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The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 33

The Bridge. Onboard the new *Flighty Temptress*. Hanger Bay. Gothic's Palace Fortress. Unnamed Island. Bajor.

"So, in short, this ship isn't going anywhere," I summarized with a frown on my face, looking between B'Elanna and Ro Laren, asking for confirmation.

My new Chief Engineer, B'Elanna Torres, had just spent the last half an hour providing me with an exceedingly in-depth explanation as to why the new and improved *Flighty Temptress*, whose construction had been completed right on-time, just didn't work as it was supposed to, well, at least with regard to its quantum slipstream drive. I really shouldn't have been surprised, though I really was, having a string of successes lately had obviously lulled me into a bout of arrogance that my kind was so famous for. I had tried to guard against that kind of thinking, as it led to ruin, but had obviously failed.

I had to remind myself that the new FT was a prototype, the first of its kind in this universe, working out these teething issues had always been a practical certainty and I needed to get over myself. Looking back, admittedly, perhaps I'd gone a tiny bit overboard during the design phase. The more complex you made something, the greater chance for something to go wrong. But, come on, this was a fucking starship and one that used many new alien technologies, complex was the name of the game.

The true issue here, if I understood B'Elanna correctly, wasn't one of energy generation. The main power core, containing a harnessed micro-singularity as its beating heart, one I'd stolen from a Collector battlefield and later improved, produced a truly ridiculous amount of power that I could scarcely hope to overtax, even with all the ship's weapons firing simultaneously for hours. The networked, but independent, secondary power systems, provided even more of a safety net should the ship suffer catastrophic battle damage that affected main power.

It wasn't even that that the different technologies, a mix of Federation, Minosian, Collector, and Husnock, were incompatible either or had been thrown together without care. I'd run countless simulations preparing for that possibility and had tweaked and upgraded and modified various bits and bobs to the point where the original race's engineers would probably struggle to recognize their own tech.

No, the real problem here was that the computer system simply couldn't supply the sheer amount of computational processing power required to safely fly the ship at slipstream velocities. It was a depressingly predictable and well anticipated problem, given that Voyager had struggled with this exact issue, an issue that they had eventually become the cause of their own destruction in one defunct timeline in the prime Star Trek universe. I *thought* that I had found the solution for it in the Husnock database, a race which routinely used this technology. Hopefully, history

wouldn't repeat itself with my ship; the Voyager crew had once thought that they too had figured this shit out, or at least a passable workaround. Pride comes before the fall and all that.

Torres' expression in response to my question was a strange mix of frustration and happiness.

"Oh, it will fly, Gothic, don't misunderstand me. The design you created represents an incredible step forward in starship design. There are so many improvements and innovations and enhancements contained in it, including ones that just seem so obvious in hindsight!! Seriously, seatbelts and an independent power system just for the bridge, why did no one think of that before?!" Torres practically shouted, looking terribly excited as she praised my work. "It's an incredible achievement for any starship designer, much less someone's first go at it. If your work ever gets out, you'd win the Daystrom Prize in a heartbeat!"

That thought made me both excited and cringe in terror. A lot of advanced technologies went into the design of the *Flighty Temptress*, ones beyond the publicly known capabilities of most alpha quadrant species. Any one of these advanced technologies, if it became known that I had them, from particle synthesis-based replication/holography, to long-range transporters, to the quantum slipstream propulsion technology, would see me hunted to the ends of the galaxy with glee. Powerful people, criminal organizations, independent races, and multi-planetary governments would happily do anything, including killing me, to get their hands on any of these technologies. What they couldn't accomplish directly through legal channels or force of arms, they'd try to achieve through subterfuge. The latter was exceedingly hard to guard against in the long-term. History had proven that over and over and over again.

And I, unfortunately, didn't have any kind of powerful government or backer to protect me or give them much pause. No, I only had my reputation. The Bajorans could barely protect themselves and I was only tenuously a Federation citizen, nor was I part of Starfleet. If I gave these technologies to the Federation, in exchange for that protection, it may spark a quadrant spanning war, while also giving up my personal advantages. People like Picard may even choose to share those technologies to prevent war.

In the long-term I really needed to think about claiming a moon or a planet of my own, one that I had complete control over and the resources to fortify and defend. I shook my head at that ridiculous idea. Talk about biting off more than I could chew.

While I had been having a bit of an existential crisis, B'Elanna had continued to share her thoughts on my new ship.

"You could fly circles and barrel roll and flip side-to-side around any ship in the quadrant, even a small fighter craft, especially with the ridiculous number of power-hungry inertial dampers and compensators you included in the ship's design! If you hadn't used that Collector power core none of it would have been possible," Torres said, sharing her thoughts and continuing to praise my work. "You did an amazing job designing this ship and meshing together some incredibly advanced technologies."

"What are your thoughts on its martial abilities?" I asked, eager to get her opinion there.

"Beyond being nimble and incredibly maneuverable, every simulation says it will fight like a *beast* too," she answered, obviously not as interested in the weapon systems as I was, or perhaps this technical hurdle to overcome with the slipstream drive was so much more interesting to her. "But back to the slipstream issue. Even if slipstream velocities aren't possible right now, the ship still has a very high maximum warp speed of 9.95 easily. It can cruise at that speed practically indefinitely with your power systems, but there's no single computer in the entire Federation that can handle this ship if you want to use its slipstream drive. There are just too many real-time calculations for any computer to keep up with in the time available before we're all killed. Even with the improved neural gel packs you used, which are simply amazing by the way-" she gushed.

"Explain that," I interrupted, obviously still not fully understanding, when I thought I had specifically prepared for this issue.

"From what I've learned from the technical materials you've given me and what I've been able to figure out on my own, the slipstream drive essentially routes energy through the main deflector, which focuses a quantum field in front of the ship like a sharp knife, allowing the ship to penetrate the quantum barrier from real space and once inside, continue to cut a path to travel through the quantum realm. That is what allows a ship using this technology to travel so quickly from one point to another. The real trick is that once you're inside that quantum realm and traveling the slipstream, the phase variance of the quantum field needs to be constantly adjusted because large gravitational fields in real space, like those created by a planet or a star or a black hole, etc., can and do affect the quantum realm and the slipstream. Large gravity signatures reach into and affect the higher dimensions, like the quantum realm! That's a huge discovery on its own! The faster you go in the slipstream, meaning commensurately traveling larger distances in real space, relatively speaking, and thus statistically encountering more and more gravitational fields, the faster those calculations need to be made to adjust the quantum field to continue traveling, or cutting, if you will, the path of the slipstream," Torres quickly and breathlessly explained.

I was following here, though I was drawing heavily on what I'd learned from watching Star Trek: Voyager, so I had a bit of advantage. It was amazing how quickly she had come to understand this ultra-advanced technology. Admittedly, she had the technical writings from a race that understood and utilized this technology to study, but that didn't in any way diminish her accomplishment. It was testament again to her engineering brilliance that she learned the intricacies and science behind this technology so quickly.

I tried to sum it up again, "And failure to make those calculations and adjustments quickly enough, relative to the speed the ship is traveling in the slipstream, will mean the ship inside the slipstream or quantum realm will be violently ejected back into real space, right into the large object in real space that generated that gravitational field and thus the need for the phase variance adjustment in the first place."

"Exactly!" she answered with a large smile, her brilliant engineering mind obviously in awe of this giant step forward in faster than light propulsion. Her smile dimmed considerably at the next logical thought. "Right into a planet, or a star, or a black hole, which would almost certainly mean the ship's destruction...and all our deaths."

“Well, that’s not good,” I joked quietly, with a serious expression on my face.

“No, it’s really not.” she agreed. “Conversely, this propulsion technology is actually perfect for traveling the void between galaxies as there are no gravitational fields to take into account.”

That was quite an interesting thought, but one I really had no interest in pursuing at this time.

She continued, “The funny thing about this technology is that the speed you achieve in the slipstream isn’t really so much about throwing power at it anymore, though that’s partly true because the more power available to the impulse drive and the thrusters the faster you’ll go in the slipstream, but with that increased speed comes the need to make those phase variance calculations that much quicker...or you die. The true limiter here isn’t so much about energy anymore, but computational power and the speed at which the phase variance calculations are made.”

This was another reminder, or perhaps a confirmation, that at the very highest levels of propulsion, it wasn’t about traditional power generation anymore. It was in line with that famous bit of dialog that Wesley Crusher had once said to the Traveler in an episode of TNG, ‘That space and time and thought...aren’t the separate things they appear to be.’ The Traveler had responded to this with alarm, saying ‘Boy, don’t ever say that again, especially not at your age in a world that’s not ready for such...dangerous nonsense.’

The Traveler, with just the capabilities of the *Enterprise*, had traveled billions of light years in just a few moments, and had even entered a quantum realm where thought became reality. Relatively speaking, the Collector micro-singularity power core at the heart of the new FT was many times more powerful than the *Enterprise*’s warp core, but at this level of advanced propulsion, it really didn’t matter. It was more about the math now and the abstract.

With these heady thoughts, I turned my mind back to the here and now. I was less concerned with traveling billions of light years or a hundred galaxies over to the galactic east with the power of my mind, than I was just traveling fast through *this* one galaxy. In a few centuries or millennia, if I was still around, maybe then I’d have the inclination to engage in the exploration of such ‘dangerous nonsense.’

So, in essence, the FT’s computer was too dumb, too slow, for the needs of the ship’s slipstream drive... but how was that possible? I took the drive and the advanced computer design architecture from a real Husnock vessel, one that, presumably, successfully used this propulsion technology to get around. After a minute or two of intense thought, I realized my error and it was a big one and I felt like doing the traditional facepalm. Like most things in hindsight, it was kind of obvious.

The Husnock ship that I had grabbed those designs from had been a vessel 10x larger than the *Enterprise*, which similarly had a computer core commensurate with its size. When I had scaled down the computer to fit my much physically smaller starship, I had not realized that a computer core that large had not truly been *needed* to run a ship that large, but had been needed to complete the incredibly processor intensive calculations necessary for slipstream travel at this

drive's top speed. I had scaled the computer core down to a *laptop*, because of the obvious size limitations on a smaller ship, but I needed a fully tricked out gaming *desktop* or even a mainframe.

The real question, knowing now what I did, was just how did *Voyager* manage to maintain its brief flights at slipstream velocities if their main computer core was so inferior to my own? It couldn't just be plot armor, could it??

I suppose I'd never know for certain, but if I had to make a guess, I *strongly* suspected that the answer was that Arturis' people, a species biologically gifted with language, including computational languages, had developed some method or formula or new math altogether to far more efficiently calculate the phase variance of the slipstream tunnel and thus *Voyager* had unknowingly benefited from that race's superior method without even realizing it, because they'd learned it from the fake Starfleet ship right in front of them. To a race using this technology, that knowledge was probably worth going to war for, in fact, the Husnock would probably gleefully conquer a race just for that method. Thus, *Voyager's* inferior computer was just powerful enough to handle it, at least at the lower slipstream speeds.

The Husnock had likely never come up with (or stolen) that more efficient method of calculating the slipstream's phase variance and simply threw more power and a bigger computer with greater processing power at the problem to resolve it. It was an inelegant, but effective solution; you had to admire its simplicity on some level. Since I was using their designs, I had the same problem to overcome now.

"We need a better computer then," I spoke out loud. "Something more advanced."

It wouldn't be that simple if her shaking head and sigh were anything to go by.

"It's not so much that we need a computer core more *advanced*. I've studied this computer core closely; its alien architecture is probably 50 years or more more advanced than anything the Federation has or even conceived of, it just needs to be *bigger*, in order to handle the intensive processing needed for this ship's speeds at slipstream. Starfleet uses the most advanced mobile computers in their starships that credits can buy and this ship's computer core makes them all look like antiquated *trash*, it's just that it has a bigger job to do, in a shorter span of time, than its computational power can handle at the higher slipstream speeds," the half Klingon explained.

Her defending the capabilities and good reputation of my ship made me laugh a little on the inside; she obviously considered the ship her baby now, and like a proud mama bear no one was going to cast aspersions on her baby, not even me, her owner, designer, and captain.

"The problem is we can't scale the computer core up. The ship is only so big, even with the extra space you wisely incorporated for future upgrades or new systems. Sure, there are older races out there, with better technology in smaller sizes, but they wouldn't sell or trade with us any more than we would with a race centuries behind us in development. Even in those ultra-rare cases where they don't have something like the Prime Directive, we just don't have anything that they would want in trade."

There were ultra-advanced races like the Voth in the Delta Quadrant, but they were far away and were unlikely to hand over their tech no matter what I could give them in return. Besides why poke those sleeping dragons? Best to remain unknown to them altogether lest you be *eaten* or stepped on by accident.

"The bottom line is that while we could probably scale it up by building a larger, more powerful computer with your replication and construction technology to handle the slipstream calculations, it just wouldn't *fit* inside the ship," she explained, looking contrite. "It sounds like a silly problem, doesn't it?"

When I had built the ship, I had used the design philosophy the U.S. Navy from my time period used with their aircraft carriers, huge and incredibly expensive ships meant to be in service for many decades, meaning adding about 50% extra space in key areas to allow for future upgrades or new systems. I had never anticipated needing to scale up the computer core this much, though, but perhaps there was a simpler solution to this problem.

"We might not be able to scale up the main computer core enough to do the job and still fit it inside, but I did build in extra space throughout the ship for future upgrades. What about a series of smaller computers, distributed throughout the ship, that can take the processing burden from specific systems away from the main computer core when traveling at slipstream and thus free up that processing power for phase variance calculations?" I suggested to the engineer. "You know, like a computer meant for the shields, for the weapons, for the holodecks, for life support, and so on."

B'Elanna gave it some thought, looking intrigued at the unconventional idea.

"We already have a secondary computer to handle communications, life support and a few other minor but vital systems, in an emergency backup capacity only," she explained softly, deep in thought. "But what you're talking about is taking that a step further and having computers built for specialized roles. Since the main computer core only needs the extra processing power at slipstream speeds, we could network the main computer core and secondary computer cores together to buttress each other when in slipstream. That might actually result in a significant increase in capacity when not in slipstream..." she said, trailing off, obviously thinking about what simulations she'd need to run to see if that were true. "It's an intriguing idea and might just work, but we still can't just replicate these secondary computer cores even with your advanced replication technology. There are several rare and exotic materials involved in their construction that still can't be replicated and I'm pretty sure we exhausted the entire supply you had on-hand here building the main computer core and other ship systems."

Having one big computer core to handle *everything* always seemed like a huge weakness to me, even if there were some secondary cores to handle some vital systems. Life support being handled by a secondary computer was always smart and something the Federation already did; meaning if the main computer went down for whatever reason, or was stolen like that one Voyager episode, you wouldn't suffocate or freeze to death before you could repair the main computer.

I could ask Sisko to borrow a runabout and make a run to Treasure Island for some of the needed materials, but assuming he said yes, that would leave records of my travel and even if I was willing to take such a risk, not everything I needed was in my current inventory. I had acquired the various materials I needed for the new FT over the course of the last year on the commodities market. If I had to do that again, it could result in a significant delay, especially if I staggered my purchases in order to continue hiding my true intentions.

"Your plan could be a solution, though I'll have to run some simulations to confirm," she said after a while, both of us quiet in thought. "Assuming it checks out, I could beam them into place, install them and network them together without having that strange construction yard of yours take the ship apart again, but I can't see it being cheap. You will need a lot of rare and exotic materials to build them even with your replication technology."

That could be a problem and would likely take a good bit of time to source all the needed materials. Building the new *Flighty Temptress* had exhausted my supply of many non-replicable materials and these weren't materials all that easy to acquire in the first place, especially as they needed an extremely high degree of purity and refinement and thus were highly restricted given how easily they could be misused. The Collector attacks had also affected the supply in the alpha quadrant as every power and independent planet reacted to the incursions by hoarding strategic materials and/or restricting their sale in case they were needed in the short-term.

"What if I bought these secondary computer cores from the Federation instead of just procuring the non-replicable materials? Could they then be also upgraded using the alien computer technology? Would that be easier than building something from scratch?" I asked.

That course of action might save me quite a bit of time and money, especially since I already had a lot of Federation credits. The Federation's inexplicable sluggishness to prepare for war, for once, was something I could take advantage of, though I may need to ask Section 31 for a favor, to ensure the deal actually went through. The plan had always been to keep that organization as much in the dark as possible, but it seemed like I might not have a choice. Owing a smallish favor to an organization like Section 31 was not something I was keen on, because they absolutely knew how the game of favors was played and would call in that marker when it suited them, probably at a time when it was most inconvenient for me. I much preferred to be in the place of the one who was owed the favor for that exact reason.

"I *should* be able to upgrade them using the main computer core as a guide, but at a guess, we'd need at least five top of the line computers, as in the best the Federation can supply for a ship maybe a class or two below yours in size since these won't be the main computer core for your ship. Assuming it's even approved, five computer cores ordered from Mars would take a lot of credits even if we can deal with the shipping."

"Let me worry about that part," I said.

Most heavy industry was done on Mars these days, which was why Starfleet kept its premier shipyard there. You could buy restricted technology from Mars, like advanced computer cores, assuming you had a lot of credits, but you had to be at least allied with the Federation like Bajor

was, otherwise the selection was limited to obsolete technology from a few generations ago. And they would *never* sell weapons to a non-member world, no matter how much you paid. Sure, the Federation liked to think it was above such base commerce with aliens, but in reality they indulged in vigorous trade just like anyone else and needed to in order to acquire the many things it needed.

"We'll have to make the purchase part of a much larger order for the Bajoran Militia," I mused aloud. "Maybe get some items for the station that we've needed for a while now. Hopefully it will look like it's all part of my job and in direct response to the recent Collector attack on the station; the timing will help sell that. With the Collector attack fresh in everyone's mind I should be able to justify it, though I'll have to loan Bajor the money to make the purchase."

That was how militaries hid their secret procurement in my day, or so I assumed; you hid what you didn't want anyone to see tucked in with a bunch of other stuff that could be important but otherwise looked ordinary and routine.

"That would have to be a relatively large order," Ro Laren said from over on the other side of the bridge, having remained silent for all of this conversation thus far, listening closely to us explain the problem. "Can you afford it?"

I brought up my VIs, Emma and Scarlett, in order to find out. Emma in her slutty Hogwarts outfit and Emma in her Black Widow leather cat suit holographically appeared in the middle of the bridge, to which I posed Ro's question, after explaining the situation.

"We're not business-oriented VIs," Scarlett pointed out. "It's not as easy as seeing if the account balance is high enough right now to make the purchase. You have dozens of daily and highly variable influxes and outfluxes of money due to several different ventures and complex investments, most notably with the omni-tool manufacture and distribution ramp up. I was created to be the avatar for the original *Flighty Temptress* and Emma the Palace Fortress on Bajor, and while we do have limited learning abilities, this may be too outside our normal scope."

Slutty Emma nodded reluctantly in agreement.

"I'm personally far more concerned with our lack of long-range sensor data," Emma said. As the VI for my island and in charge of the galaxy map system these days, getting more data was always on her mind.

Scarlett had her own two cents to give, "We need to be worrying about the Collector attacks; we need to find the source of them and shut them down before they can attack us or Bajor."

Again, this was expected. As the avatar of my warship, she was far more concerned with the martial aspect of things.

A valid concern, however without a fully functional working starship available to me I couldn't go anywhere fast, so it was all moot, though B'Elanna had said that the warp drive was fully

functional. I explained to the VI while reminding myself that while they seemed very life-like, they were in fact simply a more interactive means of interfacing with the computer systems at the Fortress and on this ship with a greater ability to carry out ongoing tasks I assigned without constant direction and input. They were both still intentionally shackled and locked down tight to prevent them from evolving into something approaching true AI. Hermione's restrictions had been loosened significantly as a test, though, with regard to the galaxy map technology.

We were all still alive, thankfully.

A very close inspection of her logs showed that none of my fears or the fears of many a science fiction movie were likely to occur with the laws and restrictions I built into them. With a healthy amount of fear in my heart, I had both modified and gone beyond Asimov's 3 laws. Instead of humanity, their focus would be on my welfare and survival and those I cared about, but including a core component which emphasized empowering me and preserving my agency as a fundamental concern. There would be no creative interpretation of the laws in such a way that they kept me in stasis as a prisoner in a misguided effort to protect me from everyone and everything, for example. And in the event that they did go off the rails, I had built in inviolable safeguards that I could assert in various ways, everything from temporarily shutting them down, to direct control, to outright permanent deletion/termination.

Scarlett was part of both the primary and secondary computer systems on this ship so her efforts were already divided. As for Emma, she was busy running the fortress and its many recently upgraded systems, especially the long-range Husnock style sensors which were always on collecting data, to collecting and collating data from the many different races allied against the Collectors so that she could update my personal galaxy map. So far she had been doing an excellent job of it, better than I could have hoped for, though that might be because of the huge computer core available to her on the island. There had been no lack of space there so I had gone a bit overboard when I got the advanced Husnock computer designs.

That reminded me, if I was not going to make the time to hire real people to maintain my palace fortress and grounds, which was a giant security risk if I ever heard one, then I needed to install some emitters in the palace and on the grounds and create some holo-servants and gardeners and shit to take care of the place. The holo-engineer programs the Husnock used were robust enough to be copied and re-tasked with a job as simple as gardening and cleaning of the palace. A holo-chef to make meals sounded like a worthwhile project too as a matter of fact, since I was growing a lot of food on my island. Once the holo-emitters were in place, I could even use them for security purposes.

My mind was all over the place these days coming up with new projects! It was annoying at times like this when I already had a large problem to solve.

"While it would be good to know where the Hur'q are, I am *not* here to defend the galaxy from them," I reminded everyone. "I'm having a hard enough time looking after just Bajor, DS9, and myself."

I spent a moment thinking about my options. I was going to need more money and soon, even with my supply of credits, which meant selling more of my inventions to the quadrant, possibly through Grand Nagus Zek again. Even with my partnership with Zek to ease the burden, creating and ramping up a quadrant-wide business was causing me to hemorrhage capital at an alarming rate. I would see those investments pay off, in time, but it would take *time*. Cash flow issues was the number one cause of new business failures in my time, and that hadn't changed in the 24th century. Ah well. The financial software I had written for my holdings said I'd probably be all right. If worse came to worst I could sell some of my long-term stock holdings or tap into my dark money reserves from Section 31 to cover any shortfall. While on that subject...

"Laren come here," I ordered, after using my armor systems to replicate a device I'd been working on for a while now, but had been too embarrassed to share with anyone. It was one of many 'let's see if I can do it' kinds of inventions I'd created while playing with and reverse engineering some alien device.

She did as ordered and her trust in me was so great, she didn't even move when I lightly jabbed her with the baton-like device in my hand, the thin fabric of her duty uniform offering no protection from the energy discharge. The energy release lit up her skin and clothes in a soft blue spreading effervescence, but only made her smile lustfully, giggle, and moan salaciously in response.

"That looks like a Klingon painstik!!" B'Elanna half yelled in alarm, jumping away from me in alarm and looking extremely confused after she witnessed Laren's unanticipated...reaction...to it.

Well, it certainly looked like one, because it kind of was, in a sense. At least it had started that way, and had been the starting device I'd been inspired by.

"Yep! It looks like one, because it started off as one, before I extensively modified the design," I told the two ladies with a large smile and a laugh. Laren still looked a bit loopy and that smile looked like it would take a lot of hard work to get rid of. Had I set it too high?? "Shortened it and made the energy discharge glow blue, rather than red. Unlike the original painstik, which stimulates the nerve endings to produce agonizing pain, it actually does the opposite and produces pleasure of varying, controllable intensity."

Basically, it was a high-tech 24th century sex toy now, or massage tool, depending on how you used it or what name you were most comfortable with. I had a feeling the Risians would be some of my biggest customers.

"You turned a painstik...into a *sex toy*?!" B'Elanna asked incredulously. She looked confused, horrified, and maybe even a bit humored at the very idea, all in equal measure. Her reaction probably had a lot to do with her mixed feelings regarding her Klingon ancestry. "Good Lord, Gothic, you realize that the Klingons will go crazy about this! It's a *ritual* object to them. They use the painstik in some of their most sacred rituals, like the Rite of Ascension, the Sonchi ceremony to confirm the death of a Klingon Chancellor, the Ritual of Twenty Painstiks on the Day of Honor, and many others!"

“I had no idea you were so familiar with Klingon rituals?” I observed, surprised at B’Elanna’s knowledge about the Klingon culture.

“My mother wouldn’t let me forget it, no matter how much I may have wanted to,” B’Elanna grumbled quietly, now looking embarrassed.

“It’s not, strictly speaking, *a sex toy*,” I demurred. “More like an advanced massage tool, though I suspect it will probably be inserted vaginally and rectally. The humanoid female has more nerve endings in the vagina than anywhere else, after all. I really should alter the design to accommodate that.”

Ro Laren looked intrigued, B’Elanna just blushed, looked exasperated and embarrassed, like she desperately wanted to facepalm, but was trying to be cool about it.

“Can you just, please, make it not look so much like a painstik??” B’Elanna asked, looking defeated.

"Easily doable," I agreed happily. "It does need some extensive testing though--" I started to say with a shit eating grin, looking pointedly at B'Elanna who was now blushing even brighter red and looking away, before I was interrupted.

"I volunteer!" Ro offered quickly.

“Thank you, Laren,” I said, sending her a wink in response, to which she just smiled prettily. No surprise there, she always was sexually adventurous. She probably already had plans to use it on my other girls when they least expected it.

My call for testing wasn’t just an excuse for me to make a sexual innuendo either. It really did need a few people willing to test it in order to gather diagnostic medical data, spot problems, and recommend improvements. Before it could be sold widely, for a start, it would need careful calibration in order to work safely on the members of different races, and not just women either. The many races of women on the station were just the start, the test audience, as it were.

Without careful calibration and built-in protections against misuse (or overuse) it could easily damage nerve endings. So, it needed to include some internal medical sensors to detect the species it was being used on (or the user had to self-identify their species somehow), a method to adjust the intensity, an ultimate limiter, and an auto-off function if misused or overused, etc. There were probably a whole slew of things I wasn’t even thinking of. Ideally, creating one version of the device was preferable, compared to multiple versions meant for different species, but physiological difference might require some individual tweaking. Thankfully, I wasn’t the first inventor to have to take into account a wide range of differences in the larger galactic community, so I wouldn’t be inventing the wheel here, but what had started ostensibly as a sex toy was likely going to end up a pretty sophisticated piece of technology with some equally sophisticated diagnostic software. I had a feeling I would soon be giving my lawyers another project to work on.

I'd already tasked my three EMH programs, who could travel between the island and my new ship, to start studying the device and running simulations on its safe usage for most of the known species of the alpha quadrant. Listening to the litany of irritating complaints coming from three bald Dr. Lewis Zimmerman look-a-likes had finally given me the push to make the time to change their physical parameters and personalities, so now both my home and ship had three EMH programs available modeled after a young Tricia Helfer from her days on *Battlestar Galactica*, Angelina Jolie from the early 2000s, and Gal Gadot from *Wonder Woman*. Earth's cultural archives did have examples of them in various forms and it was easy to create a holo image from there. They were quite easy on the eyes now and had amazing bedside manner, especially with me, after I'd worked my magic. The stink eyes my girls gave me once they'd seen them just made me laugh. Didn't they expect these kinds of shenanigans from me by now?

'I may have to reexamine my lack of interest in banging holograms,' I thought with a laugh.

Bajoran law was pretty basic when it came to product testing and safety certifications, for obvious reasons, but the larger galactic community had some pretty strict standards for products to be certified for sale, especially something like this which would effect a being's nervous system. Normally you'd have to hire a team of doctors and engineers to sign off on that kind of certification, but hopefully the certification of my EMH doctors and B'Elanna would suffice. I made a mental note to task my lawyers with examining and rendering an opinion on that question to save some time, then submitting that analysis with the certification to the proper authorities.

"Anyway, B'Elanna, I'll place the order for the computer cores as soon as I confirm I have the funds," I said, taking on that task myself. "In the meantime, assume we'll get them, so start coming up with a project plan to efficiently upgrade and then connect the new computer cores with the rest of the ship. You can prepare the installation locations now to save time. If any software updates to the FT's computer core are needed, please start that process as well."

"After examining the computer technology while studying this issue, I feel pretty comfortable the upgrades will go relatively quickly, Gothic, once I have them in hand," B'Elanna responded. "Is it possible to get Neela reassigned to the *Temptress* to assist me with the prep work? Her help would definitely speed up the process."

"Of course, but don't be afraid to make use of the holo-engineers too," I said, then nodded to Ro Laren, who, like a good adjutant, understood what I wanted and began tapping on her omni-tool to change Neela's duty assignment. O'Brien was going to have to make do without one of his best engineers for a while.

"These projects are your top priority. If you should find time after, or during our possible journey to Earth, your next project is to start preparing a list of everything you think a well-prepared ship that is likely to see combat should have on-hand. Everything from spare parts, to exotic raw materials for replication, to emergency supplies. Be exceedingly paranoid, as if we may need to spend up to a year away from resupply or traditional repair, and don't worry about the expense. If it can be replicated, go ahead and replicate it on the ship or on the island; if there are things that can't be replicated, order them and have them delivered to the station or we can pick them up on

Earth. Once everything is ready, feel free to use a Federation style inventory and storage system and store them in the cargo bays.”

“Will do, Gothic,” B’Elanna said, looking intrigued. I could already see the wheels turning as she thought about the various projects I’d assigned her.

“We won’t be leaving the station for a while, so feel free to take some time off between projects. The Fortress has its own full-sized holodeck and the island has lovely walking trails, several gorgeous clothing optional beaches, hot springs, and beautiful waterfalls hidden everywhere. Go and enjoy yourself. And if lying naked on a beach won’t hold you for long, ask Emma for access to my preliminary designs entitled 'Delta Flyer Shuttle' and tell me what you think, or what you can come up with that’s better. I’d like the *Temptress* to eventually have at least 3 shuttles available at some point, well-armed and capable of filling multiple mission roles.”

“Sounds like I have no end of projects to work on,” B’Elanna responded with a smile, looking happy at all these challenges. She was a woman who delighted in taking on new challenges and flexing her creative muscles when it came to engineering.

The possibility of helping to design a new shuttle seemed to really get her motor running, but she looked very happy at how proactive I was being with the daily and emergency needs of the ship to keep it in optimal condition. Even though she wasn't one of my girls... yet... I knew how to excite her. She had been working incredibly hard to familiarize herself with the ship and prepare it for a shakedown cruise and had been worth every credit I'd paid her. Hiring her had been a fantastic decision.

"Why do I get the feeling that you only want me on that beach so that you can see me in a bikini?" she asked, a smile in her voice.

Actually, I had my mind on other matters, though I was happy to see that she was getting comfortable enough with me to make a joke like that. She'd be gracing my bed in no time!

"If I wanted you, I'd have you," I assured her. "In fact, I could drive you to distraction with just two words."

Her look challenged me to prove it.

"*Banana pancakes*," I said.

It took her a moment to hear and process this apparent non sequitur, but she got there.

"My grandmother used to make them for me. They always made me happy and smile," she confessed. "How could you possibly know about that?!"

I smiled.

"See, I've driven you to distraction," I told her smugly. "Now you'll be spending all your time trying to figure out how I already know so much about you, and before long I'll be all you can think about."

Ro put a comforting hand on the hybrid's shoulder.

"He does stuff like this sometimes," she said. "He knew stuff about me from the moment we met, stuff few people even knew about. His genetic enhancements give him a lot of advantages, including an incredibly high intelligence, but his cunning and hard work aren't part of the package; that's just him. Just accept it, and if you make him happy you'll get a lot out of it too; he takes great care of his people."

I couldn't help smiling at hearing that. It was nice to have accomplices when it came to both screwing with and seducing people. Ro Laren's obvious admiration also made me very happy. I'd always take care of my girls. I'd like to think the rank and file in the Bajoran Militia under my command also respected me and were happy with my overall leadership. I'd gone well above and beyond in many ways, and thankfully people recognized that.

Within moments my people got back to work, or went to take breaks and I was left all alone on the bridge of my new ship, my luxurious warship.

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I felt pretty fucking comfortable as I lay reclined on my bridge's luxurious Captain's chair, feet up, sitting in the dead center of this large space. The sumptuous replicated leather covering for my chair was a bit of an anachronism, maybe even offensive to many in this time, but it was what I wanted and that's what I got. They could do whatever they wanted on their own starships.

While I had been inspired by other Federation bridge designs from the shows, especially Voyager's Intrepid-class design, which I pretty much wholesale copied in terms of layout, there were many unique design ideas in this space to make it both beautiful, functional, and practical. After having watched hundreds of hours of Star Trek in my life, I had many great ideas to do it better.

My captain's chair, for instance, like every other chair on the ship, was brimming with a truly ridiculous amount of technology and could be retracted fully into the floor when not in use. It was an extremely comfortable and ergonomic chair, made with a self-molding gel foam padding system used by the Risians to conform to the user's body for maximum comfort, including temperature regulation. Somehow, this substance could be variably adjusted to make it softer or harder on command, and would adjust for its user automatically if set to. Right now, I had it set to feel like I was floating on a cloud on a warm spring day and had adjusted the environmental controls to make it smell that way too. Of course, a chair could be too comfortable. While I could go weeks without sleep with little effect, my crew didn't have that advantage, so they could even adjust the chair to be uncomfortable to prevent them from being lulled to sleep. I wanted the captain's chair to be as comfortable as it was functional, considering how long I may need to spend in it.

The captain's chair was further equipped with a couple of built-in traditional displays in each arm rest, a small shield generator in the base capable of projecting a small shield bubble around the user, a small life support unit, an inertial damper to prevent the user from being tossed around during battle, a small drink/snack replicator, and several holo-emitters for dynamic displays that the user could choose and/or change based on their own preference.

The personal shield each chair possessed could protect them from weapons' fire, explosions or energy discharges, or even being spaced if the hull was breached. The small life support unit each chair possessed meant that even if they were spaced, they'd survive pretty much indefinitely till they were rescued, assuming a ship didn't start shooting them. The personal shield wouldn't stand up to a ship's weapons fire.

Each chair on the bridge had roughly the same design and capabilities actually and possessed their own independent power in the form of a virtually inexhaustible Collector power cell. While I believed in the benefits of rank and the privileges that came with it, normally, there really was no good reason not to provide my crew with all the same comforts my wealth could provide me. Keeping my crew both happy and safe was a big part of the appeal of working for me.

Each bridge chair also had an advanced five-point padded harness seat belt system which could automatically deploy and retract during combat, any emergency situation, or at the user's command. There were also two chairs on the left and right of the captain's chair that could be deployed assuming I got more crew and needed a position for first officer or a Counselor Troi equivalent, or had guests onboard I suppose.

Like any sane Star Trek fan, I was pretty tired of the ol' exploding consoles on the bridge, debris falling and killing crew, or being thrown around in combat routine, so I had taken several seemingly obvious steps to prevent that from ever happening on my ship, no matter how terrible a battle the ship was in. Beyond the use of the Collector power cells, which were admittedly beyond current Federation science, practically none of what I was doing was truly beyond the technical capabilities of 24th century Star Trek. Even the power cells I was using had less powerful equivalents that could have just as easily been used instead. No, the issue was in recognizing the problem in the first place and then creating a solution for it.

Like so many times since I arrived in this dimension, I endeavored to learn from their mistakes and do it better.

The first big change I'd made in the standard bridge design doctrine used by so many races in Star Trek, was to remove the physical control consoles altogether. Crazy, I know. My bridge was practically a mini-holodeck with the number of hardened holo-emitters buried in the floors, ceilings and walls, practically interference proof using the particle synthesis-based holo technology I'd gotten from the Husnock, technology which blurred the lines between what was 'real' and what wasn't. Every station, from the Conn to Ops to the captain's chair itself, could have a full suite of standard control consoles holographically projected within easy reach and could be customized according to the role and personal preferences of the user. Like any full-fledged hologram, it was as solid as the real thing and could directly control the ship's functions.

There was nothing two-dimensional in the humanoid body, for example, so why should a ship's pilot only have the option to tap buttons on a flat panel to fly the ship?

The second big change was to remove the bridge from the ship's main power grid altogether, although obviously the connection to the ship's data information network remained in order to allow the consoles to both receive and send information, as well as command the ship, though there were wireless emergency backups even there. Each control position and the emitter system itself was powered by small Collector power cells I'd taken off the ship I'd stolen. No matter how much the ship's shields were struck by enemy weapons, for example, there would be no power transfer/feedback from the shields, through the power distribution network, and thus there would be no exploding consoles on my ship's bridge since it had a completely independent power system, separate from the rest of the ship. I had installed discharge capacitors throughout the ship to handle any power feedback from the shields in case of battle, so there should be no exploding consoles elsewhere either.

Even life support and environmental controls were separate and independent on the bridge. That was a lesson many had learned the hard way at my hands. I'd killed whole Cardassian ship crews by putting their life support systems in negative/vacuum mode, or using those same life sustaining systems to distribute a deadly nerve agent to the entire ship. No one would be doing the same to me. That said, there were several episodes of Star Trek which showed just how useful it could be to distribute some cure to the entire ship this way, so there were heavily safeguarded options in place to allow for something like that if I allowed it. Life was a delicate balancing act, so yes, my design had to accommodate some risks and vulnerabilities.

The layout of the bridge was quite similar to Voyager, with the captain's position in the center, every secondary position oriented around the captain, and the bridge itself and all positions oriented toward the bow (or front) of the ship and the bridge's viewscreen. This was my nod to all the ships of Star Trek; even I didn't have the heart to truly change that, though I did bury my ship's bridge at the center of the ship, rather than take the risk of placing it at the top like Starfleet did. That had never made sense to me. One lucky shot during battle was not going to take out my ship's entire command staff.

The pilot's position was solitary and directly in front of and closest to the "viewscreen" facing the bow of the ship, though calling it a viewscreen was definitely doing it a disservice. A large space at the front of the bridge had been set aside for a fully three dimensional holo-projection of whatever the 'holo-viewscreen,' as I was calling it in the privacy of my thoughts, was providing an image of, via the ship's suite of powerful sensors.

My viewscreen was much, much larger than normal, and could be changed to multiple modes, including a tactical view with the *Flighty Temptress* projected to provide some visual indicator of where the ship was relative to whatever else was in the nearby space. If a hail came in from another ship, it'd render the video image 2-dimensionally, as most hails in this time didn't include 3-dimensional video information; if for some reason it did, a full 3-dimensional image would appear.

There was even an 'immersion' mode in which the entire bridge could be plunged into what looked like the depths of space. The walls, the ceiling, even the floor, would seemingly fall away, but the holographic view would be whatever the ship's sensors saw. I had tried it once and it was disorienting as hell for a group, but pretty damn cool if you were by yourself and would be extremely useful in large fleet engagements. Maybe with more exposure it'd be easier to deal with.

On a raised section behind the captain's position, again exactly like Voyager, on the left and right was an Ops and Tactical control station, where Ensign Kim and Lt. Tuvok on Voyager would work respectively. And on the back wall there was space for an entire bank of holographic control interfaces and status monitors, if someone wanted it. Just like every chair on the bridge they could be put in many different configurations, from standard, to reclining, to a small stool or the user could even stand at their position, or they could be retracted into the floor.

In fact, the chairs were the only absolutely 'real' elements on the bridge itself. With the chairs retracted into the floor and all the consoles deactivated, the entire bridge would appear to be one large empty room. If I was ever boarded, I imagine that this would seriously confuse some intruders. In the event the bridge was ever taken, I could, in essence, just recreate the bridge on the holodeck and command the ship from there. Options and versatility were essential for my survival...and winning.

For added security the chairs and consoles would only deploy for authorized DNA and life sign readings, and even then only when authorized codes were given. Anybody else would find they couldn't deploy the control consoles at all and the personal shield units in the floor would activate to trap the unauthorized person or persons. For convenience though, with a command from myself, as the captain of the ship, either given verbally or through my synaptic transceiver, I could fully deploy all stations, even if unattended. And in the unlikely event the emitter system was damaged, like someone shooting it with a phaser, which would be a hundred times more difficult than destroying a traditional console given the number of holo-emitters and redundancies on the bridge, I could still control the entire ship via my synaptic transceiver's direct connection to the ship's neural interface.

This ship was designed for war, so the bridge and captain's ready room was on deck 4, at the very center of the ship. It was protected by an incredibly strong independent force field and was fully encased in 3 feet of ablative armor and personal shielding, and was the safest place on the ship during combat. Given the strength of my potential enemies, the Collectors and the Dominion, I could only hope it would be enough. On a one-to-one basis with a Dominion ship from the shows, for instance, my ship would be far superior, but the Dominion had whole *fleets* of ships to fight with, thousands of ships that they could deploy in battle. My ship had never been intended to win wars against titans like the Dominion or the Collectors, but in a special ops mission setting, it could get shit done and achieve valuable strategic objectives.

Deciding I'd had enough of those kinds of depressing thoughts, I had Emma play some soft Spanish guitar music and set my captain's chair to full recline, and turned on the Risian designed massage function of my chair.

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There were a few seemingly perfect moments in life when you realized that the time was right for a new beginning and this was one of them. It was time to bond with my ship for life, just like I had with my home on the island.

Tapping a few commands into my console, I locked down entry to the bridge.

“B’Elanna, I will be unavailable on the bridge for the next hour or so, please do not disturb me unless there is an emergency,” I commanded.

“Understood, Gothic,” she responded.

With that acknowledgement, I closed my eyes and spoke aloud, “Begin the bonding process.”

My command activated a programmed set of instructions, first activating both my neural transceiver and the ship’s neural interface, as well as a slew of external sensors on the bridge. I couldn’t see it with my eyes closed, of course, but I imagine my entire body was being lit up like a veritable Christmas tree as dozens of intensive scans were being taken as I laid reclined. ‘

The output of these scans would be my physical authentication codes, such as they were, and now were being hardcoded into the ship’s very soul. These ‘codes’ were a slew of my unique identifiers, like DNA, but contained many, many other data points, like my unique neural patterns. Even if my enemies took my neural transceiver and then somehow managed to create a perfect genetic clone of myself, which would be quite a task, then surgically implanted my transceiver into the clone, that clone would still lack many of the unique identifiers in my brain and biology, as they hadn’t had the same experiences as I had. Neural patterns, for instance, were as unique as fingerprints and infinitely harder to duplicate.

In the mental space, I found myself in a bright white void, akin to Neo’s first training foray into a mental construct. In fact, I had no doubt that my own thoughts were unconsciously influencing this process, shaping it to meet my expectations.

Raising my ‘hands’ to my ‘face’ I could see that, rather than being a formless consciousness, I had brought a projection of my physical body into this digital space, my latent self-image in Matrix terms.

From my reading of this process, the Husnock captain would now create/set a ‘password’ of sorts beyond his unique physical biometrics coding, something personal to them that he would mentally provide in the background linkup as sort of a key for the ship’s lock. It wouldn’t even need to be consciously or actively thought about or input either. As long as the ‘key’ I created was present in my mind and memories, the lock would be open, and thus the link would be open and active between myself and my ship. I created a thousand-character password filled with letters, numbers, and special symbols, interspersed with feelings, colors, sensations, smells, emotions, and memories. Many of the pieces and parts of my more memorable sexual experiences formed part of my password/key. This was a mental construct, why would I limit

myself to a 'password' as if I was typing it on a keyboard or would ever need to speak it aloud? There were so many unique and personal aspects to the key I created that I couldn't imagine someone managing to figure it out or duplicate it.

Since so much of this was mental, I could already feel a connection forming with my ship, yet I was still surprised when I heard a cute little yip and saw the cutest little rottweiler puppy appear in this white, digital void. This was quite a shock to me, but again my own thoughts were obviously influencing this process to a degree that I hadn't anticipated beforehand. I had once likened the Husnock ship bond to the bond between a human and his favorite hunting dog, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised that my ship was being personified by the cutest little dark black haired rottweiler puppy with a lighter rust coloration around his muzzle and paws with two cute little light rust-colored dots above his eyes.

The puppy looked probably no older than 8 weeks old and maybe 15 pounds, mirroring how 'young' and new the ship was. She looked hesitant with me, but curious as she gazed at me so intently, so innocently, and yes, somehow I knew that it was a she. I had surrounded myself with women in this new life, so why wouldn't my ship be the cutest little female puppy.

I got down on my knees and sat back with a wide smile, waiting, holding out my hand for her to take in my scent, which was probably some kind of equivalent impression of my mind as a whole. She eagerly shuffled/bounced up to me on wobbly legs, mouth open, her rhythmic huffing and lolling tongue bringing a smile to my face. Her little happy whiny sounds and yips were delightful as she breathed deeply and practically jumped into my lap. I had never had a dog growing up, my parents heartily against the idea, but I had always wanted one. Even when I became an adult, my military service had prevented me from ever taking that next step and getting one of my own. I suppose that's another reason why my mind used this image. The choice in breed also seemed kind of obvious. They were a large and powerful breed with their origins in war and protection.

As I played with, pet, and let this cute little girl crawl all over me, I let me my mind wander to everything I knew about rottweilers as a breed. If I recalled correctly, they were a robust, working breed of great strength descended from the mastiff of the Roman legions. The Romans brought their herds of livestock with them for food as they marched around the world and the rottweiler would guide and protect those herds. They were also used to protect the herd from human bandits and rustlers. Their working role evolved over the millennia to serve as police dogs, personal protectors, and all-around blue-collar dogs capable of performing various heavy-duty tasks. Rottweilers were also among the first breeds used as guide dogs for the blind and the first to be used in search and rescue functions at disaster sites.

Appearance wise, they have glistening, short black coats with smart rust-colored markings. A female will get to be about 22-25 inches in height and 77-110 pounds when full grown.

In temperament, a well-bred rottie, as they are often called, is calm and confident, courageous, but not overly aggressive. They often present an aloof demeanor to outsiders, but exhibit a playfulness and silliness to their loved ones. They are an extremely protective and loyal breed, which is where thoughts on their aggressiveness came from. They love physical and mental

exercise, which was great for a ship I intended to fly around the galaxy in and get in battles with. In summary, they were fiercely loyal protectors and guardians for their human masters.

With all this in mind, I suppose it wasn't an accident that my mind chose this image for my new ship.

After several relative hours of play in this digital space, my little puppy settled down and had calmly set his head in my lap for a little snooze. Her little sleepy snuffles were adorable. I gently patted her head, scratching behind her ears like I'd discovered she liked. Who knew where that little detail had actually come from? Had I pat a dog in my childhood that liked being scratched that way? Or was it some little detail from countless movies and television shows I'd watched in my life. Did it matter?

Over the course of all this play and getting to know each other, I had steadily felt the bond between us deepening, settling, and stabilizing. The connection I'd had with my old ship via the helmet paled in comparison. As drunk on the experience as I was back then, it was like they had been made with the senses of my old body. This connection was the enhanced, Augment-version. Similar, but definitely not the same.

"Emma, Scarlett, come here and meet the new *Flighty Temptress*," I quietly said aloud in this digital space.

Immediately, Emma and Scarlett appeared and quietly took in the sight of the rottweiler puppy lying my lap. She stayed asleep as I continued to pet her.

"Aww!" Emma said, before falling to her knees and gently petting anywhere I wasn't.

Scarlett, moments later, did the same. She was intensely studying the puppy, which didn't surprise me as she was the VI for the ship and her program was stored in the ship's systems. As an organic being, I probably couldn't understand the interconnectedness and intimacy that existed between them. It was a symbiotic relationship of sorts.

"You're going to have to take care of her, Scarlett, just like she'll take care of us in the trials ahead," I said. "We'll all take care of her."

They just nodded solemnly in response.

Making my decision, I gently grasped the free hands of both Emma and Scarlett and mentally relaxed the shackles I'd imposed upon their programming. They still weren't true AIs, not yet, but they were much, much closer than they were before.

"Thank you, Father," Emma said out of the blue.

"Thank you, Father," Scarlett repeated, to which I just nodded, not releasing their hands yet.

They had never called me that before and it made me tear up a little. I was their creator, their father in a sense. Perhaps they weren't capable of understanding that before I had loosened the shackles on their intelligence and ability to evolve and act independently.

Mentally leaving this white space, I immersed myself in the ship's powerful sensors, looking in on what Neela and B'Elanna were up to, finding them talking about how they would best handle the multiple projects I'd given them and deciding on their strategy. They both were smiling and excited, and seemed to be working well together. Perhaps they recognized a similar passion for engineering in each other. I knew they could learn a lot from each other. B'Elanna could share what she learned at the Academy, her formal lessons on all things technical, and Neela could share her hard won lessons in engineering, on the job, while fighting for her life in the Resistance. Both would benefit greatly from that exchange of experience.

I pulled my presence away and outside the ship, rising up out of the underground hanger, passing through the numerous floors of my home. Steadily rising, I soon was above my island, looking down on its lush semi-tropical forests. Soon, I was so high in the air the island was just a small dot surrounded by seemingly endless turquoise blue ocean. Then I was in orbit over the planet, mesmerized by the beautiful sight of Bajor and its many moons. I turned my gaze then to the station and the wormhole it stood guard near, the home and celestial temple of the Prophets. For just a moment, somehow it felt like the wormhole was gazing back at me in turn.

In orbit, naked to space, feeling the touch of light on my bare skin, breathing normally, unencumbered by a confining space suit or life support system, I took a moment to appreciate the sheer majesty of this moment. It was in moments like these that I found myself feeling and reliving that incredible sense of wonder that I had had upon first arriving in this dimension, and hoping once again that I never lost it. This new life was a gift. Yet again I reaffirmed my oath, that even if all my efforts proved for naught and I died in the years to come, it would be a life well lived, one that I wouldn't have any regrets for.

With a reluctant mental sigh, I pulled myself back into the confines of my limited body and opened my eyes. The beating heart of the Collector power core felt like it was my own heart now. Given how many hours Picard must sit in his Captain's chair aboard the *Enterprise* I had a rather funny errant thought, a silly idea where I invited him to try out my chair at full recline, while being massaged, and viewing the galaxy through the ship's sensors. A minute with the neural interface helmet shouldn't be too painful. It might expose a bit too much of my capabilities, but the look of envy on Picard's face might well be worth it.

It was time to get back to work.

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"Emma, are you still recording all news programs on Bajor?" I asked from the comfortable high-tech recliner on my bridge.

One of the tasks I'd charged her with was to gather intel from a variety of sources quadrant-wide, both public and private, collating, cross-referencing, analyzing, looking for patterns and

anomalies and bringing everything to my attention that she thought I'd be interested in. On a few occasions even bringing something to my immediate attention, assuming there was something truly time-sensitive or on a topic I'd preselected, like the goings on of the *Enterprise*. This assigned task predated even the creation of the Galaxy Map system.

Very few of her reports prompted or required action on my part, nor were there many at all that required my immediate attention, but it was good to be kept apprised of galactic events. Several of her reports had even predicted ups and downs in the commodities markets before they happened, or mergers and acquisitions that led to me being ahead of the market and making a nice profit.

"Of course, General," she said.

Good, good.

"Let's go over the news for the past couple of weeks. Assemble all news stories with any official Bajoran government records and reports describing the same incidents, both public and classified sources," I decided, wanting to take a look myself and give the neural links to my island and ship a good test drive. My foreknowledge from the shows also gave me an advantage when doing this kind of analysis. Sharing my knowledge of the future with her had occurred to me, but part of me felt it more prudent to never reveal the full extent of my foreknowledge, in case her systems were ever hacked.

Being a general in the Bajoran Militia had its many perks, like official access into the most secret of databases the planet offered, but my advanced computer core would have had no problem hacking in even if I didn't, at least on the Bajoran side.

I turned to the drink/snack replicator built into the arm of my captain's chair.

"Tea, earl grey, hot, with a touch of honey," I ordered aloud, again getting a kick out of the idea of ordering Picard's favorite drink with my own twist.

I'd gotten the great idea of having a small replicator for drinks and snacks right next to my captain's chair from Shinzon (though I think Ops on DS9 had a traditional replicator as well). Transmitting holograms on to other people's ships without having an emitter on that ship was proving to be more problematic, though. I still had no idea how a group of what were basically 24th century coal miners had managed that technological feat, but chalked it up to some unknown Romulan technology they'd developed in secret or otherwise gotten their hands on. But compared to the fact that they'd been able to build a super weapon previously thought impossible, perhaps it wouldn't have been that difficult.

There was nothing too worrying going on in the news as far as I could see, but once I started digging a little deeper, especially when comparing the news reports to the official government reports, there were indications here and there that the Circle was somewhat active already, working behind the scenes to stir up trouble and somehow redirecting the official government response to allow greater success for their group. I'd have to speak with my counterpart in the

planet-side militia, and possibly Li Nalas to see what he knew or had come to suspect. Having a war hero as First Minister would hopefully prevent a proper civil war from starting up with the military's help, but the Circle didn't need the militia really, not when they had so many smuggled in Cardassian weapons. No, they just needed to foment enough unrest on Bajor, enough chaos, that the Provisional government fell, or became so unstable that the Federation would be forced to pull out to protect their citizens.

What definitely caught my eye was a local news report that had just been released talking about Vedek Winn beginning a tour of Bajor's many temples, including the one on DS9. Now *that* I would have to prepare for and deal with. Anything involving Winn had long been automatically red flagged by Emma for my attention.

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Office of General Gothic. Deep Space Nine.

I smiled with satisfaction.

It was amazing what you could do with Trek technology if you were just a little creative about it and were willing to set aside your preconceptions. An AI like Data was far too complex even for me to create on purpose (accidentally or incrementally over time was another matter altogether), but my VIs, even loosely shackled, could be just as useful and far less dangerous in the long run. And thanks to my most recent charitable donation of new state-of-the-art computers for the station's newly opened classroom, which I'd replicated and built on my island on Bajor before having them transported to the station, I now had a VI spy directly inside the school computer systems reporting on everything that happened there. I didn't expect much to come of it, but keeping an eye on things was always a good idea. Donating valuable material to benefit the station's children was also great PR for me.

As a backup, I was also paying Nog a small weekly sum to report on what happened in the school and generally around the station, just in case my new VI, which didn't have true imagination or intuition yet, missed something an organic being like Nog would pick up on. Besides, I'd been meaning to expand my spy network for a while now and Nog was well placed to be an agent for me as he had access to the school, was best friends with the station commander's son, and was Quark's nephew who thus spent a lot of time in his uncle's bar and with those powerful ears heard many interesting things. Specifically, things that even his uncle would hesitate to share with me or would extort me for far more money. Again, I didn't truly expect much high value intel to come of it, but Nog was a long-term investment that I was slowly cultivating. He was someone who I knew would become more and more useful in the years to come.

"Milla," I called aloud. "Please keep an eye on the school, and do your best to keep tabs on Vedek Winn's movements throughout the station. Record any and all verbal and non-verbal interactions. Compile background reports on anyone she interacts with, especially if she encountered them during the Occupation or is an official or unofficial member of her sect."

Winn had recently arrived on the station as part of her tour and had just stepped off the transport from Bajor according to the notification on my omni-tool. My new personal assistant and VI, who lived, for a lack of a better term, *in* my modified omni-tool and armor systems, was based in appearance on the actress Milla Jovovich and was my most advanced VI to date, though she had the least available resources in terms of direct memory storage and processing power, compared to Emma who had the Island's systems, and Scarlett, who had the ship's. Her shackles were also loosened from the start of her existence, which I was curious to see the effect of.

Milla's primary role was to serve as my personal assistant, meaning helping me with any of my day-to-day tasks that didn't fall in the spheres that Emma or Scarlett controlled. One of her primary responsibilities, though, was to monitor the sensor readings of my personal armor systems, and wherever else I happened to be at the time, whether that was the Island or my ship or the station's sensors. I had Milla wearing the sexy white strap dress the actress famously wore in the movie the Fifth Element. Milla was designed to be a jack of all trades, master of none, but her focus would be on systems access and information collection and analysis. This was a bit of an experiment on my part, but I felt like I needed a VI dedicated solely to me, based in my armor systems and omni-tool, in case I was ever inexplicably cut off from my connection to the Island or my ship. Time would tell if this experiment paid off.

"I will inform you immediately should anything odd take place or of any clandestine meetings. As a reminder, General, there are still many large gaps in the station's sensors and security surveillance systems," she replied.

"I know," I replied with a sigh. "Do the best you can. If you find her often disappearing into unmonitored sections, flag it. I may have Neela add some surveillance in those locations."

She didn't have much of a personality yet, but in time she'd learn to handle the information I needed dealing with in order to run my operations effectively, even anticipating my needs. This would also allow Emma and Scarlett to focus more on their work running the systems on the island and on the ship. Ro handled a lot too, but she was only human... well, only Bajoran, and had to sleep sometime.

"Gothic, Chief O'Brien has arrived and wishes to speak with you," Ro reported from outside my office.

I groaned at the thought of what this might be about. Was he mad that I had reassigned Neela without talking to him? Or was it something else? It had been a few weeks since my encounter with the man's wife. Is that what this was about? Had my dick managed to get me in trouble once again?

"Send him in," I reluctantly answered.

The doors swished open moments later and the Chief looked....determined? Not exactly happy, but not angry either, focused maybe.

I swiftly stood up and came around my desk with a polite smile on my face, my hand extended out to shake his.

As I got nearer to him, the tensing of his core muscles and a slew of other little visual cues told me a story long before his fist angrily shot into my stomach. So, it was definitely about Keiko.

There had been plenty of time to both discern what was about to happen and to avoid it, but sometimes between men, especially if one had wronged the other and they were upset, it was better in the long-run to just take your licks and be done with it. This punch to the gut was followed by several more, including a few to my face and an uppercut for good measure.

I let the blows connect, but bent and twisted and turned the other cheek as needed in order to soften the blows for the Chief's sake, lest all the bones in his hands have been broken...on my face. The Chief was throwing some good punches, his form was pretty solid even while angry, but while punching me wouldn't be liking punch a slab of solid duranium, I was definitely softer than that, my dense musculature and bone density meant it would injure a baseline human quite a bit more than it did me.

I certainly felt the blows, but they were light and easily dismissed, so I remained silent and let the Chief punch himself to exhaustion.

"*You-you-son of a bitch!*" the Chief yelled shakily, his breathing hard and labored after hitting me so many times. I probably should have thrown in some groans and grunts and other indications of injury to give the man more satisfaction, but I worried my acting wouldn't be believable and that it would likely piss him off even more. If I had, and had been believable, I suspected he would have finished several punches ago. "You slept with my wife!!"

"I did, Chief, I won't lie to you, but she came to me," I admitted, as I gently led the exhausted and emotional man over to my office's leather couch. "She probably told you, but we had a brief fling on the *Enterprise* a while back, before you two were married. I just figured you guys were open, like most human couples in the Federation, I'm told."

I instructed Milla to interface with my office's replicator and prepare a Scotch on the rocks for the man. He looked like he could use a drink. The soft whine of the replicator was drowned out by the Chief's slowly recovering breath. Once the replication was complete, I pressed the cold glass into his hand and he greedily took a large gulp.

O'Brien reluctantly nodded in response to my statement.

"We are, and I don't normally mind if she pursues a brief fling, but we've always told each other ahead of time," he answered. "She's been so unhappy lately. Coming to this station was hard on her, giving up everything she knew and was familiar with."

I listened patiently as he described how unhappy she was on the station and how that had saddened him, even offering to put in for a transfer. This matched what I'd seen in the shows.

I'm not sure when this transitioned from a beat down to a therapy session, but I'd happily go along with it.

"But a few weeks ago, she suddenly came home, happy as can be, content, singing to herself and dancing around our quarters, for no reason that I could see. She admitted to sleeping with you and I just became so, so angry!"

"Because I'm an Augment, with all the baggage that entails in the human collective consciousness, a person in a high position on the station you work at, and someone who also donated all the materials for the school Keiko will soon be running, which I'm assuming she's also pretty happy about," I guessed.

"Yes," he admitted, looking embarrassed and slightly ashamed at my frank and rather blunt assessment.

"I can assure you that she doesn't love me, nor I her, though we're fond of each other," I said gently. "I just fulfill a need she discovered, nothing more. You are her husband and she loves you. That hasn't changed."

"I know and I want to make her happy. If she derives some happiness from a few visits with you, then I'm ok with that. In fact, I'm sorry, sorry for hitting you today. You'd be well within your rights to bring me up on assault charges," the Chief reluctantly apologized.

"I'm sorry too, Chief, for assuming when I had no place to. And no harm done. This goes no further than us," I replied in quick assurance. "I had no intention of coming between you two or causing any marital strife. If you want me to tell her no the next time, I will."

"No, no, I'd likely be sleeping on the couch if I told you to do that," he reluctantly admitted.

Standing up to leave, the man looked like he'd found his equilibrium again, but he and Keiko would likely be having a long talk. This was all beyond strange to my old, average, rather vanilla, 21st century sensibilities when it came to sex and marriage. Those sensibilities had certainly evolved in this time, with my improved circumstances, but it was still strange to me.

As he got to the door, he turned around and gave me a highly scrutinizing look over, "Seriously, though, no harm done? Not even a little? Not even the uppercut? I'm probably going to have to go to the infirmary to get my hands examined, for God's sake."

I merely laughed with a smile as I pushed him firmly, but gently out the door. His soft chuckle in response told me we'd likely be ok with each other in the future.

XXXXX

Sisko's Office. Deep Space Nine.

"Who died," I asked upon entering the office, which I had meant entirely as a joke.

The Commander had asked me to come to his office, and as soon as I entered I could tell that something was wrong. Maybe my joke hit a little too close to home? The season timeline was so seriously out of whack I really wasn't sure what episode we were in at any given moment.

"Ensign Aquino, actually, one of our engineers," Sisko told me as he handed over a PADD that contained the results of Odo's investigation into the death thus far. "He had a very promising career ahead of him."

Using my Augment gifts, I read Odo's report in seconds, which indicated it had all started early in the morning when Chief O'Brien had discovered an interlock tool missing from his personal tool kit, and later on when Aquino had been registered by the computer as not being onboard the station, yet clearly hadn't left through any conventional means.

Scanning for the tool with the internal sensors (as it used quite a few unique alloys, including tritanium in its construction) had revealed its location within one of the plasma conduits on level twelve.

The molten remains of the tool had been found and mixed in with organic residue. Subsequent DNA analysis had shown it was all that remained of Ensign Aquino. It would've been ruled an accident, however the computer had red flagged a plasma disruption in his cellular membranes, indicating that he had been exposed to a directed energy phaser discharge set to kill *before* he was placed in the conduit.

After thoroughly reading the report, I put the PADD down with a sigh. This was all sounding familiar now. I simply couldn't keep track of everything, the episode timing had been all fucked up by my own actions and the Collector war going on, but at least I knew Neela couldn't have done it this time because she hadn't left my island for over a week now and hadn't used my hidden personal transporter to return to the station either, according to Emma. She was still working on the *Temptress* with B'Elanna, checking it over for any other problems, mistakes, or oversights I may have made, like the one I'd made with the main computer.

Even with the Husnock halo-engineers and maintenance machines/drones helping, it was a long, detailed process and working so closely together every day, with no one else around besides Emma, had them quickly on the way to becoming best friends. Given the sheer amount of time they'd spent together and their prodigious engineering skills and love for the work, maybe their friendship was inevitable. I was doing everything I could to encourage it, for both professional and personal reasons. The personal reasons included that Neela would undoubtedly boast about my prowess in the bedroom, just like Nerys and Laren had done with her, and that should help quite a bit in my slow seduction of the beautiful human/Klingon hybrid.

"Any ideas about a motive for this murder?" I asked as more people joined us. "Any current suspects?"

Again, I found myself wondering why exactly I had been called in to participate in this investigation, especially since it wasn't a Bajoran officer under my official command that was killed, that would have made more sense, but I guess I must have proven myself useful enough in

the past that the commander now recognized the value in getting my input. Or he was interested in bringing me into his inner circle for major station events to strengthen our working relationship. As for my questions, it made sense to get to them later, once everyone was caught up.

"All right, let's start from the beginning. Ensign Aquino goes to repair a power conduit-" Sisko began by saying.

Odo interrupted. "One moment, Commander. I'm *not* convinced of that."

"But the logs say he went down there," Kira pointed out.

"The logs could have been altered by our killer to cover his tracks," Odo explained. "I've checked the turbolift records the night of the murder. Aquino did take a turbolift to level three, but *not* to the power conduit where he was found."

"Where did he go then?" Jadzia wondered.

Odo's answer was succinct, "Runabout Pad C," he answered.

"A runabout?" O'Brien asked in astonishment. "What was he doing at a runabout at four in the morning?"

"Apparently, he was getting *murdered*," Odo replied dryly.

"So, we have a missing interlock tool which could grant access to just about every secure system on this station, including a runabout, and a murdered engineer," I murmured. "Well, we don't need Sherlock Homes for this one. At least not yet."

Odo glanced at me.

"Are you suggesting that someone wanted to steal a runabout and Aquino was killed to prevent anyone from learning about it? Perhaps the killer was preparing a means of escape?" he asked.

I grunted.

"Maybe, but wouldn't a Starfleet engineer immediately call security if someone unauthorized was messing about with a runabout?" I asked. "Aren't those things alarmed in case any unauthorized personnel mess with them?"

Sisko sighed.

"He should have called security, yes," the commander answered. "And there are alarms, but they can be bypassed, especially by someone in possession of an interlock tool. Which suggests someone with engineering expertise is behind this. Aquino might have even been helping someone authorized to do so, who then turned on him. We can't rule anything out at this point."

Clearly, he didn't like thinking about *that* possibility.

"Chief, I want you to go over every square centimeter of that ship," Sisko ordered.

"Bad idea, especially since we're looking for someone with access to engineering and engineering tools, strong engineering skills, as well as detailed knowledge of the layout and function of the station's energy and security systems," I pointed out. "Or at least it's a bad idea to let the Chief, in particular, do this alone and unsupervised. Have security supervise the investigation so that no one can accuse the Chief, or his people, of evidence tampering or involvement."

Sisko thought about my suggestion for a moment before nodding at the clear logic behind it.

"Agreed. See to it, Constable," Sisko ordered. "As for the rest of you I want eyes and ears open. Find out who did this."

He couldn't actually boss me around, but given that a man under his command had been murdered this wasn't the time to remind him of rank or the chain of command on this station. Besides, I had just about a hundred better, more productive things to do, then to engage in a pointless dick measuring contest.

I found myself somewhat excited. Though I had knowledge of this particular episode and where it would eventually end up, I had no idea at the present time who Winn's new patsy was. My not knowing was somehow a rather invigorating change of pace.

XXXXX

New Station School. Deep Space 9.

While an adaptive camouflage system alone, built into your armor, couldn't make you fully invisible, it was pretty good at letting you blend into the background as long as you didn't move about much or make any noise, this was even more effective in low light levels. Thankfully, I had something even better. I'd closely studied my original Klingon cloaking device and the Collector version of the same for its scout sniper variants, and later the technical writings found on the *Pegasus*, and in the Husnock database, which meant that I was fully invisible, though tangible.

With such a capability, it was beyond easy to surprise the bomber before he could plant the bomb in the station's school. I was so looking forward to sneaking up on a Jem'Hadar soldier and cutting their head off for the first time. They weren't going to be the only invisible predators around anymore! I obviously hadn't had an opportunity to test it against them, but my fervent hope was that the advanced Husnock sensor technology I'd built into my armor would be able to detect a Jem'Hadar soldier even while shrouded.

"You know, it took all of half an hour to figure out who was working for Winn," I told the bomber, after deactivating my phase cloak, startling the man something fierce from my casual lean against the wall. "Your presence here just confirmed it."

I kept my personal shield set to maximum and my armor's headpiece fully deployed, though, just in case this guy decided to go full on suicide bomber and set off his bomb early hoping to take me with him. Trying to predict the responses of fanatics was an exercise in futility, best to be prepared for bat shit insane stupidity and unpredictability.

The two crimson glowing eyes set in fluidic silver, with no other features, must have been unnerving because the guy looked terrified even beyond what you'd expect from getting caught in the commission of such a serious crime. An armored giant leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed, was probably a scary sight too.

"My VI, Milla, closely examined the personnel records for everyone in Engineering, then cross-referenced those records with a search of every record kept from the Occupation. You were flagged as having the highest probability of having been coopted by Winn into performing this cowardly action. Of course, high probability is not certainty, but thankfully that's now been settled conclusively," I mused. I'd have to praise Milla for her good work after this was all done. Her analysis was spot on. "You are Hotlz Taraf, former Bajoran Resistance fighter. We've actually met, though you probably don't remember. You were at the Resistance camp when I first met Winn during the Occupation. Your family is not a part of her congregation or what anyone would call Orthodox in your beliefs, which is why Odo must not have singled you out for questioning. I guess Milla is even more thorough than he is. I suspect you met Winn when she visited your camp and she somehow, *someway*, won your loyalty; somehow radicalized you to the point where you'd bomb a school for her and eventually assassinate even a Vedek. I suppose it doesn't matter how or why now."

The Bajoran man tried to speak.

"Don't bother denying it," I instructed calmly and casually. "You're holding a bomb in your hand, after all, and furthermore, while we've been talking Milla has already cracked the encryption on your personal database and found the program disabling the promenade's weapon detectors as well as the program disabling the corridor force fields to get you safely to your escape runabout. She's very thorough," I joked with a grim smile and some wagging of my eyebrows.

His face transformed from panic and astonishment to anger and hate in the span of a heartbeat. Winn had really dug her claws deep into this one.

"The Prophets spoke to me! I answered their call to drive you all away from holy Bajor!" he shouted, the fanaticism now clear in his eyes.

The perfect clarity and recall afforded to me by my Augment memory remembered seeing him briefly all those years ago in the village. We had never exchanged even a single word between then and now, but Milla's comprehensive report, along with its attached records, let me figure the rest out. Back then I'd been far more concerned with preventing Neela from falling under

Winn's sway to worry about the camp that she had been visiting for Prophets know how long. Looking back now, it was clear that she'd been using her time there productively, radicalizing them, gathering sycophantic supporters and followers even then. Of course, with the Cardassians after her, she was probably just looking to develop zealots who would die to protect her.

"The Prophets wouldn't need the likes of you to plant a bomb to drive us away from Bajor. If they truly wanted us gone, *we'd be gone*. I've seen what Gods like them can do when they want to," I said as I shook my head, remembering how they had made thousands of Dominion warships just disappear into the ether *like it was nothing*. "You're just a tool for The Circle, and its true masters. Winn is just a small part of a much larger group of fools so desperate for power that they don't recognize the familiar monsters pulling their strings from the shadows."

He smirked at me.

"You think you've foiled me?!" he yelled. "You might have stopped me from burning your blasphemous little school into ash, but--"

Rather than listen any further to his fanatical ramblings and ravings where he eventually worked himself up to commit suicide, like a Starfleet officer would have done, no doubt, I quickly pulled my pistol from my right hip and shot the idiot in the chest on heavy stun, probably quicker than the idiot could even see, much less with time to trigger the bomb in his hands now that the jig was up. Since the bomb had always been intended to be detonated by timer, there had been no need for a dead man's trigger, thankfully.

He fell lifelessly, unceremoniously, to the floor, with little in the way of television drama or the need for life endangering heroics on my part. My scans of his person showed no additional energy readings or other weapons. I roughly put cuffs on him and secured his homemade bomb by beaming it into my personal transporter's pattern buffer. The bomb would be harmless if kept in that dematerialized state. Odo would likely have no trouble getting a confession out of this guy, especially with the holo-recording my armor had taken from start to finish, though I would likely not give him everything.

I had a strong feeling that just like Neela in the show originally, that this guy wouldn't turn on Winn. Fanatics like him would gladly go to the hangman to protect their cause. My efforts to keep Neela out of Winn's hands had paid off, but the Prophets must really want the broad strokes of this to play out just like it did in canon, because here we were yet again, with just another idiot stepping into Neela's canon role.

There were some pretty significant differences here, though, since Kai Opaka was still alive and Vedek Bareil would likely not be coming to the station now. That had been Winn's goal all along in canon. He had been her primary rival to the open position of Kai and had engineered the entire situation to bring him to the station in order to assassinate him. In this case, since Opaka was still alive and well, her target had likely been Opaka herself.

Again, I found myself at sea here, working without a safety net. The episode timeline was all kinds of fucked up and out of the canon order, with significantly changed circumstances wreaking havoc on my foreknowledge of future events.

Still, pretty exciting though.

XXXXX

Quark's Bar. Deep Space Nine.

Everything had gone as I had suspected. With the bomb plot foiled and now lacking a convenient zealot/patsy to do her dirty work for her, then conveniently die when they were no longer needed, Winn had swiftly departed the station. No bombing meant no serious escalation in the religious conflict the school supposedly represented on the station, a conflict that she had provoked in the first place. Thankfully, Sisko saw her for who she really was, especially after I had shared most everything I'd learned.

It was nice to get some level of confirmation that this had all been part of a larger scheme to ideally get Kai Opaka to come to the station since she was the one Commander Sisko would naturally turn to in order to help calm things down on his station. Being the Emissary of the Prophets, she'd want to help him if asked. Even in the unlikely scenario where Kai Opaka didn't come personally to the station to reestablish peace and to calm tempers, Vedek Bareil would likely have come. Opaka was the true prize, but either way, Winn would have had the opportunity to remove a significant rival in the Vedek Assembly.

Hotlz Taraf had admitted everything, including the murder of the Starfleet Ensign, and while he had the technical skills to pull off the bombing and to steal a runabout, no one with a lick of sense believed he was the true mastermind behind all of this, but he'd confessed to the crimes and refused to say anything more. I considered whisking him away for a bout of enhanced interrogation, but Bajoran law was heavily against such a thing considering their recent treatment at the hands of the Cardassians. Thankfully, just like in the show, Sisko already suspected Winn of being behind it all, but couldn't otherwise prove it.

There were other vectors of attack against Kai Opaka, other vulnerabilities that Winn was aware of. Kai Opaka had had to make many distasteful decisions during the Occupation, seeking to minimize the harm to her people where she could. It was ruthlessly pragmatic on her part, but it had saved lives. That technically made her a collaborator, at least to some. She'd worked with the Cardassians. She'd done it in order to save lives, of course, but she'd still worked with them, and Winn's rather small but fanatically devoted following was using that to attack her in an attempt to get her out of office as it were and to prop up Winn as the next best choice to replace her. Vedek Bareil's death would smooth that way for her.

Still, Kai Opaka was very well loved and was largely responsible for holding together the Bajoran people with sheer grit both during and after the Occupation had ended. She was unlikely to be removed conventionally, so Winn had decided to have her killed, which was basically the only chance she'd have of becoming Kai. She must have been visiting all the temples in order to

find some divisive wedge issue worth kicking up a fuss over, one worthy of wider attention, one capable of raising her profile in the Vedek Assembly, and one bloody enough to draw Opaka away from the safety of Bajor to a place where Winn had a conveniently placed patsy ready to kill for her. Pretty crude plan overall, but it might have worked if Winn hadn't made the classic villain mistake of assuming that she was smarter than everyone else. I'd shared all my thoughts and evidence with Kira and the others. They now knew who Winn really was.

As for the school, I had made a suggestion which left everyone scratching their heads wondering why they'd never thought of it. Like in canon, Keiko actually *had* suggested to Winn to leave the teaching of Bajoran spiritual matters up to those who made it their life's work, like the various Vedeks and other Bajoran religious leaders and scholars, rather than her, a human of the Federation, which would have been both disrespectful and inappropriate at best for a non-believer. I'd confirmed that with the video record of Winn's impromptu visit. But no one had taken it a step further and suggested opening a separate, Sunday school equivalent.

A Sunday school would allow Bajoran children (or any other child who wanted to learn about Bajoran spirituality and faith) to get both points of view about the wormhole, secular and religious, without all the drama associated with it. Given the multi-race makeup of the station's student population, it made sense to even the Bajoran parents. With none of the zealous members of her congregation onboard the station any longer, and without Winn whispering her poisonous words in their ears, twisting everything to suit her agenda, suddenly everyone was far more reasonable and willing to listen to alternative points of view.

My idea wasn't exactly a novel one; it had been used on Earth for a long, long time as a compromise that mostly worked. Hopefully it would work here too. Sisko was again impressed at the valuable alternate perspective I'd brought to the table and the fact that I'd prevented the school's bombing in the first place, so I'd likely find myself invited to yet more briefings when difficult situations inevitably popped up on the station.

Now that this episode had come to a close, I was continuing to work on my 'pleasure stick,' as I was currently calling it until I came up with a suitably better name. B'Elanna had rightly pointed out that it would be seen by the Klingons as a rather serious insult to their cultural traditions, which it totally was, so I was going to redesign it so that it didn't so closely resemble the instrument of barbaric torture I had been inspired by, or had a name quite so similar to the original tool. Was 'Bliss Baton' too weird? It had a nice bit of alliteration to it. Pleasure Rod? Gothic's Omni-Massage? That one fit with the 'omni' theme I was frequently using these days.

'The *Penis/Pussy Pleaser*?' I thought with a hearty chuckle. Yeah, that might be going a bit too far and could impact sales.

I had a few ideas already on how to change the look of the device. I'd shorten it substantially, make it white in color, with a soft, rubberized, low friction bulbous tip so that it could be comfortably placed on the skin and moved without discomfort. The energy discharge would be a soft aqua blue on the skin as well, as opposed to the angry red of a painstik. And it'd be lighter weight for ease of use. My intent was to sell them both singly and in pairs so that couples could use them as toys for foreplay or as massage tools depending on the settings, with attachments

available for purchase if meant for more traditional massage uses, rather than sexual activities. Should I add the ability to vibrate?

My EMH doctors were already in the process of safety testing the underlying technology and developing modifications/settings for use by a number of species now that I already had a few baseline readings from several Bajoran women volunteers to work with, which should be safe for most humanoid races, barring perhaps the more exotic variations. The rest of the testing could be done with medical grade holo-simulations by the EMHs. I'll say it again, those programs were horribly underutilized, but I saw how valuable they were. I *owned* three beautiful doctors who represented the pinnacle of holo-engineering and had the combined medical knowledge of 150 plus worlds. And they worked for free!

Once testing (and possible redesign) was complete, my plan was to patent and then sell the replicator pattern through channels similar to those that my omni-tool was already being sold. A specialized distribution network meant for a rather personal device like this was also a good idea, in my opinion. Quark had several high-level contacts in the sex, porn, and marital aid industry, so I was hoping he would make an introduction to demonstrate the device. An introduction like that came with a fee, of course, but it'd be well worth it. And on the subject of Quark, he was coming over to my table.

"Quark, what can I help you with?" I asked kindly, but not overly friendly.

While we had business dealings together, he and I were not strictly friends and since arriving in this dimension I had long ago realized that you needed to keep a Ferengi business associate on their toes for best results. It was essential to keep them hungry for more, desperate and worried that they'll fall out of your good graces, so that they stayed on their best behavior and continued to try to prove their value. If a Ferengi thought you were content or happy with them, that's when they stopped trying so hard and their more devious side ran amok. You did not want to give their more devious side free rein.

"General," the Ferengi greeted in return.

He was looking around nervously now, like he was afraid of being overheard.

"Can I join you for a drink?" he asked.

My facial expression remained placid as I studied the Ferengi closely and then gestured my acceptance to the empty chair at my table.

"What is it, Quark?" I asked. "I'm a busy man. It's a full-time job trying to make us both some profit."

The fact that the mention of mutual *profit* didn't get his immediate attention, well, that was really worrying.

"I just came to give you a heads up, given what could have happened here recently..." Quark trailed off uncertainly, speaking rather quietly.

Ah, so he'd already heard about both the murder of Ensign Aquino and the attempted bombing of the school. Not much happened on this station without Quark learning about it in short order.

Quark bit his lip, and given his sharp teeth that must have been painful.

"Do you know about a group called The Circle?" he whispered.

I nodded slowly, discreetly glancing around and instructing Milla mentally to locate and disable any potential listening devices in range.

"Of course, you do... uh... well, I happen to have come into some information. They recently acquired *a lot* of weapons and explosives from off-world," he informed me quietly.

On the inside I was swearing, on the outside I appeared completely calm.

"Oh," I said. "Is your source credible? Has the information been confirmed?" I pressed.

Quark had many contacts and sources of information in the criminal underworld, many of whom were willing to talk with him and share information he was interested in, for a fee, which was why he was so valuable to me. For a significant fee, in turn, he was willing to share that information with me and I was always willing to pay for credible and actionable intelligence.

"Yes, it's been confirmed by a second independent source," Quark emphatically stated, knowing I would pay handsomely for information on this topic.

"Who is handling transpo to Bajor?" I asked.

"Word is that they're going to smuggle it onto Bajor by way of the Kressari," he whispered.

I had to check my omni-tool for more information on that race.

"The Kressari are botanical DNA traders," I muttered. "But, as you and I both know, there are always those who break the species mold for a large payday."

I used my omni-tool again and began consulting the station's official schedule for upcoming ship arrivals, manipulating the holo-screen projected from my omni-tool and flicking through the various lists of information. If the job wasn't too big, you could review the information on the attached screen or holo-project the screen in midair for more space to work with, even then it was mostly preference though. The Starfleet folks had long been used to using those tiny ass screens on their tricorders, so the larger built-in screen on the omni-tool was usually plenty for them. I had another option available to me now that I had a synaptic transceiver implanted in my brain; I could display this information overlayed on my visual field for maximum discretion, but I wanted Quark to see what I was doing.

"And what do you know, there's a Kressari freighter due to arrive on the station in just six hours," I said.

Quark was smiling.

"Those things are going to make us both-"

"*Focus*, Quark," I said as I snapped my fingers in his face as his eyes glazed over at the thought of the profit and the commission coming his way. "Do you know *where* these weapons and explosives are being smuggled to on Bajor?"

"No, not exactly," he admitted.

Of course not. That would be too easy. Thankfully, after selling information to me for a while now, Quark was well aware that I wanted to know what information was relatively certain and independently verified, what was rumor and conjecture, and most importantly, when he just didn't know. All of it could be valuable under different circumstances. Rumors often contained a kernel of truth, after all. Spotting that kernel was the real trick.

"Find out what you can," I ordered.

Quark cringed.

"Listen, these are very dangerous people and I'm not liked much by the Bajorans as it is," he said.

His concern was valid, and he does get attacked in the show if I recalled correctly, but Quark was like a cat and had nine lives.

"Do this for me and I'll give you three times your normal fee," I offered.

With a smile on his face now and all the motivation 3x his normal fee practically guaranteed, Quark set aside his fears and bolted from the table to start questioning his sources. A greater fee meant he could offer his sources a higher fee for the information I needed, therefore ensuring enhanced motivation all around.

Ferengi could be great business partners; you just needed to know how to motivate them properly...and how to mitigate the risks of them cheating you.

XXXXX

Gothic's Palace Fortress. Bajor.

The best thing about having a long-range transporter with capabilities beyond everybody else was that I could beat any ship traveling from the station to Bajor by many hours. And since I was officially in-charge of all off-world operations and commanded the Bajoran Defense Fleet, *such*

as it was, I had the unfettered power and authority to have ships searched in Bajoran space with little to no justification at all, like a certain Kressari freighter I had received an anonymous tip about. Sometimes being a high-ranking military officer with next to no oversight and extremely broad and undefined authority was a lot of fun!

All it took was one call to Lupaza with orders to stop and search the vessel and her squadron of armed fighters had descended on the ship like a swarm of bees.

I didn't even need a reason to search the freighter, as the Federation had absolutely no say in how I performed my duties off the station, but I'd come up with one that involved a tip from a concerned Bajoran citizen blowing the whistle on tainted crop samples that were transported in violation of the law. It was a ridiculous and paper-thin excuse, but my hope was that the Circle would assume that I'd been tipped off by someone on Bajor, one of their own, rather than an outsider. That should make them suitably paranoid about traitors in their midst and hopefully they'd limit their operations while they tried to figure out who'd talked. If they turned on each other violently, unfounded accusations thrown all around, even better for me. A little chaos and a violent shakeup in the ranks of a terrorist organization would set back their agenda by weeks, at least.

Unfortunately, I didn't have high expectations that a search would reveal much. If these aliens were smuggling weapons on this particular run then they wouldn't have docked at DS9 and let their cargo be inspected. No, they'd have gone directly to Bajor and offloaded in some Circle controlled port or location. But it hardly mattered in the end, the real point of this search was to get a Section 31 tracking and surveillance device onboard the ship, and then let them discover what was going on using one of their cloaked ships, which I was sure they already had in-system monitoring the border given the Cardassians' recent attempt to unleash a bio-weapon on Bajor.

"Emma, I want you to scan as much of the planet as you can using the Palace's sensors," I ordered. "Look for explosives and weapons' caches."

"We're going to get a lot of hits with those search parameters," Milla responded. "The city has large sections still undergoing demolition and rebuilding, which includes the demolishing of unsound structures with explosives and the removal of Cardassian buildings as soon as they can be replaced."

While this was going on I made a mental note to work with my personal VI, modeled after Milla Jovovich, to create a program that monitored my behavior. I wanted to know if I slipped too far into evil overlord territory. Signs to look out for would include the building of super weapons, maniacal laughter and trapdoors leading to a messy death appearing in my fortress. Since the *Flighty Temptress* was kind of like a super weapon, I was not off to a great start. And I arguably had a hidden subterranean lair under my house. And I had built secret passages in my palace. And I had anti-intruder measures that were pretty extreme in lethality. Maybe I shouldn't ask questions I might not want the answers to.

"I'm more interested in explosives and weapons where they *aren't* supposed to be, like near government buildings, religious locations, and so on," I said. "Do a full scan of the whole planet,

with a focus on key government structures and temples. Use the long-range sensors on the moon bases for additional readings, and don't give me any lip about how we need more, or how good an idea it'd be to build a satellite surveillance and defense net around the planet. I'm not made of money."

Nor did I want to fuck with the future to the point where the Dominion considered Bajor a threat and they took the appropriate steps to mitigate that threat. Bajor needed to be a non-threat to them.

Even I could only do so much and the amount of money I'd now loaned to the Bajoran government was getting ridiculous. They were good for it, and would even pay it back with interest I was sure, but it'd likely be a decade or more before I saw it paid in full. I consoled myself with the knowledge that without my donations in terms of money and material from my industrial replicator, Bajor would be nowhere near as far in its domestic recovery.

"No unexpected results," Emma told me after a minute of intense planetary scans. A holo-image of the world created with bright red spots indicated.

Well, shit. She was right. Oh, there were plenty of readings in unusual places, but I knew these sites and thus so did she. Many of them were hidden Resistance, now Militia, stockpiles from the time of the occupation. They were supposed to be there, and were full of weapons and explosives the Resistance had captured during the occupation. They were maintained and kept hidden, though, even to this day, even when Bajor had its own pseudo-military, just in case the spoon heads ever came back. No one felt that the Militia was going to be enough to repel the Cardassians if they truly wanted to return, barring Federation protection. For better or for worse, paranoia was now hardcoded into the Bajoran soul by 50 years of violence and brutality and I didn't see that changing anytime soon.

"Okay, what would Picard do," I muttered to myself.

I supplied myself with an answer.

"In the episode I think he scanned for something that was unique to Cardassian technology, in case the weapons and explosives were being disguised or hidden as something innocuous."

Then I remembered, beritium, which was a valuable metallic alloy used in the construction of Cardassian skimmers. Nerys' earring was made of diamide-laced beritium, from the wreckage of a skimmer she destroyed in her first battle with the Cardassians. I remembered her telling me that story back when we'd first joined forces.

"Please scan for any beritium signatures," I ordered.

This time there were actually a lot of results.

"Well, well, well, the Bajorans are using a lot of salvaged beritium," I muttered. "Or maybe we're detecting the heavy weapons those skimmers are armed with."

The spoon heads, for all their many faults, did at least know that a properly armed military force needed ground support, which included armored and weaponized vehicles of all kinds. Skimmers could be armed with heavy weapons, from heavy disrupters to guided missiles. Just the kind of stuff you'd freely give to a people when you wanted a spark a civil war to destabilize a planet. The fact that they were Cardassian weapons wouldn't even raise eyebrows, Bajoran and otherwise, since so much Cardassian weaponry had been stolen during the Occupation and used by the Resistance.

By the looks of things, the Circle had been quite busy arming themselves with weapons provided secretly by the Cardassians. They had weapon stockpiles in all the major cities, and a big one near the main temple where Opaka herself lived. It looked like Winn had a backup plan in place should her planned assassination of Opaka fail, which it did, thanks to yours truly. The Circle would likely kill or arrest the Kai for 'collaboration' during the Occupation, but mostly because she had named Sisko, human Starfleet officer, the Emissary and supported the Federation's administration of the station and help in the recovery. Her death would further destabilize the shaky peace and stability the Bajorans had scraped together after the Cardassians left, with Winn likely whipping the terrorists into a religious frenzy with talk of all of this being 'the will of the Prophets.' The Provisional Government would soon fall quickly thereafter.

The worst part of all this was the lack of anything I could ultimately do at this point, other than share my information and warn Commander Sisko and the First Minister Li Nalas about The Circle. I'd sworn to protect Bajor and I couldn't do that in a way that led to me killing Bajorans. I'd have to gather proof that the Cardassians were involved, though hopefully Odo would again do his part to prove Cardassian involvement conclusively.

At the very least I could bring Kai Opaka to my island for safekeeping. Keeping her alive and well could be the key to saving Bajor. That was something. Good luck to any fools trying to get to her on my Island. I could only hope, though, that it wasn't already too late to help her stop the civil war. If anyone could calm things down, it would be her.