

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Lauren stepped forward, positioning herself directly in V'Ren's line of sight.

"I serve my Lord Gothic in all things," she began, her voice steady and deliberate. "Like him, I am an Augment, genetically enhanced. My mind was reshaped by my parents in childhood, though their ambitions for me came with... unforeseen consequences." She paused, letting the words settle. "But my Lord? He is the total package. Enhanced both physically and mentally to a degree that has no equal in the modern day."

She stepped closer, her eyes unblinking.

"You'd have to go back to the age of Khan Noonien Singh to find anyone comparable. But unlike Khan and his kind—whose enhancements drove them to madness—my Lord has all the benefits of genetic engineering and yet none of the flaws."

Lauren turned her gaze toward me, her voice softening just slightly.

"For all his brilliance, for all his unmatched physical prowess," she said, her lips curving into the barest hint of a smile. "He is still a man."

I remained a silent observer even as I wondered where this was going.

"In preparation for this, I've read how you've been trained extensively to resist torture, to experience pain, both physically and mentally. Is it true that they used Klingon painstiks on you during your training?" she asked. "I've even read you've been trained to resist rape as a means of torture, something that all female agents, across species, realize is a particularly common tactic used against women. My Lord is capable of killing you in cold blood, capable of torturing you, but I suspect even he would not be willing to rape you."

With a gesture from Lauren a wooden table materialized with a number of devices I recognized. I should, since I had designed them and was selling them across the quadrant. Some of them hadn't even been placed on the market yet.

"Among the many humanoid races in this galaxy, did you know that females almost invariably have a higher pain threshold than their male counterparts? I always thought that that was fascinating, yet another commonality amongst humanoids," she shared idly, like V'Ren should be interested in learning this little bit of xenobiology trivia. "The Tal Shiar trained you to resist pain, but I wonder if they trained you to resist pleasure. Computer, give her a more comfortable seat, please."

In response to Lauren's command, the chair V'Ren was restrained with began to slowly change, probably to prevent the change from injuring her before it was time. V'Ren's arms remained outstretched, but the seat back soon began to recline a bit to arch her back, the straps and chair legs changing to stirrups, her knees bending up and out. Soon her legs were splayed wide open, her tight, dry slit exposed for us to see. V'Ren's head was angled down as if to force her to look at whatever would be happening between her legs.

I stayed quiet and still.

"For my whole life my Federation doctors told me that I have a sexual disorder," she shared. "If you asked the Risians, they'd tell you that there is nothing wrong with me in that department, that I am worthy of love and that I should be granted the freedom to express my sexuality, in whatever form it took. Regardless of who is right, I am a strong believer in consent," she explained as she picked up a couple of circular devices and attached them to V'Ren nipples. Then she picked up a bliss baton. "Unfortunately, torture is an inherently non-consensual act and you tried to kill my Lord."

She gently, almost lovingly, pressed the bliss baton against V'Ren clit and activated it at the maximum, the soft aqua blue glow of energy quickly spreading under her skin the longer and harder Lauren pressed. Her large tits also lit up in blue as the nipple devices activated simultaneously. V'Ren first howled, then screamed in pleasure as her body thrashed against the restraints. Lauren kept it on for over 30 seconds, V'Ren's pussy practically gushing now as she experienced this unwanted pleasure.

"You might be wondering why you haven't cum yet," Lauren said. "While you were unconscious a neural splint was surgically inserted into your brain stem. Unfortunately for you, you won't orgasm until I allow it."

Lauren grinned viciously as V'Ren's eyes widened even further.

"You might be worried that we are going to rape you," Lauren speculated, before she growled. "Bitch, by the end of this you'll not only be willing to tell us anything we want to know, you'll be begging for my Lord to fuck you. Only after we've wrung every last secret from you will my Lord's godly cock fill this unworthy pussy."

Well, this had taken an unexpected turn, but this was not a good person and it was arguably better than using a painstik or cutting off her fingers or flaying the skin from her body and salting the wound.

V'Ren's screams of pleasure echoed in the space and I was reminded of Ned Stark's words of wisdom from Game of Thrones, 'The one who passes the sentence should swing the sword.'

So, I watched, in silence.

I had some decidedly mixed feelings about all of this, but a Romulan Tal Shiar agent who had aided and abetted in heaps of murder and the enslavement of sentients, including human children, well, I don't think I'd be losing any sleep over this.

Was it wrong that this was arguably a little hot???

Was I in the cuck chair???

Yeah, best to keep those errant thoughts to myself.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 59

Main Bridge. Onboard the Flighty Temptress in orbit of Kessik IV.

All the boring, seemingly endless meetings in conference rooms—spent with people I mostly didn't want to be with—were worth it, I thought with a grin.

Now, I was exactly where I wanted to be, on the bridge of my luxurious warship, surrounded by a crew of brilliant, beautiful women, and in complete control of my life in a thousand little ways that mattered.

I turned my gaze to the massive holographic display at the center of the bridge, where a three-dimensional projection of my target slowly rotated in midair, the asteroid Eros. This? *This* was the fun stuff.

Of all the cool things I'd done since waking up in this Star Trek universe—and believe me, there had been many—this was definitely high on the list. Because today, I wasn't just moving an asteroid. I was going to obliterate it.

Oh sure, technically, the *Enterprise* was helping, but still—I was going to soon unleash the full destructive power of the GODS net to utterly, fucking, annihilate this ancient rock.

Life was good.

I deserved at least a million-man points for this. No, a billion points!

Even with the real-time holographic projection floating before me, it was impossible to fully capture the sheer majesty of Eros. Large was a relative term in space, of course. Compared to some of the truly massive asteroids out there, Eros was only average—in fact, there were thirty-two bigger ones in this system alone.

Lauren, seated to my left where Counselor Troi would usually be on the *Enterprise*, gave me a knowing smirk.

“Somebody's having fun,” she teased, noting my grin.

“You've got to admit, Lauren, this is pretty freaking cool,” I said, gesturing toward the asteroid.

She tilted her head, eyes glinting with mischief. “Boys and their toys.” Then, feigning an innocent look, she added, “Interesting choice, though. I can’t help but notice—it’s a little phallic.”

I turned to her, offended.

“How, woman?!” I gestured wildly at the floating rock, my eyes scanning it again. “It’s shaped like a lumpy, elongated potato—if anything! Where do you get ‘cock’ from that?”

Eros tumbled lazily through the black of space, uncaring that it was being mocked by a beautiful and fun-loving sexual deviant. Its surface was pocked with craters and scored with grooves from impacts throughout its long 4.5-billion-year life. Its surface was covered in a layer of fine dusty regolith, softening the harsh lines of its craters like a blanket of ash left by forgotten craters made before humanity even existed. Despite its battered appearance, there was a quiet, unyielding strength to it, a solid, ancient body of stone and iron, a fossil of the star system’s chaotic youth.

Part of me almost felt bad that I was going to carve it up like a cake, almost.

Lauren leaned in, her voice dropping to a sultry whisper.

“I guess I’ve got cock on the brain, my Lord.”

I shot her a sideways glance, growling, “Who knew sexually torturing an evil Romulan spy would get you so worked up, woman?”

If I were a normal man, I’d be dealing with some serious chafing by now.

To my right, Annika—lounging in the Riker chair—muttered, “Leave some for the rest of us.”

Lauren turned to her, arching a brow. “I’ve asked you repeatedly to join us,” she said, her voice practically dripping with invitation.

I wisely stayed silent, watching the exchange with amusement. This was yet again one of those situations where a man was best served by shutting the hell up. Let Lauren crack that nut.

Besides, given how persistent and persuasive she could be, it was only a matter of time before she wore Annika down.

They didn’t realize it yet, but they’d work very well together, in a lot of ways.

Lauren was like the devil on my shoulder—whispering wicked things designed to corrupt me and everyone around her.

Annika, though? She was my innocent angel.

Dealing with the two of them simultaneously was half the fun.

But for now, I had a job to do.

“T’Maz,” I said, shifting my focus back to the mission. “Can you confirm that Eros is a viable target under the approved testing parameters?”

Time to get back on track.

T'Maz adjusted her controls, seamlessly integrating relevant sensor data alongside the rotating holographic image of Eros. Exactly how I liked it.

I was a visual thinker, which explained why my ship featured cutting-edge holography in nearly every system. Starfleet might not fully embrace that approach yet, but I knew for a fact that future designs would rely far more on holographic interfaces.

"I believe Eros meets all testing parameters, Captain," T'Maz reported, her Vulcan precision unwavering. "It is a standard S-type asteroid, composed primarily of silicate rock, pyroxene, and olivine, with metallic elements—predominantly iron and nickel. Its density is 2.67 g/cm³, consistent with solid rock and minimal internal voids."

I nodded, skimming the sensor data myself.

"That'll be ideal for testing the platform's weapons and particle yield," I said. "Do you think it's big enough for all the planned tests?"

"It may, in fact, be too large, Captain," T'Maz noted. "Eros measures 34 × 11 × 11 kilometers, with a mass of 6.69 quadrillion kilograms."

I smirked. Perfect.

"Go big or go home," I shot back, continuing my review. "A larger target gives us more room to work with. More mass means better simulation of advanced armor and shields, just by sheer rock density alone." I let my gaze linger on the asteroid's hologram. "It also doesn't hurt that the Collectors used asteroids just like Eros for their mobile bases. After what happened, this will resonate with Kessik IV's people even more."

Lauren, lounging in her chair, flashed me a playful, adoring smile.

"You're always working an angle, Gothic," she teased. "I love it."

I grinned.

"Know your customer and know yourself, and you need not fear the result of a hundred sales presentations," I offered like a wizened sage.

Lauren laughed.

"You did not just twist Sun Tzu into a sales pitch."

T'Maz raised an eyebrow.

"While your modification of the quote may be crass—and, to some, offensive—the sentiment is logical. Human decision-making is often driven by emotion."

I chuckled. "We're an emotional species."

Kessik IV was founded as a human colony, and to this day, its population was overwhelmingly human. Appealing to that emotion wasn't just smart—it was necessary.

"Any unwanted consequences to moving or destroying Eros?" I asked, just to be sure.

"None, Captain," T'Maz replied. "However, should any sufficiently large fragments survive re-entry and strike the surface of the planet, they could cause severe environmental impacts. Smaller debris will burn up in the atmosphere."

"With the *Enterprise*, the *Cairo*, and our ship on hand, we should be able to intercept any large fragments before they hit the surface," I said confidently. "Any objections to using Eros?"

"None, Captain," T'Maz confirmed.

"Good, good," I said with satisfaction. "Hail the *Enterprise*."

"Opening a channel now."

A large two-dimensional image of the *Enterprise* bridge appeared on the massive holographic display. Sitting in the captain's chair was Commander Riker, his expression neutral—though I caught the brief flicker of a frown before he schooled his features into calm professionalism.

The current bridge crew on duty consisted mostly of nameless personnel I didn't recognize from the shows, but Mr. Data was in his usual position. People often assumed the *Enterprise* senior staff was always on the bridge, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

"Commander Riker, I have selected the asteroid Eros for testing purposes. The relevant plan for moving it into position is being sent now," I said. A soft beep through the comm channel confirmed the *Enterprise* had received the transmission.

"Received," Riker acknowledged, glancing down at the control panel integrated into the captain's chair.

"The *Enterprise*'s role will be to nudge Eros as necessary to keep it on course," I continued. "The *Temptress* will bring the asteroid up to speed and stop it once it reaches the designated coordinates."

Riker's brow furrowed slightly. "Are you sure you don't want to reverse those roles, Admiral?" he asked, his confusion evident. "Getting Eros up to speed may require more power than your ship can supply."

I chuckled. True, the *Enterprise* was a larger vessel than the *Temptress*, but unlike them, I had a small quantum singularity powering my ship—along with a warp core as a secondary system. Since the Collector power core at the heart of my vessel was a secret, I had designed the *Temptress* to emit a warp core signature comparable to an Intrepid-class ship, like *Voyager*. That level of power was far more than what my ship technically needed—at least on paper—but it ensured that what people expected to see aligned with what they detected. The scary Augment had overpowered his ship, sure, but not enough to be a huge threat.

Give people what they expected, and 90% of the time, they wouldn't look any further.

So while this plan would reveal a bit more about my ship's capabilities, the trade-off was worth it. After my performance in the Battle of Earth, reinforcing the perception that my ship was powerful—and not something to be taken lightly—was the smartest move. A fearsome reputation was a powerful deterrent.

"I think you'll be surprised at what my ship can do, Commander," I reassured him with a smile. "Are you ready to proceed?"

"We are," Riker nodded.

"Good," I said, then glanced at Lauren with a silent question. She met my gaze with an eager smile and a quick nod.

"Please proceed to Eros," I instructed. "I'm using this opportunity to allow some of my crew to pilot the *Temptress*, so don't be alarmed if we meander around a little. I'd recommend going ahead of us to avoid any risk of collision."

Riker frowned slightly but nodded sharply. "Understood. We'll proceed immediately. *Enterprise* out."

The transmission cut off as the *Enterprise* broke orbit and set a course for Eros at a quarter impulse.

"Well then, are you ready, Lauren?" I asked, watching her reaction closely. "If you're not feeling up to this, or don't want to try it with so many eyes on you, we can always do this another time."

"As you know, Captain, I quite like being watched," she said with a wink.

To my right, Annika let out an exasperated huff. Through the ship's sensors, I saw her roll her eyes, which only made me laugh.

"Alright then," I said, retrieving the neural control helmet from my transporter buffer inventory.

It had been a long time since I'd last used it. The neural implants surgically inserted into my brain made the helmet unnecessary, but it was still connected to the *Temptress* and could be used to pilot her.

"This will allow you to control the ship with your mind alone," I explained, holding the helmet for her to see. "It's a superior method of piloting, but most humanoids struggle with the input—even for brief periods. Are you sure you want to risk it? Even a few minutes of use could leave you with a wicked migraine."

"I want to do this. Please let me try, Gothic," Lauren said, her usual playfulness absent. This time, she was serious.

Dr. Gadot had already run simulations based on Lauren's extensive medical evaluation when she first came aboard. She had cleared Lauren for use of the helmet, believing her enhanced physiology would allow her to handle the strain much better than a baseline human. But simulations were one thing—a real test was something else entirely.

Of course, this wasn't Lauren's first time piloting a starship. Just like I had when I first arrived in this universe, she had become a fully licensed pilot, practically breezing through the holographic training and certification exams. Augments had a way of making difficult things look effortless. No wonder baseline humans were so jealous of us.

This, however, would be her first time piloting the *Temptress* outside a holodeck—and her first time experiencing the ship's sensors directly.

"Dr. Gadot, Lauren will be connecting to the ship shortly," I advised over the comm. "If she reacts poorly to the interface, you'll have authorization to sever the connection immediately."

Dr. Gadot had insisted on Lauren wearing a health monitor and had demanded control over the neural link's emergency shutdown. I had readily agreed.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Lauren gently.

She nodded, turning in her seat so I could place the helmet on her.

It slipped easily over her head, though I had replicated a few extra cushions to ensure a snug fit without disrupting the neural link. She looked adorable—like a sexy female version of Professor Xavier wearing the Cerebro helmet.

"It's easier if you're reclining when the connection is established, especially for the first time," I advised.

Lauren nodded again, though I could sense her nerves creeping in.

"Relax," I reassured her. "There's nothing to be nervous about. If anything happens, I can assume full control of the ship instantly."

She exhaled, settling into her seat.

"Initiating connection now," I said, activating the neural link.

The moment Lauren connected with the ship, I felt her presence as intimately as my own thoughts.

The neural link between captain and vessel—based on Husnock technology—was always active, a lifelong bond that allowed me to sense my ship as naturally as I did my own body. Fortunately, the connection was adjustable, and most of the time, I kept it at a passive level—information sharing only, rather than assuming direct control of all systems. But when I piloted the *Temptress* myself, I fully opened the link, relying entirely on the ship's sensors rather than my own physical senses. In many meaningful ways, it was as if I temporarily abandoned my body.

Now, Lauren was experiencing that for the first time.

We appeared in space, standing on the hull of the ship, looking down at the blue-green world below for a moment. It wasn't Earth, but that didn't make it any less breathtaking.

Lauren screamed at the abrupt and jarring change in perspective, instinctively clutching at me as if she might fall, burying her head in my chest. Given that it looked like we were standing in the vacuum of space, her reaction was entirely understandable.

I pulled her against me, feeling her arms wrap around my waist in a desperate grip, her heartbeat pounding against my chest.

"You're safe," I murmured into her hair. "We're still on the bridge. This is just the interface. You're safe."

I felt her breathing immediately start to slow as the words registered. I was humbled at just how much she trusted me.

"How are we here?" she asked, her voice still unsteady. "I thought I'd just see piloting controls in my head or something."

I chuckled softly. "It's a lot more involved than that."

I kept my tone gentle, rubbing her back soothingly as I explained. "Your senses have been completely replaced with the ship's sensors. But since you're still an organic being—unlike my digital children—your mind is interpreting that data in a way it can understand. When you get better with the interface you can choose whether or not you need this kind of projected environment."

Lauren nodded hesitantly, still processing.

"But how can I feel you? And see you? Why do we even have bodies here?" she asked, the questions spilling out in rapid succession. "If my body is still on the bridge, why did I reproduce it like this?"

"Our minds are designed to experience the world through flesh and blood. That's not so easy to abandon," I explained. "Your body here—my body—is a reflection of your residual self-image. Essentially, it's how you perceive yourself, how you expect to interact with the world."

Her grip on me had loosened slightly. She was still pressing her forehead against my chest, but at least she wasn't shaking anymore. That was progress.

"I know this is scary, but you're safe," I reminded her, emphasizing each word. "I'm going to turn you around in my arms, and I want you to slowly open your eyes. I won't let you go. I promise."

Gently, I shifted her in my arms, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

"Open your eyes," I said softly.

Lauren gasped as her eyes fluttered open, her breath catching at the sight before her.

Below us, Kessik IV stretched out in all its majesty, a vibrant world of deep blues and lush greens, swirling clouds casting shifting shadows over its continents. The sight was mesmerizing, almost hypnotic, a living canvas of ever-changing beauty.

She stared, her expression one of quiet awe.

"It's so beautiful," Lauren whispered, her voice trembling slightly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

I didn't speak. I just let her experience it.

For several long minutes, she simply gazed at the planet below, drinking in the moment.

Yes, in the 24th century, with how common space travel was, such sights were hardly rare. But there was a difference between seeing a planet from the comfort of a starship's viewport—and standing in the void itself, feeling as though you could reach out and touch the world with no barrier between you and the sight.

The only comparable experience I had was when I took my hoverbike into Earth's orbit all those years ago. Even then, it had been different—limited by my human senses. This was something else entirely.

"Thank you for letting me experience this with you, Gothic," Lauren said, her voice thick with emotion. "You've shown me so much more than I ever could have seen at the Institute. It's a debt I can never repay."

"You don't have to," I reassured her. "Are you ready to see something cool?"

Lauren wiped at her eyes and nodded, a happy smile breaking through her wonder.

I turned us around and extended a hand toward the Kessik system's star, a distant burning ember against the vast darkness.

It was the largest light in the sky, but distant.

Once I was sure Lauren was focused on me, I reached out—deliberate, commanding—and closed my fingers around the distant glow, as if seizing a world in my grasp.

For a moment, I was like a god, plucking a sun from the heavens.

With a slow, steady pull, I drew it toward us and the universe bent to my will. Space itself shifted.

The tiny speck exploded into a massive, searing sphere before our eyes.

A titanic inferno of roiling plasma, the star churned with violent, golden waves, its surface a living sea of fire. Superheated prominences arched into the abyss like molten tendrils, curling and snapping back as magnetic storms raged across its surface. Its light was no longer a distant glow but a crushing force, illuminating the void with relentless brilliance.

Lauren let out a stunned breath.

"That's a real-time image from the ship's sensors," I explained.

She blinked, shaking her head slightly. "How are we able to look at it without going blind?"

I grinned with humor. "Because we're not using our eyes, remember?"

Even an augment as intelligent as Lauren was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this experience.

I couldn't resist. "Do you think that's air you're breathing right now?"

Lauren let out a startled laugh, her awe momentarily broken by my *Matrix* reference. I should make a holonovel out of those movies, I thought, before I remembered how many other stories I had to write, including continuing work on the next few installments in the Harry Potter series.

After a minute of literal stargazing, I pushed the star away, and it shrunk back to its rightful place in the heavens.

I turned back to her, studying her reaction. "How are you feeling? Any pain or sensitivity?"

Lauren seemed distracted, still caught up in the moment. "What?" she asked absently. "Um, no. No, I think I'm good."

I sent a mental inquiry to Dr. Gadot. She confirmed that Lauren's vitals were normal.

"While I'd love to give you all the time in the world to enjoy this, the *Enterprise* won't be as patient as I am," I said, apologetically reminding her that we still had work to do.

Lauren exhaled, visibly struggling to pull her attention back to the task at hand.

"Oh. Yes. Of course," she said, though her eyes lingered on the stars a moment longer before refocusing.

"There are two main ways to pilot the ship with the neural interface," I explained. "The first is the 'training wheels' method, where we essentially recreate the physical controls in this digital space. It's familiar, and there are still benefits to using it that way."

Lauren cut in, eager. "No, I want to do it like you."

I nodded, understanding. "Alright, the other method is direct control. You'll pilot the ship entirely with your mind—no physical controls, no visualization of buttons or panels like you're used to from the holodeck." I paused, carefully choosing my words. "With this method, there are huge advantages, but it's also a steep learning curve. Instead of interacting with the ship as a separate entity, you become the ship. You move with its engines, perceive the world not through your five senses, but through its sensors. It's... it's a whole new way of existing in space."

I paused as I tried to better describe it in a way to make it more understandable, but I was failing. I could see Lauren absorbing the information, trying to make sense of it, but she didn't respond immediately. It was a difficult concept to grasp.

I hesitated, then added, "Maybe the only way to really understand is to experience it."

Her eyes locked onto mine, waiting. "I'm giving you control over the ship's movements, though I can still reassert control, if needed. Take the wheel, feel her out. Go ahead."

For a long moment, nothing happened, as you might expect, before it suddenly did. The ship lurched as if it had come to life. The thrusters fired erratically, sending the *Temptress* into a wild series of spins, tumbles, and erratic dives.

It was as if the ship was drunk.

Without the extensive inertial dampeners I'd built into her design, we would've been in serious trouble. As it was, Natasha immediately activated everyone's harness restraints and triggered the emergency seat protections, including the independent inertial dampers. She and I stood by, ready to intervene. I didn't think Lauren would cause any serious damage, but we couldn't afford to take risks, not with the ship's systems—or our people—on the line.

I tried not to laugh. Really, I did. But there was no hiding the smirk that crept across my face.

In this digital space, Lauren's face was scrunched up in sheer frustrated effort, her brows furrowed in concentration. She was still a newbie at this, and it would take a while before she stopped unconsciously trying to use her body to react to things—things that, in this space, were controlled entirely by thought.

My amusement dimmed slightly as the engines suddenly roared to full impulse—while we were pointed *directly* at Kessik IV.

Was this what my father had experienced when I was first learning to drive? If so, I owed him one hell of an apology.

The urge to take back control was near overwhelming, but I knew that that would be counterproductive in her learning and might even set back her confidence in a way that would be hard to get back.

"Lauren?" I asked, my voice edged with nervousness. "You do see that we're on a collision course with the planet, right? Do you want me to take over?"

"I see it, Gothic!" Lauren snapped, her frustration clear—before her tone softened. "Let me figure it out."

Her "figuring it out" apparently involved the aft thrusters firing at full power, sending the *Temptress* into a wild, tumbling spin—ass over teakettle—while still barreling toward the planet at full speed. Kessik IV grew larger and larger in our mind's eye, a looming, planetary reminder that there were better ways to correct a trajectory.

While Lauren struggled to regain control, the ship received an urgent hail from both orbital control and the *Cairo*.

"Orbital Control to the Flighty Temptress, do you require assistance?" a rather nervous-sounding voice came over the comm. "Are you declaring an emergency?"

"Everything is fine, please stand by, orbital control," I said, quickly cutting the connection before they could start offering solutions—or, worse, ordering evacuations.

"Lauren?" I said again, this time infusing her name with every ounce of meaning I could manage.

"I've got it," she gritted out.

As we hurtled toward the planet, one of Kessik IV's defense platforms had to execute an emergency repositioning to avoid a collision. Great. Pressman was going to love this. I could already hear the smug remarks forming in his head.

But just before I was about to override the controls and take back full command, Lauren engaged the thrusters mid-flip, righting the ship and sending us rocketing away from the planet at full impulse.

We cleared the planet's gravity well with seconds to spare.

"Well," I said, trying—and failing—to sound casual, "that was exciting."

"Sorry about that," Lauren murmured, still catching her breath. "I appreciate you not taking back control."

I smiled, deciding to let her have this victory.

"No worries," I said smoothly, lying through my teeth. "The thought never crossed my mind."

Lauren shot me a knowing look, but let it go.

"Alright," I continued, "let's see if you can set a direct course for Eros."

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It had taken time and more than a few unexpected detours, but Lauren was truly getting the hang of this. In hindsight, perhaps this training exercise would have been better suited to open space, far from the scrutinizing gaze of third parties. But having celestial objects nearby provided valuable reference points, something critical when learning to pilot a ship, even under normal conditions.

Open space lacked those reference points. And danger.

Danger, risk, and even the sting of acute embarrassment could be powerful motivators when learning a new skill. Humans were funny like that.

The *Enterprise* hailed us the moment we arrived at the rendezvous coordinates. Frankly, I was surprised it had taken them this long.

This time, Picard himself appeared on screen, standing at the center of his bridge with his usual diplomatic smile, which explained the patience. Riker sat in his customary chair, his expression neutral but for a faint crease in his brow. Deanna, however, looked amused. She glanced between Riker and me before flashing a subtle wink and a fond smile.

For the sake of appearances, it would look to the *Enterprise* like Lauren and I were seated on the bridge of my ship as expected. In reality, our physical bodies were reclined on the *Temptress*, virtually insensate, as our minds remained directly interfaced with the ship.

"Admiral, I trust your journey was uneventful?" Picard asked, a trace of amusement in his voice. No doubt he was thinking about how my ship had nearly collided with one of my own defense platforms—and Kessik IV itself.

"It was a bit more exciting than planned," I admitted, matching his tone, "but we got there in the end."

"Are you ready to proceed, Admiral?" Picard asked, his expression shifting to something more formal. "If you require more time to prepare, we can always delay the testing."

I had no doubt he and his superiors would love that, but the testing had already been delayed to a ridiculous degree. One way or another, I would see this through and get back to the station. If I was anyone else, I would be in real danger of being fired at this point.

"No, we're ready to proceed," I said. "As planned, the *Temptress* will bring Eros up to speed, then disengage. The *Enterprise* will apply its tractor beam to make any necessary course adjustments and ensure stability. We'll assist as needed from the starboard side once the required velocity has been achieved."

Picard nodded, glancing at Riker and then Data, who each gave their own nods of assent.

"We're ready to proceed," Picard confirmed. "I recommend keeping a comm channel open, but muted."

"Agreed," I said before muting the channel. We would be able to hear each other, but we each would need to deliberately unmute the connection to speak to each other.

As missions went, this one was fairly straightforward. While Eros was massive, it was well within the *Temptress*'s capabilities to move.

I turned to Lauren, offering a small, encouraging nod.

"Lauren, get us into position."

"Aye, Captain," she replied, eyes bright with excitement.

With far more skill than she had possessed mere hours ago, Lauren maneuvered the ship into position near the Aida crater, the remnant of an ancient impact that had left a 1.6-kilometer depression on Eros's surface. It was an ideal natural anchoring point for the tractor beam.

Applying a beam here made sense for several reasons. Most importantly, the impact had compressed the rock, reinforcing it against external forces. The crater's nearly central location also meant that applying force here wouldn't cause Eros to spin unpredictably, which would have made this entire operation exponentially harder.

I mentally overlaid a virtual targeting reticule onto the crater, marking the spot where we would apply the tractor beam. Unlike the *Enterprise*—and most ships in this quadrant of the galaxy—Federation starships typically relied on a single, primary tractor beam. That was fine for most, but I was a devoted worshiper of the Church of Overkill, and my ship had an unusual amount of power I could bring to bear.

I had designed the *Temptress* with three tractor beams—each independently powerful, allowing for fine manipulation of even something as large as Eros. But that was a capability we wouldn't be revealing today.

I would save that for an enemy I intended to annihilate to the last man, when there would be no witnesses.

Turning to Lauren, I studied her expression. She was focused, but I could see the tension in her shoulders, the way she was steeling herself for what was next.

"Are you sure you still want to do this?" I asked, keeping my tone neutral but reassuring.

Lauren nodded silently, taking a steadying breath as she braced herself.

"I'm going to apply a warp field to Eros to lighten the load. Get ready to engage the tractor beam at half power, Lauren," I ordered. "Normally, a tractor beam can pull an object toward us, but Eros is far too massive for that to work. Instead, once the beam is locked in and saturating deep into the asteroid, we'll engage the engines and gradually increase power until it starts moving."

Lauren already understood the plan, and the science behind it, but repeating it was a good way to ratchet down the tension and ensure that we were all on the same page.

"Understood," Lauren replied, her voice steady but focused.

She was still too new to the neural interface for me to trust her with the ship's warp systems, so with my children's help, I projected a controlled warp field around as much of Eros as I safely could, concentrating it around the Aida crater. The result significantly reduced the asteroid's effective mass, making it easier to manipulate.

"Imagine the tractor beam as your hand," I instructed. "Reach out and place it on the target. Don't overthink it. Just touch it—you don't need to push yet."

Lauren's digital face scrunched in concentration, her frustration growing as the minutes ticked by with no effect. The visual feed from the *Enterprise*'s bridge showed Picard's crew exchanging puzzled glances, though thankfully, their audio remained muted.

There was value in letting Lauren figure this out herself—forcing her to develop her own instinctive connection to the ship—but time was a factor. She needed a nudge.

I reached for her digital hand, guiding her mind into alignment with mine, letting her feel the way I moved through the *Temptress*'s systems, how I shaped my will into action. My presence enveloped hers, a deep and all-encompassing connection that made her gasp in surprise. It wasn't physical pleasure—such things were the domain of the real world—but it was a level of connection that would require poetry to even attempt to describe.

"Feel how I do it," I murmured, standing behind her, her back pressed against my chest. I raised her hand, interlocking our fingers, and guided her as we reached toward the Aida crater together.

The ship's tractor beam activated, extending into space and locking onto the asteroid's dusty surface.

"Do you feel it? Do you feel Eros?" I breathily and sensually whispered into her ear, like my words were fingers massaging her mind itself. In this digital space, it wasn't even hyperbole.

"I do," she breathed, staring at the asteroid. "I can feel her."

Her choice of pronoun for a giant space rock amused me, but considering how I interacted with the *Temptress* and my AI children, I didn't exactly have room to judge.

"I'm going to withdraw my influence now. Keep the beam steady," I instructed, slowly and carefully unlinking our fingers and slowly pulling away.

For a moment, the tractor beam flickered, losing cohesion—but then Lauren stabilized it, bringing it back to full power.

"Increase power to the engines by single percentage points," I ordered.

Lauren responded instantly, carefully increasing the impulse engines' output. Even with the warp field reducing Eros's mass, it still took 70% engine power before the asteroid began to even budge. Just like pushing a stalled vehicle, the hardest part was getting it to move. Once it did, momentum would do much of the work. In the vacuum of space, once moving, it'd continue moving.

The *Enterprise* did its part, using its own tractor beam to ensure Eros remained on course. Occasionally, it nudged the asteroid to correct for minor drift or to prevent unwanted spin. Together, we accelerated the asteroid until it was locked on the correct trajectory. Small course corrections might still be needed, but the hardest part of the task was complete.

Now, we just had to stop it before it wiped out the planet's entire population.

I unmuted the comm channel.

"I think we can call that a success, Captain," I said, allowing a smile to creep into my voice. "My compliments to you and your crew."

Picard took a few moments before unmuting his side.

"I agree, Admiral," he replied smoothly. "My compliments to you and yours as well."

"I'll send you the calculations for the deceleration maneuver when we're closer to the planet, though you already have the general parameters," I explained. "My ship may fall back a bit—I may let more of my crew take the helm while we wait for Eros to get closer."

Even though Eros was relatively close to Kessik IV, it would still take some time to reach its final position. Speeding it up would shorten the journey, but go too fast, and stopping it safely would become a much bigger problem.

"Understood. We'll keep Eros on course as needed. *Enterprise* out."

With that settled, I turned back to Lauren.

"Good work, Lauren," I said, genuinely impressed. "Dr. Gadot, please provide your report."

The doctor materialized in our digital space, her presence calm and clinical as always.

"Overall, I'm quite pleased with the data I collected," she said. "Lauren's enhanced mind handled the neural strain well. However, I did detect physical stress markers in her brain that grew concerning over time. While your physiology allows you to remain interfaced continuously, captain, I would recommend that Lauren limit herself to three-hour sessions at most, with a full twenty-four-hour recovery period in between."

I glanced at Lauren to gauge her reaction. She had been glowing with excitement moments ago, but now she looked distinctly disappointed at the imposed limitation.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said. "Dismissed."

Once Dr. Gadot disappeared, I turned back to Lauren, immediately sensing the shift in her mood.

"This was a success," I assured her. "You did incredibly well. Most humans can barely tolerate a few minutes in the neural interface, and even then, it's just like having a viewscreen in their head, with minor sensory input at best. You, on the other hand, had full control of the ship. That's impressive."

Lauren exhaled slowly, then smiled, the disappointment in her eyes softening as she absorbed the compliment.

She had done well.

And with more time and practice, she'd be even better.

"I know," she admitted after a long pause, her voice quieter now. "I just... I just want to be useful to you."

"You already are, Lauren," I said without hesitation. Stepping forward, I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into a warm embrace. "I've told you before, but I'll say it again—you don't owe me anything. You know that, right?"

She nodded against my chest, though she didn't say anything.

"All right," I said gently. "Let's disconnect from the ship. All you have to do is will it." I turned slightly. "Natasha, take over piloting."

Lauren closed her eyes, concentrating. A second passed. Then another. Then another ten.

After a moment, she peeked one eye open, glancing around cautiously before realizing nothing had changed. She looked sheepish, like a kid caught sneaking an extra cookie from the jar.

I couldn't help it—I laughed.

"It's not working," she whispered.

"Yeah, no shit," I chuckled before turning thoughtful.

"The helmet doesn't have an on/off switch," I reminded her gently. "It's mental. Which means... part of you doesn't actually want to disconnect."

Her expression fell, guilt flickering across her features as she averted her gaze.

"I feel so much more like this," she admitted, voice barely above a whisper. "Like I was blind my whole life... until now."

I nodded, understanding all too well. "It's a powerful thing, I know. You've experienced the universe in a way few organic beings ever will. You can look directly at a star without blinking. You can track the path of a quark from light-years away. You just helped move an asteroid fourteen thousand times the mass of Mount Everest. After that... being human again can feel small."

Lauren swallowed hard, her fingers curling slightly at her sides. "How did you... how did you come back from all this?"

"I reminded myself that for all the things I could do here, there were some things—some wonderful things—that I could only experience in my own body."

She gasped, eyes going wide.

Her breath hitched.

"What is that?" she whispered, her voice breathless with wonder, as though trying to comprehend a sensation she had no words for.

She was feeling something she shouldn't be feeling.

Because I hadn't moved.

"That's your body and the real world calling you back," I answered with a mischievous grin. "Specifically, my thumb circling your little clit."

She gasped again as she collapsed into my digital body.

"That was me fucking you with one finger, while playing with your little clit," I continued. "Now two fingers. Oh, you're really getting wet now."

She was practically shaking and unable to hold herself up now, so I did it for her.

"Now this is me playing with your clit, finger fucking you with two fingers, while flooding your tight little pussy with bliss energy," I explained.

The moment I hit her with the bliss energy, she threw back her head and howled, experiencing a powerful orgasm in the real world. After having spent hours in the digital ether of the ship's systems, physical sensation back 'in the real' would be quite amplified and intense for a while.

She disappeared not even a moment later, now having sufficient desire and incentive to return to the physical world.

“Ha! Well, that worked rather well,” I said to no one before I ratcheted down my neural connectivity to normal levels and returned to the real.

XXXXX

Main Shuttle Bay. Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*.

An overwhelming sense of déjà vu hit me as the main shuttle bay doors slid open.

My entire crew was monitoring the mobile construction yard as its many arms moved with exacting precision, assembling the first of our new weapon drones—designed specifically for combat against advanced starships. The framework of the drone floated at the center of the yard, surrounding and enveloping the drone, the antigrav field the yard project making each step of construction a little easier. Just as it was designed to do, the yard steadily expanded as the drone did.

What could be replicated was replicated mere moments before being slotted into place, with the yard’s arms moving in perfect synchronization to install components with machine-like efficiency. But not everything could be replicated. Certain precision-fabricated materials were being ferried in by B’Elanna’s holo-engineers, waiting at the perimeter for the exact moment their components were needed. This bottleneck was slowing things down, but otherwise, the entire operation was a symphony of efficiency.

I caught the eyes of my crew and made my way over.

“Making some progress, I see,” I said, nodding in approval.

“It’s coming together well, I have to admit,” B’Elanna replied, watching the drone take shape with obvious pride. “Some of the components had a learning curve—we made a few unrecoverable errors. Sorry.”

I shook my head, unfazed by the inevitable setbacks. Mistakes happened, and I wasn’t unreasonable. When it came to matters of my survival, I’d spend any amount of money and resources to see it done properly.

“I expected some issues,” I said, waving off her apology while keeping my gaze locked on the mesmerizing sight of the drone’s assembly. “We’ll do better on the next five.”

It had been fascinating to watch the *Temptress* built this way, and now my cargo fleet back on Minos was being constructed using the same technology.

And to think, all of this—the mobile construction yard, the automated assembly process—had stemmed from a one-off episode of *Star Trek: Enterprise*.

“Any trouble acquiring what we needed?” I asked aloud.

Annika frowned, clearly recalling something unpleasant.

“Per your orders, we’ve sourced everything we could locally,” she said. “But Kessik IV doesn’t have several critical components, so we’ve had to expedite shipments here. Almost every

transport carrying our orders has been stopped by a Starfleet ship en route for a ‘surprise inspection.’”

I sighed. “The Ferengi get stopped like that all the time. Their species’ reputation has consequences.”

Annika shook her head. “Only a few of the transport ships were Ferengi-owned. I specifically paid extra for Federation couriers, transports, and cargo ships to speed up delivery and avoid scrutiny where I could. *Every ship* carrying our orders has been stopped and inspected.”

That set off alarms.

“Every ship?” I asked with incredulity and mounting suspicion.

She nodded. “Every single one.”

I turned to T’Maz. “That’s not normal, is it?”

“It is not,” the Vulcan confirmed. “Deep within Federation space, Starfleet rarely stops Federation-flagged vessels for random inspections. With the fleet’s current redeployment across a dozen sectors after the Battle of Earth, this cannot be coincidence.”

I exhaled sharply through my nose. “Could Pressman be behind this? He’s been sniffing around shipyards all over the quadrant trying to figure out where we built the *Temptress*.”

T’Maz inclined her head. “Starfleet Intelligence has broad authority—especially during wartime. But even if that were not the case, one admiral requesting or calling in favors from another could accomplish the same.”

“Fucking Pressman,” I muttered. “He’s scanning everything, trying to piece together what we’re doing and trace it back to the source. Have there been any anomalies? Missing shipments? Legal pushback?”

I turned to B’Elanna. “Any issues with the purchases? Any losses during shipment?”

She shook her head. “Nothing beyond minor delivery delays. Everything arrived intact.”

I looked back at Annika. “Has anything been seized? Have we been flagged for violating trade laws or acquiring restricted strategic resources?”

“No,” she replied. “Some of the materials we purchased *are* classified as strategic resources, currently restricted in trade due to the Hur’q Invasion, but we sourced them from outside Federation borders via Ferengi intermediaries. That means they’re not subject to Federation trade restrictions. I made sure our lawyers provided all the necessary paperwork and permits in advance to every authority along their flight path.”

“That was smart,” I said with a nod and a smile. “Good work.”

Annika’s expression softened, like a pleased cat soaking in the praise.

So, it seems he hadn't yet decided to outright sabotage me or seize any of the shipments, I thought, before a troubling thought occurred to me.

"Tyr," I said aloud, and my faithful bodyguard was kneeling at my side.

"Command me, my Lord," he zealously replied.

"Scan everything we brought onboard recently," I commanded. "Look for any tracking or surveillance devices. Or anything that could be used to sabotage us."

"Your will be done, my Lord!" he said, before he shot up and ran out of the room, glancing at my crew suspiciously for a moment before obviously deciding they weren't a threat to my safety.

"Continue with your work, guys," I ordered. "I want those 6 drones built as soon as possible. When we get a chance we'll test them on our way back to Bajor."

XXXXX

Holodeck. Orbital Control Administration. Kessik IV.

Lord, this testing had become far more complicated and difficult than it ever needed to be, I thought, looking at Captain Picard, Lt. LaForge, Lt. Data, Captain Jellico, and others talking amongst themselves as we waited for all the observers to get through the enhanced security screening that was now required.

Looking back at the sheer number of ridiculous events that had unfolded, it made sense.

First, we discovered a cloaked Romulan scout ship in orbit of the planet.

Then, that ship self-destructed upon discovery and capture.

Then, we uncovered a Romulan spy in the testing room—who promptly committed suicide before we could interrogate him.

Then, the Romulan government threatened war over the deaths of these rogue elements, while simultaneously claiming that the defense net's cloaking technology violated the Treaty of Algeron.

Then, an assassination attempt on Kessik IV's government nearly killed thousands.

Then, a Starfleet admiral with a blatant prejudice against Augments did everything in his power to block the testing and the lease of the defense net.

When you laid it all out like that, a whole lot of shit had happened, hadn't it?

But finally—*finally*—we could move forward with the testing.

People began filing once more into the holodeck in the Orbital Control Administration building. There were noticeably more attendees than before, including new faces from the *Cairo*, but this time, security was airtight. Tyr was stationed outside the holodeck with Mr. Fitzwallace,

scanning each individual to confirm their identity right down to the genetic level before allowing them to enter. There had been some complaints about privacy, but I had put my foot down.

Given everything that had happened, I wasn't about to take any risks. President Moss and Mr. Fitzwallace had backed my decision completely. Moss had made it clear—if anyone wanted to witness the testing firsthand, they would have to submit to a thorough security screening, i.e., rather invasive. Otherwise, they could fuck right off and read Picard's report afterwards—assuming they had the required clearance.

Of course, she had phrased it far more diplomatically than that. But that was the gist of it.

I watched with amusement as Tyr methodically scanned each person, his usual paranoid zeal making more than a few of them visibly uncomfortable. His Breen armor, gruff demeanor, obvious weaponry, imposing seven-foot height, and an inability for most to understand his speech certainly weren't helping.

When Admiral Pressman stepped forward, I expected some protest, but aside from the intense scowl and look of indignation on his face, he said nothing. Moss must have anticipated trouble and gone straight to his superiors—probably the Federation President himself—to make sure Pressman didn't cause any problems.

Far more interesting to me than the silently fuming Pressman were the two unexpected VIP guests who had just been cleared by Tyr.

Ambassador Nyssara Vel of Betazed and Ambassador Velora Synne of Risa—of all places.

Velora Synne had only just arrived that day in a diplomatic transport vessel, making it clear that Risa had a vested interest in witnessing the testing of the GODS net. President Moss had formally accepted her credentials and invited her as a personal guest. The fact that Risa—a world that strictly prohibited weapons for anyone outside of on-duty Starfleet personnel—had sent a representative at all was surprising.

Nyssara Vel, on the other hand, had been here from the very beginning. We hadn't spoken directly, but she had been present at the reception on the *Enterprise*, standing among the group who had listened intently while I got on my soapbox with Picard. She had even supported my argument that, as time passed, the Federation public would forget the fear they had felt during the Hur'q invasion—and might eventually decide that defense nets were unnecessary or not worth the massive expense.

Both women were striking in their own ways, but more importantly, they were both highly skilled diplomats, especially the Risian ambassador. The Risians were a loving people, but it would be a terrible mistake to equate that love with weakness—many had found that out the hard way. If the profiles Hermione had compiled were even remotely accurate, I was looking at two of the most formidable diplomatic and political operators in the Federation. And if they were here, then Betazed and Risa were seriously considering the possibility of leasing my technology. You didn't send heavy hitters like them if you weren't seriously interested, you sent low-level aides or new personnel.

That was an opportunity I wasn't about to ignore.

Ambassador Vel's raven-black hair was sleek and straight, falling just past her shoulders, framing the deep obsidian eyes that marked her Betazoid heritage. She wore a flowing midnight-purple gown, its fabric shifting subtly in the light, revealing intricate patterns woven into the material—almost like the unseen currents of thought she so effortlessly perceived. At least, with everyone but me.

Silver embroidery traced the sigils of her Betazoid House along the sleeves and neckline, a quiet declaration of both lineage and status. A delicate diadem rested against her forehead, its centerpiece a single black opal—a symbol of noble heritage and the heightened telepathic abilities that set her apart.

While all Betazoids were telepathic, the strength of their telepathy could vary greatly amongst their people, to the barely telepathic, to the cripplingly powerful whose telepathy was active practically from birth. As you might expect, Betazed's diplomatic corps was filled with some of their race's most powerful telepaths, like Lwaxana Troi, considering how useful it was in their jobs.

Standing beside her, Ambassador Velora Synne embodied everything one might expect from a Risian diplomat—grace, charm, and an almost effortless ability to put others at ease. Her honeyed complexion seemed to capture the soft glow of any room she entered, while her large, sea-green eyes brimmed with warmth and intelligence. Subtle golden highlights wove through her chestnut-brown hair flowing freely behind her. A delicate silver pendant rested at her collarbone, etched with the Risian emblem for joy and exploration—a reflection of her people's guiding philosophy.

Though many might assume a Risian would favor light, flowing garments, Velora's ambassadorial attire blended traditional Risian elegance with diplomatic formality. She wore a deep sapphire-blue dress with a subtle iridescent sheen, inspired by the bioluminescent tides of Risa's oceans most likely. The gown draped fluidly around her form, with a high slit on one side—a nod to Risian fashion—while still maintaining an air of dignified sophistication. The neckline was adorned with delicate filigree, shimmering with gold and silver threads.

A sheer, translucent shawl of golden fabric cascaded from her shoulders, fastened by a small, intricately designed clasp in the shape of a Horga'hn. While the symbol suggested leisure and pleasure to outsiders, for Velora, it represented openness, hospitality, and the deep cultural roots of her people. Overall, it was both sexy and sophisticated.

The profiles Hermione had compiled on them had largely come from their speeches, writings, agreements they had brokered, and public appearances over the years.

Both Betazed and Risa were influential worlds within the Federation. If either—or, Q willing, both—chose to lease my technology, it would be a massive victory, one that would force many other Federation worlds to take serious notice. More so, even, than Kessik IV's inevitable adoption of the GODS net.

Both of these long-time operators knew how fickle the Federation public was and probably wanted to make a decision while it would still be paid for by the Federation government. Who knew what could happen in even just a few months' time.

As I debated whether to approach them, the decision was taken out of my hands. They were already walking toward me.

"Admiral Gothic, hello," Ambassador Vel greeted with composed elegance. "We wanted to introduce ourselves formally before testing begins. I am Ambassador Nyssara Vel of Betazed," she said before gesturing to the smiling woman beside her. "And this is Ambassador Velora Synne of Risa."

"Madame Ambassadors, I'm honored to meet you," I returned with a small bow of my head. "Thank you for coming today."

Ambassador Synne's smile was warm and inviting. "It is our honor to meet you, Admiral, and mine in particular. Your name is revered among my people."

That caught me off guard. I felt my confusion reflected back at me as my AI children, in response to my silent inquiry, returned the digital equivalent of a shrug.

"Forgive me, Madame Ambassador, but I don't understand," I admitted.

"Many in the galaxy think of Risa as a place of meaningless indulgence, of fleeting pleasures," she said, her tone light yet purposeful, seemingly ignoring my question. "But to us, our way of life is about something greater—the embrace of happiness, not just for ourselves, but for those around us. We believe that joy is not a selfish pursuit. It is something meant to be shared, cultivated, nurtured."

I nodded, finding myself agreeing quite strongly with her words.

"It's not about sex and hedonism, it's about connection with others, of shared joy," I elaborated.

"Yes, exactly," she agreed, her smile warm and radiant. "It is about living fully, with intention and harmony—not just with ourselves, but with each other, with our world, with the very universe itself. Conflict and war become unthinkable when you truly love another, even a stranger."

Her expression dimmed, sorrow overtaking her features. "Our dear friends, the Halkans, understood this. They lived that truth, wholly and without compromise. And yet, their lives were taken—perhaps with indifference, perhaps with cruelty—by those who neither understood nor cared for the beauty of their existence, how vital and important their threads were in this great tapestry of life."

My own expression fell. I had never realized the Risians and Halkans shared such a deep bond, though in hindsight, their philosophies aligned almost perfectly.

"You have my deepest condolences, Madame Ambassador," I offered sincerely. "I too saw their deaths as a great tragedy. I mourn with you."

"Thank you, Admiral. We mourn even for the Romulan lives lost," she replied, inclining her head. "The Halkans came to witness the GODS net not to seek power, not to wield destruction, but simply to protect. We seek the same."

She paused for a moment before continuing, her voice calm but resolute.

"Harmony is our guiding principle. So, please, do not misunderstand us. We do not seek conflict, nor revenge, as we do not allow the burdens of the past to weigh down the present. Instead, we flow with the tides of life, like the nourishing rains that sustain our world."

Her gaze drifted momentarily, as if seeing something beyond our conversation.

"Many misunderstand our openness," she said, her voice softer now. "They see only the surface, taking everything we freely offer, but true Risian philosophy is about freedom—not just the freedom of movement, but the freedom of the soul. Freedom from fear, from judgment, from unnecessary suffering. We believe life should be lived with deliberate purpose, that we should surround ourselves with beauty, kindness, and experiences that make existence meaningful."

She exhaled gently, as though releasing a weight from her shoulders.

"Art, music, and conversation are as much a part of our culture as the oceans and the twin suns and moons above us. A shared meal, a day spent watching the shifting clouds, an evening of quiet contemplation, the connection granted by physical love and pleasure—these are just as valuable as grand adventures in the stars. We cherish each moment for what it is, without wishing it to be something else."

Her expression darkened.

"But our philosophy is about *life*," she said, steel creeping into her voice, "and the Hur'q—and those like them—would deprive us of it. Not out of necessity. Not out of survival. But with cold, indifferent cruelty."

Her sea-green eyes met mine, searching.

"We do not demonize the predator that hunts to survive," she said. "But a sentient race, one with intelligence and technology, has countless choices that do not require them to consume the lives of others. To eat them—even while they still live."

I nodded slowly, understanding the full weight of her words.

"I share this so that you can better understand our purpose."

"My understanding was that the Halkans wished to use only the defensive capabilities of the GODS net," I stated carefully. "The planetary shielding alone. Do you seek the same?"

She hesitated, her gaze lowering for the first time.

"We greatly admire the Halkans, their dedication to their ideals—even at the cost of their own lives. But we... are not yet ready to follow their path completely," she admitted, the words tinged

with something like regret. "Perhaps that is a great failing of ours, to cling so strongly to life even at the cost of others. I do not know."

I frowned slightly. "I'm not sure I understand, Madame Ambassador."

She took a measured breath before meeting my gaze again.

"Pending the results of this test," she said, "if we choose to lease your technology, we would make full use of all its capabilities. But we do not wish to be the ones to control it directly... to take lives with our own hands, even in defense of our own."

Realization struck me.

"You intend to activate the auto-defense mode and leave it on permanently," I said, more a statement than a question.

She nodded, looking pleased that her words had reached me.

I had wondered why she was sharing so much about her people's philosophies, unasked for even, but it had all been intended to allow me to come to this realization.

"We do."

The auto-defense mode was originally designed as a last-resort contingency, a safeguard for times of planetary emergency, catastrophe, or large-scale assault—when the normal command hierarchy was disrupted or wiped out entirely. If no one was available—or alive—to direct the defense net, it would autonomously protect the planet from active threats.

There was a well-structured default activation protocol in place, but each leasing world had the ability to customize or disable it entirely. For instance, if President Moss and her entire command structure were killed, in hiding, or otherwise unable to respond to threats, the system would engage automatically. The planetary shield would deploy instantly, and if no leadership remained to issue commands, the network would neutralize any attacking ships as efficiently and mercilessly as possible. What 'neutralizing' meant, of course, could be decided by the leasing planet. That could mean simply disabling them and their ability to fight back or escape, or outright destroying them and vaporizing any escape pods that might have survived.

What I hadn't anticipated, however, was a leasing planet choosing to activate that mode from the outset and leaving it on permanently—essentially as a way to keep their hands clean.

If the defense net eliminated attackers autonomously, without any sentient directly commanding the action, could the leasing world claim they bore no moral responsibility for the deaths? It was a fine distinction, one that philosophers and ethicists might debate for years. I didn't particularly care. That was a question for them to answer, not me.

What no one knew—and what I would never tell them—was that auto-defense mode was far less automated than they assumed. Every defense net I deployed had a quantum-entangled link to my systems, meaning my AI children were the intelligence behind those "autonomous" actions.

And my children were powerful.

They could analyze complex battlefield conditions in nanoseconds, adapting tactics in real-time, countering even the most unpredictable enemies. If Risa activated the auto-defense mode, their safety would be in exceptionally capable hands.

Of course, my AI children would defer to me if guidance was needed or there were broader implications that could affect me or some larger strategic purpose or goal, but otherwise, they would act instantly to protect the leasing planet.

"I admit, I hadn't anticipated a leasing world using auto-defense mode in that manner," I said. "But I believe it would meet Risa's needs. You could also modify the protocols to favor disabling enemy ships rather than destroying them, if that aligns better with your philosophy."

Ambassador Synne shook her head, almost regretfully.

"As you might imagine, many among our people will question whether leasing a system capable of lethal force is truly in line with our beliefs," she explained. "We saw what happened to our fellow Federation citizens on Kessik IV and Earth—the suffering inflicted by thoughtless violence. And our dear friends, the Halkans, lost sons and daughters to the same kind of casual cruelty."

She exhaled, voice steady but heavy with meaning.

"If this test is as effective as I believe it will be, our people as a whole will vote on whether to lease your technology. But if we do, we will not involve ourselves in its operation—not even to adjust the default auto-defense parameters. If it acts in our defense, it must do so without our hands guiding it, or else it would be as if we caused that harm ourselves. We joined the Federation itself with the same goal, even knowing how militant it was in that era."

I nodded, understanding the moral complexity they faced.

"I appreciate the delicate nature of this decision for your people," I said. "Whatever you require, we will accommodate."

"Thank you, Admiral."

A flicker of curiosity crossed my mind.

"May I ask what you meant earlier when you said your people revere me?"

Both women exchanged amused smiles, as if I had just told a joke.

Ambassador Vel spoke for the first time in a while.

"After my dear friend Ambassador Troi sang its praises to anyone who would listen, your bliss baton technology has become immensely popular on Betazed," she said, a knowing gleam in her eye.

I blinked.

"Our people did not need an endorsement from such a prominent figure," Synne added with a warm smile and a twinkle in her eyes. "It is the first major innovation in decades that truly enhances connection and joy through technology, even among the most diverse peoples, of all ages and races. I believe you will find it impossible to spend money on Risa should you visit again. Our world is already welcoming to all, but you... would be received even more warmly."

I raised my eyebrows in genuine surprise—even as Natasha and Hermione giggled like schoolgirls in the back of my mind. My goal had been to create and sell a product for profit, but inadvertently, it seemed, I had contributed a new tool to ‘enhancing joy’, perhaps in a field that hadn’t seen many new major innovations since the invention of the dildo.

"I am honored to have... contributed in that regard," I said carefully, struggling to find the right words.

Both ambassadors laughed at my reaction.

"We will leave you to your work, Admiral," Synne said, her voice rich with amusement. "I know how difficult it has been to complete these tests."

"Thank you, Madame Ambassadors," I said with a respectful bow. "If you ever wish to continue this conversation, I would be honored to know you both better."

"Perhaps," Ambassador Vel replied with an intriguing smile before they both turned and walked toward their seats.

I was still turning over the implications of this unexpected conversation when someone stepped up behind me.

"If you can deliver on your promises today, Admiral," President Moss said smoothly, "it seems you may have a few more planets lined up after us."

It wasn’t exactly a jump scare, but it was a near thing considering how much of my thoughts were on working out the many future implications of that conversation.

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

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

I arched an eyebrow at the charged words.

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

Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

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

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

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

“Yes, let's do that,” I replied.

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

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

Almost.