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The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 35

Flashback

Resistance Hideout. Bajor.

The Shaakar cell, which I had been allowed to join despite not being Bajoran, was seated around a small holo-projector. The stolen and rather beat up Cardassian device had clearly seen better days and was practically an antique by Federation technological standards, but it still worked well enough to do its job, which was to show the topographical layout of a nearby Bajoran town. Even a cheap and tiny holo-portrait device commonly available throughout the modern-day Federation had a higher resolution and contrast, color depth and solidity, but the Bajoran resistance was far from being flush with resources and modern equipment. The Cardassian military itself on Bajor didn't receive the modern equipment. The Central Command basically used Bajor to offload (or dispose of) most of its aging, obsolete, and broken down military hardware that they couldn't otherwise risk using against advanced enemies like the Federation or the Klingons.

We were currently hiding out in the hills of the Dahkur Province, and this was far from the first time the Shakaar Resistance cell had hid in this place. In fact, if the Resistance had the luxury of caring about such things, you could say that the Resistance in this part of Bajor had been born in these hills. The natural composition of the rock walls and the various mineral deposits scattered throughout this area severely degraded or defeated Cardassian sensor sweeps and in that way had offered protection to fifty years' worth of Bajoran freedom fighters. Of course, the Cardassians had carpet bombed the area many times and had collapsed many caves over the last half century, but the Hills always provided more and due to necessity, the Bajoran Resistance had become quite skilled at quietly digging new ones themselves.

A few years back Kira Nerys and the rest of Shakaar resistance cell had spent the entire winter hiding in these Hills after a few overly successful operations had brought the fury and attention of the Cardassians down on the entire region. That kind of scrutiny meant that it was time to go to ground and wait for the heat to die down. With no power cells for their phasers, in order to prevent their power signatures from being detected, and with very little in the way of food and supplies, they hid from the Cardassian sensor sweeps in the caves, setting small traps to kill the few voles and other cave creatures that they could find and roasting them over small cooking fires. From the stories I'd heard it had been cold and miserable and not everyone that had gone into those caves to hide had walked out of them in the spring. Even in this era of advanced technology, exposure and starvation were oftentimes more lethal to the Resistance forces than the Cardassians themselves.

While we had ample power cells and food this time, thanks to me, the Shakaar cell was once again hiding out from Cardassian sensor sweeps in these caves, only this time we wouldn't be remaining in the caves for long. We'd hit several high value targets, including one operation that

had ended with me very nearly killing Gul Dukat himself, the Prefect of all of Bajor. That had earned me quite a bit of fame and some serious bragging rights, which had helped solidify my place in the Shakaar and the Resistance even further. Thankfully, Kira had agreed to keep it to herself how I had purposefully spared the man, but only after I had convinced her that it was the best move for the long-term survival of Bajor. I'm relatively sure she still didn't fully agree with me, but thankfully her trust and loyalty in me was great enough that my decision won the day.

The response from the local Cardassian commander to that operation, a man named Gul Divoc, was to round up the families of those suspected to have aided or provided information to the Resistance and have them publicly executed in the town square of a nearby settlement. It was yet another classic play from the evil villain handbook when your goal was to intimidate a native population into submission, in this case showing them the consequences of aiding the Resistance. It was a part of the handbook because it was historically rather effective, across species, but that efficacy was dependent on the circumstances. After fifty years of Occupation, no one was really buying it anymore. The Cardassians' penchant for casual, impulsive, and unwarranted cruelty was written in blood in the Bajoran cultural identity, so these executions were actually working against the Cardassians.

As you might expect, Shakaar had taken great exception to this idea and wanted to kill Gul Divoc as part of our ongoing efforts to harass and hopefully destabilize the operations and command structure of the Cardassian military hierarchy in the region. As I'd explained to the cell a while ago, and as Shakaar had always understood, Bajor just didn't have the resources to drive the Cardassians off the planet in a fair fight, thus we had to be clever and underhanded about the whole thing, carefully selecting targets to cause the greatest disruption in the system.

As we had talked about again and again, the ultimate goal of our Resistance was to make the Occupation too expensive and too unprofitable for the Cardassians in terms of both resources and personnel when there were better opportunities available. The Cardassians spent a lot of time, effort, and money training someone, over the course of a long career in the military, before someone rose to the ranks of Gul. While everyone we killed could ultimately be replaced, few career officers would want the job if they thought that it was going to lead to them getting assassinated in short order or being in charge of the thankless shit show that Bajor was turning out to be. That would leave the incompetent opportunists to fill the ranks on Bajor, the dregs of the Cardassian military with few prospects and even more limited ability. A long succession of barely competent replacement leaders, ones who would rarely have the time to learn from their lessons on Bajor and gain some useful experience, would further destabilize and hamstring operations on Bajor, slowing the flow of wealth and resources being generated from occupying the planet.

The public execution that would take place today would begin with the mass rape of the female prisoners, made up of both women and young girls as young as 8 years old, in front of their families, friends, and neighbors, by various Cardassian soldiers, and then the execution of everyone remaining. This would be followed by a celebratory feast in honor of Cardassia. Which I assumed was to both to simultaneously demoralize the natives and help the morale of the Occupation Forces, dinner and a show, or a show then dinner in this case, all in front of a half-

starved and brutalized population. Rape, then execution, then eating gluttonously in front of a near starved group of people. The Cardassians were some evil fucks.

If only the average Federation citizen, untouched by the many evils in the galaxy, could see what was happening on Bajor while they turned a blind eye, happy in their ignorance of what the galaxy was really like away from their blissful, easy lives, in the Federation. Those same peaceful folks might actually pick up a phaser when confronted by such evil. Well, one could hope.

Gul Divoc needed to die, and publicly too. And there *needed* to be witnesses.

He needed to die when surrounded by his loyal troops, secure in the belief that he was unassailable, while in the bosom of their protection, so that every spoonhead officer on this planet would know that they were never safe, that this was not *their* world, that every cruelty and atrocity they wrought on the Bajoran people had consequences and would be paid back tenfold. Shakaar understood my way of thinking and agreed; he was pragmatic like that. He also wasn't as xenophobic as many Bajorans were these days (though they had very good reason to be considering) so he didn't dismiss my ideas just because I didn't have a wrinkly nose.

The plan was simple enough, and that was good because the more complex a plan, the greater the chances were that something would go horribly wrong. And unlike Starfleet, we didn't have technobabble, plot armor, and the security of our righteousness in a sane universe to save us when things inevitably went wrong.

Gul Divoc would be making a standard arrogant and pretentious evil villain speech beforehand, as was protocol, at which point I would shoot him from the cover of the nearby hill cave with a sniper rifle from an extreme long range. I would have Kira with me for cover, as she was also supremely skilled when it came to doling out death at extreme ranges.

At the same time the rest of the Shakaars, some of whom would be mixed into the nearby crowd itself, would attack the Cardassian soldiers with weapons that I had provided them. Our ultimate goal was not just to kill the Gul, but to free the prisoners and to protect the crowd. In the chaos and with the element of surprise on their side, their attack would likely kill most of the nearby soldiers in the first minute or so, which should allow the condemned prisoners and the crowd itself to escape and hide elsewhere.

Kira protested mightily at not being in the thick of it with the rest of the cell, but Shakaar had handed her a rifle specially modified for long range shooting and told her that it was because he trusted her, that she was being assigned the duty of killing me should I turn traitor and completing the mission to kill the Gul if I couldn't or wouldn't. He had sent me a discreet wink at these words. In other words, generally being out of the main firefight so that she could watch me and provide support from a distance, aiding in the cell's exfil. The wink he had sent me had softened his words, but I guess Shakaar was still a little hesitant about me.

I wondered if Kira *could* kill me. After all, we were sleeping together regularly, which usually resulted in some sort of basic but intense emotional attachment. Then again, she was extremely loyal to her cell, and she greatly admired Shakaar, so she might be able to do it. Sure, she had

started sleeping with me for the benefit of her cell in order to secure an arms deal that they could barely afford, but she didn't need to continue doing that after I had given them the weapons and joined the cell. That *had* to mean something.

She must care for me. At least that's what I thought. Not that she would need to kill me, though, as I wouldn't be giving her any reason to. I was firmly on the side of the Bajorans and their struggle and had no trouble whatsoever killing the spoonhead soldiers as I'd proven time and time again. Even without the mission from Section 31, I felt certain in my heart that I would have supported them and their cause.

My desire to kill the Cardassians on Bajor wasn't because I was an unfeeling Augment, eager to kill or to prove my superiority over all others. Any person, after seeing the kind of evil shit I'd seen on Bajor, would be eager to pick up a phaser and start happily killing Cardassians. Even with everything I'd seen, I didn't think that their entire race was intrinsically evil; it was just that they had an evil government as well as fucked up ideals and a culture which indoctrinated them from a young age to do very bad things, like the German people had done during World War 2 on Earth. When your entire culture devalued everyone else, even the most 'good' of people could do terrible things. No matter how I felt about them, though, you didn't see me going around and gunning down Cardassian civilians without provocation or without some tangible benefit.

"I think I've already proven I'll do whatever it takes to liberate Bajor, but don't worry, I'll take the shot, happily even," I assured everyone.

It was strange to me that they were even letting me take the kill shot if they had any doubts about my loyalty, but maybe this was my big test. If I passed I would finally be one of them and fully accepted. The more I thought about it, though, the more I wondered whether Kira had actually told Shakaar I'd purposely spared Dukat; that might be what was actually behind this.

Shakaar nodded in response and then looked over the assembled cell.

"Any questions?" he asked everyone.

When it looked like no one would be asking anything, I spoke up.

"Are we expecting the Cardassians to have any heavy fire support of their own in the area?" I asked.

Shakaar looked over the holographic display once more.

"The town will be heavily guarded like any other public execution event like this, but no intelligence we've received has suggested that Gul Divoc has any heavy vehicles or weapons in place, in case anything goes wrong. He's new to Bajor and Dahkur Province, a transfer straight from some unimportant duty station on Cardassia Prime, so he doesn't have a clue how dangerous we can be. Standard Cardassian arrogance and sense of superiority will be our friends once again, my friends."

'Wasn't that the truth,' I thought amusedly, as my fellow Resistance members chuckled dryly at this familiar refrain from Shakaar.

So many of the Resistance's victories were the result of Cardassian arrogance and overconfidence, rather than the Resistance's tactical genius or incredible skill or anything. The fact that Bajor was the dumping ground of the Cardassian military also helped a lot.

Even if he had been told how effective and dangerous the Resistance could be, I don't think Gul Divoc would have taken the warning seriously anyways. The spoon heads were far too arrogant for their own good, force-fed propaganda on their superiority over all the other races, which I found quite silly as they were a third-rate power in the Alpha Quadrant, at best, nothing compared to the Federation, or the Romulans, or even the Klingon Empire. The only thing they had going for them was just how uniformly militarized they were and how much of their culture was focused near entirely in that direction.

"Is there a contingency plan in place?" I asked.

Shakaar's smile was indulgent more than anything else, which annoyed me greatly because it suggested that he wasn't taking the possibility that everything could go tits up all that seriously. Which he really should as it had been proven time and time again in multiple universes that 'No plan survives first contact with the enemy.' My own military career had confirmed the truth of those words over and over again.

"Run like the Pah-wraiths themselves were chasing after you and then disappear into the hills," Shakaar answered. "We'll regroup in a week's time at rally point bravo."

The Pah-wraiths were pretty much the Bajoran versions of demons, so yeah, it would make sense to run from them.

"We don't have the firepower to stand up to a direct attack from the Cardassian garrison, which means we need to be in and out fast, killing as many as we can to allow the Bajoran prisoners the chance to escape and hide," the rebel leader explained. "As long as everyone plays their part we should be fine. Scatter to the winds and meet back at the rally point in a week's time."

Well, at least it was a simple plan and wouldn't be hard to remember.

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Resistance Hideout. Bajor.

"*Gothic*," Kira begged in that breathy voice of hers when she was really horny and almost out of control with desire.

She was curling her fingers delicately around my cock and working it gently to hardness. Which I normally wouldn't mind, but I had only just gotten into our shared sleeping bag laid out on this hard cave floor and I hadn't even been given a chance to get comfortable.

"I need you *inside me*! Please, Gothic," she begged quietly, but insistently, whispering the words into my ear, her hot breath tickling me. She was wrapping her arms around my neck and trying to pull me into her.

She was rarely this eager or needy under normal circumstances, but in the run up to a major operation, where emotions and nerves were high, she often sought the pleasures of the flesh to settle her nerves. There was an unusual edge of desperation too, or the need for reassurance, in her words, breathily spoken. If I had to guess, it had been Shakaar's order to kill me if I turned traitor, which suggested that she really had come to care for me and was conflicted about the order. I think she'd still do it if necessary, but knew it would tear her apart inside. She must have needed the reassurance of our intimacy.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," I told her sincerely, kissing her.

After moving her hand away once it had successfully brought me to hardness, I rolled her onto her back. She immediately spread her thighs wide open, urging me to move my body between her legs and line myself up with her dripping cunt. I gently thrust my large cock fully inside her. Kira's immediate reaction was very positive.

"Prophets!" she called out while closing her eyes and arching her back, her hands threading in my hair, pulling me down into a desperate kiss, filled with quite a bit of emotion that she normally couldn't express outside of sex.

I found myself trying to get into some sort of rhythm, but that proved to be tricky as while I was on top of the beautiful Bajoran woman, she was also moving her hips and her arms vigorously, her legs wrapped tightly around me. I must have been doing something right because it felt like her fingers were trying to scar my back with her scratches, running up and down my back.

"Gothic... ah..." she gasped.

Bajoran women seemed to naturally have an intense sex drive when compared to human women, which might help to explain why they were breeding like rabbits even during the horrors of the Occupation.

"Harder! Faster! Fuck this tight Bajoran pussy like you own it! Ruin it for anything but your huge human cock!" she demanded loudly, between even louder moans, no longer seeming to care if anyone heard us.

There was no way the others couldn't hear Kira screaming in ecstasy right now, despite how far separated we were from the main group. In fact, I heard a few chuckles with my enhanced hearing. Of course, it wasn't at all unusual for similar words, sounds, and cries of pleasure to be heard echoing in the caves in the days and hours before an operation, in all kinds of different pairings and numbers, casual and otherwise, between cell members. When this could be your last few hours alive, no one begrudged anyone sharing a little physical comfort with each other. The sexual shenanigans that occurred *after* surviving a major operation, failed or successful, was even worse.

"Harder it is," I answered, loving the dirty talk.

Calling upon only a fraction of my enhanced stamina and strength more, lest I break her pelvis, I gave the Bajoran woman exactly what she wanted and tried to ruin that hot, tight, wet Bajoran

pussy for anyone but me. Thankfully, given our designated roles for tomorrow's mission, it wouldn't matter if she was walking bowlegged tomorrow.

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Sniper's Nest. Hill Cave. Dahkur Province. Bajor.

The 'event' didn't start for another half an hour, so apart from regular communication checks, noting relevant ranges and identifying priority targets, and keeping watch for anything the intelligence folks hadn't prepared us for, there was little to do except stare intently through the advanced scope on my disrupter rifle and wait for the action to start. There was always a chance that Gul Divoc would turn up early or there would be some last-minute change to his security arrangements, so I couldn't exactly relax even now. I had to be prepared to adjust the plan or fire at any moment.

The sniper nest, or more accurately the small, damp cave we were hiding in, was protected from even close-range sensor detection by virtue of it only having a small hole in the side of a rocky, mineral rich hill facing the settlement, which was only accessible via a small hidden entrance which was lower in the valley and quite a distance away. While the space we were hiding in was hidden, small, and quite tight, it provided an excellent view of the whole town, which Kira told me was by design. It had long ago been slowly carved out by the Resistance with unpowered hand tools and was frequently used as an observation post by the Resistance, sometimes doubling as an emergency hideout or safehouse. Unfortunately, this was likely to be its last use, as it was sure to be discovered and collapsed by the Cardassians after today's events. Killing the Gul commander in charge of the local garrison and saving so many people from a terrible fate was viewed as a worthwhile trade, though.

While the spoon heads were an arrogant bunch of SOBs, they weren't stupid. Once the battle was over they'd be able to calculate exactly where my shot had come from, which would lead them back to this nest; they'd likely collapse the entire cave and any others they found in the vicinity. At least that was what I would do.

From the view of my advanced targeting scope, the town square below was decorated in Cardassian style bunting, like rape and murder was the perfect accompaniment to a political rally, and a table was set with a few miserable-looking Bajoran servants setting out places while twelve guards patrolled the square's perimeter. It was quiet enough that even at this distance I could sometimes hear things, although that might have more to do with my enhanced hearing.

"Target is approaching from the southwest," one of the Bajoran resistance fighters scattered throughout the area reported in a whisper over our low-tech team communications channel.

The spoon-head officer was coming into town inside an armored personnel transport. In theory, I could take a shot at him right now, but it would be completely pointless, as it'd take multiple full power shots to do enough damage to realistically harm the occupants. That was assuming they didn't immediately leave the area at speed after the first shot. I would have to wait until he exited the craft and got up onto the stage for his speech before I could take the shot with any reasonable chance of killing him. Besides, mission objectives required me to take the shot only when he was

more visible for morale purposes. The Cardassians themselves would be broadcasting the event in real time to their forces.

"Gothic, you need to positively identify him before you take the shot," Shakaar reminded me unnecessarily.

"Understood," I whispered into my com device.

Despite the pervasiveness of Cardassian arrogance, some Cardassians weren't entirely stupid or incapable of recognizing and adapting to changed circumstances, so in recent years a few of the smarter high-level officers, often ones who had managed to survive an assassination attempt or two by the Resistance, having learned that they weren't actually immortal and that the Bajorans were a devious and dangerous lot to underestimate, had started using body doubles when in public situations where their safety couldn't be guaranteed. Some unlucky bastard, oftentimes a low-level soldier forced to go under the knife and face the danger of getting killed in various high-risk situations, would take the risk for the more important and higher-ranking man.

While we felt it was unlikely in this particular case, nonetheless I'd spent some time studying detailed images of Gul Divoc so that no simple look-alike would fool me. Thankfully, the advanced electronic optics in the 24th century allowed me to zoom in to a ridiculous degree and spot the differences in a Cardassian that only semi-looked like the Gul. If the Gul had a surgically altered double, however, then I could still be fooled without a DNA scan to confirm, but we had no reason to believe that Divoc had gone to such great lengths. It took a lot of time, pain, effort and skill to make a perfect body double through surgery and while this guy was a Gul, he just wasn't yet high up enough in the chain of command or on the planet long enough to justify the great expense.

Like so many of his kind, the Gul thought that he could do whatever he wished while on Bajor with no repercussions, committing all manners of evils on the helpless people here. He would soon learn otherwise. He wouldn't have long to appreciate the lesson, though, because I was going to kill him with a high-powered rifle and end his miserable existence.

"He has exited the carrier and is on foot with accompanying staff and bodyguards. Prepare to take the shot," Shakaar reported. "Prophets be with us all."

Kira sighed in relief from the prone position next to me, looking through a rifle scope of her own. I could almost hear her anxiety leaving her body like a physical manifestation. It was always the waiting that she hated the most, not the action, never the action. She'd been far too tense for a while now, so it was a good thing that Divoc seemed to be getting on with things sooner than expected.

He soon came into view. Divoc was a little overweight and his armor was ridiculously over-decorated with only a few medals and insignia, suggesting a strong political acumen and a career focused on advancement through brown nosing and ass kissing, rather than martial skill and achievement. Interestingly, his face did not look like what you'd expect of a raping, mass murderer, in fact he looked rather average, for a Cardassian. This guy was supposed to be a high-

ranking enemy officer, but he just didn't seem all that dangerous or imposing, at least from a physical perspective.

"We are still good, Gothic," Kira whispered next to me, making minute adjustments to her rifle while she continued to scan the wider area. "I see nothing to indicate we've been detected."

My throat was dry all of a sudden, my hands feeling clammy on the rifle's synthetic stock. Even Augments could get nervous and sometimes doubt themselves, and I was suddenly having second thoughts about all this. Did I really want to kill this man? This wasn't my war. This wasn't my world. What was I even doing here?

These sudden and unexpected thoughts felt foreign to me, like they were someone else's. While I had killed my fair share of Cardassians already, I hadn't killed any outside of direct combat. Staring down the scope of a rifle at extreme long-range was a very different kind of animal, a detached form of combat and killing, one where I wasn't in the thick of it, at immediate and direct risk of death myself, fighting for my life. Even in my old military career, I had never been trained for this kind of thing or engaged in this kind of fighting. It was all quite new to me.

I closed my eyes and silenced these sudden doubts with knowledge of all the horrible things the spoonheads were doing to this planet and its people every day. The strip mining, the poisoning of the soil, the forced labor camps, the mass executions, the Bajoran women and young girls raped and taken as sex slaves, and a bunch of other horrors committed upon them I couldn't even imagine.

Opening my eyes, my thoughts were calm and my resolve had returned. I looked through the advanced scope and lined up the scope's bright red targeting reticle on the moving Gul's head, several readouts displayed on the periphery of my scope's visual field, like distance to target and other datapoints relevant to the weapon's operation. While a shot to the torso was an easier and more forgiving shot, a disrupter bolt was mostly unaffected by wind and distance and the advanced rifle scopes of the 24th century made long range shots infinitely easier because so much of the math and adjustments for relevant environmental conditions were taken care of automatically. A head shot, on the other hand, would be even more assuredly lethal and this sick Gul's head exploding into a pink mist would send a much more powerful message to his comrades stationed on the planet.

"Target sighted," I reported coolly and calmly. "Identification confirmed. He's the Cardassian in the middle of the stage, now stepping up to the podium."

"Acknowledged, everyone get ready and standby," Shakaar responded quietly. "Take the shot when you're ready."

"Go ahead, Gothic," Kira encouraged quietly at my side, ready to kill her own targets, but taking the time to send me a smile which I saw out the corner of my eye. "Don't give this bastard a chance to hurt anyone else ever again."

I focused on the Gul and breathed in and out slowly. He had already begun speaking to the assembled villagers, no doubt spewing some lies meant to inspire the men under his command

and cow the Bajorans prior to the rape and execution of their neighbors. I heard none of it as he began to wave an arm around vigorously, in the same bombastic style of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini from Earth. Either he was a great actor or the man had a real passion for whatever propaganda he was spewing, maybe he even believed it himself, a true zealot and believer in the inherent superiority and righteousness of Cardassia.

In the heat of the moment your mind can go to some weird fucking places. In the cold detachment of *this* moment, for some reason, my mind went back to my youth and I could practically hear the bass guitar riff in Filter's, Hey Man Nice Shot.

That's why I say, "Hey man, nice shot"

"A good shot, man"

That's why I say, "Hey man, nice shot"

"A good shot, man"

As the chorus hit its ultimate crescendo, I smoothly pulled the trigger.

A pulse of deadly crimson energy screamed from the barrel of my weapon, crossing the incredible distance from where I laid over a mile away to my target, before striking the hateful Cardassian man with a burst of light and noise, silencing him forever.

The shot was *perfect* and his head practically blew apart into an expanding cloud of superheated pink mist, his headless torso remained standing for what felt like minutes before it collapsed heavily to the stage, like a puppet whose strings had been cut by its master. As an ardent believer in double tapping the targets I wanted to ensure were dead, I had sent an immediate follow-up shot to the torso after my first, blowing a large hole where the evil man's heart had been. Two shots in quick succession meant blood spray and chunks of the former Gul were splattered over the horrified officers on the stage. There was no doubt in my mind that my target was dead and long past being saved by this century's medical knowledge.

The entire area fell perfectly silent, Bajorans and Cardassians alike, before chaos erupted. When he dropped to the ground, the crowd of Bajorans, who'd been forced to watch the Gul's speech, actually cheered, while the soldiers tried to hurriedly get organized, pointing their weapons in virtually every direction, trying to determine where the shots had come from. They were looking for the shooter, looking for me, but without the right equipment they wouldn't be able to detect where the shots had come from.

Getting to cover would have been the smarter move. Cardassian arrogance struck again.

Shakaar and the rest of our Resistance cell, hidden in the front of the crowd, threw off their cloaks revealing the weapons they'd hidden underneath and began spraying the Cardassian soldiers with deadly energy weapons' fire, bolts of crimson red, orange, and acid green killing many in the chaos. The rest of the crowd took off running in all directions.

A moment after my second shot, Kira began firing on secondary targets, looking to kill any officer who appeared to be trying to organize a coherent response, killing three in as many

seconds. Every additional shot we took risked our position being exposed, but we were so far away standard weapons would be useless. We were still on a ticking clock, though.

"Protect the crowd while they run," she advised calmly, her body jerking slightly from her rifle's recoil, continuing to kill the soldiers in the square who were being fired upon from all sides. I knew what my job was.

Rather than reply, I looked for a new target and spotted a spoonhead who was, for some reason, attempting to protect the Gul's headless body. For this incredible show of unnecessary and unexpected loyalty, I shot him with a high-powered kill shot of his own, hoping this care for a corpse indicated that he was a high-level officer in his own right or the adjutant to the Gul.

Before he even dropped dead to the stage, I was already looking for my next target. We had to kill as many as we could before we'd be forced to abandon this position.

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Rally Point Bravo. Resistance Hideout. Bajor.

I grimaced slightly as Shakaar sat down facing me at what passed for a conference table in this hideout. It was essentially a large boulder that someone had cut the top off with a phaser, leaving a *mostly* flat surface that was kind of table-like. As for why I was grimacing, that was due to the expression on Shakaar's face, and it was not a good one.

"You have my thanks, Gothic," Shakaar started. "The whole of Dahkur Province is in your debt. Without your weapons and assistance, we could not have accomplished what we did."

Given the way things were going I figured the whole of Bajor would soon owe me big time, and I wondered what form that gratitude would take once the Occupation was over, assuming I survived it.

"Gul Divoc was a monster," Shakaar continued. "Sadly, there are too many Cardassians like him on Bajor to realistically think his death will change anything in the long-term."

That was true. Unfortunately, by itself, Divoc's demise wouldn't make much of a difference at all, but it was just one step on the long road to Bajoran liberation that I knew for a fact would happen in the next few years.

"You've proven yourself several times already, but we both know how ruthless and devious our enemy can be, so it still must be said. Genetically engineered or not, should you ever betray me or my people, I swear by the Prophets that I will do everything in my power to see you dead," Shakaar threatened, though his frown now changed to a small smile. "That said, I'm glad Nerys vouched for you. Welcome to the Resistance."

I nodded in thanks, shaking the man's hand gratefully. He accepted the human gesture with aplomb. After that rather mixed message he got up and left. Once he was gone, I looked over at a bashful looking Kira who had silently watched my exchange with Shakaar.

"Thank you for vouching for me, Kira," I told her sincerely.

I had not forgotten that I was here on a mission, on behalf of Section 31. Helping the Resistance win, to end the Occupation of Bajor, would put pressure on the Cardassians to sign the peace treaty with the Federation, and eventually lead to this world being brought into the Federation itself down the line. That was part of Section 31's plans even without knowing about the wormhole's existence. Beyond all that, I also wished to see the Bajoran people freed and not just because I was being paid to do it or because it served Federation interests; I actually felt for these people now and wanted to help them. Seeing it on a TV screen just couldn't do the evils of this Occupation justice.

"You're a skilled and powerful warrior who hates the Cardassians, someone who has a lot to offer the Resistance. Of course, I offered to vouch for you," Kira responded, somewhat bashfully.

She shuffled a bit in her seat and I knew right then and there that my ability to slaughter spoonheads wasn't the only reason she wanted me to stick around.

"When we drive the Cardassians off Bajor, what will you do?" she asked me.

I assume that she was already thinking about not just her future once the Cardassians were gone, but also mine, and how she might fit into it.

"I'm not sure," I admitted truthfully.

I really didn't know for sure, not really, as I didn't know what my personal future would look like after this mission was over, or even if I'd survive the Occupation. Perhaps if I ever got to have an orb experience that would change, but for now my plans were flexible out of necessity.

"You did well today. You saved a lot of children from seeing their mothers and sisters raped and their fathers killed. With Divoc dead we can concentrate on other things until his replacement arrives," she said.

"Until it starts all over again," I offered quietly.

"Until it starts all over again," she replied equally quietly, nodding, looking resigned. "That's life on Bajor."

Soon enough there would be a new officer sent to oversee this province, one who would be sent here to make the Bajoran people suffer as much as possible, likely another needlessly cruel and evil Cardassian in a long succession of them, eager to make his mark, maybe even to avenge his predecessor or to prove he was better, or smarter. Perhaps I'd kill him too.

"I'll try to make a difference then," I said with a smile.

Kira smiled at me warmly, then went back to eating. Nothing more needed to be said.

I knew it was going to be a long, hard road to ending the Occupation, but Prophets' willing, I was going to see it through. In the process, maybe I would even make this place, a place that I had bled and killed for, my home too.

XXXXX

Present Day. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress* at Warp. Shakedown Cruise On Route to Earth.

“Increasing speed to warp 5,” I reported aloud as I mentally commanded the ship to travel at the new speed from the Captain’s chair on the bridge. “How are we looking, B’Elanna?”

“Good, Captain, my diagnostics show no issues,” B’Elanna reported over the open comm link, sounding quite pleased with herself. While distracted, it seems she had not realized her Starfleet training had taken over since she was calling me ‘Captain’ instead of Gothic. I admit, I didn’t mind at all.

We had started off this journey, on course to Earth, at a very sedate Warp 1 and had kept that heading and speed for a full 30 minutes while my entire crew, consisting of T’Maz, Neela, and B’Elanna closely monitored the ship’s many sensors and the status of the warp core and engines. Once the 30 minutes were up, and there had been no issues, I had increased the warp speed by a factor of 1. This had continued, per plan, until we had reached the present speed of warp 5.

So far, it had been incredibly smooth sailing, with only the smallest of adjustments needed to finetune the engine’s performance. Adjustments to the engine were extremely common for the prototype of what was essentially an entirely new class of ship.

After another 30 minutes had passed, I was ready to increase speed once again, but hadn’t yet gotten the go ahead from B’Elanna, or any indication that she needed more time at the present speed.

“B’Elanna, do you need more time at this warp factor?” I asked, curiously.

“Sorry, Captain, no. We can increase speed as planned,” B’Elanna answered, sounding embarrassed.

“No worries. Increasing speed to warp 6,” I reported.

Immediately, I felt a mild vibration begin in the ship, which the sensors confirmed.

“Detecting an increasing vibration in the engines!” B’Elanna reported more urgently. “Adjusting the matter/antimatter intermix and warp plasma flow accordingly. Adjusting warp field geometry.”

Moments later the vibration started to dissipate and then came to a stop.

“Engine settings are optimal for this speed, Captain,” B’Elanna reported, sounding relieved.

“Should we stay at this speed longer than 30 minutes, B’Elanna?” I asked, a panorama of sensor displays and active diagnostics were visibly surrounding my head in a colorful arc of reports. In fact, the holo-displays were locked onto my eyeline and moved as my head moved. That was the beauty of a dynamic holographic display, rather than a ‘real’ one.

“No, Captain, unless there are further issues, I recommend an increase of speed at the planned 30-minute mark,” B’Elanna answered.

“Understood, if you believe a longer period would be beneficial between speed increases, please let me know and we’ll adjust our test plan.”

“I will, Captain,” she replied.

The ship’s speed gradually increased like that to warp 7, then 8, then 9 with only minor adjustments each time to find the optimal settings for these new engines.

“B’Elanna, I will be increasing speed to the ship’s maximum warp cruising speed of warp 9.99, by tenths. Is engineering ready?” I asked.

“We’re ready here, Captain. Please proceed,” B’Elanna, as the ship’s Chief Engineer, answered.

“Understood. Increasing speed to warp 9.1,” I said, before pausing for 10 seconds, “warp 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 9.8, 9.9, 9.99!”

At the speed of thought, I reviewed all the diagnostics available to me. I could see B’Elanna was adjusting various things with each increase in speed, but the vibrational shudder in the ship that we had previously experienced never returned.

“B’Elanna?”

“We are good, Captain, all systems are in the green. You designed a very fast ship!” she gushed.

“Natasha, open a video channel to engineering,” I ordered. Immediately the main viewscreen showed a holo-image of the engineering space. B’Elanna and Neela coming into view of the camera.

“Congratulations, people! Good work!” I said aloud, looking at the viewscreen then glancing behind me to T’Maz. “We will stay at this speed for the next half hour and then slowly decrease till we come to a full stop in open space away from any star systems. Please send me your full reports in preparation for a staff meeting in conference room 1 at 1300 hours. Before that though, I do want initial impressions.”

B’Elanna spoke first.

“Captain, the ship performed extremely well. We experienced some vibrational feedback when transitioning from warp 5 to warp 6, but a few minor adjustments to the engines and warp field geometry resolved that issue. Each increase in warp factor required another minor adjustment, which will be automatically used in the future. There was no damage to the engines or the ship, but Neela did detect increased stress at various points in the warp plasma distribution system.”

Neela jumped in at that point.

“It’s nothing to worry about in the short- to mid-term, but long-term it could be a premature wear or breach issue, especially if ship is on a sustained cruise at high warp or during combat operations,” Neela explained. “With your permission, we’d like to shore up those areas showing the stress, maybe even expand those conduits and/or reroute the plasma a bit.”

“If both of you are in agreement, please go ahead,” I said, giving my approval. “And if you think those sections of the network require an expedited replacement schedule, I’m ok with that as well.”

“Thank you, Captain,” B’Elanna responded. “We’ll monitor for the moment and then reassess.”

“Good work again, people,” I said, feeling very pleased at this successful test. “T’Maz, B’Elanna, review all your data and submit your reports and recommendations, if any.”

“Will do,” B’Elanna said.

“Aye, Captain,” T’Maz replied.

XXXXX

Main Cargo Bay. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress*. Unclaimed Space.

Looking at the readouts for the main transporter control console, I was pleased with what I found.

“Natasha, confirm pattern integrity of Distribution Group 1 of the selected buffered cargo,” I instructed, wanting to confirm that the cargo was still viable before going through with this plan.

“Pattern integrity is at 100%, father,” Natasha responded in that smoky, sexy voice of hers. Surprisingly, being called father didn’t take away from the sexiness. “Do you wish to materialize Group 1 in the cargo bay?”

“Yes, materialize all 12 modules here,” I replied. “Lock down cargo bay. Inform me if any of the crew approach this area.”

“Understood, cargo bay secured. First transport initiated,” Natasha responded.

As this cargo bay had a six-pad transporter, the first transport beamed in 6 modules, followed seconds later by the remaining six. What appeared on the bay floor were 12 large cubes approximately 6 feet by 6 feet coated in a light absorbing black that practically sucked up the light in the room and would be extremely hard to detect visually while in space.

I had been inspired by numerous episodes of Star Trek in creating this little endeavor. The idea of using the transporter buffer as a storage device was actually inspired by an episode of TNG in which Montgomery Scott, whose ship had crashed onto the surface of a Dyson’s Sphere, had come up with an ingenious modification to the transporter system as their rescue became increasingly improbable and supplies were quickly running out.

He and the other sole survivor of the crash had entered into the crashed ship’s transporter buffer after Scott had locked the transporter in a permanent diagnostic cycle, thus preserving the integrity of their patterns, while also cross connecting the phase inducers to create a regenerative power source for the power-hungry transporters. For 75 plus years he remained in the transport buffer, unageing, in some ways arguably non-existent, only to be rescued by the *Enterprise-D* who completed the materialization process and brought him back to life. His companion had not survived that jury rigged existence, but that did not take away from the sheer genius of what he

had done with little in the way of true resources in the middle of a life-threatening emergency. With spare parts, an insane idea, and their very lives at stake, Scott had essentially created the equivalent of a 24th century gamer-style inventory, or pocket dimension, using transporter technology.

What Scott had done in an emergency situation 75 years ago, I had done on purpose with all my resources and the benefit of hindsight, or foresight, in my case, and had integrated this ingenious modification to the transporters into my design of the *Temptress*. With the advances in technology over that time span, coupled with all the alien technology I possessed, my ship's 'inventory' was huge. By expanding the pattern buffers and memory capacity, coupled with more powerful and efficient data compression, my ship could hold a great deal more than it should.

The cubes themselves would become advanced sensor arrays that would be the beginning of my own galactic sensor network that I intended to seed the alpha quadrant with. It would be a powerful sensor network that paid little heed to national borders, and one that I alone controlled. I had used the same construction technology that had built the FT, to build these sensor arrays back on the island and had beamed them into the FT's transporter buffers before we'd left Bajor. Taking inspiration from the Husnock, as we traveled, I would drop these sensor arrays along our journey.

The sensor cubes weren't pretty, but I had given them a great starting package of useful and versatile technology that could be built upon. At the heart of each of them was a Collector power cell from one of their weapons I'd stolen, so they'd have a near inexhaustible power source at its heart, but one small enough and unusual enough to evade detection. For those instances in which the Collector power cell's standard output was insufficient, a bank of advanced capacitors would store power until it met the required amount.

Each undeployed sensor cube also had maneuvering thrusters, a micro replicator, a small shield unit, a quantum entangled communications array, stealth capabilities I'd copied from the original FT, and warp capabilities that I had shamelessly stolen from the design of the Federation's class 8 probes. I had been extremely impressed by that design, which I'd once seen in an episode of TNG. In that episode, Ambassador K'Ehleyer had been stuffed inside a class 8 probe casing with a life support unit and was warped to the *Enterprise* in what looked like a coffin. The Federation had designed an extremely powerful, yet surprisingly small and efficient warp drive for the probe. With an onboard warp drive, capable of sustained travel at warp 9, I wouldn't need to individually drop and place each sensor cube at its final deployment coordinates.

If B'Elanna or T'Maz were aware of what I was doing right now, they'd point out that I was deploying sensor cubes that didn't actually have *any* long-range sensors. Well, they'd be 100% correct in pointing that out. When I had designed the sensor cubes, my goal had been to make them as modular and self-sufficient as possible. Ultimately, I wanted the equivalent of fire and forget technology, technology that wouldn't require that I place them individually, nor anything that I would need to maintain or repair in person, meaning I'd never need to return to them in person.

I had designed these cubes to be deployed and then travel autonomously to their final programmed destinations, within a limited drop range. Once they reached their final destination, their onboard replicator unit would start producing additional technology modules. The first order of business was preventing its detection. The replicator would begin producing micro construction spiders from a design already input in their databanks. This technology was an offshoot of the same technology which had built the FT. Each 'leg' of the spiders had the ability to produce a holo-tool to effect any installation or repair or maintenance the sensor cube required during its service lifespan.

Once several spiders were produced and operational, the onboard replicator would begin the replication of a Minosian cloaking device, originally meant for their drone weapons. I had had little use for this technology since I had acquired it due to its inherent limitations. The cloaking envelope it produced, while actually extremely efficient and hard to detect, was lethal to organic lifeforms. There was no problem in this case. Once the device was produced, which was another modular cube, the spiders would begin installing the technology. After the cloak was operational, the sensor array would be replicated and similarly installed.

Ultimately, I had set out to deploy a sensor array/module that I could communicate with and make changes and updates to in the future, without ever having to come into physical contact with it again. If I never interacted with it in person in the future, it would be much harder to link these sensor modules to myself. Should they ever be discovered or the technology at risk of being captured, the micro singularity's containment field could be dropped, thus sucking the entire unit into a black hole to be crushed and unrecoverable, leaving no evidence behind to be studied, reverse engineered, or linked back to me.

"Natasha, activate and link the QEC for all 12 units," I commanded.

"All units have been activated and linked," Natasha responded.

"Have each unit send test data packets to Hermione on Bajor for fidelity check; have Hermione do the same," I said.

"Test data packets sent," Natasha replied.

"Hermione, please confirm receipt and fidelity," I said aloud, using my permanent quantum entangled link to Hermione on Bajor to instantly communicate with her.

"Receipt confirmed, all 12 units show perfect fidelity, master," Hermione responded in her Emma Watson voice, complete with British accent. "No data loss."

"Excellent," I said with a smile at everything coming together. "Open bay doors and transport units," I commanded, wanting to watch what happened next with my own eyes.

An audible alert with flashing lights signaled that the cargo bay doors were being opened. A blue hued force field was keeping the room pressurized.

"All units transported," Natasha said.

"Begin deployment."

In groups of 6, the sensor modules were beamed into the black void of space 10 kilometers away from my ship. One of the units, already at its pre-programmed coordinates, immediately began executing its instructions and began replicating the spider construction units. The remaining 11 units, fired their thrusters briefly to reorient on new vectors and activated their warp drives, creating flashes of white light in the distance as they began their 90 light year journeys to their final destinations. If they maintained warp 9 during the entire journey, they would reach their final destinations in 21.68 days. Each sensor module had a 100 light year sensor envelope, so I would have quite a bit of new data coming in in the weeks ahead. Hermione was quite looking forward to it.

“Natasha, have you been monitoring the crew?” I asked aloud. “Is there any indication that they’re aware of what we were doing?”

“None, father,” Natasha responded. “Any record of our activities in both the internal and external sensor feeds, as well as power consumption logs, were hidden from them.”

“Good work, Natasha. Good work, Hermione,” I said to both of my VIs. “Please notify me when the first distribution group goes fully online.”

“Will do, father/master,” they responded.

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Comfortably sitting in my captain’s chair with my legs crossed, I probably looked like a King on his throne as I stared at the stars through my ship’s sensors, my attention split between multiple tasks, including monitoring ship traffic on short and long-range sensors to ensure no one was too close or on an intercept course, tracking the journey of my 11 sensor modules and monitoring their status reports, and reviewing the engine logs from our recent warp travel test.

“B’Elanna, I’d like to begin the slipstream test in the next hour, do you require more time to review the data from our warp trials?” I asked over the comm.

“Negative, Captain, engineering is ready to proceed as scheduled,” B’Elanna immediately responded, sounding happy with all the progress we’d made.

“Very good, prepare for the test-” I started to say, before I was cut off by a loud, insistent beep from T’Maz’s console and a similar ping in my mind.

“Captain, we are receiving a priority 1 distress call, audio only,” T’Maz reported.

Wow, why did it suddenly feel like I was going to be sucked into an episode of Star Trek?

“Let’s hear it,” I calmly ordered.

“To any allied ships in range, this is the Federation planet, Kessik IV, requesting emergency assistance! Our long-range sensors have detected Hur’q ships on course to the planet. It is estimated that they will arrive in system in the next 3 hours. We urgently request any and all assistance! To any allied ships in...”

“The message repeats, Captain,” T’Maz reported, cutting off the audio message.

The coincidences continued. B'Elanna, my chief engineer, had been born and raised on Kessik IV with her mother, Miral, for most of her childhood. The universe was really fucking with me today.

"Are there any Federation or allied ships in range capable of offering the planet assistance?" I asked, hoping that I was not going to be sucked into battle with an untested ship, though I suspected that I already knew the answer from years and years of watching the shows.

"No, sir. We are the closest ship in range. The second closest allied ship is a full day's travel away at that ship's maximum warp."

I sighed breathily.

"Of fucking course it is," I said quietly.

"Sir?" T'Maz inquired.

"Never mind. What information do we have on this world?" I asked.

Again, of course, I could pull up this information myself, but I needed to use my crew like in a traditional ship setting.

"Kessik IV is a Federation member world and is the fourth planet in the Kessik system, in the Taurus Reach region. It is a world with rich dilithium resources and was established in 2264 by the crew of the mining vessel *Epimetheus*, originally as an independent settlement. The planet has a population of roughly 50,000, mostly humans, fairly well spread out across the planet, though there are a few population centers of greater concentration. Kessik III is also inhabited, but has a much smaller population; less than 300 people at last system census."

"Distance to planet from our current position?" I asked.

"4.12 lightyears," she answered.

"Time to reach planetary orbit at maximum warp?" I asked.

"At maximum warp of 9.99, 4 hours, 36 minutes, 18 seconds," she replied.

"Gothic to B'Elanna, what is your confidence in the weapons and shields," I asked.

"It's quite high, Captain, but why do you ask?" she replied, sounding confused at my question.

"We have received a distress call from your homeworld, Kessik IV. Hur'q vessels have been detected on course to reach the planet. They will reach the planet in roughly 3 hours. We are the only allied vessel in range capable of rendering assistance in a timeframe that will make a difference."

There was a long pause in response to my words.

"Captain, while my confidence in the weapons and shields is high, I would normally not recommend taking the ship into a combat situation before we have had time to methodically test

those systems. In this case, given the personal connection to me, I can't exactly be objective, but I feel like we can safely take the risk."

"Understood, I will let you know my decision shortly."

"T'Maz, what is Section 31's position on a situation like this?" I asked, curious as to what she'd say.

In response, she left her station and walked to stand in front of me in all of her nude glory.

"I have been given authority to offer payment for any combat actions taken in the protection of Federation interests from Collector hostile activity," she answered. "For your assistance in helping repel the Collectors from Kessik IV, Section 31 will offer 50k bars of gold pressed latinum."

"100k bars, plus expenses as a result of repelling the attack or rendering assistance in any form, and a really great blowjob from you right now, assuming it's a fight that I think we can win and survive," I countered, with a caveat of my own. "I also have the salvage rights on any Collector technology recovered as a result of the battle."

"Agreed," she said before falling to her knees between the legs I spread open for her, unzipping my pants and gently pulling out my cock to stroke it to hardness. "However, it was unnecessary to ask for fellatio as part of your payment for this mission. I am always willing to provide this service, at your request."

"I know," I said with a smirk, before I roughly pulled her head down to swallow all ten inches of my cock in one go, her quiet sounds of choking on me were lovely, even as she gave no indication that she wanted me to stop, in fact I think she quite enjoyed it. "I just felt like exercising my power over you."

With a mental command, I plotted a course to Kessik IV and engaged the warp drive at maximum.

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"Time to planet 90 seconds," T'Maz reported from her console, no longer nude as we were going into an active combat situation. At my insistence, my entire crew would be wearing basic armor and carrying a sidearm at all times.

"Red alert," I ordered, which engaged a number of automatic protocols, including a five-point harness style padded seat belt deploying from our seats to securely wrap around us and an independent, dedicated force field flashing into visibility for a moment. T'Maz looked momentarily startled as she was secured to her seat in a way that Starfleet vessels just didn't do. The ship's two shields went up automatically and weapons were primed and ready to fire at my command. "Preparing to drop out of warp."

"Tactical display," I ordered, opening wider my neural connection to the ship and closing my eyes. I was tempted to engage immersive mode for the bridge viewscreen, but without training in that first it would be more detrimental than useful. "I have the conn and weapons."

Three medium-sized carrier ships were displayed, each receiving a specific target designation. Since the Collector invasion had begun, a great deal of intelligence had become available on the Collector forces, including ship classifications and expected armaments based on previous engagements. Luckily, these weren't the asteroid sized ships we had encountered in the past, but were probably about the size of a galaxy-class, so nothing to scoff at.

From the shield strength I was detecting during the threat assessment scan, their shield technology had gone through several improvement cycles as they captured more technology from this universe. Their shields were probably now at the level the Federation possessed in the late 23rd century. Luckily, like most races when not in combat, the Collectors did not keep their combat shields up.

"Any indication that they've detected us?" I asked, calmly.

"None, sir," T'Maz reported, going intently over the sensor readings. She probably had 10 displays up simultaneously.

"Engineering, prepare for sustained combat operations. Coming out of warp in 45 seconds," I advised. "Comm link is being kept open between the bridge and engineering if you need to communicate information."

"Understood," B'Elanna responded tersely. "We're ready down here. Neela and the holographic damage control teams are on standby."

We dropped smoothly out of warp while cloaked quite close to the planet. All over the ship, ablative armor was being deployed that covered every square inch of the ship's hull, including every 'window' of the ship. I had been inspired by the finale of *Voyager* and the anti-Borg technology Janeway had brought back from the future. Of course, I didn't possess the actual technology, but I had gotten some great ideas from it.

While most humanoid ship captains unconsciously fought along the system or galactic plane, I decided to come up from underneath and between two of the Collector ships, like a great whale breaching the surface of the water.

Ridiculous amounts of targeting data was flooding into my mind at the speed of thought. This was most definitely not the way I had wanted to test the new *Flighty Temptress*' new weapons for the first time. Doing this in orbit of a Federation world, in view of all of its sensors, rather than in deep space where I could kill my enemy without witnesses, was also a bad position to be in. The Federation and its many enemies would no doubt learn far too much of my ship's capabilities from this engagement, which meant that I needed to hold back where I safely could. Keeping some of my tactical advantages secret could be the difference between life and death in the years to come. The Dominion and the Founders were amazing fucking infiltrators, the same with the other intelligence giants like the Tal Shiar and the Obsidian Order.

On the other hand, some of my capabilities coming out here and now, while I saved a defenseless Federation planet, could be the best possible outcome for exposure.

As I passed between the two ships, cutting the space between them like a dagger, I released a spread of quantum torpedoes from my five launchers, while strafing both ships with neon blue pulses from my 7 beam emitters. The quantum torpedoes, in conjunction with the jacketed streams of positrons and antiprotons, wreaked terrible damage on both ships. Unfortunately, while the shields were primitive, the ships were huge and a ton of power was being fed into the shield systems.

“Enemy shield strength on target alpha is down to 22%, target beta is at 37%. Shield grid failure in several locations,” T’Maz reported, a visual of the two enemy ships, with red highlighting showing where the shield failures were located, so that I could priority target them if I wished, was displayed on my screen. “Our primary shields are at 93%.”

Though the *Temptress* was still cloaked, while we had been firing on the two Collector vessels our weapons fire was visible as it left the cloaking envelope which gave away our location and allowed them to generally target us, so we had taken several hits, some grazing as I had quickly rotated the ship. Already, the Husnock-style adaptive lattice shields were regenerating.

“All carriers are releasing fighter craft. 20, 45, 75, 105 fighters launched,” she succinctly reported.

“Understood. Going to full impulse!” I called aloud. “Targeting all weapons on target charlie.”

Making a full impulse dash in a perfectly straight line at the third carrier ship which had suffered no damage thus far, I targeted and fired all my weapons in one barrage, unleashing hundreds of beam pulses and 10 quantum torpedoes to devastating effect, taking several hits in return. The swarm of fighters that target charlie had released soaked up a lot of my fire, but much had gotten through their screen. At the same time, my sensors were telling me that we were target locked and being fired upon by targets alpha and beta behind us, deadly beams of antiproton and phaser energy and photon torpedoes confirming our position was known, at least generally.

“Captain, recommend evasive maneuvers!” T’Maz advised.

“Not yet,” I calmly replied, allowing the weapons fire to shorten the distance, taking several hits that had been fired first.

When I was practically in knife fighting range with target charlie, I waited to the very last moment, risking a collision between our two ships, before I activated thrusters to barrel roll to starboard, just like the Romulan drone ship had been capable of in *Star Trek: Enterprise*. The value of all those power-hungry reaction control thrusters and inertial dampers soon became apparent. On the bridge I could only detect a small fluctuation in the gravity plating as the ship compensated for this insane maneuver from a manned starship.

With little time to evade, all the weapons fire from targets alpha and beta that they had shot at me continued on to strike target charlie and caused the ship to blow up in a spectacular fashion.

Mentally commanding the ship, I engaged evasive maneuvers to lose the target lock and deployed the anti-fighter phaser canon batteries along the hull, shooting thousands of bolts of deadly energy, destroying or damaging many fighters as the carriers continued to launch them

with little care for the pilots. This anti-fighter screen lit up my ship's position like a Christmas tree, negating the value of the cloak, but that was part of the plan. The shields soaked up hundreds of shots from the fighters, but as planned they grouped closer together to chase me as I led them into tighter and tighter evasive patterns. The auto-targeting program for this weapon system was excellent and was enhanced by Natasha as she was capable of bringing all the precision of a Virtual Intelligence and the creativity of an organic mind while firing. Many fighter craft were being destroyed, but just as I'd expect, the Collectors didn't give a shit about those kinds of losses and kept on coming.

"Primary shield strength is at 81%," T'Maz reported. "Fighter craft are closing. Potential for ramming attacks are high."

"I know," I replied firmly, waiting for the swarm of fighters to get a little more tightly packed together.

With a thought, I engaged the ship's tractor beam on wide mode and rerouted secondary power to enhance the tight grip I held them in. The swarm of 83 fighters were trapped in the beam of gravitons, like an insect caught in sticky amber.

Turning hard to port, I pointed my ship directly at targets alpha and beta, presenting a very small target profile. Increasing my speed to maximum, the torsional stresses on my ship increased dramatically while dragging the trapped ships behind me, but the Collector power core that I had stolen from them, ironically, was plenty strong enough for this. I waited to the last second before I engaged the many thrusters on the bottom of my hull and peeled up and away, releasing my tractor beam's hold on the fighters at the very last second, giving them no time to change course and thus avoid a collision with their own carrier ships.

83 Collector fighter craft were thrown, at ramming speed, into the two carrier ships. The two carrier ships' shields crumpled as so many fighters impacted the shields and broke through to strike the hull. The carriers' hulls sported numerous breaches, the same kind of damage a human might experience if shot at point blank range with a shotgun. Secondary explosions were seen in many places only moments before both ships exploded in a brilliant flash of light, lightly shaking the ship. While still flying away, bits of debris still impacted my shields.

"Targets alpha and beta have been destroyed," T'Maz calmly reported, though I could detect the hint of lust and admiration in her voice. "37 fighter craft remain and are grouping to attack. No other Collector ships detected in range."

"Let them come," I offered in challenge, fluctuating power to the cloak before dropping it entirely, acting as if the cloak had been damaged at some point during this engagement. This freed up even more power to route to the capacitors.

"Cloak has dropped!" T'Maz reported, sounding confused.

With the cloak dropped there was no question as to where my ship was now, so I led them on a merry chase away from the planet while continuing to fire on them, thinning their numbers even further. The only reason this worked was because of how overpowered I had made my ship's

sublight engines. Also, at various times during this battle, I had also generated a small warp field around the ship which drastically decreased its mass to increase the speed even further. Chief O'Brien had done the same in DS9 in order to move the entire station's immense mass to the mouth of the wormhole with only a few working thrusters.

"23 fighters remaining," T'Maz reported.

"Good shooting, Natasha," I complimented.

"Thank you, father."

Once the capacitors reached the required level for discharge, I slowed to just within a few kilometers of the remaining fighters and fired my secondary weapon. An omnidirectional plasma wave was released in a bright yellow sphere of expanding energy which vaporized the remaining 23 ships.

"All fighter craft have been destroyed, Captain," T'Maz reported. "Your strategy and tactics are masterful. The victory is yours."

"Ours, T'Maz, but thank you all the same. Be sure to praise me effusively in your report to Section 31," I replied with a relieved laugh, releasing much of the tension that I had felt during my first 'real' space battle in my new ship. "Engineering, damage report."

"Captain, shields are at 83% and are regenerating," B'Elanna reported. "Minor damage to shield emitters. No hull damage. No injuries down here either."

"Good, begin any repairs needed, but we need to quickly return to the planet. I detected at least 3 dropships on the surface during the battle," I informed them.

Grim nods were the response, everyone having heard the horrific stories from the various worlds the Collectors had landed on.

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T'Maz was walking with me through the large corridors of my ship to the main transporter room.

"We've entered into geosynchronous orbit over the main population center on the planet, Captain," T'Maz said, keeping my slow pace. "The 3 large Collector dropships landed there, likely to capture people and technology. Sensors indicate at least 75 Collector warriors on the surface, possibly more as there is some lingering interference as a result of the battle."

"Hmm, that fits the tactics we've seen so far," I said, as I ran diagnostics on each of my weapons in preparation for combat.

"Captain, I highly recommend that we wait for reinforcements," T'Maz calmly argued. "Reinforcements are less than 20 hours away."

"A lot can happen in 20 hours, T'Maz, and none of you can be spared either," I quietly responded, already knowing that she would offer to accompany me. B'Elanna and Neela already had. They would be more useful on the ship. "At the moment the Collector forces on the planet

don't yet appear aware that their ships in orbit have been destroyed. Neither you or I know what they'll do once they realize that they're cut off. If I had to guess, though, I'd say that they'll start killing and destroying *everything in sight*, in order to weaken their enemy as much as possible for the rest of their people, before dying themselves, which they don't fear. They'll also likely send a long-range signal to their people calling for reinforcement. We're actively blocking any transmissions off the planet, but we really don't know if we're being successful with how little we know about their technology. There are just too many unknowns here and we can't risk waiting."

"Your assessment is logical, Captain," T'Maz admitted, reluctantly.

"You know I love a good fight and I'd be just as happy killing them from the safety of orbit, but they're deployed throughout the city. There would be too much collateral damage with an orbital strike," I mused. "If I could get away with it, I'd beam their warriors into the pattern buffer and purge them all into the ether, but you and I both know how that would be received. Starfleet would have me up before a war crimes tribunal in no time."

T'Maz appeared thoughtful, as we entered into the main transporter room.

"That is highly likely," she reluctantly admitted. "It is unlikely Section 31 would be able to cover up our actions definitively."

"Fucking Starfleet pussies. Killing them this way is ok, killing them that way is a war crime," I bitterly complained, pulling each of my holstered sidearms and visually checking them over, then doing the same for my sword and grenades. Computer diagnostics were well and good, but sometimes you just needed the assurance of seeing that everything was in order with your own two eyes. "I understand and see the rationale behind prohibited forms of warfare, but the Collectors never signed any of those treaties forbidding the use of transporters as weapons of war. They've certainly never officially declared war or acted in accordance with any of those rules during this conflict, yet we're supposed to fight like gentlemen or something. They've been fucking eating prisoners, for Prophets' sake!! It's insanity!"

"Our analysts do not predict the Federation's willingness to engage in more ruthless forms of warfare and tactics until casualties reach the several hundred million mark, or alternately a founding member world is devastated or destroyed," T'Maz admitted.

"Wow," I said, not doubting the accuracy of 31's analysis. It lined up all too well with what I had seen in the shows depicting the Dominion War.

I held my arms out at waist height and commanded my armor's personal transporter to materialize my battle rifle. In shimmering silver white vertical lines, it appeared resting on my arms. I quickly took proper hold of it, clipping it to my armor, and continued my weapons check. It had taken an embarrassing amount of time to realize that I could apply the same transporter buffer inventory system to the personal transporter built into my armor with only a few modifications and upgrades. Being an Augment meant that I was ridiculously smart, but that didn't mean that I was infallible or always thought of everything.

“I’m ready, T’Maz,” I said, mentally commanding my full helmet to rise up and surround my head. “The ship is under your command until I return.”

T’Maz raised her right hand in the traditional split finger Vulcan salute.

“Good hunting, Captain,” she offered, and I returned the salute.

“Energize.”

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I beamed into the 7th floor of a futuristic abandoned apartment building in the middle of the city, close, but not too close to the fighting. While the planet only had a population of roughly 50,000 people, the city had a good portion of that total number in its 20,000 residents, which is probably why the Collectors chose to come down here.

Not everyone who sought to start a new life on a new (sparsely inhabited) world was necessarily interested in having some large spread of land in the idyllic and rustic countryside. Humanity was a very social creature at its heart, craving community, and many wanted to live in a city together. A ‘large’ city also provided easy access to off-world travel and all the amenities of the modern Federation, but without a planetary population in the millions or billions.

Opening the sliding transparent aluminum door to the apartment’s balcony, I gazed out onto what was probably a very beautiful city before the Collectors arrived. Now, pitch black smoke rose from various sections of the city on fire, explosions could be heard in the distance, bright crimson beams of phaser fire intermittently visible. While I was 7 floors up at the moment, my enhanced hearing picked up the sounds of screams of terror, of rage, of despair. This was the cacophony of war. The weapons may have changed, the enemy might be aliens, but the basic horrors of war remained the same, regardless of time and dimension.

Holding my hands upright, bright white light flared into existence on each palm as I replicated two of my newest inventions, the aerial microdrone. These microdrones were the size of a ping pong ball and would be my eyes in the sky, connected to my armor’s systems via a datalink.

I had been inspired by the Black Hornet-nano drone that I had often used to great effect in Iraq and Afghanistan during my military service. That drone was actually a mini-helicopter that could fit in the palm of my hand. It was 100mm long with a rotor wingspan of 120mm and only cost 200k a piece, versus the 16 million or so of the big boy drones, like a Reaper. Unlike a giant Reaper drone that could fly 25 thousand feet in the air for 40 hours stretches at a time, had dedicated pilots in the US, and could carry a payload of weapons, a microdrone was infinitely simpler. The men on the ground controlled it, could pilot it into buildings and hallways, scout out enemy positions and/or IEDs/traps. It had saved our lives on several occasions, giving us advanced warning of danger.

With access to modern technology, I had used a small power Federation power cell, an anti-grav unit with micro thrusters, and some advanced sensor technology that could do some interesting things.

“Milla, link to newly replicated micro-drones 1 and 2. Launch and begin scouting Collector targets, begin at the drop ships, augment with ship sensors as available,” I ordered.

“Acknowledged,” she responded and they silently and immediately took off into the air and began traveling at speed to the drop ships nearly a mile away, the outer skin of the drone dynamically changing to match the color of the sky to reduce its visibility.

Going back into the tastefully dedicated apartment, I pulled a handsome wooden table to the middle of the room and unceremoniously swept off the table’s contents to crash messily to the floor, then set my rifle on top and deployed the attached bipod. I then pulled up a nice chair to get comfortable, put my thumb through the stock and my finger rested above the trigger guard. Resting the butt of the rifle against my shoulder, I tried to find a comfortable position.

“Drones 1 and 2 have reached target drop ships,” Milla informed me.

“Begin video display from drones 1 and 2,” I ordered, before taking direct mental control of the drones’ systems. In hindsight, I probably should have replicated 3 of them, but I had never trained with that scenario.

At my order the drones’ video feeds, with attached sensor readings, were shown in two holographic displays above where my rifle’s scope would be. The drones were tiny and virtually silent, but they weren’t actually invisible; I couldn’t fit true cloaking tech into their small shells, but I had been able to include the exographic targeting sensor technology that I had long ago fallen in love with. The Starfleet folks were fools for not using it more. Active shields could block the sensor from working, but very few places were continually shielded at all times.

The three Collector dropships had landed near each other in the middle of a large clearing in a park in the city center, approximately 50 meters separating them. Their landing/boarding ramps were down and several Collector warriors could be spotted standing guard around the ship, while others were dragging bodies and technology back into ship and then leaving again.

Switching to the exographic sensor output, I penetrated the hull of two of the three ships, methodically moving from the rear ramp to the front where the pilots would be to get a full tactical picture. Luckily, the ships were identical in design and layout. They were priority targets and needed to be taken out of the equation first, even before the hunting ground teams, lest their firepower to be brought to bear on the city.

In the rear of both ships were mesh cages that held numerous weeping human prisoners of all ages and genders. It appears the Collectors were filling the ship from back to front for maximum efficiency. The prisoners closest to the ramp were still unconscious from their capture and were being thrown into large piles of bodies with little care for injury. Indeed, several were dead already from broken necks when they’d impacted the floor or cage wall too hard. The Collectors didn’t seem to care.

Further in, were likely the people that had been captured earlier as whatever stun effect they had been under had dissipated and they were now conscious and awake. Many were clutching each other tightly in terror in the limited space inside the cages, weeping and whimpering in despair,

trying to put as much distance between themselves and their captors by pressing themselves up against the hull wall. Some still had some fight in them, or had gone mad with rage, and they were throwing themselves at the walls of the cage, heedless of their injuries.

I could see some of the prisoners talking so I had the drone emit an infrared beam at the hull's surface as close as I could to the ones talking. The vibrations on the hull would be enhanced and translated into recognizable sound. With any luck, I might be able to get some valuable intelligence.

"Hush baby, everything is going to be all right," said a young human mother cradling her daughter that couldn't be older than 4 or 5, forcing her own eyes away from something that made her cringe in atavistic terror. I could tell that the mother was desperately trying to keep it together and appear strong for her daughter, but the child wasn't completely buying it and knew something bad was being hidden from her. Young children could be incredibly insightful like that at times.

I rotated the display view around to see what was scaring the woman, what she was shielding her daughter from seeing, and saw a Collector warrior tearing strips of bloody flesh off a human leg with his teeth and claws and then feeding it into his maw greedily. Even more horrific a realization was that the leg was far too small to be that of an adult. The corpse of a young girl, maybe 12 at the oldest, was separate from the group of prisoners, lying discarded in a corner. She was missing a leg torn off at the hip, the size of the pool of blood around her indicating that she had bled to death, which told me that the Collector had torn it off to eat while she had still been alive. Had that terrified little girl been forced to watch her leg being eaten in front of her as she bled to death? I prayed to all the deities that would listen, begging that the Gods grant this young girl peace and happiness in the afterlife. No one deserved to die like that.

"Are we died yet, mama?" the little girl asked in a whisper that I truly wish I hadn't heard.

The girl's mother looked horrified and despondent at the question, clutching her daughter even closer, hiding her away in her chest.

"No, no, no baby, we're ok, we're ok, mama loves you, mama loves you," the young mother offered in desperate reassurance, laying kisses all over her daughter's face, but I could tell that she didn't truly believe it herself.

The hatred and rage I felt in that very moment was so powerful and overwhelming that I felt it could snuff out a star. The Collector species needed to be wiped out to the very last. Committing genocide on them would be granting this universe a mercy.

Forcing myself to move on, lest I truly lose my shit, I saw 3 of the engineer caste taking apart various pieces of technology that they'd been brought from the planet. This was interesting, but not particularly important at the moment. Moving to the very front of the ship, two Collectors were in the 'cockpit' of the craft, touching various panels. Even after recovering/stealing a Collector ship, my ability to understand and operate a Collector ship was minimal at best as most of that stolen ship's technology hadn't been functional from the battle damage it had sustained. If I had to guess, however, I believe they were trying and failing to make contact with the carrier

ships that they believed were still in orbit. The three carrier ships were large enough to be capable of sending down many more dropships to the surface, yet they hadn't. These pilots needed to go first, before they realized what had happened in orbit.

"Gothic to T'Maz, I will be beginning my assault on the dropships momentarily. The Collectors have captured and taken many of the planet's citizens prisoner. Activate sickbay EMH doctors and prepare for transport of these people up to the *Temptress* for medical assistance. Triage critical injuries and move those that can be out into the cargo bays or guest quarters, or whatever. Use your discretion."

"Understood, Captain. Sickbay had been notified. We are standing by for transport," T'Maz responded after a moment's pause.

Marking each pilots' position, I moved drone 2 to see if the third dropship was set up similarly to the first two. Luckily it was. The one good thing about the Collectors' regimented and militaristic society was that once you recognized the pattern for what it was, they were quite predictable in the way they operated, with little deviation. The ships were identical in design and layout and I would bet good money on each of them carrying 25 Collectors apiece, including 2 pilots, 3 engineer types, and 20 warriors, which accounted for the 75 Collectors currently on the planet. Perhaps I was being unfair and unrealistic, but it felt like a poor showing by the citizens here that they hadn't managed to kill even a single Collector, but perhaps they didn't have the weapons necessary to penetrate their armors. I idly wondered if this planet's citizens were Klingon civilians, whether they'd have done better.

My rifle's magazine was full of bullets made of hardened tritanium with an added gram of molecular solvent inside the bullet, encased in a ceramic shell. The solvent was designed to dissolve metal, which meant that the bullet would be dissolved once it hit its target and the shell encasing the solvent broke due to impact forces. I had learned from my holographic training and had taken steps to leave no physical evidence behind if I could help it.

My holographic training had also inspired me to write a new targeting program that would allow me to pre-program approximate transporter coordinates on priority targets that weren't moving around very much, like a macro that would let me cycle through the pre-designated targets for a quicker fire rate. If your target was sitting in a seat, for example, the range of potential movement was quite limited so why not pre-target that position ahead of time?

'Target program is complete. 6 priority targets in program. Minor adjustments will be required to account for movement,' Milla informed me.

'Understood,' I mentally replied.

My first target was the side of the head of pilot 1 in dropship 1, a bright red targeting reticule appearing on the side of the Collector's head in my holographic display, which stayed there even as I mentally rotated the view above to extrapolate the bullet's projected flight path in a red dotted line, based on the initial transporter coordinates.

‘Slow is smooth and smooth is fast,’ I thought the familiar mantra, before I slowly and smoothly pulled the trigger in the silence and safety of an apartment a mile away from my target.

The advanced chemical propellant ignited, sending the extremely dense tritanium bullet down the shortened rifled barrel to be caught in a microtransporter beam to be dematerialized, only to materialize an inch away from the side of the head of a Collector pilot where it continued at the same speed that it had been fired at. The bullet traveled into and through the side of the pilot’s head only to go through the other pilot’s head. The blood and gore left behind told me they were dead before my sensors did. Luckily the cockpit door was closed, which prevented the rest of the ship from realizing what had just happened.

My targeting view changed automatically to the pilots of the second ship and I smoothly pulled the trigger again in a two-for-one kill shot.

My luck, unfortunately, ran out when I took the shot on the pilots in ship 3, only for pilot number 2 to bend down to do something or other and the shot missed him entirely, penetrating into the hull.

I barely had time to think *‘fuck’* before the targeting program moved the transporter reticule to the second pilot’s head and with only a minor adjustment in targeting, I quickly pulled the trigger again before he could sound the alarm and was rewarded with another kill, letting out a sigh of relief when the rest of the ship’s personnel didn’t change their behavior.

Collector design emphasized specialization, so the various spaces of the ship were segregated from the others, which meant that I could start taking out targets from front to back.

Lining up my next shots, I began a symphony of killing, pulling the trigger smoothly over and over again to first kill the 3 engineers, then move back to the prisoner holding area.

From the video my drones were providing me, the guards looked agitated, as best as I could tell. Perhaps they did hear the tritanium bullets striking the hull, but had not understood where it was coming from or what it meant when no alarm was triggered by their superiors. Luckily none of them decided to investigate further up.

I rotated around and reoriented so that the flight path of the bullets I’d fire hopefully wouldn’t kill any of the prisoners due to overpenetration, which was a distinct and unfortunate danger with this kind of weapon. As I was about to pull the trigger once again, I hesitated as I realized that there were many conscious and awake humans who’d see how the Collectors were suddenly killed. This was an unexpected hiccup in the plan.

‘Fuck it,’ I thought, resigned.

The attack on the ships had already begun so I was committed. There were two other ships to clear out and colonists to rescue. While my thoughts had run a mile a minute, my hesitation was extremely brief and I repeatedly pulled the trigger killing the remaining ten guards on the ship.

“Gothic to T’Maz, I am beaming all living colonists from dropship 1 to sickbay. Please organize things up there,” I informed her, before I sent the command, via my neural connection, for the ship’s two 6-pad transporters to start beaming up the colonists.

Bright flashes of light immediately whisked away 12 colonists at a time. A few seconds later, another 12 colonists were taken. Once everyone my sensors told me was living was taken, I readied myself to clear out the next ship. The bodies of the dead colonists on the ship would have to wait for now.

I had two more ships to clear. Time to do some more remote killing.

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Drawing my sidearm, I vaporized the two bodies in the cockpit of ship 1 that were in the way before I stood in front of the primary console. The deck plates were slippery with the blood they’d shed when I’d shot them, but thankfully my boots were specifically designed for better grip and my armor was automatically exerting a slight magnetic attraction to grip the metal deck plates under me without me even being aware of it.

Clearing the two other ships had gone off without much trouble, though on ship 3 there had been some unforeseen casualties in the human prisoners. War was a chaotic business at the best of times. One of my shots on a Collector warrior on ship 3 had missed when the fucking thing had moved unexpectedly and instead of a quick kill shot, I’d gotten him in the neck and he had squeezed the trigger of his rifle killing a few of his fellow warriors as well as 3 of the captured hostages in his death throes. I regretted the loss of life, but shit happens that is often out of your control. I tried to minimize the risk to the prisoners, but the universe didn’t always provide. All in all, I was happy with how well things had turned out; it could have been a lot worse.

Unfortunately, 31 Collector warriors still remained on the planet. I could continue to pick them off one by one, but many of the colonists would die during that process. I was hoping I could find a way to get them all at once.

I placed my hand on the console, hoping Collector computer security remained as shitty or as non-existent as I’d previously experienced

“Milla, Natasha, initiate secure interface with this ship and begin infiltration of its systems.”

“Interface established,” Natasha responded, unsurprisingly. Milla was quite taciturn for some reason unless I asked her a question that required a direct response.

“Is there any emergency signal we can send to recall all Collector forces from the planet?” I asked.

“Searching,” Natasha responded. I continued to monitor the area with my drones in case any Collector forces returned to the ships, my rifle at the ready. I had already picked off a few and beamed away the prisoners and the corpses of the Collectors too in order to avoid alerting the others. “An emergency recall equivalent has been found.”

“Is there any information on the circumstances when this kind of recall would be initiated?” I asked, wanting to understand what kind of response it would trigger in the remaining Collector forces.

“According to description, emergency recall is a priority order to return to dropships due to overwhelming enemy arrival in system or approaching on sensors,” Natasha explained.

“So, my single ship engaging the forces in orbit wasn’t considered a true threat?” I asked.

“Unknown,” Natasha responded after a brief hesitation. “Though available data supports this conclusion.”

“They probably didn’t even warn their ground forces, especially since they don’t value their soldiers’ lives, only captured resources,” I guessed.

After several moments weighing the risks of this plan, I decided to roll the dice.

“Send the signal,” I ordered. Immediately the ship I was in started automatically broadcasting a truly alien alert sound. “While we wait for the rats to return to their nests, initiate secure download of all data in this ship’s systems. Interface with the other ships too for download. Store data in segregated archive.”

“Secure download initiated,” Natasha responded and a small progress bar that anyone from my time would recognize appeared in my armor’s HUD, percentage complete and all.

I beamed to the roof of a nearby building with a view of the large field/open park space in front of the Collector ships, focusing my ship’s powerful sensor array on the area. If humanoid forces received a priority recall order, they’d drop any loot or hostages that they had taken and returned to their ships. Who knows if these alien would act the same way. In case they didn’t, my transporters were ready to beam away any captured people they tried to make off with.

Within 10 minutes, a large group of 28 Collectors, were running at full speed for their dropships to retreat from the planet. When they reached the midpoint between the city and their ships, I mentally reached out to my ship in orbit, lowered the power output of my beam weapons to 1% and commanded the ship to fire on this large group from orbit.

Immediately, hundreds of bright neon blue pulses streaked down from the sky, burning away the clouds, striking the ground with thunderous explosions of light, flesh, dirt, and rock. I continued the orbital bombardment for another 10 more seconds to ensure all the Collectors were well and truly dead.

The sudden silence that followed was jarring. Scanning the area with my sensors, I could not detect any remaining life signs. Starfleet might be pissed that I had done things this way, but they could go fuck themselves. This had been the best way to kill these bastards as a group. My chosen tactic here had a cost to me, unfortunately, as it meant that I had destroyed all their weapons and their many power cells that I had found so many uses for and had no way yet to recreate.

Extending the sensor sweep to the rest of the area, I detected 3 more Collector life signs.

Guess my rifle had to do a bit more remote killing before this day was over.

When had combat taken on such an arcade-like quality? I almost felt cheated by it all.

Almost.

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Conference Room. Onboard the *Flightry Temptress*. In Orbit of Kessik IV.

In the conference room with me was T'Maz, B'Elanna, Neela, and attending remotely via video display was the EMH Doctor that I had modeled after the actress Gal Gadot.

"B'Elanna, Neela, I want you both to travel to the surface and secure the 3 Collector dropships for salvage operations," I ordered. "Transport all Collector weaponry to the ship and remove the ship power cores and anything else not nailed down and valuable. Any valuable materials should also be removed, even if you have to take a plasma torch to cut it off the hull to remove it. Buffer inventory anything that we don't immediately need to store in the cargo bays. Any questions?"

They both shook their head in response, quite used to my more mercenary attitude when it came to alien salvage.

"T'Maz, your report?" I asked.

"Starfleet has dispatched the U.S.S. *Cairo* to repel the Collectors and assist the planet with emergency operations in the aftermath," T'Maz reported. "They are still 16 hours away at maximum warp."

"Why does that ship sound familiar?" I asked aloud.

"It is an Excelsior-class starship under the command of Captain Edward Jellico," T'Maz added.

"That's it. I remember hearing..." I started, before abruptly trailing off. I tried to cover my slip up by pulling up any information I had access to on both the *Cairo* and Jellico on my omni-tool.

While I didn't immediately remember what ship he had previously commanded, I did remember Jellico from an episode of TNG where he had assumed temporary command of the *Enterprise* when Picard, Worf, and Crusher had gone on a secret mission against the Cardassians. Picard was captured during that mission, which had been the true objective of the Cardassians, and was then tortured by them. It was an incredibly well-liked episode and had showcased just how incredible an actor Patrick Stewart was. Unfortunately, I had no way to know whether those events had happened yet or at all in this different dimension, so I really couldn't explain my knowledge here. I was surprised this didn't happen more often.

"I am not familiar with the man, though I could request his personnel file, if you wish," T'Maz offered, to B'Elanna's visible confusion. Thankfully, she didn't ask anything.

"No, that won't be necessary. I think we need to be underway before that ship arrives though," I answered, quickly reviewing the data on the ship and its captain. "Don't you find it utterly ridiculous that Starfleet is still fielding a ship that was first designed and constructed in the

2280s?? Refit after refit after refit has been required to keep it somewhat up to date. It's not like the Federation doesn't have the resources or shipbuilding capacity to construct new ships. The Federation is going to pay in blood for fielding so many different old classes of ship that they've just kept refitting instead of replacing altogether."

B'Elanna looked interested.

"I said the same thing when I was at the Academy. My thoughts were *not* well received," she complained in a sour, annoyed voice. "Objectively, the resource costs in maintaining and refitting these old ships actually exceeds the cost of building new ones."

"If I had to guess, it's on purpose, to limit the power of Starfleet and keep it from becoming too militaristic by the member states, or some bullshit like that. They'll wish they had more new, state-of-the-art ships before long, I guarantee it," I said. "Anyways, Doctor, I'd like a report from you as well."

"Of the 235 colonists that you transported to the ship, all but 12 have been treated and released, to be transported back to their homes on the surface," the EMH reported. "2 colonists succumbed to their injuries and died before they could receive stabilizing treatment. Of the 12 remaining colonists onboard, we are in the process of growing replacement organs and limbs, treating chronic ailments, or providing advanced surgeries or medical interventions that are currently beyond the ability or capacity of the colony's medical infrastructure to provide at present."

"Why is that?" B'Elanna asked.

"Before the Collectors landed, they destroyed several key pieces of the planet's infrastructure to reduce resistance and randomly struck various parts of the planet from orbit," I answered. "It's an effective tactic as resources that could be utilized to fight back against their invasion, are instead directed to keeping their population alive."

"Can we offer any assistance?" B'Elanna asked.

"Feel free to offer any material assistance to the colony that can be easily replaced by our replicators, but any technical assistance will have to wait until you and Neela have completed your salvage of the Collector ships," I answered.

"Understood," B'Elanna said with a firm nod.

"Any other questions or issues to discuss, again, I want to be gone before the *Cairo* arrives.

No one spoke up at first, but surprisingly my EMH in attendance signaled that she had something to say. I gave her a kind smile and a go-ahead nod.

"The planetary government has requested the use of our sickbay and its resources for some of their most serious cases. I delayed giving them an answer until I spoke with you," she said.

"I don't have an issue with that, request approved," I said. "No one from the planet is to have access to any other part of the ship besides sickbay. In fact, beam them directly from the planet

to sickbay and back again. I'll be activating some holo-security to keep people from going anywhere they are not supposed to."

"Thank you, Captain," Dr. Gadot replied.

"Anything else?" I asked, looking around.

Dr. Gadot again spoke up.

"Several of my patients have expressed a desire to meet and thank you for their rescue, Captain. I think it would do them a great deal of good if you met with them when you had a few moments free," she requested.

Now that surprised me on some level, but I couldn't think of any reason why I shouldn't do it.

"I'll stop by shortly, doctor. Now if that is all, let's get to work."

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Sickbay. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress*.

Walking into my ship's sickbay, I stopped just inside the entrance and took in the large room. Was it narcissistic to pat yourself on the back at one's foresight in spending all the money and resources I had in making this a state-of-the-art medical facility, one with all the capabilities of a full hospital that you wouldn't otherwise find outside of a planet or a major space station? I bet the planet's citizens who had benefitted from that foresight and spending would happily tell any and all willing to listen that it had been money well spent.

Spotting me, my EMH doctors who looked like Gal Gadot, Tricia Helfer, and Angelina Jolie waved to me in welcome before returning to their respective duties.

I started at one end of the room, going from biobed to biobed, shaking hands and exchanging kind words, receiving heartfelt thanks from the various people who had been told that I was the one who had killed their captors and facilitated their rescue and transport up to the ship.

Coming to the last biobed, I found this one was double occupied by a mother and daughter, in fact the same mother and daughter I had spotted during my reconnaissance on the first dropship. My smile turned a touch brittle as I was reminded of the little girl who had been so brutally killed by the Collectors, probably only a short time before I began my reconnaissance.

The mother was smiling happily as she held her daughter tightly in a hug, my Tricia Helfer EMH who was wearing one of my medical omni-tool sensor gloves, was carefully scanning the little girl.

"Hello there, little one," I greeted the little girl gently, not wishing to scare her. My girls had told me that my form could be a touch intimidating to some. She took me in with those wide innocent eyes that only a young child is capable of. Thankfully, I could still see that spark of innocence in them, despite what she'd just gone through.

I looked at her mother and nodded to her with a smile, trying to convey to her just how impressed I was with her for keeping her daughter safe and that innocence alive despite how horrific the situation had been. For some reason, I felt like she understood what I was trying to say with only my eyes, giving me a tremulous nod and smile in return.

“Allison, Natalie, I’d like to introduce you to Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Force, captain and owner of this starship. Admiral Gothic rescued you from the Hur’q forces who had taken you captive,” EMH Tricia Helfer introduced.

The mother, Allison, quickly reached out with one hand to tightly squeeze my offered hand, the other hand still clutching tightly to her daughter. Her eyes immediately welled up with tears of gratitude.

“Thank you, sir, thank you, thank you for saving my daughter and I, and all our people,” she gushed, tears rolling down her face. “You saved our lives. We can never repay you. I thought, I thought it was the end for us all. We felt so helpless. So many of us didn’t make it...”

I gripped her hand with both of my own.

“You’re welcome, Allison. You’re welcome,” I said, truly moved by her thanks. “You stayed strong and protected your daughter, shielded her from so much. Continue to be strong for her in the days ahead and you’ll both get through this and come out even stronger than you went in.”

While my focus had been on Allison, Natalie obviously wanted to give her own thanks, because she somehow launched herself out of her mother’s arm to wrap her arms around my neck like a little spider monkey. I instinctively moved with her to prevent her from hurting herself against my solid form and wrapped my arms around her too, holding her up and rubbing her back.

“Thank you for saving my mommy and me from the bad people,” she said heartfully, whispering her words in my ear, then placing many little kisses against my cheeks one after another.

“You’re welcome, Natalie,” I said quietly into her ear too, continuing to rub her back gently.

There would be consequences, both good and bad, short and long-term, from my actions today, but in this very moment, basking in the sweet, innocent gratitude of a little girl whose life I’d saved, *I really didn’t give a shit.*