

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

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

“Even as President of my world my authority does not give me direct authority over Starfleet personnel or assets. I can’t necessarily control what Starfleet might do in any given situation or if they might try to seize your technology,” she said. “The thought of firing on a Starfleet vessel, even just to warn it off, fills me with anxiety and unease, but that feeling is many times worse when I think of the many citizens who lost their lives recently and how it could have been prevented by your defensive technology. That said, I made a solemn promise to my people and to myself that I will do everything in my power to ensure the tragedy and horrors that befell my people will never happen again, if I can help it. If we agree to this deal, I will warn Starfleet that we are obligated to defend your property and its secrets and should they prevent us from fulfilling our obligation, that the system can defend itself and we will do nothing to assist them.”

“I promise you, Madame President, my defense net will offer a level of safety and protection to your people that they have never had before. It will be worth it,” I assured her.

“It fucking better be, Admiral,” she practically growled, showing the steel underneath her beautiful exterior as she leaned forward to stare into my eyes across so many lightyears of space, before her tone again shifted on a dime. “Pending the results of a real demonstration, let’s talk price; you mentioned that you’d be willing to take payment in our planet’s mined dilithium. If I’m only licensing the technology, renting it rather than outright buying it, I expect the price to reflect that.”

My genuine smile in response to her haggling on the price was practically Ferengi. Now we were getting somewhere.

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 39

Holodeck. Onboard The *Flighty Temptress*. At Warp.

Floating in the middle of a blank, colorless void seemingly without end, I sat still, legs crossed, breathing regularly and deeply, in a classic meditative pose straight out of a movie or television show. Between breaths my body would probably look as still as a statue to an outside observer, that was the level of control over my body granted to me by what I was. Despite how it looked, I felt entirely comfortable, entirely *in the moment*, as I felt my place on the ship and accepted my metaphysical place in the galaxy and in this universe.

While on the outside I was utterly still, my chest only intermittently expanding and contracting as I inhaled and exhaled, inside my mind I was *building* and *destroying* entire worlds, like I was

a God, creating and giving breath to life through my will alone. I idly wondered if the truly God-like beings of this Star Trek universe might take offense at these thoughts, perhaps thinking me vain and reaching beyond my station, moments before they metaphorically smote me from a different layer of reality on a capricious whim. Yeah, it was probably best not to test the true limits of my Patron's protections by voicing any of this out loud. You never knew who was listening and might take offense.

Still, I felt the distinct urge to create, to author, to build, and I hadn't felt the urge to write a new holonovel in a long while. My focus these last few months had been firmly on my new ship, and on creating new technologies that would enhance my chance for survival in the years to come. Now that my ship was complete and in a good place, my creative urges were turned to more light hearted, but profitable pursuits.

My holodeck surroundings mirrored the utter desolation of my mindscape as I reached back into my hazy memories made in another body, with weak, baseline human senses and fallible, incomplete memories. I was employing Betazoid and Vulcan memory techniques and ironically, my pseudo occlumency, to dredge up every detail I could of 7 books and 8 movies that had been made in another time and dimension.

Colorful books formed around me one by one, pages in groups large and small fluttering through the air and then flying into place in the order that I could best remember them. Then several large televisions, of several models and sizes, formed around me, showing the 8 movies, pieces and parts coming from my memory to form the whole. All these movie-like transitions were the result of the mental connection my mind had to my ship, its powerful computer systems, and the holodeck itself, assisting me as I 'wrote.' These systems helped fill in the blanks here and there when my memory ultimately failed.

Expanding out around me in an explosion of color and substance, the ground came into existence where before there had only been a blank void. With but a thought, vibrant green grass grew suddenly, though the blades of grass were so utterly still it looked unnatural to my eyes. That just wouldn't do.

With another thought the world I had created was filled with air, and wind, and clouds, and weather patterns extrapolated from nearly 500 years of recorded Scottish weather data. Then, in a burst of color, a star came into existence through my will alone. This world's star broke the distant horizon, bringing bright sunlight, color, and warmth into a largely empty world, moving unnaturally fast across the sky as I laid out its path, sunrise and sunset occurring within moments of each other before I reversed time and that dusky orange that I so loved, the time right before sunset, lit up the sky and clouds in lovely colors.

My world still felt unnatural, being a flat grassland stretching uninterrupted to the horizon. So I brought the black lake into existence and added some topography, including a large cliff. With little effort, I brought into existence one of the most iconic magical castles known to the people of my world and time.

Rising seven stories into the air, large pointed turrets pointing into the sky, Hogwarts castle, for the very first time, came into existence in the Star Trek universe. Kind of.

Rising gracefully from my sitting position, I took in my latest creation, carefully maintaining my mental connection to my ship and the holodeck to keep everything static and functioning as I wanted it to in this nascent program. I was in a sort of free form narrative test mode where every parameter of the program was still fluid, rather than semi-locked as fixed narrative parameters. It wouldn't be incorrect to say that my will was keeping this world from dissolving into nothingness, from disappearing into the digital ether.

I was simultaneously proud and disappointed in what I had built, which made for a strange dichotomy. What was in front of me was decidedly Hogwarts castle as described in the books and borrowing heavily from the movies. Per the first book's pages, it was a thousand-year-old castle supposedly in the medieval gothic style, but with my real time access to Earth's historical database I could see the castle was *actually* a bit of mutt, a mix of several styles, including Northern Romanesque, Gothic, and Gothic revival. My new knowledge wasn't the cause of what was bothering me, though. The magical world was filled with a distinct subset of humanity, arguably an entirely new subspecies, with their own unique culture, and their own buildings infused with magic to fill in the blanks on the architectural and engineering knowledge that didn't yet exist in the time period in which it was built.

No, what was bothering me was the fact that I could sense the substance of the castle was only skin deep, practically a bounce house inflatable castle with only air on the inside. There were some rough outlines of rooms inside that my memory of the books and movies had built and were continuing to build in the background, rooms like the Great Hall, various classrooms seen in the movies, Dumbledore's office, the room of requirement, the chamber of secrets, but there were whole swaths of the castle that were practically blank space, because 7 books and 8 movies could only describe or show so much. Yes, I was borrowing heavily from the creativity of tens of thousands of creative minds involved in the making of the movies, but a holonovel was a fully immersive environment (well, at least the good ones were) and filling in the blanks was where my own skill would need to shine through.

"Hermione, Natasha, can I have a moment?" I called aloud into the air, eyes still locked on the castle and lands that would be the primary setting for seven installments of the series, so it needed to be dialed in right from the beginning. They appeared not a moment later.

"Father, how can we assist you?" they asked in unison.

A threw an amused glance their way, before continuing.

"I need some help with my latest holonovel, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," I explained, gesturing, "specifically fleshing out Hogwarts castle. From the novels I'm basing it on, it was built in Scotland, United Kingdom, Earth, circa 993 CE, old Earth calendar."

They affected a glance at Hogwarts and their eyebrows raised dramatically. Hermione was the first to speak up.

“Father, your...castle...is a bizarre mix of architectural styles that does not correspond to 993 CE on Earth,” she said gently, as if trying to spare me some hurt feelings. Amused, I let her continue with a composed face. “Furthermore, the castle, as designed, would have collapsed in upon itself well before completion. The current internal makeup is also impossible.”

Natasha glanced sharply at her sister as if in rebuke at her harsh words, then at me sympathetically. I lost the battle to control myself and let out a long, loud laugh. Their confusion made it all the more funny.

“Girls, I know it’s a bizarre mix of styles that could not stand on its own,” I admitted with a big smile. “It’s a magical castle from a series of incredibly popular children’s books from my time. When logic and sound engineering fail, insert magic to make it possible.”

The looks of confusion on their faces were really pretty funny.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said with a wave of my hand as if to dismiss this topic. “Access the Harry Potter database that I just created and filled in the ship’s computer. Ideally, I’d like to flesh out the castle fully, including magical effects that don’t have a sound scientific basis even today. Use even the most throwaway lines from the books and the briefest of throwaway shots from the movies to extrapolate a rough outline as a starting point. Access my personal database for anything that could help.”

Their faces went blank for a few moments as they directed their considerable processing power to learning everything that I had painstakingly uploaded into the database over 6 plus hours of meditation, including my personal database, meaning the many things that had been in my apartment and on my computer when I had been originally brought to this dimension. What had taken me many hours, and even that had been with a synaptic link between my brain and the ship’s computer, took only seconds for them. That was the scary power of a virtual intelligence bordering on true AI.

“Father, the castle appears to be replete with impossibilities that our processing cores are struggling to understand,” Natasha admitted, albeit reluctantly. Hermione nodded in agreement. “I am not sure we can competently assist you.”

“Can you elaborate?” I asked, though I had a good guess as to the kinds of things that they were struggling with.

“Spatially expanded spaces that do not conform to known Euclidean space, with unknown, yet specific conditional parameters to access or utilize. Hidden passageways that function akin to modern transporters-” Natasha answered.

“Doors that won’t open unless you ask politely, or tickle in the right place...” Hermione interrupted, then began to trail off, like her computer mind was struggling with the sheer illogic of what she was saying. A look of shocked realization appeared on her beautiful face. “Father, was I named after the Hermione character from the books? And were my physical parameters copied from the human actress, Emma Watson?”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably, looking anywhere but at her, feeling a little embarrassed. Thankfully, Natasha rescued me.

“Stairways that move with intelligence, walls pretending to be doors and doors pretending to be walls,” Natasha exasperatedly continued. “Seemingly sentient portraits and ghosts.”

“Girls, chalk all this up to ‘magic,’” I soothed. “Magic is wonder and whimsy and routinely making the impossible, possible, even the 24th century version of possible. And if it helps, view the magical people and races as species with the ability to biologically manipulate energy and reality. In fact, I suspect the wizards and witches are capable of utilizing zero-point energy or anaphasic energy and they represent another evolution of humanity, perhaps even humanity further along the path.”

My girls appeared thoughtful at my words, looking surprised I was talking about fictional characters as if they could be real. Given my personal experience with the multiverse, I had little doubt that they were, at least somewhere.

“Don’t worry about understanding it or making it scientifically viable,” I advised, painfully being reminded that my girls, while ‘real people’, by a given definition, were digital beings and some things might well be beyond them. “Just get me started. Extrapolate from the source materials what a castle school might look like. Use castle designs from the historical database as well as other fantasy fiction from Earth. I’ll fill in the blanks on any magical effect that needs to appear if you’re uncomfortable or unable to reproduce them in the program.”

“Understood, father, we’ll begin work on it immediately,” Hermione answered. Natasha nodded as well before they disappeared.

I took in the castle once again and with a mental command, the sun fully set. A moon appeared in the sky as I glanced at where it should be, the reflected light beautifully lighting up the clouds and the surface of the Black Lake with silvery moonlight. With another mental command, every room in Hogwarts instantly lit up with candlelight, simulating the famous crossing the Black Lake scene that every first-year student had when they got their first glimpse of their new castle home. With yet another thought I was standing on a large boat, one that was bobbing and moving through the water, propelled via magic. Glancing at the water meaningfully for a moment, a long, large tentacle came out of the water as if to wave at me, as if I was a new student of Hogwarts, the friendly and famous giant squid of Hogwarts coming into existence for the first time.

Beyond being one of my favorite stories from when I was young and hopefully a huge and profitable hit for me in this time, I was really hoping to loosen the utter stranglehold that The Adventures of Flotter had on the young and impressionable minds of the Federation’s many children. Yes, Flotter and his motley crew of pals did a nice job representing and depicting the natural elements and/or the forces of nature, imparting sound, basic scientific principles to kids, but there was a decidedly moralistic tilt to many of its stories, a subtle indoctrination in Federation thinking and propaganda.

In my opinion, that of an outsider who had not grown up in this culture and who had watched the many series of Star Trek, the Federation's youth needed a bit more wonder and whimsy injected into their young imaginations. It also wouldn't hurt to have them encounter the darker side of life in the stories as they grew up. Hell, fighting against Voldemort and his forces during the second Blood War, dealing with issues of racism and bigotry, might be exactly what the Federation needed. Many would likely follow canon Harry's path, barely fighting, unwilling to make the hard choices, but I bet you many might become competent fighters and tacticians as they fought their guerilla war in books 6 and 7 and my program would allow them to fight a truly bloody and realistic civil war if they wanted to. In some ways, maybe my Harry Potter series of holonovels could impart some valuable skills or ways of thinking that could lead many to better weathering the Dominion shit storm on the horizon.

I let a bloodthirsty grin appear on my face as I thought about how *I* would fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I'd be throwing around a lot more than a fucking expelliarmus, that's for sure. A truly smart player would learn battle magic and healing, acquire magic resistant dragon hide clothing, enchanted blades, spare wands, medical and weaponized potions, and have several warded bolt holes with critical supplies and resources stocked up. He'd attract, train, and surround himself with his own private army of loyal and deadly fighters. He'd also lock down several hotties in the books, like Hermione, Fleur, Tonks, and Luna, but that was maybe my own preferences coming out to play.

How realistic should I be when depicting a boarding school full of young, horny kids away from home for long stretches of time with huge swathes of empty castle and little adult supervision?

Would my players recognize and/or counter Dumbledore's manipulations?

Would they tolerate the child abuse of the Dursleys?

Given the nature of the stories and how they naturally became more complex and darker as the years went by, the Federation would be hard pressed to justify blocking any of the early books from their people. Just like a smart drug dealer hooking their customer on his product with free samples or discounted initial prices, I'd give them a light hearted taste of HP with the first few books, magic, wonder, and whimsy, then by the time they realized that there was outright murder and torture depicted, and an internal civil war to fight and survive, it'd be too late. There'd be too big of a fan base, hopefully clamoring for more, to realistically block them from their citizens.

"I'm coming for you, Flotter!" I sillily yelled, a bolt of lightning streaking and branching across the dark sky.

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"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, from the front of the classroom, the looks of which I'd stolen shamelessly from the movies. Flitwick was perched on top of his pile of books as usual. Why he didn't just transfigure some stairs or a step stool, who knew. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too - never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

“Pause,” I called aloud, the draft program coming to a complete stop, all the characters stilling completely, including the really young actors who played Harry, Hermione, and Ron in the movies who were learning the levitation spell in this particular charms lesson.

Introducing wizard magic and their effects on reality presented me with the same problems to overcome that I’d had to deal with when creating the biotic effects in my Mass Effect holonovel. Thankfully, the solutions I’d come up with there could be recycled and reused to a degree.

The three components required to perform HP-style wizarding magic, in the books and how I’d defined it in this program, were intention (and willpower), incantation, and wand movement. Thankfully, when the player wanted to perform magic, it’d be relatively clear to the holodeck’s/holosuite’s many sensors, especially if they brandished their wand in a specific wand movement and said or shouted the bullshit latin spell names from the books and movies. Thankfully, the books did have quite a few spells already made. If, for example, the player was particularly motivated to learn new spells in the Hogwarts’ library or if they located the secret Room of Requirement and found the spell books there, a rough and tumble English to Latin translator program which basically described effects, would fill in the blanks. That meant the vaunted Hogwarts library needed to be shrunk down or restricted greatly. I’d input a few hundred spells already and sprinkled them around the virtual world I’d created.

“Give me Harry’s wand,” I said and instantly the familiar holly and phoenix feather wand appeared in my hand. “Computer, there are 11 wand movements that can be performed when casting a spell, please record my movements as the ideal example for all future cast magic in this program and any sequels that come after it.”

“Understood, begin when ready,” the computer responded in Natasha’s voice, but it was just the voice and not the essence or the mind behind it.

My wand began to move with precise movement in the 11 wand movements from the books and movies. My wand flicked, jabbed, pointed, rolled, swirled, swished, tapped, twirled, twisted, waved, and made shapes. The three traditional shapes were the horseshoe, incomplete infinity, and infinity. All spells had one or more of these movements.

“Computer, allow up to a 10% deviation from the ideal to register a successful wand movement,” I ordered, adjusting the magic narrative parameter file which would govern when the program registered a spell being successfully performed and having the program react accordingly. During the initial training I’d have the program show the wand movement path in bright white light for them to trace while learning. “Allow up to a 5% deviation in the spoken incantation for a successful spell.”

Spoken incantations in the books were for amateur wizards, but without integrating my mental control technology I saw no way for the holodeck to realize or register that the player was mentally incanting a spell. There was no way in hell I was going to release one of my unique technologies that gave me such a huge advantage over others just for this. I could do away with the wand movement, though.

“Adjust magic narrative parameter file, after 100 successful castings of a spell, allow the player to successfully cast spells without wand movement, but still require a general direction for the spell to be cast for any non-area of effect type spells. Inform the player of this change or evolution in the casting methodology,” I commanded, turning my eyes up while deep in thought. “Allow the whisper or subvocalization of spell incantations as well, for all spells, after 20 spells have been successfully practiced 100 times.”

Was that too much? Nah. It was supposed to be hard for many wizards and witches to reach that level of competency, silent casting only being taught in 6th and 7th year after years of magical education and instruction.

“Computer, resume,” I commanded.

Immediately the program resumed and the young wizards and witches of this class began incanting ‘wingardium leviosa’ to no effect, or in some rare cases, comic effect.

“Wingardium leviosa!” Ron incanted loudly, pumping his arm and wand like it was a club and he was beating someone over the head with it.

“Stop, stop, stop,” Hermione bossily commanded. “You’re going to take someone’s eye out. Besides, you’re saying it wrong. It’s leviosa, not leviosaaaa.”

I smiled at reproducing this famous moment from the books and films in 24th century Star Trek.

“You do it then, if you’re so clever. Go on! Go on!” Ron mocked.

“Wingardium leviosa,” Hermione incanted with confidence, her spell successfully levitating her feather.

“Pause!” I commanded, circling the area around Hermione’s feather. “Computer, adjust magic narrative parameter file. For any holographic elements connected to the program, adjust projection accordingly to accomplish the desired magical effect, assuming it is successfully cast per already established parameters. That goes for the charm being utilized in this scene, but is applicable for all magic including potions, charms, transfiguration, battle magic, etc. For any ‘real’ objects brought into the holodeck, interface with gravity plating control, isolate as tightly as possible and gradually reverse gravity to cause the object to rise. Use force fields to lift the targeted object if that’s a more expedient or safe option or for greater precision of movement.”

“Change logged,” the computer responded.

“Open to do list for future years of this story. Take dictation,” I commanded, a responding beep indicating I could start. “First, dark arts usage, particularly overuse, should gradually make the user unable to cast more light oriented spells. Consider introducing some kind of warping of the environment simulating that their mind is being affected by the use of too much dark arts. Consider introducing a magic cleansing ritual that would allow them to cast the dark arts but cure the negative effects. Second, spell creat-” I paused briefly as the doors to the holodeck opened and T’Maz walked in, completely nude, my eyes going to her model-like form. It was quite the distraction.

“Spell creation, for now all spells are limited to canon spells or those I created, introduce some form of high-level mathematics, maybe based on warp field theory, to allow players to create their own spells assuming they put in the work to get there. Third, user targeted apparition, not sure how that’s going to work. Maybe require the player to shout their destination prior to the apparition, similar to floo travel. Thankfully I’ve got till 6th year to figure that all out. Fourth, if the player wants to explore the muggle world, the 1990s United Kingdom, I need better data. Earth’s historical database has giant gaps given the chaos of the time. The Vulcans had scanned or visited Earth several times before First Contact, they may have the sensor scans I need for a more immersive environment even if it’s not strictly historically accurate or the right time period,” I said, thinking about how I would change things to better fit the history of my dimension, rather than this one. I lifted an eyebrow at T’Maz in obvious question.

“It is possible, Captain. I am not overly familiar with Vulcan’s history with Earth, pre-First Contact, beyond those parts of my family’s history that involve my ancestor, T’Pol,” T’Maz replied. “I can submit an inquiry to the archives of the Vulcan Science Academy. They retain many of the records of the Vulcan High Command of that era.”

“Not until we reach orbit of Earth,” I commanded. “I don’t want there to be anything to suggest our journey from Bajor was unusual in any way or that my ship has a superior method of faster than light propulsion.”

“Understood, Captain,” T’Maz replied, but remained, as if waiting for me to command her to report.

“Report, T’Maz,” I said, amused at how formal my crew had become lately, even when I’d made an effort to keep things pretty informal in the way I ran my ship.

“There is an anomalous reading in empty uncharted space along our projected path,” T’Maz reported. “Do you wish to change course or investigate further?”

I accessed the sensor logs and got more of the fine details first hand. There was a powerful and unrecognized energy signature in an area of space that should be empty, though it was uncharted by any of the major powers, at least publicly. My finely tuned Star Trek shenanigan senses were tingling, but those shenanigans, while dramatic and dangerous, often resulted in extremely profitable and worthwhile encounters. It would be a risk to investigate, but risks often paid off in a television show universe.

“Recommendation?” I asked, buying myself more time to think.

“Without more information, I do not see the need to change course at this time,” she answered.

“We should investigate further.”

“I agree, let’s see what’s there.”

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The Flighty Temptress. Outside of Normal Space. Exact Location Unknown.

The Star Trek shenanigans didn't even have the decency for us to reach the probe in the expected timeframe. Instead it had somehow instantly changed positions and emitted some kind of disruption wave that knocked the ship out of warp. And guess what I was doing while all this was happening? Taking a shower. Now that's something you didn't see in the shows. Stuff happening when people were just taking a shit or something. I suppose that wasn't as heroic or impressive, seeing your heroes in such a mundane position.

I could have easily taken control of my ship even in the shower, but I had promised myself that I'd let my crew handle things without me and frankly she didn't do anything I wouldn't have done.

I quickly left the shower to put on my armor and gather my weapons when the ship's red alert klaxon sounded. T'Maz attempted to both scan and make peaceful contact with the probe to gauge its intentions, but it immediately opened fire on us, with an, again, completely unknown energy weapon. My shields, having never encountered a weapon of this type, actually took a bit of damage before B'Elanna and T'Maz quickly came up with a fast and dirty change to the shield harmonics that better defended against the weapon. Knowing my girls, they'd be closely analyzing the sensor readings and trying to come up with an even better modification they could make in the future if we ever encountered this strange weapons technology again.

Of course, T'Maz had returned fire and destroyed the probe in a suspiciously short amount of time, just as I'd gotten back to the bridge, which of course led to even more Star Trek drama as a spatial anomaly formed and pulled the ship in. I call bullshit. First a pitched battle in space and on the ground with the Collectors on a Federation world, then a hostile encounter with a completely alien probe in the middle of nowhere empty space that upon its destruction creates a spatial anomaly we couldn't escape from?

Couldn't this shakedown cruise have gone without any weird shit happening? It felt like every moment of slightly more interesting 'action' in my life had to devolve into a dramatic episode of television. My only hope was that the payoff here would be worth all the trouble.

"Captain, I believe that we have been pulled into some sort of dimensional rift," T'Maz calmly reported from her station, having vacated the captain's chair upon my arrival on the bridge. "Sensor readings are remarkably similar to those we took when we battled the Collectors for the rift device and entered into that other universe."

For a moment, I remembered fondly a time in my life when those words would have been limited to the mouths of actors on a TV screen, or otherwise confined to the dialog of science fiction books or video game cut scenes. Then I remembered how utterly fucking boring that life had been, and how awesome triple blowjobs were, and told myself to *shut the fuck up and stop complaining like a bitch*. Whatever insanity the universe had in store for me was another part of the adventure that was my new life.

"Can you confirm that we are in another reality?" I asked, fearing I already knew the answer and hoping we weren't in some dark mirror dimension. Those had been some scary fucking episodes of Star Trek.

My scientific expertise, which had grown by leaps and bounds since coming to this dimension, didn't exactly cover inter-dimensional rifts, even with the little bit of personal experience I had with them, phenomenon that even the Federation still knew precious little about. Anomalies like these weren't as common as the Star Trek shows might make you think, it was just that ships called *Enterprise* were stupid strong magnets for trouble, no matter how rare and improbable, if not impossible it was.

As for the alternate reality thing, well, it wouldn't be the first time that I'd entered one of those, my chase after the Collectors into another reality in the old *Flighty Temptress* coming to mind. Unfortunately, my old ship was a pale reflection of what my ship now was and its sensor technology at the time had been civilian basic, at best, so we really didn't have the highest quality sensor logs to go back to and compare. Thankfully, I had spared no expense with this new version of my ship and had had the benefit of knowledge from several advanced races to upgrade my sensor technology with. My ship was also a badass, a warship designed for years of prolonged bloody war, a technological marvel capable of cracking a planet in two or traveling from one end of the galaxy to the other. I had done everything I could, spent an insane amount of money and used every resource at my disposal in order to increase my chances of survival, even in a hostile alternate universe in which we may be cut off from the supplies and infrastructure of 24th century Star Trek.

"Unknown. Sensors, as well as all primary systems, are offline. Power levels are extremely low. Until repairs are made, it may be difficult to ascertain exactly where *here* is," the Vulcan answered. "However, short-range sensors are providing us with some limited data. I am detecting several other vessels in proximity; they also appear to be disabled."

I pulled up several holographic screens showing what little the sensors actually had recorded before the spatial rift we went through knocked them out.

"Curious, T'Maz, don't you think?" I asked, continuing to analyze what data we did have. "A probe knocks us out of warp, it attacks and is easily destroyed, suspiciously easily, which somehow creates a spatial rift we're pulled into and we find a bunch of disabled ships on the other side."

"You believe that has all been a trap meant to pull us here?" she asked.

I didn't bother answering as I received updated damage reports from engineering. Apparently the best of British understatement was a cultural habit shared with the Vulcans. I soon discovered that my ship was in fact *heavily* damaged by the transition and we were only intact and somewhat functional because I was a paranoid bastard who believed in overkill when it came to the ship's power systems, system redundancies, armored hull, the stupid amount of inertia dampeners/compensators, the holographic nature of the various consoles, and my decision to disconnect the bridge control systems from the main power grid altogether in order to prevent power feedback damage. In fact, my decision to keep the bridge on an independent power grid with dedicated power cores feeding all functions in the event of main power failure or feedback might be the only reason we still had power on the bridge.

If this was a Federation ship, I was certain several of the bridge consoles would have exploded in someone's face already, severely injuring or killing a red-shirt crewmember or two, and the bridge itself would be pitch black with perhaps a few flickering lights and screens, intermittent sparks flying, and lots of debris and smoke. *On my bridge*, though, we barely felt a bump, the personal shields surrounding each crew position and the 5-point safety harnesses each crewman were cradled by during emergency situations wouldn't have allowed an injury even if there had been a bump, all of my consoles were fully working and the lights were normal. The Federation ship design philosophy could suck it. You can't argue with results like this.

Sensors, communications, propulsion, weapons, the cloaking system, and many other systems were offline though. Until power was restored and/or repairs were done, we were utterly helpless, and also stranded. This didn't make sense, though, the number of systems out didn't correspond with the actual damage we took during the transition. There was something else at work here.

"I just got this ship working!" I jokingly complained to the heavens, looking back at T'Maz with a smile, though my attempt at projecting a calm and confident demeanor was lost on the Vulcan.

"Gothic to B'Elanna, I want damage control back online. See if you can get the holo-engineers working and deploy them immediately to begin making critical repairs or figuring out why we don't have power to so many systems," I ordered, disengaging my seat harness and standing up. "T'Maz find out what you can about those other ships. Maybe they can clue us in as to what is going on here. And you should get dressed; I really don't need to be distracted right now. Everyone grab a sidearm from the armory. In fact, new standing order on this ship, every member of the crew is to have an enhanced omnitool and sidearm on their person at all times while on duty."

"Aye, Captain," the Klingon-human hybrid and my beautiful Bajoran replied in synch.

"Aye, Captain," T'Maz replied.

"Intruder alert!" Scarlett announced, now displaying a holo image of my ship, zooming in on a deck map with red dots indicating where they were in real-time. Internal sensors were still mostly working, thank the Prophets, unfortunately internal force fields and defenses weren't. Those systems were extremely power intensive. A pattern was definitely starting to emerge here.

Well, at least I now had someone to take out my increasing frustration on.

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The Flighty Temptress. Outside of Normal Space. Exact Location Currently Unknown.

I'd left the bridge quickly, via the turbolift, in order to repel the boarding parties Scarlett had detected, only it didn't look as if the enemy was actually trying to take control of my ship; they were just grabbing stuff before beaming out, and as far as I could tell there was no discernible pattern to what they were taking.

"T'Maz," I calmly called over the comm to the person I'd left in charge on the bridge while B'Elanna and T'Maz went to try to fix my ship. "Track their transports as best you can; I want to know exactly where they are taking our stuff. I have a feeling that we may need it all back."

"Understood, Captain."

I slowed my breathing and quieted my normally overactive mind, readying myself for combat, readying myself to take lives and to do terrible acts of violence in defense of myself and my ship. Only when I was ready, did I carefully and quietly pull my sidearms from the quick draw magnetic holsters on my thighs, backing up slightly in the lift to give myself more room should they be close to the doors.

As the turbolift jerked to an awkward halt (what the fuck was happening with my ship?!), I raised my arms and before the doors had even fully opened, I had fired on target, two of the raiders dying instantly as the supremely deadly neon blue energy hit them center mass, boring right through their armor like it wasn't there, one shot one kill. I instantly took aim on two new targets, but my next two shots weren't lethal for some reason, despite it being perfectly well aimed, which silently shocked the hell out of me. They weren't even properly stunned, drunkenly stumbling in place. I had not adjusted my weapons' settings, yet my second shots from each weapon had been weaker than the first. What the fuck was going on?!

The aliens only died moments later after I rushed forward and practically shoved the barrel of my weapons into their eyes and pulled the triggers at point blank range, their corpses collapsing bonelessly on top of some boxes they had pulled from a storage bay for economy of transport. Even a stun shot could kill if you put your weapon directly against the head of your target. But why had that been even necessary?? Diagnostics showed my weapons were in perfect working order and had not taken any damage during the transition or this fight. Capacitor readings, though, were unusually-

Before I could fully take in what my weapons' diagnostics were telling me about this bizarre situation, an alien jumped out at me from where he had been hiding in a side corridor, and I dodged a *bayonet* of all fucking things. I mean, what else could you call it, the alien had attached a long blade to the tip of his rifle, which for Star Trek was a really fucking odd sight, so I didn't think I was dealing with any of the species I was familiar with, the raider's armor concealing their form. However, I had no time to 'guess the species' as I was too busy trying to overpower the lifeform desperately trying to kill me. It was far stronger than most humanoids and it actually had some decent close quarter fighting skills and the viciousness to make up the difference.

Since my usually superior strength wasn't going to ensure me a quick victory in this fight, I used my better technique, speed, as well as my superior reflexes to great effect, putting some distance between myself and the alien who wore a set of exotic looking dark armor, kicking a container into the alien to slow him down. When the alien recovered and tried to quickly close the distance and impale me with its bayonet I sidestepped and spun quickly so that the pointy end went past me at the very last moment.

Now having doubts in my sidearms, I let them drop and be drawn back to their magnetic holsters. With a smooth motion, I gripped the handle of my antiproton sword resting on my back and poking over my right shoulder. With a smooth pull I drew my sword and with a twist of my wrist brought the doubled edged sword around in a full arc, the sword cutting through the air so quickly it let out an energized whistle.

This sword was pretty much the closest thing the Star Trek universe had to the lightsaber of Star Wars fame and was another of my many inventions, its antiproton edge allowing it to cut through damn near anything. The science and technology behind this weapon actually came from the Hur'q/Collectors, but they never would have imagined using it the way I had. Since the blade edge was made of energized antiprotons, no physical matter could withstand it. Given enough time and effort I could even cut through the thick hull of a starship, as I had done once before when I had stolen two Collector power cores from destroyed ships, so the armor worn by the alien stood no chance of withstanding my attack.

In the silence of the corridor, my enemy's head slowly fell off his neck and loudly struck the deck plate with a meaty thump. Thankfully, the antiproton edge had cauterized the flesh as it cut, so there was no blood to dirty my brand-new fucking carpet. Fucking alien bastards messing up my new ride. Cleanliness aside, cauterizing wounds would prevent bleeding damage, which wasn't ideal. Perhaps I could impregnate the anti-proton energy with something that would prevent cauterization as well as coagulation. The Jem'Hadar had done something similar to their weapons, so why couldn't I?

"Captain, new boarders have beamed onto the ship in other sections. They appear to be after our supplies," T'Maz reported just as I finished my foe.

"Understood," I replied as I brought my sword close to my eyes and watched as the neon blue antiproton edge of my sword began to slowly, but steadily dim, before settling on a low-level field, which lent credence to my suspicions.

While this ship did contain valuable and incredibly advanced technologies, our emergency supplies were really nothing special. We had a large supply of rations in the form of high calorie, nutritious, long-lasting food and water, medical supplies, as well as spare parts, in case the replicators all failed during an emergency situation or main power was lost, but most of it had little actual value in trade. Everything we had on hand at the moment was only the stuff my replicators could produce. Part of the mission on Earth was to allow B'Elanna the chance to purchase those emergency supplies for the ship that *couldn't* be replicated but could easily be sourced from the Federation. So why was this stuff being taken?

I had little time to think more on this behavior that made no sense to me as two more of the armored aliens were now charging up the corridor, weapons in hand. Armored might be a generous term for the cobbled together trash they had strapped on themselves, but any port in a storm, right? For some reason they didn't try to shoot me, they again tried to stab me with their bayonets. Why not just fire at me from distance?

Moving with reflexes no baseline human could match, I closed the distance between myself and the faster runner and ducked under his stab by falling to my knees, letting my momentum carry me forward as I swung my sword at waist height, bisecting the alien into two pieces, the blue glow from my blade's edge going out completely now, leaving me with a naked blade. A preternaturally sharp blade made with the most advanced metallurgy and materials technology available to 24th century Star Trek, but still a naked blade.

The second alien's weapon did fire weakly, though, as I came up to my feet by slicing him in half from left hip to right shoulder, so I figured that they were just low on energy and were very reluctant to waste it when a blade would work just fine to kill a single man with no seeming back up. If, for some reason, they were running low on even the most basic of supplies like their rifle's energy cell, it would explain this piracy act. Power generation in an era of space travel was stupidly easy, though, so this raised even more questions in my mind and the evidence was starting to pile up to explain why my sidearm's shots were weaker than they were supposed to be and why my sword's anti-proton edge had dimmed. It was as if the energy had been leached out prior to my pistol firing and the micro-singularity power cell's recharge rate couldn't keep up its normal rate of regeneration and storage in the weapons capacitors. That just wasn't possible under normal circumstances. I had fired on full auto for minutes and still not completely depleted the capacitors.

It was rather dark in the corridor, but I could see just fine with my genetically enhanced eyes so I checked out one of the more intact aliens, pulling off its covering head piece. At first I didn't believe what I saw, but I recognized this species. It was a *Reman*, of all things, who like their Romulan cousins were descended from the Vulcans who'd fled their home world many millennia ago.

They were the slave labor caste of the Romulan people since at least the 22nd century, and no doubt had been for even longer than that. They were forced to work in the extremely hazardous dilithium mines of their world. I didn't know how this group had gotten off their piss poor excuse for a planet, but it hardly mattered right now.

As Remus was a tidally locked planet, the Remans lived on its dark side, in near total darkness for virtually their entire lives, and thus had evolved or adapted to become extremely sensitive to light. Some Remans, if not all, possessed telepathic abilities similar to those shown by Vulcans and Betazoids. How strong those abilities were was a matter of conjecture, but most believed it varied widely.

I recalled from watching Enterprise that the Romulan Senator Vrax employed two Reman bodyguards, and Remans were used by the Romulan Empire as shock troopers and cannon fodder during the Dominion War, often being deployed in the fiercest of engagements where casualties were expected to be high. So, perhaps some Romulan ship was using them as cannon fodder in raids, although that didn't explain why they were raiding my ship. Again, this was something I could figure out later, once my ship was secure and I had a better handle on exactly what was going on in this situation.

Right now I needed to repel these boarders and remembering some of the limited information I had on this species gave me an idea. At the moment, the inside of the ship, apart from the bridge and engineering, was lit up only with emergency lighting in an effort to conserve power. However the level of light could be easily adjusted by the captain. It would be slightly more costly in terms of reducing our energy reserves, but that was why I had secondary power systems.

"Scarlett, bring light levels up to 200 percent of normal," I ordered. "On every part of the ship. Warn the crew, please."

The sudden change hurt my eyes, and my enhanced eyes were able to adjust to high illumination. The remaining Remans were used to near total darkness, though, and they did not like the change one bit judging by the screams of agony I could now hear coming from somewhere else on this deck.

"Next time, bring goggles," I whispered, taking off down the corridor towards the screams with combat knife in one hand and sword in the other. It was time for some more bloody knife work.

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Once the boarders had been dealt with, *with extreme prejudice*, their weapons and equipment collected and sorted away, their bodies were secured for later study. What supplies they'd not been able to transport away was secured again in emergency storage, we all returned to the bridge in order to share what limited information we had. Hoping to figure out together what was going on around here.

"After close study of the sensor readings from our previous mission, I have confirmed that the *Flighty Temptress* has been transported to another dimension," T'Maz reported. B'Elanna and Neela looking alarmed at this new, yet curious, not yet asking for more information. They obviously understood that some information was need to know only. "Nearby space is filled with dozens of disabled vessels, some totally inoperable, stripped and broken down to their superstructures, others minimally operating. This entire region appears to be effected by-"

"A dampening field," B'Elanna offered quietly, looking thoughtful. Neela was pulling up and studying information on her omnitool. Thankfully, all my crew had been given omnitools with a Collector micro-singularity power cell at its heart else I suspected it wouldn't work at all.

"Yes," T'Maz answered, looking unaffected and unperturbed at being interrupted. "This entire region of space appears to be affected by an extremely powerful, omnidirectional dampening field that extends beyond the range of our currently limited sensors. It is draining the power systems of this ship, including our handheld weapons, though it doesn't appear to be as effective as it should be as the vast majority of our power is derived from harnessed quantum micro-singularities, which seemingly is beyond the dampening ability of this field."

"The warp core, on the other hand, has completely shut down," Neela added. "The matter/antimatter reaction has gone cold."

“You can’t dampen a singularity, only contain it,” I said. “It’d be like turning off the nuclear fusion inside a star; that’s the work of Gods.”

“That was my analysis as well, Captain,” T’Maz replied. “Though I believe that to be a gross oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomena. The religious overtones are also exceedingly illogical.”

B’Elanna rolled her eyes exaggeratedly, which amused me.

“If this is the work of technology, rather than a natural phenomenon, it is a feat far beyond Federation science to reproduce,” T’Maz continued. “The Romulan ship carrying the Remans you encountered seem to be benefitting from this limitation as well, as their ship also uses a harness singularity for power.”

“This field can’t dampen the singularity, but it can dampen the capacitors we use to store the excess power generated. We use that stored power for weapons and other power intensive applications like long-range sensors and the like,” B’Elanna said excitedly, as if she had come to a realization. “Captain, since you used Collector power cores all over the ship, the ship remains partially functional as the power is being consumed as it’s generated, but it can’t be stored for larger applications.”

“A sound conclusion, B’Elanna,” T’Maz agreed.

Well, that explained why the Remans hadn't just blasted the ship apart and picked over the wreckage when we had been somewhat disabled upon arrival, and why their boarding parties had been using bayonets for the most part. The power sources for their weapons weren't working correctly. Romulan ships only used a singularity for main power. They relied on more traditional power sources for everything else, including their energy weapons, handheld and otherwise. Collector technology was actually far more advanced in this area as it allowed for the creation of harnessed micro-singularity power cells to be used in hand-held weapons.

Interestingly, the Collector power cells weren't affected, only the capacitors were, which essentially resulted in severely reduced operation as my sidearms were actually extremely power intensive. This might be one of the few instances in which my overkill philosophy had backfired on me. Still, if I had been using traditional Federation style power cells, I suspected they wouldn’t have worked at all, making any weapon powered by those cells as dangerous as a rock. Those were batteries, merely storing already generated energy in their cells, not producing/generating it anew. Our power cells were actually producing power at all times due to the leashed micro-singularity at its heart. Trying to dampen that would be like trying to stop a fundamental aspect of existence from working.

My ship's main power core was still working, albeit at a reduced rate, but with the damage to the ship incurred upon the transition to this realm, it wasn't yet possible to tell if the power core was truly being affected by the field to this extent or if there was another problem with the power distribution systems, or some combination of the two. Thankfully, overpowering the ship as I had was coming in handy. Power was being syphoned away as it traveled through the power distribution system, but overpowering the ship meant some was reaching the end systems.

"For the moment, we are trapped like the other ships and cannot escape by going to warp or otherwise," the Vulcan reported. "This anomaly is similar to the Tarkanous Gravity Well. 247 ships have been lost there since it was discovered."

Well, that was encouraging.

"The Remans' transporters still work, which suggests that they've been here long enough to adapt or to develop a workaround, at least to some extent," I mused.

"The fact that they did not have working energy weapons suggests it's not perfect, or there is some kind of limitation to it," Neela pointed out.

"Agreed," I said.

We would need to suss out whatever workaround they'd come up with to see if it could be used to improve our own situation.

"We still need to find out as much as we can about our surroundings while we affect repairs," I continued. "And find a way to stop anyone else from beaming over personnel and stealing our supplies. B'Elanna, I was able to acquire a large number of Collector power cells from our little misadventure on Kessik IV, feel free to use as many as you need from ship stores."

"Thank you, Captain, that's helpful," she replied. "I should be able to rig up transport jammers in key areas, like engineering and our cargo/storage bays to prevent the Remans from trying again."

How they were getting through the armored hull which should have refracted sensor scans was another issue, but if they were desperate enough they could have just decided to blind transport into likely open spaces, based on their observation of the ship's shape. That was a dangerous proposition, but if you were desperate enough...

"With only short-range sensors currently operational, we have been unable to relocate the Raman vessel once it fled the vicinity after the attack," T'Maz reported. "Sensor readings taken during the boarding showed significantly reduced operational capacity, with low overall energy readings, signs of long-term unrepaired damage, and only a small crew to operate the ship with."

"They're still several times better off than many of the other ships we've detected," B'Elanna clarified. "Their Romulan power core must have given them a distinct initial advantage when they were brought here."

Their crew was even smaller now that I'd killed quite a few of them during the raid, at least the ones that were near me when I'd raised the light levels, but that was what you got for stealing my shit. The rest had cut their losses and transported away with whatever stolen supplies they'd managed to take by that point, likely realizing that they were fucked and were being systematically hunted and executed by a monster with a sword and an energy pistol that still somewhat worked. A stun at point blank range could still kill, as I'd personally seen.

If the ship had been at full strength and operating normally, and somehow they'd gotten onboard through our shields and advanced hull armor, I'd have increased gravity and released my predator aliens, space marines, and xenomorph holograms to kill them all in exceedingly gruesome ways.

"Captain, I have detected a vessel nearby," T'Maz reported, now dressed in a tight-fitting silver white bodysuit that her ancestor T'Pol used to wear. "While sensors indicate no lifesigns aboard, life support appears to still remain functioning at low levels. It is my hope that some of the computer systems on that ship can still be accessed and will contain information about this area of space and its inhabitants. We must retrieve any information they have to better understand the situation we find ourselves trapped in. I am somewhat familiar with Romulan computer systems and volunteer for this away mission."

I nodded in response, "I agree, we need more information on this region of space and what is ultimately going on. We'll take a spare power cell and an energy converter. Hopefully, the technology on that ship will be compatible with ours."

"B'Elanna, how are our sublight engines?" I asked.

"I can give you 1/4 impulse, but that's the best I can do," she answered. "Reaction control thrusters remain functional, but I wouldn't count on them for any fancy evasive maneuvers."

I nodded in response.

That would only leave B'Elanna and Neela to handle the ship, but since it wasn't going anywhere at the moment there wasn't much to handle aside from ongoing repair work. Should any other groups or ships wish to rob us again, we *should* have ample warning with short range sensors working.

"I expect no difficulties in successfully completing this mission, sir," said the Vulcan.

I was forced to sigh.

"You've totally jinxed us now," I complained. Didn't the Vulcans know anything about Murphy and his capricious sense of humor when you made statements like that?

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With main power limited to a fraction of its normal output, the transporters were operating on backup power and thus had limited functionality. Backup power in this case being the independent power cell that I'd built into the transporter room which B'Elanna had once called overly paranoid and a total waste of finite resources, like the Collector power cells. Well, joke was on her. The backup power cell did not allow us to transport the full range it otherwise would have, especially with the dampening field constantly draining power from the cell's capacitors, but it was more than enough for T'Maz and I to be able to beam over to the alien vessel when it was so close. My ship had long-range transporters, reaching as far as 5 light years, but they were only working at very close range at the moment. To preserve power I had moved the ship much closer to the other vessel.

Life support here was barely functioning so I was glad that my Iron Man-like armor had so many features, including the ability to survive in hard vacuum, so the thin atmosphere and cold here were no challenge to me.

My fellow Section 31 agent didn't seem to mind the conditions all that much, but she was Vulcan, a very hardy race, and therefore better suited for dealing with extreme environments than most. Still, it would be best not to linger here too long as even T'Maz had her limits and Vulcan was a desert planet after all.

"Alright, let's see if any of these consoles are working," I ordered.

I'd never seen this kind of ship before, in life or in some database, however I figured that it was Breen, due to the dead Breen in full environmental suit lying on the deck. My omnitool's sensors told me that he had been dead for several months, at least, but the sterile environment had slowed decomposition to a crawl.

"Gothic, I have found the data terminal," T'Maz reported after she had supplied additional power to the terminal with the cell and converter.

"If this is a Breen vessel, I want you to grab as much of the database as you can, T'Maz," I urged.

"I will initiate the download of this ship's database as soon as I have overcome the native encryption."

While she worked on that, I remained vigilant, but the temptation to look under a Breen's helmet was pretty overwhelming. After a discreet scan that my curiosity and paranoia demanded, which these fuckers actually had countermeasures in place to prevent, including an explosive should someone take a look even after death, I decided to proceed with my plan to look under the hood, as it were. Luckily the dampening field was stopping these defenses from working. I carefully disengaged the helmet and soon wished I hadn't, as they were not an attractive species under there. In fact, they had an ugly face kind of similar to the alien hunters from the Predator movie franchise, the Yautja. When T'Maz looked over at what I was doing she wrinkled her nose, suggesting that there was an incredibly bad smell in the air for her to react. As I had my helmet deployed and was operating with a scrubbed air supply that my armor was supplying me, I couldn't tell.

Wisely, I put the helmet back on, curiosity assuaged, but only after taking several holo-pictures of the face and corpse, including some medical scans and biological samples of its blood, while feeling more than a little disappointed. As a long time Trek fan I'd longed to know why the Breen wore their environmental suits. As it turned out keeping their bodies covered and cool just hid the fact that they smelt really, really bad to most humanoid and were some ugly motherfuckers. The smell wasn't even from decomposition as this was a sterile environment. But hey, maybe there was something I was missing here. Still, I had some serious bragging rights now and the holo pics to prove that I'd seen the true face of a Breen and lived to tell the tale. Letting anyone I didn't trust know that I'd done this would probably see the Breen race collectively after my ass, so I'd be keeping this mostly quiet.

"The download is in progress," the Vulcan reported.

That was when an alarm went off throughout the ship. Someone must have rigged the computer so that they'd be alerted should anyone tamper with it. Either as part of some sort of trap, highly likely in this situation, or as some hard copied response to someone copying their secret database, also not out of the realm of possibility with a species as secretive and mysterious as the fucking Breen.

"I have gotten all that I can from this data terminal, we should leave immediately," said T'Maz urgently.

Alas we couldn't simply leave.

"There's a slight problem there. When that alarm went off it activated a jamming field. We can't contact the *Temptress* and we can't beam out," I explained calmly. Even my link to the *Temptress* wasn't working properly since we had come through the rift. Being in a different quantum realm or reality, or the dampening field itself, had obviously had an effect on the quantum entanglement-based communication system.

"We need another way off this ship," I said.

T'Maz came up with an idea before I could.

"This vessel may have escape pods that remain. Most races' escape vehicles utilize a backup chemical propellant to reach escape velocities; this primitive form of propulsion should be unaffected by the dampening field," she said while checking her omnitool. "If we can get beyond the range of the jamming field our crewmates could transport us back onto the ship."

Since that was as good a plan as any, we were soon heading to a section of the ship that appeared to have a single escape pod that remained intact. Getting my hands on some examples of Breen technology also appealed to me considering that there was still a good chance they'd join with the Dominion again in a few years time and I wanted to learn as much as I could about them. Would that energy dampening weapon they'd used to such great effect during the War work on my ship?

"I've got point," I said as we reached a large corridor, a Romulan disrupter pistol in hand rather than my custom sidearm. While I would have preferred to use my own weapon, having custom designed it to fit all my unique needs, it was also a power hog. Retrofitting a Romulan disrupter with a Collector power cell meant that I could fire it like normal, though the chances for an overload were high considering I was feeding the weapon much more power than it had been designed and rated for. The Collector power cell I'd practically welded on to the casing was also feeding it power of a very different frequency and density than it had been designed for. Bottom line, there was a lot that could go wrong here.

Spotting my enemy, I quickly discovered who had set this trap for the unwary; it was the Vidi'ians of all fucking people.

They were a race afflicted by a horrific degenerative disease approximately 2,000 years ago, known as the phage. Now their entire technological base, culture, resources, and government, the Vidi'ian Sodality, was centered around advancing their medical knowledge, the prolonging of

their lives in the face of this relentless disease, and the survival of their race, oftentimes through any means necessary. As their bodies were continually ravaged by this disease and ultimately failed in time, new transplants and procedures were required to keep them alive and ahead of the disease's adaptations.

Usually organs were harvested from the recently dead of other races, but aggressive factions within the Vidiian culture became impatient and willing to do any manner of evils, despite being opposed to violence, in the pursuit of new ways to stave off the phage, often harvesting organs from unwilling donors and performing horrific medical experiments on any outsiders that they encountered to discover any other race which might possess a natural immunity to the disease that they could learn from.

This was a race based in the delta quadrant and possessed no FTL technology advanced enough to get them close to Earth in a reasonable timeframe, where we had been before coming here. That they were here at all meant the operational range of whatever force or party that had brought us here extended well beyond the confines of the alpha quadrant. That raised their threat level considerably. These organ thieves were from an area of space that was tens of thousands of light years beyond the furthest borders of Federation space. The only reason I even knew about them at all was because Voyager would soon be stranded in the delta quadrant and had encountered them during the show.

I killed one of them with a bright acid green beam of energy, even as they fired one of their hybrid weapons at us, which was a combination of medical scanning device and transporter. This was both a tool and a weapon, which they used to disable aliens and harvest their organs from what I could recall from the show. My jury-rigged weapon allowed me a much higher rate of fire when compared to these aliens who were hardly in the best physical condition, nor the best soldiers, and who were not trying to *directly* kill me with that tool. They needed me mostly intact if they wanted my organs. I found myself curious how they shielded their weapons.

Given how physically weak they were it seemed rather odd that they would leave this ship in such a poor state, which was clearly a trap for others they'd set up, where the air was too thin and it was too cold for most humanoids to survive in the long term. Maybe they didn't have the energy reserves to make it more attractive or maybe making it too easy would seem too good to be true and their prey would be too suspicious to risk coming onboard.

As for them, I realized that they could just be wearing some sort of thermal insulated clothing with a breathing apparatus if they needed to come onboard this craft for any real length of time to collect their prey. The cold here might actually help to preserve their bodies, including their failing organs.

As I passed by one of the organ harvesting aliens I'd killed with my disrupter, I picked up his device/weapon. The Vidiians' medical science and technology were *decades* ahead of the Federation, making it incredibly valuable to me on a few different levels, and something my sexy EMH's could study and improve their medical knowledge with. There was also a device attached to the alien's armband which I didn't recognize, but grabbed anyway. T'Maz quickly studied the armband device, and came to a conclusion.

"I believe that this is some sort of homing beacon as well as transport enhancer," she surmised. "It would explain how they were able to beam on board this vessel through the active jamming field."

Thinking fast I came up with an idea.

"If it's a beacon that can work through the jamming field, can you modify it so that we can use it to signal the *Temptress* and use it help them get a lock on us?" I wondered.

Escaping that way would make far more sense than running around in a hostile, unfamiliar environment and having to fight an unknown number of aliens who wanted to harvest our organs, all the while looking for a functioning escape pod, then trying to figure out how to operate its alien technology. Where had the Viidians even come from? Was there a ship nearby that escaped our scans?

"It is possible," T'Maz told me after a moment's thought, seeming surprised for a moment at the potential solution that I had offered. "We will need to find a workspace to attempt the modifications, and you will need to protect me while I work."

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Once my fellow Section 31 agent and I had returned to the ship the whole crew, all four of us, gathered in the conference meal to share a meal, information, and to figure out what our next steps would be.

"With the information that we have been able to retrieve from the Breen ship and the aliens who attacked us, we've been able to learn a few things about our situation," T'Maz explained to everyone.

She brought up a three-dimensional image of an odd-looking superstructure. It was a *huge* space station, but unlike any that I had ever seen before, including anything I'd seen on the shows. It kind of looked like a globe on a stand with some odd bits of an outer shell around it.

"This is called the Forge, or at least that is what the inhabitants of this area of space have come to call this station," she explained. "It is what is responsible for generating the dampening field that is keeping the *Temptress* and the other ships disabled, and it is why we are trapped here."

Something about this seemed awfully familiar to me, but I had no time to use the Vulcan memory enhancing meditation techniques in order to find out what part of my mind held relevant information about this situation, assuming I was even being reminded of a canon Star Trek episode.

"Do we have any idea what or who is running that thing? Or why it's here?" asked Neela.

"No. The database we acquired had no credible information on its origins. It could potentially be an automated machine of some sort, or an artifact left by a highly advanced, but long extinct civilization," T'Maz replied. "We do know that this phenomenon has been going on for quite some time due to the quantum dating of some of the ships that we can detect within sensor range. Hundreds, potentially thousands of years."

The holo image was zoomed out in order to see the spherical area covered by the dampening field, or at least as much of it as we could see/confirm within our impaired sensors' limited range. There was *a lot* of debris scattered about, the scans we'd taken didn't give much detail though, a possible side effect of the dampening field or something that was part of its design, but we did know that these bits of scrap were what was left of many, many starships.

"Even over that period of time and even if most of the ships that fall into this place are immediately destroyed during the transition," B'Elanna offered, "that's a lot of debris out there."

That was a sound observation and required more thought.

"It's safe to assume that this so-called Forge has a powerful energy source, one with longevity too, given the sheer size and power of the dampening field that it's continuously generating," I summarized. "And assuming 'The Forge' is an accurate translation of the name of this station or an understanding of its true function, it's possible that the missing materials are being used to build something."

I could tell that everyone was deep in thought.

"A forge can be used to make tools or weapons," I offered to the group. "And since someone with this level of technology could get raw materials far more easily from many different places, I'm thinking that there is another reason for bringing starships here, from across the galaxy and across dimensions, something that involves more than simply gathering raw resources, though they may be doing that too."

The Forge didn't strike me as a research base, so I didn't think it was just about the technology being brought in, if that was the case they'd be much more careful about capturing ships intact.

"Perhaps we will have the chance to discover their intentions," T'Maz said, before she changed the hologram again to an image of an atomic structure. "This substance is called Isodesium, a rare chemical element which appears to offer enhanced resistance to the effects of the dampening field."

I assume she had gotten this information from the database we had just raided or from the Vidiian technology.

"While power intensive and delicate work, under normal circumstances we could simply replicate the material, however the replicators are currently non-functional while under the effect of the dampening field. Therefore we must acquire enough of the material from local sources to shield one of our replicators from the effects of the dampening field, then we can simply replicate as much as required to shield our most vital systems."

"Will a single power cell be enough to power the unit even if we acquire enough of this substance?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no, probably not," B'Elanna admitted. "We'll have to jury-rig a series of them together with spliced power inputs and balance the power draw across sources. That'll be risky and add some danger to all this."

Simply shielding the power core itself wouldn't solve our problems, as aside from the damage done to the ship, which we still hadn't fully addressed with only the four of us capable of working on the problem, the power distribution network would also need to be fully shielded to prevent the power from being siphoned away by the dampening field.

If we could get the *Temptress'* systems powered up enough, then we could attempt to destroy the Forge. That would likely deactivate the dampening field, but even that was impossible before we determined what God-forsaken button on that station could open a dimensional rift in order to send us home. My enhanced mind was already planning how to use timed explosives to allow the ship to escape and to prevent more vessels from succumbing to this trap, though I might need to bring out *Shiva, The Destroyer*, given the size of this station and the dampening field making more modern weapons a non-option.

"Why didn't we already have something in place to protect us against dampening fields?" Neela innocently wondered aloud.

That may have been an oversight on my part during the design process, but a reasonable one. There also weren't many ways to overcome an active dampening field beyond overpowering it or destroying the field generator from outside the field's area of effect.

"To be fair, an omnidirectional dampening field of this range and strength is beyond the capabilities of any known race in the alpha quadrant," I said, feeling a bit offended. "And Augment or not, even I can't think of everything. You should be impressed that this ship has worked as well as it has, considering I designed it practically by myself from the ground up and mixed so many advanced technologies from so different sources together."

"Captain, no one is saying the *Temptress* isn't an incredible achievement and giant step forward in starship design," B'Elanna assuaged, throwing a dirty and pointed look at her fellow engineer. Besties or not, it seems that B'Elanna wasn't going to tolerate a slight against her baby. "Isn't that right, Neela?"

"I'm sorry, Gothic," Neela apologized, an abashed look on her face, looking genuinely remorseful, like a little guilty kitten. "What I said was not meant as an insult or an attack."

T'Maz looked decidedly impatient now, at least in her Vulcan way.

"Captain, can we please return to more relevant matters?" T'Maz asked.

"Of course, T'Maz, please continue," I encouraged, throwing a small smile at Neela to let her know that all was forgiven.

The projected holo-image changed to a strange looking structure. It looked like an old federation ship, an old Klingon D-7, and a few more vessel types I couldn't even come close to identifying, had been welded together in some kind of unholy mish mash. A starship chimera, if you will.

"Now, *what* is that?" asked B'Elanna incredulously. Leaning forward to look at this bizarre image.

I resisted the urge to make a joke about modern art when my blood ran cold in shocked recognition, a powerful chill going through me. This profane amalgamation had the name 'I.S.S. *Hood*' emblazoned on its hull, rather than 'U.S.S.,' like I was used to.

This ship being projected, at least significant chunk of it, was a *Constitution*-class heavy cruiser starship originally in the service of the Terran Empire in the 22nd and 23rd century. The design was obtained by the Imperial Starfleet when the U.S.S. *Defiant* was transported to the mirror universe through a dimensional and temporal rift.

Given how old this class of vessel was I doubted that any of the original crew were still alive, much less a threat, it being far more likely that others had since moved into the wreckage, or it might be possible that the ship was now crewed by the descendants of the original crew. Nevertheless, its presence here suggested that whoever was behind this had sent those probes into more than just our reality/dimension.

"There are several active groups in this area of space according to the scans and observations taken since our arrival. The alien database we acquired also confirms what our scans have shown," T'Maz explained. "They are all raiders of sorts, constantly fighting over the finite resources within range. My threat assessment of the different parties and factions has identified this particular group as the greatest threat to us, composed of members from many different races who have banded together in order to better survive. The database describes them as 'scavengers,' rather than pirates, suggesting that they don't steal from the living, but instead invite useful crews that make it alive through the rift transition to join them. Only when they are refused, do they employ violence. The vast majority of ships don't survive the transition, which speaks well of how soundly you designed and built this vessel, Captain. No ship has withstood the transition with as little damage as our ship has sustained, per the records I found in the database."

That would make them the closest thing to civilization around here, a proto-Federation of sorts. Compared to the pirates who likely murdered whole crews and stole everything of value, they were practically saints.

"They also possess a large quantity of isodesium," T'Maz said next. "My scans are being sent to your individual omnitools now."

We all quickly reviewed the data.

"Are you saying we should steal the isodesium we need from them?" B'Elanna asked. "I'm not saying I'm against it, but let's be clear what we're talking about here."

T'Maz looked unaffected by the question/accusation, "Yes, we should *steal* it, as you put it. My scans have not detected a source of the mineral in the quantities required to shield one of our smallest industrial replicators anywhere within range. Our survival and our ability to escape the dampening field depends on returning the ship to full power."

"I, too, am not opposed to stealing what we need, but can we not attempt to trade for what we need first?" Neela asked, playing devil's advocate. Given our history together in the Occupation,

I knew that she had no issues making tough calls or getting her hands dirty, especially when our survival was on the line.

"Normally, I would try to trade for what we need first, but since this is such a rare commodity in this space, there is a strong possibility that they'll say no, or ask for something we would be unwilling to part with," I said. "Tipping them off to our intentions would make stealing it later many times harder, if not impossible."

My crew nodded in agreement, signaling their support of the plan to steal what we needed.

"They have an active transport inhibitor field active, similar to the one Torres set up to protect our ship's vital areas," I realized, having now gone over much of the available data we had on this group. "I'll have to fly over there in my armor, cut my way inside, grab as much of this Isodesium as I can, lower the field, and then beam back."

I made it sound so simple, but of course I knew that it wouldn't be. At least the equipment I had that was powered by Collector power cells weren't fully affected by the dampening field, either by purposeful design to resist such a thing, its exotic and rare method of power generation, or just sheer dumb luck, I stood the best chance of performing this mission.

"What is the minimum amount we would need to get an industrial replicator operational, so that we can produce more of this substance on our own?" I asked, glancing at T'Maz and B'Elanna for an answer.

"I recommend that you acquire at least 20 kilograms of it, Captain," B'Elanna answered. "We could potentially do what you're asking with less, but that gives us a decent safety margin."

"Hold on, if they have this isodesium then why aren't their ships fully operational?" asked Ro.

That was actually a good question.

"I can only speculate, however, given the ages of the ships that we can identify visually, it is likely that they lack replicator technology or possibly do not have replicator technology advanced enough to manufacture the substance, or perhaps they do not have the power needed to replicate it successfully. There is insufficient data available on which to reach a provable theory," T'Maz speculated. "With the dampening field affecting their systems, even partially, they may be unable to manufacture a large amount of the needed material through other conventional methods."

And what little they had in manufacturing capabilities they would also have to devote to the production of everything that they couldn't scavenge to keep their ship running and their crew fed. Plus they likely hadn't been able to repair all of the original damage done to their ships when they were brought through the rift in the first place. My vessel was probably going to need a shipyard before it could be fully repaired, which made it even more vital that we reach Earth. There was no chance in hell, though, that I was going to put in for repairs on Earth and risk the Federation, or a slew of other enemies who routinely monitored the Federation or had infiltrated their facilities, to learn of my ship's unique capabilities.

My mobile repair and construction yard back at my palace fortress on Bajor was the only option I'd consider at this point, but hopefully Earth would be able to supply enough of our needs to get the holo-engineers up and running again. B'Elanna could hopefully get us most of the way back with their help and the replicators fully working again. Any non-replicable parts could either be manufactured or ordered. With her skills, she might even be able to get us all the way back.

"Unless there is anything else to discuss, I need to prepare for the mission," I said, glancing around to see if they wanted to talk to me about anything else. Seeing no takers, I got up and left.

I wished the replicators were still working because if they had been I could have replicated some guns from my time, guns which didn't require power cells since they used chemical energy to propel bullets at supersonic velocities to kill, which obviously wouldn't be affected by the dampening field. If the dampening field was *that* comprehensive then we'd all be dead by now as humanoid bodies depended on a series of chemical reactions in our bodies in order to keep us alive.

"Scarlett, please remind me when we leave this place and the replicators are once again running to add several 20th century projectile weapons and a supply of corresponding ammunition to the ship's armory," I requested aloud, my dutiful VI, the computer on this ship, acknowledging my order.

It was a shame my armor didn't have any built-in blades. Sure, I had my combat knife and sword, but wielding them in the vacuum of space was just asking for them to go floating away should something happen. They also weren't exactly super precision tools for a stealth mission when operating in vacuum and zero gravity. Thinking that made me wish that my Iron Man-esque suit of armor could change form and function on a whim, to adapt to my needs as needed, like producing a built-in precision cutting laser/phaser on command, or repairing damage instantly.

Perhaps using nanotech of some kind was the key? What race had I *seen* use nanotechnology to such devastating effect, taking the ability to near instantly *adapt* to a horrific, but awe-inspiring art form? The Borg, in another reality, had shown me just how powerful nanotechnology could be if used to its maximum potential. That technology was fundamentally what let them successfully assimilate thousands of different species and claim a huge swath of the Milky Way galaxy. That was a powerful lesson that Tony Stark could have benefitted from.

It was a shame that I had only seen those movies up to the point that I had been taken in 2016. There were some amazing movies coming in the future that I would never get a chance to see.

With that thought a deluge of scenes were shown to me from Marvel movies that I *knew* I had never seen before I was put on this wild ride into the Star Trek universe. *Tony Stark was a fucking genius of geniuses*, my fucking hero. The latest Iron Man armor I saw in those images was awe inspiring in the adaptability his nanotech gave him. He had obviously felt like I often had and worried about being caught naked and vulnerable without his armor at some critical juncture and had built-in the ability to instantly deploy his armor from inside his own body.

I had no idea who that huge purple alien with a ball sack for a chin was, but Tony's new armor was giving that fucker a run for his money. Was this my patron giving me some ideas for their

own amusement? Was it Q? Was it the Prophets paying back one of their owed favors? Who cares?! This vision didn't exactly give me the design schematics involved, but I felt *inspired* by what I had seen. Once out of this hellhole I was going to spend some time coming up with a new armor design based on nanotechnology.

Unfortunately, that was something I'd only have time to think about later, when we were out of this trap. Right now I needed to get ready for the next life-threatening mission in a long series of them that my life had turned into, and not let myself be distracted by plans for a future that I seriously might not live to see if I didn't remain fully focused on my current objectives.

It was time to play super thief.