

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

As you'll see as you read chapter 63, a "Last time on..." isn't really necessary. This chapter is a continuation of chapter 62 in many ways and as such they go hand in hand. Chapter 62 was an experiment of sorts for me, something I had never done before in my writing, a way to stretch myself creatively and I continued that in this chapter.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 63

Main Conference Room – USS Enterprise, In Orbit Above Kessik IV

Conversations buzzed quietly around the long conference table aboard the *Enterprise*. Small clusters had formed—senior officers of the *Enterprise* chatting with one another or with their guests. The room was near capacity, really. Present were Captain Picard's entire senior staff, along with Captain Jellico of the *Cairo*, Admiral Pressman from Starfleet Intelligence, General Martok, Ambassadors Synne and Vel, and President Moss herself.

The occasion, if it could be called that, was an impromptu "watch party"—Admiral Gothic's enigmatic term for the gathering, likely some term from his time and dimension—complete with serving staff circulating in the room taking everyone's drink orders. They were assembled to view a live broadcast soon to air across the entire Federation: a high-profile interview that had already stirred considerable speculation, including numerous cautious inquiries from his superiors in Starfleet Command and the Federation government.

Picard had, of course, heard of *Open Hailing Frequencies!*—the wildly popular Federation-wide interview program—but had only ever seen brief clips. Snippets would sometimes find their way into mission briefings or intelligence reports on prominent figures, and while Picard considered the show more spectacle than substance, he was too seasoned an officer to dismiss any source of insight out of hand. Even theatrically edited interviews could reveal glimpses of a person's character, their instincts, or their motivations. You could learn a lot from such answers and the host of the show did seem to have a way of eliciting answers to questions that would normally not be answered or perhaps never quite so candidly.

Still, that kind of sensationalist programming was far from his preferred fare. He tolerated it as one might tolerate a mildly irritating background hum—useful in its way, at least in some circumstances, but never sought out. Beverly and Deanna, on the other hand, were known to enjoy the show. They occasionally watched it together when the host interviewed someone

familiar, or when the topic intersected with the *Enterprise's* own missions—an occurrence that, much to Picard's private exasperation, had happened with unsettling regularity.

Did his two senior officers really need to giggle quite so much while watching it?

And did the show truly require nearly naked men and women dancing provocatively between segments? What possible journalistic value did that serve? He had once posed that exact question to Beverly and Deanna—only to be met with laughter. At their captain's expense, no less!

Don't even get him started on the photonic fireworks. In a news program. Honestly.

Curiously, the highest-ranking figures in the room—himself, President Moss, the Ambassadors, and Admiral Pressman—remained largely silent, each keeping to their own thoughts. None of them joined in the casual conversations happening around the table. Whether by habit, temperament, or the weight of what was about to be aired, they stayed detached, thoughtful, watchful.

If Picard had to put a word to it, Pressman looked like some unholy blend of constipated, irritated, and deeply uneasy. Given the admiral's now well-known disdain for Admiral Gothic, it was not hard to guess why. The idea of Gothic being handed a live, unfiltered platform—one with a reach of hundreds of millions across the Federation—was no small matter. Regardless of the setting or the show's journalistic integrity (or lack thereof), the potential impact was undeniable. And Pressman knew it and obviously wondered what that meant for him and Admiral Gothic's growing fame and influence. In fact, Picard had learned that Pressman had actually attempted to stop the interview and broadcast, but had been shut down quite hard, by both the Federation President and Starfleet Command.

Picard's gaze moved across the room.

At the far end of the room, Captain Jellico and his first officer, Commander Leslie Wong, were engaged in a hushed exchange. Beyond their reputations—which had taken something of a bruising in recent months—Picard knew little about either officer, certainly not enough to guess at the subject of their conversation.

From what he had observed, Captain Jellico was nowhere near the hardline detractor that Pressman was, which was honestly surprising given his actions in the days following the invasion of Kessik IV.

Closer by, Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi—friends for years—were exchanging quiet laughter, clearly amused by something. Whatever it was, Picard chose not to ask. He had suspicions as to just how...*close*...his two senior officers were to Admiral Gothic, but he had no wish to confirm those suspicions. There was some bliss in ignorance—the old adage was true—at least in moderation.

Mr. Worf and Mr. Fitzwallace appeared to be discussing the stalled investigation into the attempted bombing on the surface. Both men wore expressions of tight-lipped frustration. Picard had followed their progress closely, and it was clear the investigation had reached an impasse.

The bomb itself had been a marvel of sophistication, especially in how well it had thwarted Federation sensors despite being made of scraps—and the perpetrator had employed equally advanced methods to evade capture. The word *tradercraft* had surfaced repeatedly in Worf's status reports, a term that spoke volumes and had disturbing implications in just who it pointed to as the perpetrator.

While it had pained the man, Picard was sure, Lt. Worf had realized that advancing his investigation required training and expertise that was largely outside the scope of his knowledge base. To his credit, Worf had requested help from Starfleet Intelligence. That outfit's analysis independently confirmed that the tactics bore a striking resemblance to known operational methods used by the Romulan Tal Shiar, especially methods that might be used by one or more of their operatives unexpectedly cut off from any external support or resources.

It was hardly a surprise, given recent events and tensions—but frustratingly, it still wasn't enough to justify a formal accusation. Not yet at least.

Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge were deep in conversation, with LaForge gesturing animatedly as he pointed to something on the PADD in his hand then gesturing vaguely in the direction of the nearest defense platform distantly visible in the conference room's window. Data, ever the stoic, remained expressionless—but even from a distance, Picard could tell he had already uttered his trademark "*Fascinating*" more than once.

Though Picard couldn't hear the details, it was clear that they were discussing the GODS net and its capabilities—a topic that had no doubt captured both of their imaginations, as well as so many in his ship's engineering and science-based departments.

His engineering staff had spoken of little else since the GODS net's successful tests. It had become *the* topic of conversation—on duty and off, in the engine room, in the corridors, in Ten Forward, and even now, here in this very conference room. Picard, though well-versed in a range of scientific disciplines, a true jack of all trades master of none, had to admit that most of the technical chatter flew well over his head. Still, a common thread ran through all of it.

How had Admiral Gothic managed to achieve planetary shielding on that scale?

What kind of processing power was required—especially in a self-contained system—to generate and maintain a shield of that strength and complexity?

As it was not receiving power from any external source, what powered each defense platform?

What data compression algorithms had Admiral Gothic used?

Were the defense platforms networked, and if so, how many would need to be destroyed before the system's functionality was impaired or it failed entirely?

Could a planet actually amplify sensor range? And if so, what did that suggest about their current understanding—or lack thereof—of subspace mechanics?

He had personally witnessed engineers and scientists stop mid-step in the corridors—motionless for several minutes while struck by sudden inspiration, uncaring that they had nearly caused a

collision with the people walking behind them, including their captain—and begin scrawling complex subspace equations directly onto the electronic wall panels, desperate to take advantage of whatever fleeting idea had inspired them before it slipped away. It was as if the GODS net had ignited a kind of collective obsession, and no one wanted to risk losing even a fragment of insight, no matter what context or circumstances that insight chose to arrive in.

The questions were endless. And while Picard might not grasp every technical nuance, he certainly understood his engineers' excitement, supported it even. Admiral Gothic had accomplished something long believed to be impossible—yet every sensor reading insisted that it was real, that it was *not* some elaborate deception. The admiral had been notably secretive about the technical secrets behind the GODS net, arguably understandably so, but that hadn't stopped the ship's engineers from trying to reverse-engineer it themselves.

To minds like theirs, it wasn't just a mystery. It was an irresistible *challenge*.

With proof that such technology was possible, Picard suspected scientists and engineers across the Alpha Quadrant would soon be racing to understand the underlying science. For many, it would be a fascinating academic pursuit. But for every other major power in the known galaxy, this would mark the beginning of a new arms race.

That thought quickly darkened his mood.

Gothic would undoubtedly find more and more worlds eager to lease his technology—of that, Picard had no doubt, regardless of what his report stated. But what impact would this have on the fragile balance of power that had—for the most part, *admittedly*—maintained peace across the Alpha Quadrant for more than eighty years? And could Picard truly not support the technology simply because he was fearful of its implications on galactic peace? Wasn't the proverbial genie out of the bottle already?

Picard hoped the admiral fully understood the storm he was stirring up. He glanced at Pressman, still silent and brooding. Men like him—cautious, suspicious, paranoid some would say—would be deeply wary of the influence Gothic's technology now granted him, though Picard was becoming increasingly more convinced that Gothic had been right and that prejudice was at the heart of Pressman's hatred for the man.

The credits and latinum Gothic stood to earn, even from a single planetary lease, were an almost obscene fortune for any private individual. Honestly, it would be an incredible amount even in terms of a midsized colony world with a few million citizens.

But money was only part of the equation. What would Gothic—a prolific and ingenious inventor with proven success doing what many had previously thought technically impossible—do with that kind of wealth and the resources? Unlike many other Starfleet officers, though he was loathe to admit it, Picard knew the power of wealth and money and what a truly motivated person could accomplish with it. Truly, the dilithium Kessik IV would almost certainly pay in—a resource in extremely high demand at the moment, one that a private individual would normally have a hard time acquiring—could power a few dozen starships.

More concerning still was the access and relationships Gothic would be capable of forging with planetary leaders and governments throughout the quadrant, inside and outside the Federation—connections many with vision would consider far more dangerous than any sum of money, no matter how great a figure it was. After all, if wealth alone determined power, the Ferengi Alliance and the Grand Nagus would rule the galaxy outright. While the Ferengi did *not* rule the galaxy, by any metric, they certainly had an oversized impact on galactic affairs given the relatively small size of their polity.

Those connections alone could make the man virtually untouchable by the Federation, as doing anything against the man could upset long-term alliances and relationships.

The Gothic Orbital Defense System held the promise of safeguarding countless worlds and their futures, worlds that had previously relied on the distant strength of others—or it could be a Pandora’s Box, once opened, unleashing nothing but disaster, chaos, calamity...and *war*.

“It’s starting, Jean-Luc,” Beverly whispered, leaning close to pull him from his reverie.

Still lost in thought, Picard muttered quietly aloud, ‘*Why on earth did they need photonic fireworks?*’

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“I’m very happy to introduce my guest for this interview—Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Forces, CEO of the Gothic Arms and Defense Corporation, designer of the Gothic Orbital Defense System, recipient of the Karagite Order of Heroism and the Federation Council Medal of Honor, and the renowned author behind the Harry Potter holonovels currently taking the Federation by storm. Admiral Gothic, we are honored to have you on Open Hailing Frequencies! Welcome.”

“Thank you for having me, Tessa.”

“That smile should be illegal,” Deanna murmured to Beverly.

“I know,” Beverly replied with a grin and an exaggerated swoon. “He is *yummy*.”

“I would veto any such law,” President Moss added in a conspiratorial whisper, a devious little smirk on her face—sending all three women into a fit of schoolgirl-like giggles. The Betazoid and Risian Ambassadors added their own two cents, but he *very* deliberately ignored whatever it was they were choosing to add.

Picard cringed inwardly, wishing for the mercy of sudden onset deafness. Deanna and Beverly were, of course, free to *associate* with whomever they pleased. Yet being confronted so directly with the consequences of a decades-long regret was another matter entirely. He was only human, after all.

“According to reports the Hur’q arrived with three medium-class carriers and hundreds of fighters. By the time you entered the system, all three carriers and 105 of their fighters were still active.”

“That’s correct. The planet’s defenders made a heroic last stand. They gave everything to protect their world—but the Hur’q were too many and too strong. They are the real heroes of this story, not me.”

It was generous of Gothic to honor the fallen defenders who had given their lives for their world, but the truth remained: for a single starship to withstand, let alone defeat, such a force of Hur’q was nothing short of astonishing...and disquieting.

Picard found himself wondering, not without unease, whether even the *Enterprise* could have prevailed against such stark odds. If he was honest with himself, he sincerely doubted it. Their most recent encounter with a smaller Hur’q force—one that had boarded his ship and cost the lives of so many of his crew—the pain of that was still fresh in his mind. He was proud of his vessel and his people, but pride would not blind him to reality.

The *Enterprise* would have fought bravely; of that he had no doubt. They would have given their very lives to protect the people of Kessik IV. But the odds suggested they would have been destroyed in orbit, their sacrifice yet another tragedy of this invasion, yet another in a litany written in innocent blood, rather than a triumph. And even if, by some unlikely chance, they had won the battle in space, the ground forces alone were probably beyond their ability to contend with. His security officers were among the best-trained in Starfleet, especially in the realm of ship-to-ship combat, but they were not soldiers trained specifically for ground combat in wartime, against soldiers bred specifically for war. The Hur’q were creatures designed—engineered—from their very birth for combat.

The *Flighty Temptress* had already demonstrated its capabilities—here at Kessik IV and even above Earth—but many unknowns remained about the full extent of its power and capabilities. Once more, Picard was reminded of the concerns he had shared with several colleagues in the Admiralty—concerns that still gave him pause.

Such a warship, owned and commanded by a single individual only tenuously tied to a planetary government, a government entirely lacking the ability to stop him, represented a profound risk—not only to galactic security but to Bajor’s duly elected government. Coupled with the GODS net, Gothic might very well be beyond challenge at this point, save by the deployment of hundreds upon hundreds of starships being brought to bear against him.

Even the vaunted Vor’cha-class cruisers sometimes held in “private” ownership by Klingon great houses posed less of a threat overall. At least the Klingon Empire had both the will and the means to suppress any rogue elements within their citizens. Bajor, by contrast, had no such ability. If Admiral Gothic chose to defy law or treaty, there would be little the Bajorans could do to stop him.

In response to the very concerns he had voiced to his colleagues in the Admiralty, Starfleet Intelligence had conducted a highly classified threat assessment. Its conclusions were troubling: simulations indicated a 93% probability that Admiral Gothic could successfully lead an insurrection against the Bajoran Provisional Government and install himself as its new head of state.

Even more unsettling were the follow-up projections. Despite Gothic not being Bajoran by birth, the analysis suggested the populace would largely support such a regime change, given his immense popularity both within Bajor's civilian population and its 'military', whose personnel were mostly made up of former Resistance fighters who had fought and bled side-by-side with Gothic. Many of those people owed Gothic their very lives.

To Picard's chagrin, the assessment went further still, indicating that Bajor under Gothic's leadership would likely thrive—that the planet's recovery from the Cardassian Occupation could be accelerated by decades, and that its technological advancement might leap forward by a century or more in only a fraction of that time.

Indeed, the Bajor that would emerge after Gothic deposed the current government and took over would be both stronger and more prosperous as a whole.

The assessment had also explored what options the Federation might have should such an event occur. The conclusion was sobering: virtually none. Though human by birth, Gothic was a naturalized Bajoran citizen. If he overthrew the Provisional Government, it could too easily be framed as an internal matter—one the Federation would be compelled, legally, morally, and ethically, however reluctantly—to respect. An internal matter that the Federation would have no right to interfere with beyond harshly worded letters and diplomatic protests, despite their strategic interests in connection with the wormhole.

One section of the report—a “special response” appendix—had been completely redacted from the report and his eyes, even from his own considerable clearance level, though he had just enough clearance to be allowed to know it even existed.

Picard could easily guess what it contained: contingency plans ranging from appeasement, to covert subversion, to diplomatic and economic sanctions, to outright assassination. Early in his career, the very thought that the Federation might consider violence would have shocked him. Now, with age and experience, it merely wearied him. He disliked it, abhorred it really, he believed it violated the very ideals upon which the Federation was founded—but he was not so naïve as to think it never happened. Especially when those in power deemed the threat an external or existential one.

“Our scans showed the nearest Starfleet vessel, the USS Cairo, was over 24 hours away at maximum warp. There was literally no one else that could arrive in time. I had the means to help... so I decided to answer the call.”

“Were you under any obligation to assist the Federation or Kessik IV?”

“While Bajor is an ancillary signatory to the Mutual Defense Treaty signed by several Alpha Quadrant powers during the Hur'q invasion, no. I was under no legal obligation to intervene. Technically, I wasn't even on official duty. This was a shakedown cruise for my personal starship—closer to a vacation than an official mission.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Picard noticed Captain Jellico flinch at the reminder that his ship had been a full twenty-four hours away at maximum warp. He lowered his gaze, shoulders stiff

with unspoken shame. Jellico bore no fault—no captain in this situation reasonably could—but Picard understood the feeling all too well. He had felt it himself, more times than he cared to remember: the helplessness of being too far away to render aid in time. No matter how fast the *Enterprise* could travel, the galaxy remained a very big place and delays ultimately cost lives.

His reflection was cut short as Admiral Pressman suddenly slammed a hand against the table, jabbing a finger at the screen in furious accusation.

“A vacation, he calls it! In his *personal warship*!” Pressman roared, his voice dripping with incredulity and disdain. “Where in the hell did he even *get* such a vessel? Where the hell was it built? How did we not even know of its existence until it appeared over Bajor? No private citizen should be permitted to command such power. And those cargo ships—where did they come from? For all we know, he could be assembling a fleet at this very moment. We should board and impound his vessel, Picard, and get the answers ourselves. Between the *Cairo* and the *Enterprise*, we could seize it now, while he’s distracted planet side with this interview. General Martok—you are welcome to stand with us to eliminate this threat to the galaxy.”

Picard felt a stab of trepidation—and, if he was honest, a flicker of shame—that his own private concerns about Gothic’s starship were now being twisted to support Pressman’s venomous tirade. But that shame gave way to alarm as the admiral went even further, openly advocating the seizure of Gothic’s vessel by force.

Could the *Enterprise* and the *Cairo* working together survive such a confrontation? Picard doubted it. Even with General Martok’s aid, the odds were grim—*The Flighty Temptress* had already proven its superiority against Hur’q forces both here and above Earth. And to attempt such a strike *within range of the hundreds of powerful orbital defense platforms encircling the planet*—platforms still under Gothic’s direct control—was nothing short of insanity.

No. This was madness.

And Jean-Luc Picard would not gamble his ship, nor the lives of his crew, on Admiral Pressman’s madness—rank be damned.

“Admiral, while your concerns are logically consistent, I am not aware of any legal authority that would permit such an action under Federation law or the laws of Kessik IV,” Data said, his voice precise and unyielding in the silence Pressman’s outburst had created. “An order, possibly unlawful on its face, would require explicit confirmation from both Starfleet Command and the Federation Council and perhaps an official opinion from the Judge Advocate General’s Office.”

Bless you, Data, you beautiful android! Picard thought with relief, as the tension in the room visibly eased. President Moss, who had been on the verge of rising to object, instead leaned back, allowing Data’s calm logic to take hold, her eyes sharp and watchful.

“Commander Data is correct, Admiral,” Picard said evenly, his voice carrying no hint of the alarm he felt. Jellico gave a curt nod of agreement. Moss offered a silent one of her own. “So, let me ask plainly: are you issuing us a direct order to board and seize Admiral Gothic’s vessel? And if so, do you have written confirmation of that authority from either Starfleet Command or

the Federation Council? Because I very much doubt President Moss—or Kessik IV—would sanction such an act.”

“We absolutely would not,” President Moss said, her voice dry and cutting as a desert wind. “Worry, fear, and prejudice are not legal justifications for the use of force in our territorial space.”

“Nor would I or my ship take part in such a dishonorable act,” Martok growled, his tone low and uncompromising. “I have measured his heart in combat. He is an honorable man.”

Picard met Admiral Pressman’s challenging stare without flinching. Was the man seriously considering relieving him of command and taking over the *Enterprise*? He knew his crew—and he knew them well—they were unlikely to accept such an unlawful order, even given the latitude Starfleet Intelligence routinely enjoyed when it came to such things.

Glancing at Jellico, Picard intentionally caught the other captain’s eyes. The same unease and worry flickered there—a recognition of the dangerous ground they all stood upon.

Pressman looked defiant, even as he seemed to suddenly register President Moss’s presence in the room, before reluctantly sliding back into his seat.

“No, no... I’m not giving that order,” he admitted, his voice grudging, eyes returning to the screen and the ongoing interview as if to reclaim some sense of control.

“I’m sorry. Are you saying... you personally fought and killed seventy-five Hur’q warriors? Alone? By yourself?”

“That’s correct.”

“Admiral, the allied soldiers I have interviewed, who have done battle with Hur’q warriors, invariably speak of them with fear, saying they are extremely deadly to a man and that overwhelming them with numbers and weight of fire is the only way to win because they’re bred for combat, unlike us. Faster, stronger, and more lethal than any average soldier.”

“I’d have to agree with that.”

“A great victory for any warrior, worthy of song—even for a human, and that’s saying something for a Klingon,” Martok growled with a wry laugh. “When I recounted it to the High Council, they agreed wholeheartedly.”

Now *that* was quite interesting, given the Klingons’ history with human augments.

“How was what you did, even possible then?”

“I’m a trained soldier. I have been most of my life. I fought in multiple conflicts on my homeworld, and later against the Cardassians during the Occupation of Bajor. Combat is not unfamiliar to me.”

“And by some definitions, I’m an Augment. I possess certain physical advantages granted by genetic enhancements.”

“Yes,” Martok added, casting a pointed glance at Worf. “My people remember the human augments well.”

Worf nodded solemnly, as if acknowledging a shared private pain that only another Klingon could truly understand or appreciate.

“They literally eat the people they capture, oftentimes even when they’re still alive. Not out of necessity. With their level of technology, there’s really no need for it, it’s entirely unnecessary—no biological imperative that can’t be met with replicators or nutrient synthesis or outright cloning of mindless bodies, considering how skilled they are with genetics, after all. But they still do it. Whether it’s a sign of a total disregard for other sentient life, or some predatory or hunting behavior hardwired into their genome that makes those other options undesired or impossible, we just don’t know.”

Many in Starfleet Command had speculated on this, trying to better understand their enemy. Yet it defied all logic, given the Hur’q’s technology and available resources.

“Hunters should eat the flesh of the prey they kill, this is true,” Martok said, his voice low and intense, “but even we Klingons do not consume the flesh of sentients—living or dead.” He paused, eyes hardening. “Honor does permit eating the flesh of the dead only in extreme survival situations. Tales of ships crash-landed on hostile worlds, with limited food and resources, often speak of such noble sacrifices—of wounded warriors sacrificing themselves so that others might live. The Hur’q have no such honor. May they be cast violently, screaming, into the nothingness from which they came!”

Picard, normally eager to learn about other cultures, felt a quiet shiver of revulsion. He could very well have gone the rest of his life without knowing that, in Klingon eyes, cannibalism could be considered honorable under certain extreme circumstances.

“Speculative theories abound in the militaries of the various powers: maybe it’s cultural, maybe it’s psychological conditioning, maybe it’s part of their design, something they built into their own genetic code in the distant past to ensure the hive is constantly challenged to get stronger and to weed out the weak examples of their race. That’s what I think, actually, based on everything I’ve seen. Adversity breeds strength. The Vulcan and Klingon homeworld are very harsh worlds, by any definition, yet those planetary conditions led to a very robust and strong species evolving on each of them. Maybe the Hur’q kept that purposely, even when their technology made it entirely unnecessary to kill sentients for food anymore.”

Picard had never encountered such a theory, yet it made a disturbing kind of sense, given how the Hur’q relentlessly sought technology to enhance themselves. The thought left a cold weight in his mind—what other patterns might they follow if they returned?

“A most intriguing hypothesis,” Data offered. “The xenobiology department should consider studying the phenomenon now that the invasion appears ended.”

“To call them ‘bred’ for a purpose doesn’t quite capture it. They’re not raised. They’re produced—like a product from an industrial replicator, stamped out again and again, each

iteration designed with ruthless precision to serve a single function. Only in this case, the 'product' is a living being, a warrior of questionable sentience. And with every enemy they encounter, every technology they capture, the template is refined. Improved. Perfected. So, they don't care about the lives of their warriors because in their mind, the weak have been removed. In fact, those warriors serve the hive even in death as it gives them valuable data to improve the genetic template."

Admiral Gothic's words unsettled Picard on multiple levels. By every Federation metric for sentience—loose and overly inclusive though those standards could be, given the strangeness of life in the stars—the Hur'q warriors qualified. And yet, Gothic was not wrong: they were not born, but manufactured en masse from a genetic template, created solely to serve as organic weapons and discarded at will.

Were they truly sentient, then?

Picard felt a grim relief that such a judgment lay far beyond the authority of a mere Starfleet captain.

"They do not know the pleasure of victory, nor the satisfaction of honing one's skills through dedication and hard work, nor the experience earned from battles won," Martok shared quietly. "They have no personal or familial history, no ancestry, no mother or father, brother or sister, husband or wife. They are autonomous weapons, produced on an assembly line—not people—and should be destroyed without mercy, as you would any weaponized drone or a machine."

Picard felt a cold unease at the General's words, a shiver of moral discomfort that spread through the room. Around the table, aside from Worf perhaps, the faces of the Federation officers were taut with restraint, wrestling with the profound question of what truly constituted life, and what made it sacred.

"The Admiral and General make valid points," Data said, his voice coldly analytical, in a way that might have challenged even a Vulcan's composure given the topic being discussed. "Hur'q warriors, while biologically alive, exhibit the functional characteristics of autonomous drone weapons. They are engineered from a template, produced through advanced fabrication methods, programmed for defined objectives, refined for efficiency, and deployed with no regard for the survival of any individual unit."

"Well put, android," Martok growled. "They are insects to be crushed beneath a warrior's boot—dangerous, yes, but insects nonetheless. No one of their kind will mourn them, and you should give them no such regard either."

Picard thoughts fixed onto the words, feeling the weight of an uncomfortable truth: the Hur'q were alive, yet in every essential meaningful way, they were not. Even clones had more agency. And if he acknowledged that, even in part, did it make the act of extermination easier—or inevitable?

He had stared into the darkness of war before, but never with such clarity at the abyss between life and instrument. Every principle he had lived by in Starfleet, every moral certainty, trembled under the unflinching logic laid bare before him.

The distinction gnawed at him, a reminder of the tenuous line between sentience and instrument, morality and necessity.

“Each one is a living weapon—stronger, faster, more agile, and more aggressive than any organic soldier should be. And when you pair that with the advanced armor and weapons they’ve scavenged or stolen from the many species they’ve defeated, you have a force that’s not just dangerous... it’s devastating, an existential threat, one that the alpha quadrant had no experience with and has been slow to adapt to. The combat doctrine of this era is completely unsuited for an enemy like that.”

Riker, who had remained silent until now, spoke cautiously, almost reluctantly.

“The Admiral is correct. The Hur’q employ swarms of fighter craft, willing to sacrifice themselves in ramming attacks for the slightest advantage. They routinely use boarding actions to seize people and technology, and their asteroid and world-ships function as mobile fortress bases. Our starships, our defenses, even our standard procedures—none are well-suited to counter tactics like these. They are too alien and it would take years, decades even, to adapt to them.”

Martok’s voice was low, grudging. “Even the Empire has been slow to adapt. Even we Klingons, who do *not* fear death, do not throw our lives away so recklessly.”

Riker pressed on, his tone edged with frustration. “And it’s not just the tactics. They maintain no sovereign space, claim no worlds, defend no set territory. They are a completely mobile species—one that may not even have an evolutionary homeworld anymore. How do you fight an enemy that in many ways has nothing to defend, and cares for nothing as sacred?”

From the silence, he suspected no one had an answer to that, not even General Martok.

“Now, we don’t know the exact timeframe for the Hur’q. But our best estimate? It takes them one to two weeks from start to finish to produce a warrior. Fully formed. Fully matured. Genetically enhanced from the moment they emerge—stronger, faster, deadlier than nearly any humanoid one-on-one. And with baseline combat instincts and knowledge already built into their genetic code. No training required. And utterly disposable, which is why the Hur’q fight in a way that makes no sense to us. We are concerned about losses, they are not.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard that about them before.”

“I did warn you. The reason the powers of the Alpha Quadrant banded together wasn’t out of goodwill or diplomacy—it was necessity. The Hur’q could outproduce any of us alone. Soldiers, ships, equipment—manufactured in weeks, like coming off a replicator line. No single one of even the great powers—the Federation, the Klingon Empire, the Romulan Star Empire—could have withstood them alone. They would’ve been overrun given enough time. Wiped out.”

Silence fell over the room as the weight of his words sank in. Picard had expected Martok to roar a vehement denial, to assert that the Klingon Empire could never have fallen—but Martok remained quiet, his face darkened with shame and doubt. Had the Klingons reached the same grim conclusion in their own assessments?

“Did we really defeat them? I’m not so sure, Tessa. What the Enterprise accomplished—that was closer to a miracle than a military victory. We should be grateful it worked, absolutely... but we can’t count on miracles to save us. Not when the stakes are this high. Relying on a miracle isn’t a strategy—it’s a gamble with everything we hold dear.”

Picard wished he could argue with Admiral Gothic, to claim the *Enterprise* and the Federation would always prevail, no matter the threat. But he was a student of galactic history, and history was rarely so kind. That way of thinking had doomed countless civilizations, both primitive and hyper advanced—even galaxy-spanning powers like the Iconians and the T’Kon, civilizations that had lasted for thousands upon thousands of years.

Strategically, objectively, what the *Enterprise* had achieved over Earth was a miracle, not a victory. Luck, not planning, had tilted the scales. And any gambler could tell you: luck has a way of running out—always at the worst possible moment.

“There’s a lot we can do—in the short-term, mid-term, long-term. Some things will be harder than others, but only if we have the will to see it through. There’s a powerful saying from my past that feels particularly fitting here: ‘Freedom isn’t free; it is paid for with the blood of patriots.’ The defenders of Kessik IV who lost their lives fighting the Hur’q were patriots, and its high time we learned the lessons this war has laid bare. Change is not just necessary—it’s overdue.”

“That sentiment is almost Klingon,” Martok acknowledged.

“Change is overdue—that is why we are all here, isn’t it?” President Moss said, fixing a meaningful glance on Ambassador Synne and Ambassador Vel, who returned it with solemn nods, as if they were continuing a conversation that they had already shared.

What exactly had these prominent women been discussing?

Admiral Pressman looked as if he wanted to respond—but, wisely, he remained silent.

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“No forgiveness necessary, Tessa. In fact, I appreciate the directness. And to answer your question—no. I am nothing like Khan.”

“I’m called an Augment only because I’ve been genetically enhanced beyond the baseline human genome. I understand the shorthand, but the label carries heavy historical weight—and in my case, it’s not entirely accurate. Biologically, yes, I’ve been genetically enhanced, like them. But ethically, ideologically, philosophically—I couldn’t be further from someone like Khan.”

Picard felt a pang of shame. When Gothic had first set foot on the *Enterprise*, he and his crew had treated him with suspicion, even confining him to quarters on the mere possibility that he might be a relic of the Eugenics Wars.

In the years since, Picard often questioned whether that had been just—or even moral. After all, one's genome was not a crime. And in Gothic's case, those enhancements had occurred in an era when such procedures were not yet prohibited by Federation law. In fact, the Federation did not even exist yet.

"I was born on Earth, in the year 1982—old Earth calendar. But not this Earth. Not the Earth of this dimension."

"I'm sorry... are you saying you're from an alternate reality?"

"That's right. The crew of the Enterprise confirmed that rigorously—after initially thinking I was a war criminal from the Eugenics Wars era. Now that was awkward. Though they didn't say it, I could tell that they were thinking, 'So, you're saying you don't want us to bow at your feet and be amazed by your sheer awesomeness? No? We're very confused now.'"

Out of the corner of his eye, Picard caught the slightest flinch from his first officer. During Gothic's brief time aboard the *Enterprise*, Riker and he had exchanged more than a few heated words. Now, it seemed, Riker—like Picard himself—carried some regret for how he had handled those moments. That he could recognize it, even privately, spoke well of his character.

"That's an interesting choice of word. Patron implies support, protection... not exactly what I'd call someone who abducts you across dimensions, genetically alters you, and strands you in a future you didn't ask for, with no seeming way to return to your reality. Don't you resent them for what they did? They took you from everything and everyone you knew. They changed you on a very fundamental level, violated you by most definitions."

"I understand why many would see it that way. And I don't blame you. But no... I don't resent my Patron. I miss my family. I miss the world I came from. But this life? This new life has been a gift."

"From where I stand, I'm living in the future. I've gone on adventures I never could've imagined. I helped free an entire world from oppression—more than once. Kessik IV, Bajor... maybe even Earth, in some small way. And if I'd died doing those things, I'd still call it a life well lived, a life worth living. Even if I died, I'd still be grateful to my Patron... whoever or whatever they are."

"That is a beautiful way to view such a forced relocation," Ambassador Synne said at last, her voice breathy and ethereal. "Admiral Gothic lives in the moment, embracing his new life fully—the good and the bad—rather than clinging to what was taken from him or mourning what cannot be changed. If more souls chose such a way of living, the galaxy would be far brighter. Unlike those who came before him, he has chosen to liberate rather than conquer, to live in the present rather than the past, to risk his life for others instead of turning away."

Her words left many in the chamber thoughtful, silent in their reflection.

“Just because he seems better than the genetic tyrants of old—or hides it more convincingly—does not make him a good man,” Pressman growled.

“Your prejudice blinds you, Admiral,” Synne replied, her voice steady and almost sorrowful—more pity than anger, which made the words cut deeper. “A person should not be judged by what they might do, but by what they choose to do. Admiral Gothic possesses the power to cause untold devastation, yet time and again he has chosen to shield others, even at great personal risk. Many in this room owe their very lives to his sacrifices, the great personal risks he’s taken. If he sought only power or pleasure, he would never have risked everything when duty did not demand it.”

Pressman’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing further, his gaze falling sullenly back to the screen.

“No, being seen as an Augment hasn’t always felt like a gift. Although, being fitter and far better looking than I used to be definitely has its perks with the ladies. I can’t say I’ve minded that part.”

“I’ll say,” Deanna murmured with a soft giggle—quiet, but not quiet enough to escape his ears. Several of the women present exchanged knowing smiles.

“Tell me, Counselor Troi,” Ambassador Synne asked in a perfectly even tone, free of hesitation or shame, “have *you* experienced jamaharon with Admiral Gothic? Some among my people who have shared the rite with him describe it as... extraordinary. Is their praise well founded?”

President Moss’ eyes gleamed with intrigue, while Ambassador Vel only grinned, clearly entertained by her colleague’s bluntness—and by the obvious discomfort rippling through most of the men in the room, himself included. Her words also served to lighten the building tension. As he had learned all too well from Ambassador Troi, a telepathic people rarely observed the same conversational taboos as others. It was simply unnecessary. At least Vel showed more restraint than Troi had; she seemed content to enjoy the moment without adding her own commentary aloud.

Of course, the instant the thought crossed his mind, Vel glanced his way and winked.

Counselor Troi, rather than sidestepping the question, leaned into it—her expression suggesting that she was giving the matter serious consideration.

“I can only speak for myself,” she said at last, glancing at Doctor Crusher. “I don’t claim to be all that familiar with your people’s jamaharon rite, but what I experienced was... the best I’ve ever known. Life-changing, really—a revelation of what intimacy could be.” Her voice trailed into a breathy whisper, soft yet unmistakably heard.

Doctor Crusher gave a subtle nod of agreement, a small smile on her lips. Riker, whose long-ended romance with Troi was well known, reacted more strongly—his expression tight with unspoken thoughts.

Picard cringed internally, the words confirming his private suspicions while leaving him with an odd sense of emasculation, or inadequacy, which struck him as an odd reaction given how comfortable he was with his own masculinity. Yet when his eyes swept the room, he found the same unsettled look mirrored in nearly every male face present—save, of course, for Commander Data's. In that uneasy recognition, Picard felt an unexpected flicker of solidarity, a shared kinship among men who knew, beyond doubt, they had never inspired such a confession from any of their former lovers.

At least in this facet of life, perhaps *prejudice* was the wrong word for what Augments like Gothic endured. Perhaps the more accurate word was *jealousy*.

Ambassador Synne smiled gently. "I do believe you've experienced jamaharon, Counselor. It warms my heart that you found such a connection with another. I hope I may know the same before I'm recalled to my world."

"I'm sure Admiral Gothic would be more than willing to give you that... opportunity," Troi replied, her tone amused. "He was too much for Beverly and me, even working together."

Both Picard and Riker cringed.

"The ability to share jamaharon with several partners at once would be celebrated on my world," Synne said with open confusion.

"Oh, it would be here too. Isn't that right, Beverly?" Troi teased, eyes alight with mischief.

Whatever Beverly might have said in response was mercifully lost, for Picard had all but slammed mental shutters over his ears, chanting *lalalalala!* in silent desperation.

"But what about the downsides? What have you lost by being genetically enhanced?"

"Unfortunately, being labeled an Augment also means carrying all the historical baggage that comes with the term. There's still a lot of fear and prejudice tied to it—even here, even now, centuries later. Maybe... maybe it's the last true prejudice the Federation hasn't let go of."

"Unfortunately, I am compelled to agree with Admiral Gothic," Ambassador Vel said evenly.

"As a telepath, I cannot escape the self-awareness that comes from seeing the Federation and its people as they truly are."

General Martok merely looked amused at the Federation being taken to task. Pressman remained stone-faced and unapologetic, while Riker's expression betrayed guilt.

"Humanity, like several other Federation worlds, endured terrible consequences from genetic engineering," Vel continued. "Betazed was spared such history, but others were not. That fear is understandable—but to let the sins of the past dictate our judgments in the present is not."

"Ambassador," Riker pressed, "if we ignore the past, are we not doomed to repeat it? Humanity nearly destroyed itself with genetic engineering. Isn't the Federation justified in prohibiting it?"

"The prohibition may be justified or it may not, I have no wish to engage in a debate on that topic," Vel conceded, her voice softening, "but the prejudice in the present it has fostered is not."

Nor are the restrictions placed on the lives of those who were altered through no choice of their own. Tell me, Commander,” her eyes fixed on him now, unflinching, “is it not inherently immoral and unjust to condemn people for choices made by others long before they had any say?”

Picard hoped he was being honest with himself about his concerns regarding Admiral Gothic—his ship, and his capabilities as a whole. He wanted to believe those doubts would have surfaced with anyone, and not from some deeply ingrained prejudice against Augments that lingered in humanity’s cultural memory.

“It is ironic—perhaps even telling—that while the Federation prohibits genetic engineering, it punishes those already altered by it,” Martok said coldly. His words landed like a photonic grenade in the center of the room. “And yet, the Federation shamelessly indulges in the practice themselves at the Darwin Genetic Research Station, where it has created Augment children of its own. You condemn it with one hand while embracing it with the other. Perhaps we should add hypocrisy to the Federation’s long list of sins.”

Considering how highly classified the station and its work were, most of the room could only stare at the General in stunned silence. Martok, for his part, looked grimly amused at their shock.

“Did you truly think my people would not know?” he shot back.

Of course, the crew of the *Enterprise* knew—his ship had been dispatched to the station itself. But Jellico, Wong, President Moss, and both Ambassadors clearly had no idea such a place even existed.

“General,” Picard interjected smoothly, though with a hint of urgency, “many here do not possess the necessary security clearance to discuss that matter further. Admiral Pressman and I would be glad to speak with you privately, if you wish.” He resisted the urge to tighten his jaw. He could not order the Klingon to remain silent, but this breach of security would have to be reported to Starfleet Command at once.

Martok merely grunted and turned back to the screen.

“If this is true, it gives me great pause, and must be better understood,” Ambassador Synne said, breaking the silence.

“I will assist you in this inquiry with the Council,” Ambassador Vel added.

Picard winced inwardly. While he had not previously opposed the existence of Darwin Station or its work, perhaps it had been an exception that should never have been allowed—especially given the alterations to the children’s immune systems, which rendered them lethal to others and condemned them to a lifetime of isolation.

Was it right to impose such draconian restrictions on augments, only for the Federation to create them themselves? He truly didn’t know.

“You mentioned that prejudice against Augments might be one of the last biases still lingering in the Federation. Many would strongly disagree with that. Some would be downright offended by the very suggestion.”

“I’m sorry if that offends anyone, but I’m simply speaking from experience—mine and that of others like me. I could rattle off a list of small injustices, like how Starfleet has delayed approval of my omnitool for years—despite its clear superiority and life-saving potential—solely because it was designed by an Augment. Or how, just recently, every shipment of materials I’ve ordered for my company has been intercepted and searched by Starfleet ships. Every. Single. One. Even within Federation space. Even when sourced from Federation member worlds or allies. That’s not normal, Tessa.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Picard caught Pressman flinch.

It was news to him that every shipment bound for Admiral Gothic was being searched. Gothic was right, it wasn’t normal. With the Federation reeling from the invasion, Starfleet scarcely had the manpower to maintain even its standard inspection and anti-smuggling patrols. For every single one of Gothic’s shipments to be intercepted and examined suggested more than chance—it suggested deliberate targeting, perhaps even harassment.

In isolation, perhaps such scrutiny might be considered prudent, given the unanswered questions surrounding Gothic’s vessels and his shipbuilding capabilities. But the effort was so blatant, so heavy-handed, that it all but confirmed hostility rather than caution.

Did it need to be quite so obvious?? A few random inspections could have been justified, but inspecting every single shipment?

Pressman, if not orchestrating the campaign, was certainly complicit. Whatever subtlety the man had cultivated in his long career with Starfleet—and its Intelligence branch—seemed to have been utterly abandoned when it came to Gothic.

Trying to view things in as favorable a light as was possible, perhaps the man felt things were moving too quickly to afford to be subtle about it?

The complaints about the omnitool, unfortunately, were all too familiar to Picard. The device had been a constant source of friction among himself and the crew, with requests crossing his desk almost weekly—most often from Commander LaForge and Mr. Data—citing the many ways it was demonstrably superior to standard tricorders and a host of other specialized tools combined in a single device.

Ordinarily, such matters fell within the individual captain’s discretion, each captain having the power to make exceptions as needed to such minor bits of protocol and regulations while onboard. He had, after all, made a similar exception permitting Counselor Troi her non-regulation attire while on duty. But in this case, Starfleet Command had issued an uncharacteristically rigid directive: no commanding officer was to authorize use of the omnitool while on duty and no exception was to be granted. Such blanket prohibitions were exceedingly rare, and Picard had found the policy strange from the beginning.

In practice, however, he knew that many of his officers quietly broke regulations, concealing omnitools beneath their uniforms when on-duty. He had turned a blind eye, not out of negligence, but pragmatism—the devices had already saved lives on hazardous away missions and proved indispensable when standard equipment didn't measure up or things needed to be repaired in the field. He would not sacrifice his crew's lives on the altar of a regulation that seemed nonsensical and arbitrary.

Until now. Listening to this interview, the logic behind the prohibition suddenly felt uncomfortably clear. He chastised himself for not recognizing it earlier.

What else, he wondered, had he been too blind to see?

"When she was a child, her parents took her outside Federation space to undergo an illegal medical procedure known as accelerated critical neural pathway formation. The goal was to increase her cognitive abilities—pushing her intelligence well beyond what we'd traditionally classify as genius. And in that, the procedure succeeded."

"But as is common with such unregulated procedures, it came with consequences. Unforeseen, irreversible ones. Her neurochemistry—and personality—were altered. Among the side effects, she developed what used to be referred to as compulsive sexual behavior disorder. Hypersexuality. What some, with far less compassion, once labeled as nymphomania."

"That has to be an archaic diagnosis."

"It is archaic. But in Lauren's case, it was applied when she was six years old. Hypersexuality at that age, in human society, was viewed as an insurmountable issue. She was institutionalized—not because she was violent or a danger to anyone—but simply because she had been altered into something society didn't understand or know how to accept."

Ambassador Synne gasped, eyes squeezing shut as her head turned away in visible pain. "It is archaic. Barbaric," she said at last—her voice tight with anguish, yet edged with icy resolve.

"This wasn't something she chose. It was something done to her—without her consent—by her own parents. And for that, she paid the price. Not with rehabilitation. Not with care. But with confinement. She spent the next thirty years in a facility, labeled and forgotten, all because the side effect of her enhancement didn't fit a comfortable narrative. No megalomania, no violent outbursts, no thirst for power. Just an uncorrectable neurochemical imbalance—treated as a moral failing. Yet up until only a few months ago, she was institutionalized. Three decades of her life confined there, imprisoned there."

"Tessa... Lauren is in her thirties now. On Earth, the age of consent is sixteen. At sixteen, she should have had the right—as all Federation citizens do—to seek out consensual sexual relationships and express herself freely. That's a basic right of personhood. Of sentience."

"On Risa, this wouldn't even have been an issue, even at her young age—cultural context matters—but for humans, dealing with someone genetically engineered, suddenly everything becomes about fear and control. So instead of finding support or treatment—or even considering

reaching out to the Risians, who arguably have far more experience with sexual psychology than any other culture in the quadrant—they institutionalized her. A child. And they kept her locked away until she was an adult.”

Everyone jumped as an open hand slammed against the conference table like a hammer blow. To his shock, it was Ambassador Synne who had risen, trembling with emotion.

In all his years with Starfleet—through wonders and horrors few in the galaxy would ever witness—he had never seen such raw, unbridled fury on the face of a Risian. He had not previously thought that they were even capable of it, something outside their emotional range altogether. The sight was so rare as to be almost incomprehensible, rarer even than glimpsing a Vulcan overcome by passion and emotion.

“We could have helped her!” Synne’s voice cracked with anger. “Given her a safe place to grow, in a culture that would have embraced her for who and what she is—free to express herself, her identity, her sexuality—without shame, without judgment... without life-long imprisonment!” Her words grew into a growl. “This is barbarism. Earth and the Federation should be ashamed. My people will have answers. If we truly are one great community, then this must never be allowed to happen to *any* of our people.”

“No, that wasn’t care. That was fear and prejudice, dressed up as morality and protection.”

“It took a team of dedicated lawyers and a great deal of effort and resources to secure her release. And even then, we faced constant roadblocks—unnamed officials citing vague and undefined ‘national security’ concerns. How that could possibly apply to someone who had been imprisoned since she was 6 years old is beyond me. If that’s not prejudice, Tessa, I don’t know what is.”

“I did not fully understand it before—my people have no history with such matters—but perhaps he is right. It is prejudice,” Synne said, her words more measured now, though the anger still burned beneath them. Her eyes flicked toward Admiral Pressman. “And I wonder... who in power saw fit to delay the release of someone unjustly imprisoned? My people will find the answer. Of that, I give my word.”

“Surely a group home can’t be compared to a prison. Isn’t that an exaggeration?”

“I don’t think so—not in the slightest. And I’d encourage you, or anyone watching, to verify everything I’m saying. Please. Ask the uncomfortable questions. Shine a light where people would prefer darkness.”

“There were only four genetically enhanced individuals at that Institute. They were kept in a separate, high-security wing of the facility—secured with biometric locks, the building enclosed in powerful electromagnetic shielding that would make a military base jealous. They were cut off from the general population of the Institute, denied access to technology, denied any ability to contact the outside world.”

“You’re right, Tessa—even convicted criminals in Federation penal colonies have more rights than they did. Access to lawyers, the ability to communicate outside the prison, the right to

interact with the other prisoners. Even now, after everything, the only real progress we've made is that I'm finally allowed to communicate with the ones that are still there."

"These restrictions were never about treatment, or care, or rehabilitation. They were about fear. The fear of what people like them—and people like me—might be capable of. That's not medicine. That's not justice. That's prejudice, pure and simple. And the Federation needs to take a long, hard, honest look in the mirror and ask itself: are we still holding to our values, or is fear piloting the shuttle?"

"Captain, the Admiral is correct. By law, Federation prisoners are afforded greater freedoms than the augments appear to have been granted," Data observed in his calm, curious tone. "This does not align with the Federation's current legal framework. Why are they being treated more stringently—why is their freedom curtailed more comprehensively—than that of individuals convicted of murder and other violent crimes?"

The question, posed with such clarity and simplicity, struck Picard like a hammer. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to ponder, aware that every person in the room now awaited an answer he was not prepared to give. He had no good answer for his second officer. Still, he tried—slowly, uncertainly.

"Those legal protections are granted to traditional prisoners," Picard began. "I suspect that, because the augments are classified differently—under some form of medical institutionalization—the Federation does not consider itself obligated to extend the same rights and protections as it would to those formally convicted of crimes."

Saying it aloud pained him. It revealed a truth he wished he could deny: that the Federation, his Federation, was failing its own ideals. These people were being treated more harshly than true prisoners. And that realization made him... ashamed.

"Ah... a loophole," Data replied evenly.

Pressman slammed his fist against the conference table, the sound cracking through the room. "It's because they are dangerous!" he snapped. "A few hundred of them nearly brought humanity to the brink during the Eugenics Wars. A century later, they almost ignited a war with the Klingons—a war we would almost certainly have lost. We cannot endanger everything we have built for the sake of a handful of mutants. Their treatment must stand as a warning to every parent tempted to tamper with their children and believe they alone can bear the consequences."

"Admiral, that—" Picard began, only to falter as his gaze shifted to Riker. His first officer visibly winced. Picard realized why: Riker had once made the same argument, almost word for word, when Gothic first came aboard the *Enterprise*. Hearing those words again, now laced with Pressman's venom, forced Riker to confront them anew—and perhaps to question them altogether.

"It's not just them—it's their potential, their progeny," Pressman muttered, his voice low and fevered, as though he no longer realized he was speaking aloud. "They will multiply. Their children will carry this cursed blood into the wider galaxy. Gothic already keeps a harem of

whores, and his lifespan could be measured in centuries, if not more. How many more of his kind will he spawn if given time? With his fortune, his technology, his ships, and now these infernal defense nets, he could become untouchable—short of sacrificing thousands of lives and hundreds of ships.”

“A patient’s medical records—and my reports—are classified at the highest level!” Crusher snapped, fury flashing in her eyes as she stabbed a finger at him. “They cannot be twisted into this grotesque excuse for policy!”

“You are an admiral of Starfleet, not the enforcer of some authoritarian regime,” President Moss cut in, his voice cold, precise, and merciless. “The Federation does not govern through fear of what *might* be. We hold to our ideals—not only when it is easy, but especially when it is hard.”

Pressman’s lip curled. “You are a fool, President. If you knew the things I have done—the horrors I have faced—to shield the Federation from an unforgiving galaxy, you would drop to your knees and thank me for bearing that burden.”

The chamber fell into absolute silence.

“I think you should leave, Admiral,” Moss said at last, his tone measured but final. “Your superiors—and the President of the Federation—will be in contact with you soon.”

“Fools,” Pressman spat, his face contorted with rage. “Fools, every last one of you!” He lurched to his feet and stormed out, the door hissing closed behind him.

“As a genetically enhanced human, I’m not allowed to join Starfleet. It’s illegal.”

“When I first arrived aboard the Enterprise, I learned that painful truth firsthand. I was devastated. I had hoped—naïvely, perhaps—that my skills and intentions would be what mattered. But I was told the law was clear on that point, even my more exotic origins didn’t matter in that regard.”

“Is this true, Mr. Data?” Ambassador Synne asked, her tone sharp.

“Yes, Madame Ambassador,” Data replied without hesitation. “Such laws have existed since the Federation’s founding and remain in effect today.”

Synne inclined her head slightly, her expression thoughtful. “Then perhaps the time has come for those laws to be reviewed. Even the strongest foundations must be examined, from time to time, to ensure they still uphold the ideals they were built upon.”

“You’re suggesting the Federation did nothing to help the Bajorans because there was nothing to gain from it?”

“It’s much easier to ignore another’s suffering when it doesn’t cost you anything to look away. For decades, Bajor’s suffering didn’t impact the Federation—strategically or politically. Now, with the wormhole discovered, things are different. Bajor now matters. A Cardassian-occupied Bajor would mean Cardassian control of the only known stable wormhole in the galaxy. Cardassian control of Bajor is no longer just a tragedy—it’s a direct threat to the long-term

security and prosperity of the Federation, because who knows what is on the other side. I promise you, that kind of ruthless pragmatism drives Federation policy as much as it would the Klingons or the Romulans.”

Thankfully, Federation assistance had been given prior to the discovery of the wormhole, Picard thought, but Gothic made some very uncomfortable points.

Without the wormhole as a factor, would the Federation truly have remained to aid Bajor, especially given the political instability laid bare by the Circle affair? The Federation was normally loathe to insert itself in such situations, as if it was tacitly endorsing one faction over another. He wanted to believe it would have stayed—but a persistent doubt whispered that this was not conviction, merely hope.

“When we come back, we’ll be joined by the President of Kessik IV, Miss Donatella Moss, and Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise.”

Picard drew a steadying breath and rose, already feeling drained by an interview he had not yet even entered.

“I believe that is our cue, Madame President,” he said gently. “May I escort you to the transporter room?”

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“Thank you, Tessa. It has been an incredibly difficult time for my people. But the Federation as a whole has provided tremendous support, and many of our fellow member worlds have sent aid in various forms—everything from replacing critical technology destroyed during the invasion, to sending counselors to help our people cope with their grief, to deploying security personnel and ships while our defenses remain in such a precarious state.”

“In moments of tragedy like this, the great strength of our United Federation of Planets—our alliance—really shines through.”

“Finally, a single bright spot in this troubling interview,” Ambassador Vel muttered. “I was beginning to rethink our Federation membership.”

Riker *sincerely* hoped that the ambassador was joking—the loss of Betazed would be a devastating blow to the Federation, especially as they were one of the few fully telepathic races in the Federation—but after what he’d heard today, he couldn’t be certain. And as a man who usually trusted his instincts, he wasn’t about to place money on this one.

“I will petition my government to send aid,” Ambassador Synne offered. “In times like these, we must stand together.”

“As will I,” Vel added more firmly, making a quick note on an omnitool, he noted. Those sleeves could hide a lot it seemed.

“Captain Picard, why was the nearest Starfleet ship so far from the planet? Why was Kessik IV left alone to defend itself?”

“The Hur’q invasion stretched Federation resources to the breaking point across the quadrant. To be candid, threat assessments did not identify Kessik IV as a likely target for the Hur’q, so few fleet assets were stationed nearby. There were other worlds in the sector deemed higher priority. As we have learned from recovered battle wreckage, Hur’q propulsion and power generation technology does not rely on dilithium like we do. We did not believe Kessik IV held much strategic value for the Hur’q, in population, in technology, or in resources. In hindsight, that was a grave miscalculation.”

Jellico looked pained, even as Captain Picard defended him and the Federation.

“We had orders to patrol in that area,” Jellico explained plaintively. “We were exactly where we were ordered to be.”

“No one is blaming you, Captain,” Riker gently reassured the troubled man.

Jellico gave a curt nod, though the doubt in his eyes suggested the words had offered him little comfort.

“Starfleet’s role has evolved since its founding over two centuries ago—nothing remains static. But we have never lost sight of our fundamental mission: to protect the people of the Federation. I certainly have not.”

“Yet when Kessik IV and Paris was in terrible danger, it wasn’t Starfleet that saved them—it was Admiral Gothic. He was simply passing by, by chance or luck, someone with no obligation to do anything at all. Should we really rely on the generosity of passing strangers on vacation, on miracles, to save our lives? Is Starfleet, as it stands today, truly capable of fulfilling its primary mission?”

“We are deeply grateful for Admiral Gothic’s extraordinary service to the Federation, both on Kessik IV and on Earth, even when on vacation. Starfleet has protected this great Federation for over two centuries with honor and distinction, meeting every threat and prevailing.”

“Bah!” Martok barked, slashing the air with his hand. “You cling to past glories like old warriors telling stories in a tavern. Starfleet is not the same blade it once was—it has lost its sharpness. The Empire sees it clearly, even if you do not.”

Data tilted his head. “General, could you elaborate?”

“You act as a military, but you are not one anymore,” Martok said, his voice edged with contempt and a warrior’s disappointment. “Your admirals speak of exploration, diplomacy, and science. Worthy secondary goals, perhaps—but they are not of defense. You have wandered far from your core purpose, and that makes you weak. A fleet divided in its heart cannot stand united in war against terrible foes. That is the truth, whether you wish to hear it or not.”

He leaned forward, his single eye glinting, as if he were about to speak of a shared pain. “The Empire fights the same rot—peace softens us, dulls our instincts. We fight it tooth and nail, lest we forget what it means to be Klingon. But you... you embrace it, yet believe you are not doing

so. That is not strength, that is self-delusion. It is the first step toward decline and ultimately your inability to carry out that which you were founded to do.”

“Ah,” Data interjected quietly. “I believe our term for this phenomenon is ‘mission drift’... or perhaps ‘mission creep.’”

“I’m unfamiliar with that term, Data,” Crusher admitted.

“Ideally, an organization’s mission should guide both its grand strategy and its day-to-day choices,” Data explained. “When that alignment breaks down, the organization risks losing sight of its core purpose—and, eventually, its very identity.”

“Is that always a bad thing?” Deanna asked.

“Not necessarily,” Riker replied. “Starfleet has to adapt. The needs of the Federation evolve and change, and we’d be foolish not to change with them.”

“I strongly disagree, Commander,” Jellico said, his tone sharp, almost cutting. “Starfleet hasn’t just drifted like a ship that has lost main power—we’ve self-righteously set course in the opposite direction, we have abandoned the very skills and focus that define us. We’ve traded the ability to fight and defend for diplomacy and exploration, and we fool ourselves if we think that won’t come back to bite us, that it doesn’t come with a terrible cost. It already has, both during the Cardassian War and the Hur’q Invasion. I fought on the frontlines of the Cardassian War—I’ve seen competent officers die because we were too slow to act, too timid to wield the power at our disposal. The Federation is safer when Starfleet knows its purpose—and right now, we’ve forgotten it. This is weakness disguised as evolution and progress.”

“With that in mind, let me ask you this: What percentage of Starfleet’s active-duty ships are still based on designs created more than 75 years ago?”

“I don’t have that information with me.”

“No worries, because I do.”

Riker’s mind churned as he scanned the numbers, laid out with almost ruthless clarity. Starfleet, like the Federation itself, was a vast, complex, galaxy sprawling organization, yet this breakdown made it almost painfully simple to see—shining a brutal and unforgiving spotlight on its scale and complexity...and possibly...its failings. The precision of the data was undeniable, a testament to the show’s meticulous research team.

“Mr. Data, are these numbers accurate?” Riker asked, incredulity creeping into his voice.

“I, too, would like to know that,” Jellico interjected, his piercing gaze locked on the screen as though it could bore through the very data—and through Riker himself.

“Yes, Commander, Captain, these figures are accurate,” Data confirmed, though a flicker of confusion crossed his face. “Is this data... surprising to you? Admiral Gothic drew attention to these matters at the recent reception in Ten Forward. When you disputed his statements then, I had assumed you would have conducted your own verification.”

Riker could feel Deanna's semi-amused stare, but it was Jellico's presence that weighed on him like a physical force, an unspoken demand for accountability.

"No, no, I didn't," he admitted, a flush of embarrassment warming his cheeks.

"Why hadn't he?" he asked himself.

Was it because the source was an augment? Or because he feared what he might find—fearful that the truth, laid bare like this, might be impossible to ignore or refute? That the organization he had devoted his entire adult life to, might be unable to carry out its core function.

"The USS Cairo, the ship that was twenty-four hours away from Kessik IV when the Hur'q attacked—the one that was meant to protect this world—is an Excelsior-class vessel. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"The Excelsior-class was first designed and launched over eighty years ago, correct?"

"Yes, I believe that's correct."

"To keep it viable in the modern day, the entire class has undergone five major refits over its—let's be honest here—very long service life."

"Again, I believe that's correct."

"And yet, these ships are still on the front lines. Still protecting Federation worlds. Captain, with the leaps forward we've made in propulsion, power generation, transporters, shielding, sensors, hull composition, computer processing, weapons, you name it... does it make any sense to continue fielding starships based on designs from eight plus decades ago?"

"The Cairo and ships like her serve with distinction across the Federation. Their crews are among the finest we have—men and women who have dedicated their lives in service to the Federation."

Given that the topic was the very ship Captain Jellico commanded, every eye in the room flicked toward him, drawn almost unwillingly.

Jellico's face was a mask of cold focus, his gaze fixed on the main viewscreen with such intensity that it seemed to bend the air around him. The silence he radiated pressed down on the room, daring anyone to speak out of turn.

"I don't doubt their dedication for a second, Captain. But my question wasn't about the valor of their crews or their lives of dedicated service to the Federation, sentients who are doing the best they can with what they've been given, which are, frankly, antiquated starships—it was about whether it makes sense to send those crews into danger aboard outdated vessels. Ships that, however noble their long, long, long service history, may not offer the protection Federation citizens deserve."

“As the captain of an Excelsior-class vessel, I can say with confidence and authority that it was a brilliant design—a cutting-edge step forward that few of our peers across the galaxy could match...at least in its time,” Jellico said quietly, the room holding its breath. “The refits have kept the class relevant, but on a one-on-one basis, it can no longer compete with designs from even thirty or forty years ago among our closer technological peers, like the Klingons or Romulans, let alone more modern ships.”

Riker could only nod in reluctant agreement. Early in his career he had served aboard the *USS Hood*, an Excelsior-class ship, as first officer, and knew exactly what it could—and could not—do.

“I love my ship, and I love my crew,” Commander Wong added, “and I serve on the *Cairo* with pride. But the inexorable march of time and innovation does not pause for sentiment. I would gladly match our crew against the finest in the fleet—even the *Enterprise*—but there are missions, situations, and adversaries that force me to admit the Excelsior-class may simply be outmatched, especially one-on-one.”

Jellico merely nodded in agreement, though not in defeat—Riker could see that clearly. A captain could not afford false bravado when his crew’s lives rested entirely on his decisions. He had to face, with brutal clarity, what his ship could accomplish—and what it could not.

But hearing it laid out so plainly by Jellico and Wong felt like a betrayal, not of them, but of the *Cairo* itself. The bond between a ship and her crew was almost sacred, a relationship Riker had always accepted without question. And yet, suddenly, that bond felt fragile, almost illusory. The Excelsior-class—so reliable, so stalwart—was being measured, found wanting, stripped of the pride he had assumed was justified.

He thought of the *Enterprise-D*, the Galaxy-class ship that he had served on for more than eight years now: a brilliant new design, a ship straight out of the shipyard, the flagship of the fleet. He and Picard had been its first commanding officers, blazing trails, making history. The contrast gnawed at him.

Riker’s mind turned to the *Cairo*’s history. Just how many men and women had commanded her in its long service life? How many first officers had it had? Just how many had stood on her bridge and borne the weight of lives and missions, trusting that the ship would rise to the occasion? He feared the answer would shock him, just like the numbers now before him had.

“I was very surprised to hear you say that Starfleet does not rely on the Constellation-class to protect the Federation, since Constellation-class ships have participated in thirteen separate combat engagements during the Hur’q invasion, according to Starfleet records. In eleven of those cases, these very, very old ships were lost with all hands. Those valorous crews you referred to earlier, who dedicated their lives in service to the Federation, now gone, forever.”

“That is a mischaracterization of unique circumstances, ma’am. The Hur’q invasion was unprecedented in our history, in both scale and ferocity. Every Starfleet vessel within range was ordered to respond to incursions during this conflict—not just for direct combat, but for evacuation, rescue, or to offer humanitarian aid.”

“Perhaps. But would it surprise you to learn that even before the Hur’q Invasion, during the most recent Federation–Cardassian war, Constellation-class ships were deployed in seven documented unclassified combat missions? Who knows how many other missions took place using Constellation-class ships that we don’t know about it. Was the Cardassian War unprecedented in our history, in both scale and ferocity? That does not feel correct, sir.”

“I attended the Academy with a Constellation-class captain; we were not friends, but I knew him,” Jellico said, his voice tired. “During a larger engagement, his ship was limping away when a single Cardassian Galor-class vessel caught up to them. That ship could have destroyed the Constellation with a single full-powered shot, yet the Cardassians toyed with them, slowly picking them apart to prolong its demise. When the warp core was in danger of breaching, the captain ordered his crew to abandon ship. Over the course of an hour, the Cardassians methodically and deliberately destroyed each defenseless escape pod with people inside, in direct violation of galactic law. They deny it ever happened, of course. We believe they let one pod return to the fleet intentionally, to spread the story and demoralize us.”

“They died in battle, Captain, honorably, no matter the odds,” Martok said, his voice resonant with Klingon certainty. “Their people celebrate them in the afterlife.”

Jellico nodded quietly, neither dismissing nor agreeing, simply acknowledging the grim truth.

“Is Starfleet’s industrial capacity so limited that we cannot field modern starship designs? That we can’t retire active-duty vessels after, say, thirty years of service like the other powers do? Wouldn’t that better protect the people of the Federation?”

“I am the captain of a single Starfleet vessel, even if it is the flagship. Matters of fleet logistics, starship design, or shipbuilding fall far outside my official authority or purview.”

“I understand, I really do. But would it surprise you to learn that the Federation has fewer shipyards than both the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire—nations whose territory and resources are significantly smaller than ours? Or that, even with our limited number of shipyards, we’re still operating far below their official operational capacities? That prior to the Hur’q invasion, Federation shipyards across the quadrant were averaging just 50% utilization?”

“Many in the Empire have wrestled with this question for decades,” Martok said, his tone uncharacteristically uncertain. “In the years after the Khitomer Accord, we assumed it was a trick—a gambit to lure us back into a war we could not win, while we were still recovering from the destruction of Praxis. But it never came.”

“Are these figures accurate as well, Commander Data?” Ambassador Vel asked, her tone clipped.

“Confirmed, Madame Ambassador,” Data replied. “However, shipyard utilization has recently increased dramatically as Starfleet and the Federation work to recover from the losses sustained during the Hur’q Invasion.”

Vel’s eyes narrowed. “Are we at full capacity, then?”

“No, ma’am,” Data confirmed. “Current reports indicate approximately 70% utilization.”

Vel’s eyes widened in surprise. “How do we explain that?”

“I do not know, Ambassador,” Data admitted, his expression unreadable. “There is no official explanation for the current utilization rate.”

“Can you please speculate, Commander?” Vel pressed.

Data’s eyes flickered as if scanning every possible variable for an answer, likely consulting with the *Enterprise’s* computer. “Currently available data suggests that, after years of operating at roughly half capacity, Federation shipyards lack the trained personnel required to maintain shipbuilding at each facility’s full rated capacity,” he reported, his voice neutral. “Starfleet personnel are being reassigned, and a recruitment drive is underway to staff these facilities.”

Vel’s lips pressed into a thin line, her expression betraying her dissatisfaction. “I see.”

“Would the security of the Federation be improved if Starfleet retired ships over thirty years old—like the Excelsior and Constellation classes—and instead prioritized building new ships based on new designs, and more of them?”

“It is not that simple. Such a shift would require enormous political will, sustained public support, redirection of critical resources from other ongoing projects, a complete overhaul of operational priorities—not to mention new training standards and a surge in recruitment to crew those ships—”

“Ha! I can see it in his eyes—he wants to say ‘yes,’ but unfortunately even we Klingons cannot escape politics,” Martok said with a grin. “Wait until you become a General or an Admiral. There are days I wake up longing to be just a common soldier once more.”

As Martok drifted into nostalgia, Riker couldn’t help but recognize the validity of the question—good even, given the figures that had just been shared. But what answer could Captain Picard realistically give? And what could he have said if he had been the one asked the same thing? Privately, Riker felt a pang of relief that he wasn’t the one on the hot seat.

“General, is it correct that the Empire retires ships after roughly thirty years of service?” President Moss asked.

“That is correct,” Martok replied, his tone measured. “Although our ships see battle far more frequently than yours, so few reach the end of their expected operational life before destruction or becoming uneconomical to repair. For those that do survive, we retire and recycle them roughly twenty to thirty years after launch, making way for new or upgraded classes of ships. A ship is a tool, not a relic to be overly sentimental over.”

“No offense, General,” LaForge interjected, “but while Klingons are fearsome warriors, they lack the engineering expertise to maintain and repair their ships at the level the Federation does. Part of the reason for their accelerated retirement schedule is simply that they cannot keep these vessels operational beyond a certain point.”

Martok nodded slowly. “I cannot deny the truth in your words. Unlike many of my counterparts, I am well aware that the Empire is in dire need of more scientists and engineers.”

“An old adage comes to mind,” Jellico added, his tone measured. “Just because we *can* does not mean that we *should*.”

Martok rumbled an agreement.

“Admiral Gothic, Captain Picard clearly prefers to discuss the difficulty of change, rather than discussing or debating the need for it. But I believe I’m asking a question that can be answered in a straightforward fashion. Would the security of Federation citizens be improved if Starfleet weren’t relying on aging ships—ships that could be replaced, given the excess shipbuilding capacity we already have?”

“I think the short answer is yes—absolutely. The people of the Federation would be safer if those changes were made. That much is obvious. But I also understand why Captain Picard hesitates. It’s not a simple issue, and pressing him for a yes or no strips away the historical and institutional context that shaped Starfleet into what it is today.”

“Finally, a clear answer at last!” Martok bellowed, laughing, the sound echoing with genuine relief.

“But the great Starfleet captains of old—Archer, Pike, Kirk, Sulu, Spock—they understood. They knew that defense wasn’t some unfortunate necessity, it was the foundation upon which everything else was built. Without safety, there is no diplomacy. Without security, there is no science. Without survival, there is no exploration.”

“In a galaxy as dangerous and unpredictable as ours—especially with threats like the Hur’q emerging from seemingly nowhere—we cannot afford a Starfleet that treats defense as a secondary concern. Not anymore.”

“Even in the Empire, the names of such worthy foes are remembered long after their passing,” Martok said, his voice low and serious.

The Admiral’s observation was difficult to dispute. The Hur’q Invasion had exposed deep systemic flaws and vulnerabilities throughout the Federation.

“But that gradual shift in purpose—call it attitude, guiding philosophy, whatever you like—didn’t happen in a vacuum. Starfleet reflects the culture of the Federation itself. And part of that is the reality that it hasn’t faced a true peer adversary threatening its survival in over a century. The Federation-Klingon War required the intervention of a god-like species, the Organians, just to stop it. Even temporarily.”

“The Federation faced the very real possibility of defeat against the Klingons—unlike the smaller conflicts with species like the Cardassians or the Tzenkethi, where the Federation was never truly at existential risk. It hasn’t seen a war of that scale in over a century, at least until the Hur’q invasion. Without such powerful enemies to contend with, complacency set in. Long-standing fears about giving Starfleet too much power and resources began to influence critical

policy decisions once again, including ship replacement schedules and shipbuilding priorities. For the last hundred years, the Federation has never fielded the fleet size it both could and should, given the vastness of its territory.”

“We, too, have not been immune to such complacency,” Martok admitted. “Many in the Empire believe that only through war can our weaknesses be purged.”

Though the Klingon Empire had never ceased its expansionist conquest, its ambitions had slowed significantly since the Accords were signed. A more militaristic, more aggressive Klingon Empire would be the last thing the Federation needed right now, especially as it struggled to recover from the Hur’q Invasion.

Riker’s concern extended beyond the Empire itself. Should the Klingons strike against the Romulans, the Cardassians, or the Breen, the quadrant would almost certainly be dragged into the conflict, willingly or not. History had shown again and again that Klingon wars rarely left anyone on the sidelines.

“You’re saying that we did this to ourselves. “Why would we do that?”

“That’s the right question. From the very beginning, when the Federation was founded, the member worlds feared losing their sovereignty in this new alliance. They worried that by giving up most of their militaries, Starfleet would eventually grow too large, too powerful, and too militaristic—making it impossible to resist, and that they might be quietly conquered without a fight, even helping in that goal by having their own forces assimilated into the nascent Starfleet. Don’t just take my word for it—those debates were intense and well documented. It’s all in the public record of those worlds around that time.”

Martok leaned forward, eyes sharp, “Ah—perhaps this is the answer we’ve been seeking. What we failed to understand.”

Riker flinched inwardly. Even as allies, giving the Klingons a window into the Federation’s inner workings felt perilously risky, regardless of whether he fully agreed with Gothic’s assessment. Martok had made it very clear, saying it again and again, that many in the Empire wanted a return to the old ways.

“You’re saying those old fears about Starfleet becoming too strong resurfaced during the past century, when the Federation didn’t face a true existential threat? That the member worlds deliberately weakened Starfleet so it wouldn’t become too powerful to control or to resist?”

“Exactly, Madame President, though ‘deliberately’ might be too strong a word. I doubt it was some grand conspiracy with leaders meeting in secret on a distant asteroid or moon to plot this out. It was more organic—an unintended consequence of self-interest and fear guiding decisions independently. And now, a hundred years later, here we are.”

“Given your positions, I am very curious to hear your thoughts, Madame Ambassadors,” Data said, fixing both women with an unwavering gaze. “Do Admiral Gothic’s words have merit?”

Like Riker, he suspected that every Starfleet officer in the room had wondered the same thing in private. Yet only Data had the courage—and the temperament—to voice a question that no one else dared to ask, a question that threatened to force answers most would rather avoid.

Yet here we are, he thought wryly, almost echoing the Admiral's words without meaning to.

Ambassador Vel looked every bit as pained and uncomfortable as the others.

“Admiral Gothic is correct,” Vel began, “to my knowledge there has never been any grand conspiracy among Federation member worlds to weaken Starfleet. But the Admiral is also correct in noting that Betazed, like many worlds, has long harbored fears of a Starfleet so powerful that no single world—or even a coalition of worlds—could resist it. History is filled with examples of overly powerful military forces deposing their civilian governments. My own ancestors served in government when Betazed debated whether to seek Federation membership. They had profound reservations, fears about the future, yet ultimately viewed it as a necessary risk given the dangers faced by many independent worlds then—and still today.”

Data turned his attention to Ambassador Synne.

“Our people shared those fears, which is why we sought Federation membership,” Synne added. “We are pacifists and have never maintained our own armies or fleets. Any force large or powerful enough to defend us could also threaten our sovereignty—it is a danger we have always accepted—so perhaps we are not the best example for Admiral Gothic's point. Indeed, for my people, we wish Starfleet to be as strong as possible to fully protect our world against all dangers. Unfortunately, like our neighbors on Kessik IV, we have learned that perhaps we are not as safe as we once believed. That is why we are strongly considering leasing the GODS net and placing it under Admiral Gothic and his company's autonomous control, in line with our own moral convictions.”

Riker winced. Many had feared that Gothic and his company might secretly retain control over the deployed defense platforms even when leased to planetary governments—but Risa intended to hand that control to Gothic outright, openly, from the very start. Gothic's company, or its autonomous control software, which may as well be the same thing, would in effect be in control of the defenses of one of the most highly visited planets in the quadrant, from those in and out of the Federation.

He would have no choice but to report this to Captain Picard upon his return, who would in turn have to report it up the chain of command. This would likely go all the way up to the President's office.

The Federation Council would likely protest the move, but legally, ethically, and morally, it was ultimately the Risians' decision, especially if they were willing to pay for it themselves. And the Risians could easily afford it. Not many people knew it, but Risa was one of the richest planets in the Federation being one of the most visited worlds in the quadrant.

Every Federation member world retained their own sovereignty, unfortunately leaving the Federation with little room to challenge or protest their choice.

“There are a lot of external forces working in concert to weaken both Starfleet and the Federation. But at the most basic level, we’re looking at a Federation with a fleet that’s far smaller than it should be for a polity with territory as large as it has. And what we do have is made up largely of aging designs kept in service decades past their intended service life, with no serious effort to create new designs and replace those old ships by tapping our underused industrial and shipbuilding capacity to fix the problem.”

“Even with a reduced and aging fleet, to its credit, the Federation has managed whether most threats. But in my opinion, the greatest danger we face is the slow, steady drift away from Starfleet’s core mission. It needs to remember what it was built to do—and start acting like it. Maybe it’s idealistic to think this invasion will serve as a wake-up call. But if it does, maybe we’ll finally see the will to root out the weakness that’s taken hold.”

“Millions have died, entire worlds lost, hundreds of ships and tens of thousands of highly trained starship crews killed or missing,” Jellico said. “I can only hope we, as a people, have the courage to recognize what is right before us.”

“I admit,” Martok said, “that while the Federation and the Empire have been allies since the Khitomer Accords, my people have long been wary of a stronger Starfleet and Federation. But the threat the Hur’q posed to the entire quadrant could only have been withstood with the help of our Federation allies. Even now, it is their people who aid our worlds, providing humanitarian relief where we cannot.”

Martok paused, as if weighing his next words carefully, the unspoken truth hanging in the air: Klingons were not exactly known for their humanitarian skills.

“I can make no promises, but I will encourage my superiors to do what we can to support our allies, the Federation,” he concluded with a heavy sigh.

“I want to know what you think we should do. And I suspect many in my audience feel the same. You’re not just a man from another time—or another dimension—you’re an outsider, who has already done so much for the Federation in a very short time. That perspective lets you see things we might be blind to, purposefully or not. So please, Admiral, tell us what you think we should do.”

“I want to know as well.

“First, we need new designs for a new generation of starships—ships built specifically to defend the Federation. Not multi-mission platforms, like virtually every ship in Starfleet today. Not science vessels that can be converted into warships or fight in a war, if forced to. But vessels created with one purpose: defense. Build them with greater operational automation in mind from the start so they require smaller crews to operate.

Second, we need to build those ships—a lot of them—while expanding Starfleet Academy and other training institutions across the Federation. Relax the overly rigid admissions standards and increase class sizes. Recruit more general crew to serve aboard them, so new ships don’t sit idle in drydock waiting for bodies to fill the stations.

Third, once the new fleet is operational, retire the old starships. Recycle them. Or, if they're still useful and space worthy, turn them over to the control of the member worlds so they can police their own space more effectively without relying solely on Starfleet. But stop pretending that eighty-year-old ship designs can still carry the burden of the Federation's defense."

Martok swept his gaze across the room.

"You act as if this is some great revelation!" he barked, laughing. "Design new ships, build them, retire the old ones—bah! Should it be any surprise? You Federation people, always finding a way to make the simple things complicated!"

"We have the capacity to build more ships—that's not the issue. But once those ships are built, we need people who can actually operate them. Retraining the crews from decommissioned vessels will help, but that only goes so far. The goal isn't just to replace one old ship with one new one—a one-to-one exchange—it's to field more ships than we've had in a century."

"But Starfleet's current admittance standards are ridiculously high. Not just academically, but in terms of who and how many are even allowed to take the entrance exam. That alone puts a hard cap on how many people can serve. It's an artificial bottleneck—self-imposed."

"You said 'artificially.' You believe one of the ways we've weakened Starfleet is by limiting the number of people who are even allowed to serve?"

"Absolutely. We've prioritized prestige over practicality, selectiveness over readiness. And we've done it while simultaneously refusing to implement greater automation aboard our ships—automation that could significantly reduce crew requirements. We've limited the pool of people and simultaneously refused to make it easier to stretch those numbers across more ships. It's a self-defeating strategy and a way to justify much smaller fleet sizes than the Federation can field or requires."

"I believe there's been a systematic effort—intentional or not—to do exactly that. If you discourage automation on starships, subtly dissuade your population from joining Starfleet—which, by the way, is likely why the percentage of humans in Starfleet is so disproportionately high—and simultaneously restrict training slots while raising entrance standards to absurd levels, the result is predictable: you end up with far fewer people available to crew starships."

Martok's grin stretched from ear to ear as he swept the room with a delighted gaze, his eyes sparkling with barely contained mischief.

"I must thank Admiral Gothic for inviting me to this... 'watch party'—the looks on your faces, as if he were revealing the secret wisdom of Kahless himself!" Martok laughed, slapping the table with relish. "Let me speak plainly, as if you were a particularly dimwitted Pakled child: *more ships, more crew!* HA! HA! HA!"

He laughed as though he had just delivered the greatest joke in the universe, unconcerned that he might be laughing alone.

“I must share this with Chancellor Gowron and the High Council when I make my report—*they* will appreciate my humor, mark my words,” Martok continued, still jovial. “I have served on a dozen ships in my career, captained three of them, and now I lead whole armies and fleets. Yet without an advanced degree in science, or training in diplomacy or philosophy, I likely would never have been allowed to captain even a garbage scow in Starfleet, much less be allowed to attend your Starfleet Academy. Your extreme admission standards are laughably absurd. When it served our interests to allow you to weaken yourselves, we said nothing. Now, your weakness endangers us all.”

Again, the room fell silent, unsure what to say.

“A Klingon Bird of Prey is no heavy cruiser,” Martok continued, his tone now serious, “but it is a powerful, versatile warship, capable of performing many mission types—and it can be crewed by as few as six people.”

He turned to Jellico. “Captain, what is the standard crew complement on an Excelsior-class ship?”

“Seven hundred fifty,” Jellico replied, crisp and concise.

“The older a ship, the more crew it typically required to operate it,” Martok continued, fixing Riker with a sharp gaze. “Commander, a Galaxy-class starship is both larger and superior in nearly every definable way to the Excelsior-class. What is the standard crew aboard your ship?”

Riker answered, “Approximately one thousand.”

“How many are truly required to actually operate the ship safely and effectively, rather than run the *Enterprise*’s many science departments or to conduct research?” Martok

“A few hundred perhaps,” Riker admitted, reluctantly.

“See?” Martok said, as though explaining a truth a child should grasp. “Fewer crew per ship means you can field more ships, even larger more powerful ones.”

“But if we’re all to blame, then we all share the duty to fix it. Whether anyone watching agrees with me or not—whether my words resonate or fall flat—I think Captain Picard would agree on one point without hesitation: the Hur’q Invasion laid bare deep, systemic flaws. Flaws that can’t be ignored. Starfleet, and the Federation as a whole, must change. Because we may not get another miracle next time to save us. And make no mistake—there will be a next time.”

“I agree, Admiral. “We can—and should—do better.”

“Yes,” Martok said gravely, nodding. “There will be a next time. It is as close to a certainty as the universe allows. We cannot rely on miracles.”

“Nor can we rely solely on the distant strength of others,” Ambassador Vel said, locking eyes with her counterpart from Risa.

“Agreed, Ambassador,” Synne replied, her voice measured and grave. “You are right—a change is needed. Are we to be that change?”

Riker's eyes flicked between the two women, taking in the determination etched on their faces. He could feel it in the room: a quiet, almost imperceptible shift had just occurred. Decisions had been made here, in this very moment, that would shape the course of worlds. Even without knowing every detail, he somehow understood the magnitude of what had just been settled. The air itself seemed to hum with it—a sense that history was being written, silently, before his very eyes.

“I noticed you deliberately left out planets adding an advanced orbital defense net—like the one your company provides—as one of your proposed solutions.”

“I do think it's a good idea, valuable in the short to long-term; I believe the Federation President was right about that. A system like the GODS net offers constant, local protection—both defensive shielding and offensive capabilities. It will reduce a member world's reliance on Starfleet for local protection and will allow Starfleet to redistribute fleet assets across entire sectors of space. Given the losses Starfleet experienced during the Hur'q Invasion, that would give them some time and breathing room. But mentioning it myself felt a little too self-serving.”

“Starfleet isn't what it once was, unfortunately. A lot of worlds could benefit from leasing that kind of protection, which is probably why the Federation President launched the planetary defense initiative. Whether it survives past the next election cycle—or the next news cycle—is anyone's guess. People have short memories, even after extreme events.”

The two ambassadors shared another nod, another shared understanding.

“I held his hand as he wept, as he asked again and again why he couldn't have died with his family. Saying how he wished he had. Then the grief gave way to rage. He started hitting himself in the face. He said he wanted to pick up a phaser and kill every last one of them. The Hur'q. All of them. Everywhere.”

“I made a promise to Matthew that day—and to hundreds of others who suffered similar losses and injuries—that I would do everything in my power to ensure that this never happens again. If that means making enemies in the Federation or in Starfleet, or with the Romulans, then so be it. I'd happily give my life for my people.”

Martok growled low, his eyes narrowing as if recalling something long forgotten.

“What is it, General?” Ambassador Vel asked, sensing the storm behind his silence.

For a moment, Martok hesitated. Then, with a heavy breath, he spoke.

“My family has served the Empire as warriors for more than fifteen generations. We have endured—where so many others did not—because we remembered. Because we passed down not only tales of triumph, but of failure. Not only songs of victory and glory, but words of warning and survival.”

The room stilled as Martok paused, his gaze distant.

“I remember the stories my grandparents told, from the days of the Klingon-Federation War. They spoke of humans like Matthew—humans who had lost too much, too quickly. Men and

women broken by grief, consumed by rage. They became something else entirely. My grandparents warned us that such humans could be more ruthless, more relentless, more merciless, than any Klingon warrior in the throes of a blood frenzy. They told us of the horrors they witnessed—what those humans did, and what they would do again if ever pushed beyond their breaking point. They warned us that these humans were like fire: once unleashed, they would consume everything before them, until nothing remained but ash, including themselves.”

Martok chuckled ruefully, almost manically.

“They were strong proponents for peace with humanity and the Federation.”

“When I saw the results of that simulation, I felt hope. For the first time since the invasion, I believed I had found a way to keep the promise I’d made—over and over again—to so many of my grieving people in those first terrible days. I threw myself into making it happen. I gathered support. Gathered funds. I instructed my administration to research the legal viability under Federation law, so that I could shut down any attempts to stop me. And we found that we could. There was nothing stopping us.”

“I, too, wish to feel that hope,” Ambassador Synne said aloud.

“The testing hasn’t exactly been without its difficulties, though, has it?”

“No. We’ve faced multiple delays, interferences—most notably due to the Romulans. They violated our space with a cloaked scout ship, deployed operatives to illegally observe the tests, and even went so far as to intercept, murder, and impersonate the Halkan ambassador and his diplomatic party. Of course, they claim that that was all the work of rogue agents.”

“And then someone tried to bomb the memorial event honoring Admiral Gothic and those who died in the invasion.”

“Yes. We can’t say with absolute certainty who was behind the bombing attempt, but all signs point to the Romulans, given the timing and prior actions. My head of security and Captain Picard’s team have both been investigating, but so far, we haven’t identified the individual or individuals who planted the device.”

“My people have a saying: ‘If the Romulans are trying to stop you from doing something, keep doing it—for surely you are doing something right!’” Martok declared, as though imparting ancient wisdom.

“I am unfamiliar with that saying, General,” Data observed.

“I am not surprised,” Martok admitted with a grin. “I just made it up, though it is undoubtedly true. But if I repeat it often enough, with sufficient gravitas, to enough people—it will *become* a saying of my people.” He let out a booming laugh. “All sayings must begin somewhere, do they not, android?”

Data inclined his head, calm as ever.

“Your logic is sound, General.”

Riker rolled his eyes at the exchange, while Worf and Fitzwallace shifted uncomfortably, both again reminded that the bomber still remained unidentified and may even now be plotting another attack against the Federation.

“For the first time in our planet’s history, nearly the entire eligible voting population participated. And after a careful, transparent, and audited tabulation, 98% voted in favor of leasing the Gothic Orbital Defense System.”

“Congratulations, Admiral. There’s still work to be done—finalizing the lease terms, agreeing on operational protocols and policies—but we’re ready to move forward. As of this morning, I’ve signed a Letter of Intent as President.”

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

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

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

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

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

And all of it had all been wrapped up in a neat little bow with the timing of President Moss’ announcement. *Had they coordinated the timing of it?* Everyone now knew Kessik IV would lease the technology regardless of Federation endorsement, transforming itself into one of the best-defended planets in the entire Federation—second perhaps only to the core worlds of Earth, Vulcan, and Andoria. The first domino had fallen, and countless more would soon follow—regardless of Captain Picard’s report—as other worlds inevitably sought the same protection,

even if they had to pay for it themselves. And it would be Kessik IV—an obscure, lightly populated, and strategically unimportant world—that had altered the course of galactic history and policy for decades to come.

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

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

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

The Federation Council would have to act.

Starfleet would have to adapt.

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

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