said quietly. “This is why they handed over so much incriminating evidence. This... *this* is far worse. It’s proof of their crimes on a galactic scale. If they realize we’ve gained even partial control of the network, they’ll execute every last slave to hide the evidence.”

“Why haven’t they done it already?” Lauren asked. “It seems like a tremendous risk.”

“They can’t—not yet,” I said. “As long as there’s even a chance the network is still secure, they’ll hold their hand. Too much is at stake. This operation funds their deepest black projects—the ones they keep hidden even from the Romulan Senate. If they wiped out the entire slave network, their clients would turn on them instantly. Many would demand compensation that the Tal Shiar probably can’t fully pay; others would expose everything out of spite.”

I adjusted the holographic data display, rotating the model to study it from a new angle. “And rebuilding it? Impossible in the short term. They’d never regain the trust of their buyers. Every major power in the galaxy would be watching them for the next hundred years.”

“The Romulans are paranoid control freaks—they’d *need* to know where their product is, to ensure they got paid as well as to keep the secret safe,” I speculated. “I’d bet anything they schedule periodic location dumps, probably semi-randomized to mask the pattern. If we monitor the frequency long enough, I suspect the collars periodically transmit their coordinates in small bursts.”

“Why wait?” Hermione interjected, almost smugly. “We AIs are natural data hoarders, father. We’ve been recording the entire subspace spectrum since the moment we had the capability. That capacity has only grown as your cloaked sensor network expanded—our coverage is now exponentially greater.”

“Analyzing now,” Natasha said, her holographic face going still alongside Hermione’s, the intensity of their processing plain to see. “The collars transmit their location data in randomized bursts over a 12-hour window every 36 to 48 hours. Our sensor records capture this data whenever they’re in range.”

“Can you map the locations of all the collars?” I asked.

“The data is encoded as background noise and must be reconstructed,” Hermione replied. “But yes, Father, we can.”

“Good. Show me. Center the map on Kessik IV,” I ordered, my tone taut with anticipation.

A three-dimensional holographic map snapped into place, centered on Kessik IV, gradually expanding to reveal more of the galaxy. I was relieved—there were no collar pings on the planet itself, nor within several light-years—but that relief quickly vanished. My frown deepened as several pings appeared, then dozens, then hundreds, scattering across Federation space: aboard ships drifting in empty sectors, clinging to rogue asteroids, hidden on barren planets inhospitable to human life. Some were in territories nominally claimed by the Federation but uninhabited—likely illegal mining operations or unmonitored outposts.

Every galactic power had such regions: space they officially claimed, yet was largely unexplored, unpatrolled and unmapped, except by long-range surveys from unmanned probes. Federation member worlds and their attached star systems accounted for only a tiny fraction of the space within their official borders. The Klingons, Romulans, Ferengi, Tholians, Gorn—all the major powers had vast swathes of unmapped, uninhabited, and largely unexplored territories within their borders. And now, the Tal Shiar collars had turned that uncharted void into a galactic network of despair.

My frown deepened into a grim line as pings began appearing even on Federation member worlds. Not in overwhelming numbers, but enough to shatter the utopian vision that Star Trek had instilled in my mind. Pings dotted Klingon space, Cardassian space, Ferengi space, and Romulan space. The holographic map expanded relentlessly before finally stopping.

Angrily I noted that even Bajor itself showed a few dozen or so pings. If I called Kira right now, I knew she would be able to assemble a wet work team in an hour tops—veterans of the Resistance, hard men and women who were unafraid to get their hands dirty, people experienced in black ops who knew how to keep their mouths shut. They could wipe out everyone involved and free the slaves, but it would expose much given the timing. It would not be a hard connection to make given V'Ren's fate was still unknown to them.

But no, I knew I needed to sit on this information. I had to calm myself first before deciding anything. Sometimes doing nothing was the hardest thing to do, but often the smartest as well.

“This is the full extent of our sensor network's current range,” Hermione explained. “By the next location update cycle, we should be able to fill more of the map.”

“Good, good. Hermione, dispatch cloaked sensor drones to that location on Bajor, I want to know what's there,” I ordered, forcing calm into my voice, masking the turmoil roiling beneath. “Lauren, you've done exceptional work. I am profoundly grateful. It's reassuring to know I can rely on you for anything—even something like this.”

“I will serve by your side in all things, my Lord,” she said with solemnity, kneeling before me, pride shining in her eyes. “In the light or in the dark.”

I had never demanded such submission, yet I accepted it fully, especially since it had arisen naturally. I placed my hand gently on her head, gently caressing her, acknowledging it. Submission, when it was voluntarily given, was so much more gratifying than when forced. As

much as I claimed to be a ‘good Augment’ I knew I had been changed both in body and personality coming to this dimension and had a dominant streak a lightyear wide that I worked hard to keep in check.

“I need some time alone with the prisoner, Lauren,” I said. “Continue analyzing the data. Share it with no one else.”

“Your *will* be done,” she replied, rising with a faint smile, bowing then leaving. I watched her go, the silence settling over the room... until Tyr spoke, unexpectedly.

“I feared your women might lack the strength of devotion to serve by your side, my Lord,” he observed, “but I believe I may have been mistaken. She has the right attitude, I think.”

I raised an eyebrow at Tyr’s comment, wondering—not for the first time—whether his zealous service might one day become a problem for me.

Turning back to V’Ren, my thoughts churned. The scale of what we’d uncovered was staggering. This was no longer about a captured Tal Shiar operative who’d botched her mission; this was something the Romulans would glass entire worlds to bury before it saw the light of day. If the Tal Shiar knew or even suspected that I had V’Ren, especially if they thought I had access to the collar subspace network, they wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate me. I was already high on their shit list thanks to the GODS net and its implications for the current balance of galactic power. If they knew what I knew now, it would all but guarantee a kill order or a bounty on my head so big I’d never be able to leave Minos, they’d come for me—no matter what protections Section 31 had negotiated for me.

I hadn’t made a final decision, but I’d been heavily leaning toward handing V’Ren over to Section 31 once we were done interrogating her. She was beautiful, yes—but I didn’t need a dangerous, compromised operative and sex slave in my life, someone I’d have to keep hidden and constantly monitored. She’d likely already given up most of what she knew. We could press her for more, to fill in the details, but the risk far, far outweighed the reward. No—the thinking had always been it would be better to let Section 31 take her off my hands, collect a healthy payday, and let Starfleet’s investigation into the bombing quietly die.

But with everything I had just learned that was no longer an option. V’Ren was far too dangerous to give to anyone, even to Section 31. I’d already broken her, and that made her a liability. The odds that she’d tell them everything she’d told me were simply too high. And if I ever fell out of favor with 31, they wouldn’t need to kill me themselves—they could hold the knowledge over my head to force my compliance, or tell the Romulans what I knew, who would then kill me themselves. Section 31 wouldn’t need to lift a finger.

Section 31 might have been the best positioned and most qualified to handle what we’d uncovered—but qualified doesn’t mean safe and it certainly didn’t mean prudent. If those collars could receive and transmit, what else could be done with them? How easily could the technology be repurposed as a weapon, or used to blackmail entire systems? Was Section 31 beyond using all those non-Federation slaves themselves for their various black projects? They cared deeply

for all citizens of the Federation, but did that care extend even a little to non-Federation people? I had my doubts.

No, it would be better to eliminate this dangerous snake in my midst, to remove the risk entirely.

I drew my sidearm with a single smooth motion, thumbed the selector to vaporize, and pressed the muzzle gently to V'Ren's temple. She remained unconscious, a faint, sexy smile still on her beautiful face. She had earned this execution many times over given the evils she'd committed on a galactic scale, but at least her last feelings in this universe would be one of blissful pleasure; there were far, far worse ways to go for someone like her.

I nearly pulled the trigger. At the last moment I stopped—not out of mercy, or morality, or any weakness due to her looks or the loss of a new sex pet—I wasn't *that* far gone in my hedonism. I *stopped* because cold, hard logic intervened. Killing her right then would close options I might soon need. It would leave dangerous questions unanswered, a story unfinished, and enemies I could ill afford. There was a very small window to act here, to direct the wolves to different prey.

So, I slowly lowered my gun, holstered it and stepped back, the decision deferred but the danger still very real.

“You needn't sully your divine hand, my Lord,” Tyr offered, zeal burning in his tone. “Give the word and I will send this foul xeno back to the nothingness from which she crawled. Her soul will serve you for eternity in the afterlife.”

I waved him off absently, mind already racing.

Leaving a competent, ultra-paranoid spy organization with an unanswered threat was a recipe for disaster. They would pick at every loose thread until the whole tapestry came apart. Even if I'd covered my tracks perfectly and nothing came of it, the Tal Shiar might simply decide to cut their losses — and in doing so, kill tens of thousands of enslaved sentients with a remote command.

No. Better to give them a story that made sense—an answer that would satisfy them. They would still probe, of course, but if the outcome matched the narrative they wanted to believe, their confirmation bias would do much of the work for me.

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Directing his security team with silent hand signals, Worf advanced down the dim corridor of the nondescript Kessik IV apartment block. His phaser rifle was tight against his shoulder, tricorder slaved to it and passively sweeping ahead—minimizing any chance their scans would be detected.

Given the bomber's demonstrated technical sophistication, Worf refused to take even the smallest risk. His ten-person security unit moved in disciplined formation, covering angles, with overlapping fields of fire. Their professionalism was evident; the hours they'd spent drilling inside a holodeck-perfect simulation of this very building had been well worth it.

At this late hour the corridors were empty, the building's residents asleep in their beds. Worf would have preferred to strike during daytime, when the building's residents were more likely to be away from their homes, but simulations warned that doing so would greatly reduce the odds of intercepting the suspect or suspects. During daylight, the operative—or their support team—might be away from the apartment entirely.

No—striking during the day would have been a mistake. There would be no way to know whether the entire cell had been caught if they did. If even one operative slipped away, they would vanish deeper underground or, worse, launch a desperate counterattack once they realized Starfleet was closing in. Multiple Romulan agents had already chosen suicide over capture; cornered survivors would be even more dangerous.

It was, Worf admitted with a flicker of pride, a testament to his perseverance that they had found the cell at all. The investigation had stalled a while ago, but while others declared the trail cold, he refused to abandon the pursuit. By correlating patterns in stolen technology with a series of localized systems disruptions, he had narrowed the search to this district. Even then, they might never have pinpointed the exact location without the anomaly: an unusual spike in power usage followed by a brief lapse in whatever sensor-dampening field the Romulans were using. That single moment of carelessness had given him the opening he needed.

Breakthroughs in investigations came in many forms. Most were earned through the grind of disciplined, persistent, unrelenting hard work—but occasionally, you just got lucky. Worf's long career in Starfleet had taught him to value both the sweat and the serendipity.

Even with the lucky break of the brief dampening-field disruption, the operation might never have been authorized without the second discovery: traces of a substance not native to Kessik IV. Under normal circumstances that, too, might have been dismissed. But the substance was unmistakably Romulan in origin. That fact alone had been enough for Captain Picard and President Moss to greenlight this operation.

His team reached the apartment door in silence, falling into their assigned positions—two flanking the entry, the rest covering the corridor. Additional security units waited outside on the street below, sealing off potential escape routes. Above them, the *Enterprise* held station, its sensors primed and ready.

Ensign Marryweather, the team's sensor specialist, worked her tricorder with practiced precision, her expression tightening with every passing second. Whatever dampening field the operatives had deployed, it was exceptionally effective.

At last, she looked up and gave Worf a small shake of her head—no penetration, no readings. They would be going in blind, their scans limited to only what their eyes could see.

Perhaps they had become too reliant on technology for such things, he thought with a grimace.

Worf's frown deepened, but he signaled one of his officers forward. The ensign knelt beside the door's security panel, tools already in hand, while another positioned a manual breaching device along the door's edges. With the interior unscannable, forcing the door open mechanically was

the safest option; it avoided triggering any automated defenses that might be tied to the building's internal security systems.

A quiet nod passed between the team members as each completed their tasks, and the metal panels began to separate with a slow, controlled grind.

Once the door was forced open, Worf swept the interior with a swift visual scan. A worktable dominated the room, scattered with half-assembled components—another explosive device in the making, he thought grimly. His gaze dropped to the floor near the threshold: no tripwires, no visible triggers.

He carefully stepped inside.

What he *didn't* see was the thin infrared beam stretched across the room at chest height. The moment his body broke the line, the trap detonated.

The world lit up in fire.

The blast erupted with brutal force, hurling him backward through the doorway and slamming him into the opposite wall as if struck by the hand of an angry god. Night over Kessik IV flared brightly as the apartment blossomed into an inferno, flames roaring out through shattered windows and into the sky.

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Reception Hall. Kessik IV.

The Reception Hall of Kessik IV was a cavernous, flexible event space—a ballroom by design, but far more often a blank multi-use canvas. It could be transformed into a lecture hall, a presentation venue, or a fine-dining banquet room capable of seating thousands. The planetary government rarely required a space of this scale, so the public routinely booked it for festivals, conferences, and community gatherings. Colony worlds thrived on this kind of practical, multipurpose architecture.

In my own era, major governmental agreements were usually signed in far more formal settings: ceremonial offices, ornate conference rooms, auditoriums steeped in history, or even outdoor plazas chosen for symbolic value. But this wasn't the ratification of a treaty or the enactment of a law—it was simply a lease agreement between the government of Kessik IV and a private company.

As a result, the atmosphere was relaxed, almost casual. And frankly, I much preferred it that way.

At the moment, the hall was arranged as a hybrid venue. At one end stood a broad, elevated stage dominated by a solitary, ornate wooden desk—carved from a native hardwood and easily centuries old. Two elaborately crafted chairs sat behind it, flanked by a large holodisplay to give the audience a clear view of the proceedings.

Directly below the stage, was an expansive open mingling area. Guests clustered there with drinks and hors d'oeuvres while waiters wove through the crowd with trays bearing delicacies from half a dozen worlds. The hall was already close to full, and I quickly picked out a number of notable figures: President Moss with her staff, Captains Picard and Jellico accompanied by much of their senior officers, Ambassador Vel of Betazed, Ambassador Synne of Risa, and—half-hidden in a shadowed corner—Admiral Pressman with a contingent of unfamiliar personnel. General Martok and his ship had already been recalled to duty, but he and I had shared some more bloodwine and bloody steaks before his departure.

This was a formal signing ceremony, but it was also a formal dinner reception and gala ball, so the people here were dressed to impress.

I entered the room as if I owned it, which immediately drew many eyes in my direction. My women walked with me, all of us linked arm in arm in a long line. Lauren and T'Maz held my left arm, while Annika rested proudly on my right. Her place at my right side was well earned; she had taken up the role of my executive assistant for everything related to my various business enterprises. Much of today's event was the result of her hard work while working alongside President Moss' people.

“Must we always make such a spectacle of ourselves, Gothic?” Annika whispered, her smile flawless even as she felt the weight of the room's collective stare upon us all. “We really should've arrived twenty minutes ago.”

“Even a fashionably *semi*-late entrance should make a statement, my dear,” I murmured back, letting my gaze sweep the hall. “Besides, this whole shindig can't properly begin without us.”

People weren't staring solely because the GODS net lease was being signed today. Nor was it just our timing. It was how we were dressed—and the undeniable fact that we looked damn good.

I wore black from neck to boot—sleek, glossy pants and a fitted shirt, topped with a deep glossy red patterned vest and a long black velvet coat that swept to my shins. The lapels were broad, and sterling-silver thread traced the cuffs and edges in an intricate filigree that shimmered with every step. At my throat hung a brilliant large diamond pendant, replicated to resemble one of the GODS-net defense platforms—a subtle bit of branding I found amusing.

My girls were no less arresting. Each wore a sheer, floor-length lace nude gown, floral motifs drifting like soft brushstrokes across their bodies. The dresses were sheer, leaving their color-matched lingerie fully visible by design—Lauren and T'Maz in elegant black, Annika in white threaded with tiny diamonds and paired with the most minimal of thongs.

They were stunning, and the everyone in the room knew it. I caught more than a few gazes—admiring, hungry, envious—trailing after them as we passed.

I waited for someone to approach, and I didn't have to wait long. Ambassadors Vel and Synne glided through the crowd like predators in open water—sharks, graceful and sensuous—parting

bodies with almost no disturbance, leaving only tiny ripples in their wake. I suspected this was a maneuver they had perfected over years of social and diplomatic navigation.

To my surprise, they didn't address me first. Ambassador Synne moved with unerring purpose straight toward Lauren, like an arrow finding its mark.

Lauren's eyes widened when I was unexpectedly bypassed, but she recovered almost instantly, her composure snapping back into place.

"Ambassador, it's such a pleasure to meet y—" Lauren began, but her words faltered as the Risian Ambassador gently cupped her face, one hand on each perfect cheek, her expression radiating warmth and genuine care.

"Lauren, we have never met, yet I know, deep in my heart, that you are extraordinary and wonderful and perfect *just the way you are*," she said with unwavering certainty, her gaze locking onto Lauren's with intent focus. "You have been perfect since you were six years old, and every moment after. Do not let anyone ever convince you otherwise, my child."

Lauren opened her mouth, words forming but never emerging. Finally, she closed her eyes, a shudder running through her as if an immense weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Risians were a truly remarkable people. They accepted everyone. Loved everyone. Gave everything freely. For Lauren, this was a profound moment of acceptance—one she had only just begun to experience in her life.

"Thank you, Madame Ambassador," Lauren said softly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I've only just begun to realize that... it's taken a lifetime, really. But Gothic and my crewmates here have shown me that I am worthy of love, that I am not broken beyond repair."

"No, you are not," Synne replied, her voice imbued with the unwavering warmth of a mother whose love could not be shaken, even by the galaxy's harshness. She looked around, as if wishing she could make the universe gentler for all its suffering. "I can see you've found a place where you are loved and appreciated for who you are. But know this: you will always have a home on Risa, among a people who will cherish you just as you are, even if the actions of my Federation brothers and sisters sometimes fall short of their ideals."

President Moss and Captain Picard, having followed the Ambassadors, both flinched slightly, a flicker of shame crossing their faces at the unspoken reminder: Lauren had spent her life effectively imprisoned simply for being a hypersexual augment. Their shame deepened when they realized it was not the Federation that had acknowledged this past injustice and freed her—but only my relentless efforts, despite active opposition, that had secured her freedom.

When Lauren seemed to need a moment to process everything, Ambassadors Synne and Vel turned their attention to me.

"It is a momentous occasion," Vel said warmly. "Congratulations on the first lease of your orbital defense system. I have no doubt it will be the first of many."

"Thank you, Ambassador," I replied. "I certainly hope so."

I glanced at my girls and then at Moss and Picard. “Feel free to mingle, ladies,” I said. “There are a few people I need to speak with.”

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I took a delicate sip of an excellent Bajoran springwine and nibbled on a beef filet crostini that had been circulating. From my vantage point with President Moss and Captain Picard, it was clear that many guests were enjoying the food and drink, taken directly from my transporter suspension.

Annika, as always, didn’t miss a single trick. Her business acumen never failed to impress me. Even this event was being leveraged to market our other products. If Bajoran springwine caught on, it could become a valuable export for Bajor, aiding the planet’s economic recovery even in an age of replication. And since Bajor lacked a fleet of warp-capable cargo ships, my shipping company would be perfectly positioned to distribute it across the galaxy.

I suspected Annika had already instructed my holo-gardeners back home to begin cultivating the kava needed for our own springwine production. I could see it already, ‘The Admiral Gothic Reserve.’ But even then, it would take years, and my private island—vast as it was—would never be able to meet galactic demand if springwine became even moderately popular. The galaxy, after all, was an enormous place.

“This is truly excellent wine, yet I can’t place its origin,” Picard complimented, swirling the liquid in his mouth with the practiced elegance of a true vintner. “Simply delightful, so unlike the Earth varietals I’m accustomed to.”

“It’s Bajoran springwine,” I explained. “Bottled just after the Cardassian withdrawal from wild kava fields, so it’s a fairly young vintage. Occupation and pre-Occupation-era vintages are exceedingly rare, for obvious reasons, though I do have a few aboard my ship, Captain. I’ll send you a couple bottles.”

Picard looked both impressed and hesitant. “I couldn’t possibly—”

“It would be my pleasure,” I reassured him, though I knew my generosity wasn’t entirely selfless.

Chateau Picard was already well-known, its fame amplified by Picard’s storied career and accomplishments. If he spoke favorably of springwine to his network of influential wine connoisseurs, it would generate serious buzz. Jarvis had already prepared a transport container and was coordinating the transfer to the *Enterprise* the instant I made the offer. The bottles would be in Picard’s quarters long before he returned to his ship. Having a personal AI assistant was a serious cheat code.

Thankfully, Annika and my other girls had quickly figured out how to divide the labor among themselves with minimal friction. While Annika handled executive business matters, an AI simply outperformed humans in certain areas and tasks—and she didn’t take it personally.

“Thank you, Admiral,” Picard said graciously, clearly aware that pushing back against a gift too much would be poor form.

“I understand Lieutenant Worf made a breakthrough in his investigation of the bombing,” I said carefully, taking another deliberate sip of my springwine. Despite my clearance and involvement, updates didn’t always come as quickly as I wanted and I needed to know what conclusions they were reaching on their own.

A grim shadow crossed Picard’s face.

“Yes,” he replied, “Mr. Worf believed he had located the bomber. They were tracked to an apartment building, and a security team was dispatched to apprehend them.”

“That’s promising news!” I said. “Are they in custody?”

President Moss interjected, her tone measured. “No. Unfortunately, a trap was triggered. The apartment exploded; the operative chose to kill themselves rather than risk capture.”

I let out a sigh of feigned frustration and disappointment, yet was internally happy that that was the conclusion they’d reached.

“No fatalities, I hope?” I asked in concern. It hadn’t been my intent to kill any of the team sent to apprehend V’Ren, but I knew accidents happened and I couldn’t control everything.

“Thankfully, no,” Picard answered. “Mr. Worf was seriously injured, but he is on the mend.”

“Please thank him for his service,” Moss added.

“I will,” Picard replied with a nod of thanks.

“I suppose suicide fits, given recent events,” I said grimly. “The operative we discovered on the ground committed suicide, and those in orbit chose to self-destruct their scout ship to avoid capture. Were any bodies recovered?”

Picard looked as if he wanted to end the conversation, but Moss spoke up.

“One body was recovered—a Romulan woman,” she said. “Picard’s team is performing an autopsy now, but the body was badly damaged in the explosion. Beyond race and gender, I’m not sure we’ll learn much more.”

Just as I had intended. All the evidence would support the narrative I wanted everyone to believe, especially the Tal Shiar: V’Ren died in the blast, which had the benefit of being true considering she was alive and unconscious in the apartment when the bomb went off. She died a good agent of the Tal Shiar who followed protocol when facing the serious risk of imminent capture. That would be a story they wanted to believe, because it was exactly what she had been trained to do in that situation. The explosion itself would obliterate any forensic traces left of her capture and prolonged interrogation. All remaining sensor data would corroborate the story I wanted everyone to accept.

“A Romulan, then, just as we suspected,” I said. “Do we think there might be more of them on the planet?”

“We don’t know for certain,” Picard replied. “But we suspect they were alone—the last of their team. Based on transporter logs, local surveillance, food replicator usage, and power consumption records, it appears only one person occupied that apartment during its recent period of habitation. Before that, it had been empty for at least nine months.”

Long before we set any of this in motion, my AIs had infiltrated Kessik IV’s network and planted everything needed to make it appear that V’Ren had still been living in that apartment even after her capture. Because most of the records were entirely authentic, she had been living there for a while after all, the subtle fabrications blended seamlessly. Even data from the apartment’s toilet would match what would be expected from a single occupant—perfectly consistent with V’Ren—making detection of our edits nearly impossible, even for a team of forensic AI specialists.

My goal had been to wrap this all up with a little bow. The bomber had been found, it was clear that only one person was responsible—a Romulan agent—and she had died before anyone could capture or interrogate her. Hopefully, the Tal Shiar would breathe a sigh of relief, convinced that their horrific crimes—a sprawling network of slavery spanning the quadrant—remained hidden, at least for another day.

The mission to Kessik IV was par for the course. Most polities across the galaxy would be angry at such a thing directed at them, but would not otherwise be surprised or feel it worth going to war over as it was exactly what their intelligence services routinely did themselves. The systematic enslavement of their people, the targeting of colony ships, the enslavement of people from pre-warp civilizations, that, though, was an entirely different matter that would cause a shitstorm of epic consequences to land on Romulan shoulders.

“Prophets willing, perhaps this Romulan debacle is over, but that is still cold comfort for you and your people, Madame President,” I said.

“Yes,” Moss growled, “once again it seems the Romulans are to blame. They spied on our testing, killed the Halkan ambassador and his retinue, and then they nearly killed thousands of my people. Never again.”

The last words were barely a whisper, but I heard them all the same. It was a testament to her character that she hadn’t mentioned her own near-death, never placing her life above that of her people.

“You now have a second Romulan corpse in your possession, Captain. What are the Romulans saying?” I asked Picard, giving Moss a moment to collect herself.

“The same as before—rogue elements, no definitive proof of state involvement, and all that,” he replied, his frustration evident.

“No, just a brand new Romulan scout ship fresh from the shipyard,” I scoffed. “Yeah, clearly no state involvement there. After all, everyone has easy access to state-of-the-art Romulan military hardware.”

“Unfortunately, it’s now fully out of our hands and in the hands of the diplomats’,” Picard countered.

“And the politicians,” I snarked. “Present company excluded, of course, Madame President.”

I resisted the urge to smile at the elegance of a plan falling into place. President Moss clearly wanted to fire back at Picard, but a bell-like chime sounded, signaling that it was time for the lease signing ceremony to begin.

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President Moss and I stood behind the desk, two large PADDs resting on its surface alongside a stylus. A series of bell-like chimes settled the room into a respectful silence. News agencies from across the galaxy were present, capturing holophotos and videos, with tiny camera drones flitting through the air near the stage.

“My friends, today is an auspicious day,” Moss began, her voice ringing with authority. “A day that will be remembered for years to come. It is the day our people take ownership of our own security, declaring to the galaxy that we are not afraid, that we are not broken, that *we are strong!*”

The crowd erupted in cheers, particularly the citizens of Kessik IV, caught up in a fervent surge of nationalism for obvious reasons.

“We are sending a clear message to the galaxy: we have the strength to defend ourselves, and woe be to anyone who dares threaten us again!”

“We are part of a great Federation, and the strength of that Federation is evident in the outpouring of support from member worlds during our darkest hours. Worlds weeks away at maximum warp have generously aided our recovery. We are deeply grateful to them. They are our brothers and sisters among the stars, and we will never forget them, just as we stand ready to give them aid in their own times of need.”

“Today, following a planetary vote overwhelmingly in support of it, we pledge our wealth and a commitment to our defense by leasing the Gothic Orbital Defense System—a network of orbital defense platforms that provides unparalleled local security through planetary shielding, advanced sensors, and powerful offensive capabilities. This network will remain in our orbit, always ready to protect us, regardless of the circumstances, the distance of the nearest Starfleet vessel to our world, or other higher priorities elsewhere. It is our protection, and ours alone.”

“We honor and remember all those who gave their lives in the Hur’q invasion, and we make a solemn vow here and now: Never again! Never again!”

“Never again! Never again!” the crowd echoed, their voices rising in unison, fierce and unwavering.

Moss and I sat down, stylus in hand, and countersigned the lease agreement as the chant continued, rising and echoing through the hall. She pressed her palm to the PADD's surface.

Just as we had rehearsed—Annika's suggestion—we stood and shook hands, the flashes of hundreds of holophotos capturing the moment and beaming it across the galaxy.

A new series of chimes rang out, calming the crowd and ending the chanting.

"Computer, recognize Admiral Gothic, CEO," I said aloud.

"Recognized," Natasha's voice replied.

"Transfer full command authority to President Donatella Moss, constitutional president and elected leader of Kessik IV," I commanded. "Reduce command authority of Admiral Gothic to corporate default."

"Full command authority transferred to President Donatella Moss of Kessik IV. Command authority of Admiral Gothic reduced to corporate default."

"Command is yours, Madame President," I said with a smile, she nodded in response.

"Computer, raise planetary shields!" she loudly commanded with a bright smile.

As planned, the holodisplay behind us changed views. The audience watched in awe as the orbital platforms activated, a translucent light-blue shield enveloping the planet before fading to a soft glow. During the event planning, it had been clear that a visible demonstration was essential—proof that, with the signing, President Moss now held full control of the GODS net, not me. Short of firing the platforms at a massive asteroid we'd be forced to tractor in for target practice—a spectacle we'd wisely avoided—raising the shields was the most dramatic, visible, and undeniable display of her new authority over the system.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

As the cheers began to subside, President Moss spoke again, unexpectedly.

"Our example has inspired our fellow Federation brothers and sisters," she announced.

"Ambassador Nyssar Vel of Betazed and Ambassador Velora Synne of Risa have authorized me to share the news that the Federation planets of Betazed, Risa, and the independent world of Halka have also chosen to lease the GODS net. They, too, have decided to take control of their own futures."

The crowd erupted once more, louder than before, but this time I was whooping and hollering right alongside them, exhilarated by the confirmation. Even as I celebrated, orders were being sent across the galaxy setting in motion everything needed to satisfy these new leases as quickly as possible. Now was the time to put action to words as quickly as possible.

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It really was a lovely event, I mused as I sipped my chilled springwine and shook hands with yet another dignitary from a world that I had literally never heard of before today—certainly not one

ever mentioned in any Star Trek episode I'd ever seen. Even as I exchanged pleasantries, my mind wandered.

Dinner had been superb, the company excellent, and President Moss and I were clearly the people everyone wanted a moment with. Considering the room was filled with the who's who of the Federation, nearby independent systems, and half the galactic press, it was a banner day for my companies. I didn't have to go begging like some desperate salesman; they came to me.

The fish were practically leaping into the fisherman's boat. A few I even had to reluctantly toss back when my AI children mentally informed me they were embroiled in some protracted regional conflict and absolutely not the sort of clients I wanted my technology mixed up with. That would be the fastest way to lose the Federation's goodwill—not to mention my largest future customer.

Of course, it was a shit metaphor, since I wasn't going to eat or gut any of these "fish," but it was the first thing that came to mind. My potential customers were practically begging for my product, and all it took was one planet to take that first leap of faith.

Just as I'd predicted: Kessik IV grabbed the first plate at the buffet, then the Betazoids, then the Risians, then the Halkans—now everyone wanted in, and the line was backed up to the damn door. Picard's report probably wasn't even drafted yet, but everyone was acting like approval was a foregone conclusion, and honestly? They might be right.

When it came to governments, the tail often wagged the dog. Four worlds committing to lease the GODS net—three of them Federation members—would put so much pressure on the Federation Council that they might have no choice but to greenlight me and the GODS net, barring something really damaging coming to light... like discovering that I could seize control of the system back anytime I wanted.

And with Section 31 in favor of it and quietly working in the shadows, nudging the scales with their invisible, morally flexible fingers, things were going to move fast. Very fast.

My thoughts drifted to President Moss. I had barely recognized her tonight after the signing—she was smiling, radiant, practically overflowing with hope for the future. Until now, I had only known the version of her forged in the aftermath of the Hur'q invasion: a woman carrying fresh grief, steadying herself under the weight of loss and shame, guilt and responsibility. Seeing her like this felt new... and, I hoped, a sign that this dark chapter of her life was finally coming to a close.

During dinner she had been so smiley and happy...and mischievous. We had been placed next to each other for dinner and oh boy, she could somehow carry on a full-blown policy discussion even as her soft silky hand snaked under the table, took my cock out, and jerked me off right as she was talking to Picard.

The little minx had even trapped my cum in her hand and clandestinely drank it down. Troi, Vel, and Synne of course knew exactly what had been happening and looked amused, but thankfully everyone else had been oblivious.

“There’s a lot more where that came from, Gothic,” she had whispered breathily in my ear afterward. “I’ll summon you to my office to finalize our... mutual obligations. Perhaps with some new friends,” she added, casting a deliberate glance at the two beautiful ambassadors at our table. They answered with flirty, knowing smiles.

I could hardly wait for the invitation.

A human waiter approached quietly and leaned in. “Admiral, my apologies for the interruption, but President Moss and Ambassadors Vel and Synne have requested your presence in the president’s private office.”

I turned back to my conversational partners and offered a look of polite regret.

“Apologies, gentlemen, but I’ve been summoned. If you’d like to continue this conversation, please reach out to my executive assistant, Annika,” I said, shaking their hands before slipping away—measured steps, no sudden movements, nothing that would draw unnecessary attention.

At long last, it seemed I was about to live out a teenage fantasy and would be banging Donna—from *The West Wing*’s equivalent in this universe. Being a dimensional traveler certainly had its perks. Fantasies fulfilled, a little heroism here and there, wealth piling up, the occasional stunning alien companion—it wasn’t a bad way to spend one’s existence. Most days, I lived like a king, formal coronation not required.

Women wanted me; men wanted to be me, I thought with no small amount of satisfaction as I crossed the room, trying not to move too abnormally fast. Tyr shadowed me a few paces away, looking surprisingly dapper—and only mildly absurd—in the formal suit stretched over his Breen armor underneath.

Of course, because the universe could be a cold-hearted bitch whenever the mood struck her, I wasn’t even halfway to the President’s office and a sure-thing orgy when I received a cascade of high priority alerts in my HUD. The only way it could have been worse was if I was mid thrust in Donna’s wet cunt, coitus interruptus at its finest.

Thank Q, the Prophets, the Metrons, the Douwd, the Organians, and every other cosmic-level busybody that this universe didn’t usually operate on that level of cruelty. The closest it ever got was Wesley accidentally walking in on me with his mother just as I nugged vigorously inside her, which was... well, traumatizing for him and hilarious for me.

“Natasha, for the love of all that’s holy, tell me this can possibly—” I began aloud, before she cut me off.

‘Father, a cloaked shuttle has just latched onto the hull and is attempting to override the airlock security. We only detected them when they interfaced with our systems,’ she reported via her neural link—using a tone I’d rarely heard from her: flat, focused, and deadly serious. ‘I do not know how long I can prevent entry. The programming is adaptive and completely alien to me. The shuttle’s warp core also appears to be in a controlled overload.’

My heart stopped for a beat before fury surged through me. Someone was invading my home. *My home!*

My thoughts kicked into Augment overdrive as I gamed out the possibilities. A cloaked shuttle already docked meant they were inside the primary shield envelope. The secondary, skintight shield might blunt some of the damage, but the shuttle itself was latched onto the hull, which meant it likely wouldn't be able to protect ship against a pointblank warp core explosion.

Most of my weapons couldn't be brought to bear—not at that distance and not without risking catastrophic collateral damage. Maybe I could orient the anti-fighter batteries around to get a firing solution on the shuttle, but God only knew what would happen then. You only put a warp core into a controlled overload for two reasons: you desperately needed a massive, short-term power boost... or you wanted the vessel to go up like a hair-trigger bomb. And if *I* were staging an incursion like this, that's exactly what I'd do.

Someone really, *really* wanted aboard my ship—badly enough to attempt it within spitting distance of two Starfleet vessels and the planetary defense net. A defense net that I no longer fully controlled, I remembered with a cringe. And this situation wasn't anywhere near dire enough to justify revealing that I *could* override a leasing world's control of the GODS net. That card needed to stay hidden. *Were they hoping that I'd expose that capability?*

I had strong suspicions, but I needed the truth: who was behind this—and why.

'Natasha, can we beam B'Elanna, Neela, and Dr. Lanning off the ship?' I asked.

'No. The shuttle is emitting a short-range transport scrambling field of an unknown design,' she replied instantly. 'We *could* attempt it, but I couldn't guarantee pattern integrity.'

"More unknown tech," I muttered as Tyr guided me into an empty storage room, not realizing I had accidentally said that aloud. Each new report ratcheted up the alarm. 'The first place they'll go is Engineering or the bridge—probably Engineering, that's what I would do with me and most everyone else at this event. Order an immediate evacuation and relocate everyone to my quarters. Then lock it down. Hide their life signs.'

'They're moving now, per your orders.'

'How far does the scrambling field extend?' I asked.

'It's extremely short-range—likely to keep it hidden from the *Enterprise's* sensors,' she replied.

'Stand by to transport me alone to the edge of the scrambler field, into open space. I'll fly in under my own power,' I ordered. My fancy clothes dissolved into transporter suspension, and my nano armor formed from beneath my skin, encasing me head to toe in fluid chrome, ready for battle or a trip into hard vacuum.

'My lord! Please let me accompany you!' Tyr begged.

'You'd survive space just fine, Tyr, but your armor doesn't have stealth or cloaking like mine—something I really need to fix,' I said. 'I don't want *anyone* realizing what's happening. Your job

is to run interference here. Tell people I'm taking a wicked shit, I don't care. Just make sure no one figures out I left the planet.'

Tyr gave a curt, disgruntled nod—and then relented.

I engaged the stolen Hur'q stealth technology and disappeared from sight and most known sensors.

'Transport me now,' I ordered. The transporter took me from Kessik IV—and from what had promised to be a sure-thing orgy—into the vacuum of space.

I could forgive a lot, but cockblocking me from an orgy? *Somebody was going to fucking die.*

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"They've overridden the airlock security," Natasha reported through my armor's neural link as I stepped through a secondary airlock near Engineering. Her voice carried a quiet, genuine remorse—she sounded beaten.

"Not your fault, Natasha," I soothed. "A completely alien programming isn't something easily overcome, especially if it already understand our system architecture. And even if you'd held them at the airlock systems, they could've cut through the door or used an explosive. Those doors are not made of neutronium."

Engineering was empty when I arrived. The warp core from my first ship hummed steadily, producing the ship's secondary power as designed. My ship's true heart—the Collector-derived micro-singularity core—remained locked away in a secure hidden vault; the warp core routed through Engineering was the prop everyone expected. Give people what they expect, and they rarely look any further.

I jumped and flipped backward, planting my armored back gently against the bulkhead above the reinforced doors to engineering. The armor emitted a tractor beam to keep me in place, as if I'd been welded to the wall. I flicked my hand to summon my battle rifle from my armor's internal transporter suspension and readied it for combat.

"Show me their positions," I ordered through the neural link.

Through my HUD I watched as seven indistinct silhouettes crept through the ship in disciplined formation—lanes of fire neatly established. Thankfully, they hadn't split up into smaller teams, which was good as it would have made confronting them so much harder by myself. Two teams of two led the advance, a single figure—clearly a VIP—moved in the center, and a rear pair closed the column.

"We couldn't detect them at first, father," Natasha said. "We had to adapt sensor filters to penetrate the cloaking field."

"They're using Collector stealth technology," I noted, surprise lacing my voice as I cross-checked the sensor readings against my own records. When I first obtained a sample of Collector stealth tech, I had immediately devised a method to penetrate it—just in case I ever encountered

more of their scouts. It was a reasonable precaution, though hardly typical in the Star Trek universe. “How...unexpected.”

The fact they were using such technology at all was both surprising and alarming. These weren't Collector or Hur'q—the shapes didn't match the standard templates. Collector scouts, warriors, and engineers were uniform, based on a genetic template that they didn't deviate from. These intruders, however, were clearly individuals, each with differences between them. None were the same.

Time and again, Star Trek fans watched as the Federation or other powers encountered advanced alien tech in a single episode—and then never again. A reasonable person would seize such technology, reverse engineer it, then integrate the advancements to gain an edge. But not in this universe. Even during the Dominion War, when the Federation captured highly advanced Dominion tech superior to their own, almost none of it seemed to be reverse-engineered or applied to advance Federation technology or science. Sure, they came up with countermeasures in a few rare instances, but never used it themselves.

Whoever had infiltrated the ship was using varied and advanced technology from different sources: a cloaked shuttle, alien programming, and Collector stealth tech. The combination was far more alarming than any single anomaly—it suggested someone had broken a rule I'd always assumed was universal.

If they had Collector stealth tech, then they too might be able to penetrate the same cloaking field, so I switched to a more advanced but energy intensive cloaking field like a starship might use.

‘They’re moving quickly, but slower than expected,’ Natasha reported. ‘They don’t seem to have a solid grasp of the deck layout. Analysis indicates they’re heading for main Engineering. ETA: three minutes, seventeen seconds at current pace. Shall I engage intruder countermeasures?’

I let the words hang for a beat as I considered the question. ‘Negative,’ I said at last. ‘I want to see what they do when they reach Engineering. To give them an opportunity to interface with our systems—it’ll give us a chance to see what they are really looking for, what their mission objective really is. Can we do that without risking the ship? Or do I need to neutralize them before they get there?’

‘We can,’ Natasha answered. ‘We can create a modal simulation of the real systems—fully isolated from the true command-and-control systems of the ship. They can interact with the simulation as if it is real, while we monitor and analyze their every action.’

Perfect. Let them play with the simulation while we learned everything we could from them.

An ETA ticked down in my HUD: 1 minute, 37 seconds.

‘Do it,’ I ordered. I felt my other AI children—Carl and Jarvis among them—flow into Natasha’s processes, helping to spin up a quarantined simulation so we could watch the alien code probe our systems without endangering the actual ship. ‘Activate five life-model decoys. Make them look like they’re engineering crew.’

‘Father, they’re not ready,’ Hermione warned, speaking for the first time since the incursion was detected. I could sense Natasha’s attention was entirely focused on the task I’d given her. ‘We’re nowhere near ready for deployment.’

‘I don’t care,’ I replied quickly. ‘Use whatever we have available. I want to see how they react to encountering crew. They don’t have to be perfect replicas of living people—just believable enough to provoke a response.’

One of Dr. Lanning’s side projects had been to develop an NS-5 variant and a set of behaviors designed to mimic live crew aboard my cargo vessels. Unmanned ships were a rare thing in the Star Trek universe, and Annika had suggested that we may need plausible living crew decoys to serve on the cargo ships. Some worlds did not allow unmanned ships in their space, so the NS-5 life-model decoys had been the result—imperfect, but useful.

Real skin and other biological markers were being integrated into their designs, along with the custom programming needed to fake all the little behaviors that sold the illusion: the way a real person walked, slouched, sat, breathed, coughed, and so on. There were even prototype systems being developed to let the decoys “drink” or “eat” if absolutely forced to—taking in liquids or solids into internal containment compartments—but everyone hoped that particular feature would never actually be necessary.

The plan was for them to interact with customers as little as possible ‘in person’, but when they *did* need to, they could handle brief subspace calls, meet with customs officials, transmit sensor logs as though they were human, Bajoran, or whichever species they were imitating, and even move beyond the range of the ship’s holoprojectors if required. Lauren had suggested we just make all the fake crew Breen and clad them in Breen armor, just like Tyr, but I was worried how it would look employing so many of that race. The actual Breen might come knocking and that would be a disaster. Not every species was fans of them either; the Klingons hated them.

‘The quarantined modal simulation is complete,’ Natasha reported. ‘We can feed it false data as needed if the invading program manages to bypass the simulated security. In the meantime, we will learn from its behavior and adapt countermeasures accordingly.’

‘Good. Learn everything you can,’ I ordered. ‘If the hostile software looks like it’s going to break containment, kill the modal environment—no hesitation, even if we haven’t extracted everything we wanted.’

‘Understood,’ she replied, just as the NS-5 decoys filed into the room and immediately began mimicking routine work at the engineering consoles. The modal was now fully simulating every shipwide response from those engineering consoles, those command functions moved entirely away from engineering itself.

A six-person strike team with a commander or VIP—how would they react to finding *five* crew on duty? It wasn’t a one-to-one matchup, but close enough to make any trained unit of professional operatives wary. Their response would be very telling.

My HUD countdown hit zero.

The engineering doors slid open.

Bright pulses of energy erupted from the doorways without warning. The life-model decoys reacted perfectly—shouting, scrambling, feigning panic—before the “engineering crew” was ruthlessly vaporized. The sheer intensity of the discharge disrupted the Collector cloaking fields the intruders were using, revealing seven figures as they swept into engineering and fanned out around the room in a practiced search pattern to secure the area.

My shock was real. So was my rage. If B’Elanna and Neela had actually been here, they would have died in the opening seconds. Not even their bodies would have remained to bury and mourn.

And the surprises kept on coming. Almost none of the factions capable of mounting an incursion like this would open with immediate lethal force, let alone with vaporization. Most humanoid species avoided that method entirely—either out of squeamishness, cultural taboo, or simple practicality. Even Klingons, for all their ferocity, preferred to give an enemy the chance to fight back; vaporizing someone before they could even draw a blade was considered dishonorable. Romulans didn’t do it either—why waste the energy? Dead was dead, and vaporization was unnecessary, inefficient overkill by their standards.

Whoever this was, they weren’t merely hostile—they were ruthless, singularly focused, and willing to discard every tactical advantage in pursuit of their true objective. They hadn’t even paused to capture and quickly field interrogate even a single member of the engineering crew, people who would’ve known this ship better than anyone. They didn’t try to coerce, capture, or use a single one of them. They simply erased them.

The ship clearly wasn’t their target. Their behavior told me everything: they believed they didn’t need a single living soul to accomplish whatever they had come for.

I recognized their weapons, though—high-powered Federation pulse rifles, the kind issued to Starfleet Special Operations... and, once upon a time, a Section 31 operative who had been killed in the early days of the Hur’q Invasion. If this *was* Section 31, I was royally screwed six ways from Sunday. But it didn’t track. Our relationship was solid, and the GODS net was poised to boost Federation security for decades to come. You don’t kill the golden goose unless the galaxy is already on fire and only the golden goose’s death will put out the flames.

Interestingly, the team themselves were baseline humans as far as I could tell, though that was always a roll of the dice in the Star Trek universe with so many similar looking humanoid races. When their cloaking fields collapsed, they pulled off their helmets. Maybe to improve visibility?? Everything I had seen so far told me that these people were professionals—disciplined, efficient, textbook. Yet they pulled off their helmets in the middle of an op.

They weren’t used to the equipment, I realized in a moment of clarity. In fact, they looked happy to take it off. The Collector scout armor had likely only been given to them shortly before this mission. They hadn’t trained with it, didn’t like it, and weren’t comfortable with it. Finally, something that fucking fit expectations. Federation types did not like using non-Federation technology.

But the biggest shock hit last.

Their commander—the VIP they were treating like precious cargo—was Admiral Pressman.

Pressman. The persistent thorn in my side. Annoying, obstinate, political to the core—but *this*? A cloaked infiltration of my ship during a state dinner, armed with alien tech, and the immediate, cold-blooded vaporization of my supposed crew? No, I had never seen this coming.

What the actual fuck was happening right now?

“Once aboard, our scanners began working properly, sir. These crew members weren’t detected on any of our life scans,” Operative One reported to Pressman. In my HUD, I tagged him as the likely team leader—and the first one who needed to die.

“Find and eliminate anyone else on board. We leave no witnesses,” Pressman growled. Then, to my disbelief, he pulled out an interface spike and jammed it directly into an ODN access port on one of the engineering consoles.

Why the bloody hell was an admiral—the admiral running this insane operation—handling that himself? You assign a dedicated mission tech for that kind of work. A highly trained expert. You don’t have the flag officer get his hands dirty. Why was he even here?? Some desire to micro-manage his team? Was that device the source of all the alien programming? Why did he not want anyone else to handle it? Did he not want to give them a chance to examine even more of this non-Federation technology? The team looked discomforted by it, but were too professional for more than a slight tightening of their expressions given his rank.

‘Father, the same alien programming is attempting to breach our database,’ Natasha warned.

‘They’re not trying to take control of the ship?’ I asked.

‘No. They appear to be hunting for something specific in our database,’ she replied.

‘Put up a reasonable amount of resistance, test the programming a little to see what is effective against it, then let it in. I want to know exactly what he’s after, what all this was for,’ I instructed.

I watched in the digital realm as the alien code sliced cleanly through the simulated security layers—fast, precise, methodical, ruthless—before Natasha allowed it to succeed. As expected, it immediately targeted every scrap of technical data on the GODS net: schematics, technical information, deployment schedule, construction records, even the manufacturing history of my ship.

But what it went after next was the real shock—and far more dangerous.

It wanted to know everything about Deep Space 9.

Not just its design specs, but its defenses, the wormhole itself, sector security protocols and contingency plans... even classified information on the Prophets and their Orbs, something I knew far more about than anyone off Bajor itself. Somehow, Pressman had learned that I once asked Picard for a favor in that regard.

That was enough. I had seen what I needed to see.

By the time they had reached Engineering my rifle was already primed—set to an antiproton beam calibrated to punch through Collector-grade armor. Seeing the discomfort in this team of special operators I considered trying for a non-lethal takedown, but then I remembered how they had vaporized my fake crew and decided it wasn't worth the risk.

I fired three center-mass quick shots before any of them realized where the fire was coming from. The team leader went down first, clean and immediate, dead. A large hole burned straight through his torso.

On the third impact, I released the tractor beam keeping me secured to the wall and dropped to the deck plates, uncloaked. Return fire pounded the metal where I'd been previously, tearing holes through the bulkhead, metal dripping like hot wax from the intensity of the energy pulses. I landed on a bent knee, sighted quickly and carefully, and put two rapid, precise bolts into two more of the intruders.

The last operative had shoved Pressman behind him, acting as a human shield with the warp core looming behind them both. Whether that was luck or deliberate strategy, it complicated things: I couldn't risk a kill shot without risking overpenetration—anything that punched through the operative could then hit Pressman or, worse, breach the warp core and take the whole ship with it.

My rifle dematerialized and I drew my sword in one smooth motion, sprinting forward at an angle away from the man's dominant hand—low, fast, at a speed only an Augment could manage. Vaporizing shots chewed into the space I'd just vacated as my blade swept gracefully once across his waist, then immediately back across his neck. The energized plasma edge severed him cleanly and easily; the two cuts landed so close together in time the body hadn't even begun to fall apart yet.

Pressman stumbled backward in open terror, pressing himself against the railing around the warp core, a Collector antiproton pistol shaking in his hand, looking as if he was going to press the weapon against the warp core itself. I couldn't have that.

I closed the distance quickly, shoved the weapon aside, and swept his legs out from under him. He hit the deck hard just as my rifle rematerialized. I leveled it at his chest and fired down into his prone form without hesitation.

A greenish beam erupted, encasing the man in a Minoasian stasis field, freezing him, his metabolic processes suspended.

Seventeen seconds from first shot to last. This was why they feared Augments.

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I watched Pressman stir briefly as if confused, then snap fully and unnaturally awake, making me wary and confused once again. Nothing, *nothing* fit here.

A seasoned intelligence officer—or in this case an Admiral with ties to Starfleet Intelligence—wouldn't have been trained to snap to wakefulness like that. The taught best practice was to feign prolonged unconsciousness and hope your captors relaxed, with the hope to gain useful intelligence while they thought you unaware or to spot an opportunity to effect an immediate escape.

Maybe he hadn't been trained for this situation? He had spent most of his career as a ship captain rather than doing true intelligence work. If that was the case, then it should have been a groggy bout of slowly and visibly stirring to wakefulness, nothing so sudden as what I had just witnessed.

The Minosian stasis field was a useful non-lethal capture tool—designed to keep a subject alive and immobilized until the applied energy was expended. The applied stasis field was self-powered, essentially fire and forget, and did not require a continuous power source. That was both its strength and its weakness as there was a time limit. In this case the stasis field had collapsed far sooner than expected, as if maintaining stasis around Pressman's body had drained far more power than a normal human physiology typically required.

Worrying.

As far as I knew Pressman didn't have any non-human DNA in his ancestry, but Federation records on that kind of thing were highly secure and even then oftentimes incomplete. I'd already tasked Jarvis with doing some research on Pressman's ancestry and had asked Carl to prepare a report on what had happened on the tech side. Yet another thing wasn't adding up here.

It was irrelevant in this case. The instant the field winked out I had moved quickly to secure him, running him through the transporter to remove his clothes and make sure there were no other surprises, then strapping him to an upright restraint board—Hannibal Lecter style. His arms were forced wide; the bindings held him as if he had ten times a human's strength. It was overkill, but between the alien tech, the vaporizing weapons, and the odd stasis behavior, I wasn't taking any chances.

Wouldn't it be incredibly and hilariously hypocritical to learn that Pressman had undergone a little genetic engineering himself?

"Welcome back, Admiral," I said, light and conversational, letting the casual tone unnerve him. "I have *so* many questions for you."

"Release me at once—I am an admiral in Starfleet!" he barked.

The absurd self-righteousness and entitlement in his voice, even now, even in this extreme situation, made me pause for a moment before I barked a genuine laugh. "Wow. Yet another surprise today," I said, still chuckling. "Did not see that coming."

I took him in again, measuring, as if trying to figure him out.

"You boarded my ship in an illegal, cloaked shuttle. You vaporized five of my crew and tried to download my database," I said slowly, as if explaining things to a particularly dimwitted child.

“You are no longer an admiral in Starfleet. You are an enemy combatant; you are my prisoner. I will strip every secret from you, and then once I’ve taken every last bit of useful intelligence from your broken body, I will vaporize it so no one will ever know your fate. How much you suffer before that grisly end—well, now that’s entirely up to you.”

There was no way we were going to use the pleasure torture route for this fucker.

“People will look for me, they’ll know what you did,” Pressman tried defiantly, this time in a more normal voice. Again, surprising.

“Yeah, I don’t think they will,” I commiserated, as if sad for him. “You went out of your way to hide what you were doing. You did all the heavy lifting for me. Thank you. No, this is the end of the line for you, my friend.”

I sighed, theatrically slow.

“I can tell that we are going to go round and round on this and waste a whole lot of each other’s time before you realize the seriousness and *finality* of your new situation,” I said, my voice low and cold. “So let me impress upon you, with action, this cold, hard truth; *I will be the last face you see in this life.*”

I drew my sword with a single, clean motion. The blade sang as it cut through the air, and in one precise stroke I sliced through Pressman’s right wrist. The wound sealed instantly under the blade’s heat—cauterized—and his hand fell away from his body. The sound of it hitting the deck was drowned out by the stunned silence that followed.

I waited for the scream of pain and terror—humans have a deep, atavistic terror of losing their dominant hand—but none came. Silence. Instead, Pressman’s severed hand lying on the deck plate turned into a viscous, orange gelatinous ooze before flowing back to the man.

My brain stuttered at the impossible sight. Instinct took over: I jumped back as far as I could, putting as much distance as I could between me and this thing, my rifle rematerializing in my grip, its ominous whine telling me it was ready to be fired at maximum power.

Natasha was even faster. A powerful forcefield snapped into place around the changeling on my ship.

Pressman’s entire form became that distinctive burnt orange, slipping effortlessly through the restraints that would have held any normal humanoid captive.

“You have no idea what you’ve started here,” Pressman—or rather, the Founder masquerading as him—warned stoically. “But you will. All of you solids will.”

I brought up my weapon to kill the changeling on my ship before it was spirited away by a Dominion transporter beam.