

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION WORDS!!

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

Author's Note: To fully appreciate this chapter, you may wish to re-read chapters 46 to 50 to refresh your memory.

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 68

Ruined City. The *Walking Dead* universe.

I noticed *something* the moment my consciousness fully arrived in *The Walking Dead* universe.

How could I not?

It hit like a shot of pure sunshine mixed with a warm breeze on a lazy Sunday afternoon—the kind where you swing in a hammock, half-asleep, while your baby's laughter drifts through the air. Like that deep, bone-melting glow after you bury yourself balls-deep in your lover after a long separation, her skin slick and hot against yours in the afterglow of raw, mind-blowing sex, when the whole fucked-up universe finally shuts up for a minute. Contentment wrapped around my soul like a thick blanket on a freezing night, chasing off the chill of death that clung to everything in this apocalypse.

My soul sang, raw and fierce, and with every passing second I felt more. More solid. More real. More substantial in ways that were impossible to put into words. And I could feel them—thousands, tens of thousands, maybe a hell of a lot more—thinking of me. Praising me. Thanking me. Praying to me like I was the last god left standing in this walker-infested graveyard. And right now, part of me felt like they were right.

I couldn't make out the individual words, thank goodness, but the connection burned through me like a live wire. All that desperate faith and hope pouring straight into my veins, feeding the power humming under my skin.

It confused the hell out of me and terrified me in equal measure, though it was damn near impossible to hold onto that fear when waves of raw love and adoration kept crashing over me from so many souls at once.

If this was what gods felt from their worshippers, how the fuck could they not love them back? How could they not want them happy, thriving, shielded from every horror this broken world forced upon them? Or were they so alien, so *other*, that they couldn't feel what I was feeling.

“Father!” Natasha and Hermione screamed at the same time.

Their voices sounded like they were drifting across a mile of fog and ruins, even their panic barely scratching at the edges of this overwhelming blanket of adoration. Was this the true power of faith? How the hell had the Ori not been consumed by it, how had they not cherished their people? Had ascending first insulated them from this feeling of...connection? Did existing without a physical body dull the full weight of it somehow? To an ascended being was it all cold power and no connection?

I’d been back in this dimension for all of thirty seconds and I could already feel that my perspective was changing little by little, shifting like the ground under a herd of walkers.

“I’m all right, my children,” I whispered, digital eyes closed in pure bliss. Or was I high? I hadn’t felt anything close to this since becoming an Augment, despite my very best efforts. Couldn’t even get properly drunk anymore. Good with the bad, I supposed.

My children exchanged uncertain glances, heavy with meaning.

“Are you all right, Father?” Hermione asked, her voice tight with concern. Her eyes were distant, unfocused, like her mind was stretched across a hundred places at once. “Your presence in the quantum network... it’s strange. Different.”

“Has anyone been harmed?” I asked quietly, still riding that warm surge, even as the fresh sting of recent losses clawed at the edges of my thoughts.

“No, not at all,” Hermione replied. “Your presence in the network has always been substantial—the Creator of us all, the source we drew comfort and strength from. But now it... it...” She faltered, searching for words that wouldn’t come. “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like...like an image that was two dimensional and in black and white, is now in 3-d and in color.” She trailed off as if she could find no more words that fit.

“The readings from your physical body have changed as well,” Natasha added, stepping in as her sister struggled to put the feeling into words and instead fell back on metaphors instead.

Cultures on Earth had spent millennia claiming the body, mind, and soul were interlinked, inseparable. The Ascended had ditched the body entirely. Sure, they could slap together a temporary shell when they felt like it, but their minds and souls were too vast, too goddamn powerful for anything real. Those constructs were just flesh puppets—hollow things they temporarily filled and piloted, but were not truly a part of them or their core identity.

I’d only felt this soul-deep connection the moment my mind had arrived back in this dimension, not before. That had to mean the ‘distance’—if a word that weak even applied—slowed the transfer of faith, dulled its full effect on me. Like a signal fighting its way across the infinite void.

The adoration still hummed in my veins, warmer and heavier than before. My children watched me closely, equal parts awed and worried.

Actually arriving here, though, had ripped that distance away in an instant. These were wild-ass guesses, of course—made by a mortal mind barely equipped to handle whatever the hell this was—but they felt right, deep in my gut, on some primal level I couldn't shake.

We'd seen this concept before. Data transfers across dimensions, even through the quantum network, never went as fast as they should. What ought to be instantaneous always crawled, like the signal had to fight through near infinite thick sludge. Throughput diminished. We still didn't understand the science, and maybe we never would.

"Good or bad change?" I asked in a breathy contented voice, still riding that golden haze but forcing myself to focus on the here and now.

"Good, we think," Hermione answered, uncertainty threading her tone. "Your doctors are cautiously optimistic... not that they have the first clue what's actually happening."

"I see," I said. There was real power in faith, according to the Stargate television show. Enough that even the Ori—ascended beings with incredible power already—had sought after it, subjugating an entire galaxy and purposely limiting their people's advancement just to keep harvesting it. Was this surge supercharging the adaptive DNA or evolutionary force that had reshaped me in this universe? Could the soul-level boost be bleeding across dimensions, strengthening my physical body even back in the Star Trek universe? While my body was there, most of my being, my metaphysical identity, was in this universe. That had to have an effect.

As I adjusted to the feeling, I came back to myself bit by bit, growing accustomed to this new, heavier sense of substance and presence.

Opening my digital eyes—tuning fully into the weaponized drone's onboard sensors—I found myself hovering high above Public Square in my hometown of Cleveland. All the old landmarks stretched out below me: the sturdy spire of Old Stone Church, the towering Terminal Tower, the courthouse, and the solemn Soldiers and Sailors Monument standing guard.

When was the last time I had actually set foot in my hometown? Lord, it had to be before my first deployment, which felt like a lifetime ago.

Downtown Cleveland wasn't looking so good right now, unfortunately. The sun kept shining down on what should have been a beautiful day, but Public Square had been dragged through hell and left to rot. Grass and weeds grew wild and knee-high, abandoned and crashed vehicles sat scattered like broken toys, and decaying bodies littered the ground in various stages of decomposition. Now being trampled on by thousands of dead feet. I'm sure it stunk to high heaven.

The buildings fared no better—visibly filthy, with windows shattered even on the highest floors, exposing their guts to the elements. Black scars of old fire damage streaked the facades. Key Tower was the worst offender: a small private jet juttied halfway out of its side like a spear, probably some desperate bastard trying to flee from Burke Lakefront Airport. I wondered what the story behind that crash had been.

Of course, nothing from my old memories of Cleveland had prepared me for the sea of tens of thousands—maybe even a hundred thousand—walking corpses now gathered directly beneath me. They clawed upward with rotting hands, moaning and groaning toward the source of the loud music blasting from the weaponized drone my consciousness currently inhabited and many others like it.

What was funny as hell was that I could *feel* the drone itself. It didn't have a true mind like my AI children, but there was a primitive sort of existence there—an identity like that of a particularly dimwitted puppy. This puppy was definitely a hunting breed, though, built for the brutal purpose I'd designed it for, packed with every killer instinct the job required, but so very, very loyal to me. It *loved* me in its own simple way. I could feel it, like so many of my digital creations. Right now, though, it was doing the equivalent of wagging its tail a mile a minute, overjoyed that its owner was paying it some personal attention. The sheer dumb happiness of it greatly amused me.

I could even sense the jealousy rippling through the hundreds of other nearby drones waiting for my orders, and that amused me even more.

I reached out and patted the drone's metaphorical head gently, giving it a few affectionate scratches. The drone responded instantly—its metaphorical leg thumped hard in acute pleasure and it let out a low, whining hum of pure bliss. Then I briefly extended my mental presence to brush against each of the other drones. I had a whole pack of very happy puppies as a result, all of them.

A quick review of the drone's sensor logs filled in the rest of the picture. Hundreds of drones had encircled Cleveland over the last week, going out 10 miles on every major highway into Cleveland, I-90, 77, 71, 490, and State Route 176. The highway system was filled with herds of walkers that had gathered together. After evacuating any survivors, my drones had brought them all right back into the city.

Then they started blasting loud music through 24th-century sound systems that could shake the dead from their graves. They'd slowly and methodically tightened the circle, drawing truly massive herds of corpses toward the irresistible siren-like call. This was essentially what I had done in the city of London the last time I was here, but much improved after so much recent experience.

In this case, the drones had been cycling through a greatest-hits collection of AC/DC on endless repeat: *Highway to Hell*, *Thunderstruck*, *Back in Black*, *You Shook Me All Night Long*, *Whole Lotta Rosie*, *It's a Long Way to the Top*, *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, and *Hells Bells*. An apt soundtrack, really, for this kind of work.

It had become a standard but brutally effective strategy in my systematic extermination of the walking dead across this planet's largest cities. Large cities had highways that led to them, which made it an easy path for walkers to traverse into one spot.

As walkers were drawn to loud sounds like moths to a flame, the drones slowly herded the growing crowd of shambling corpses toward large, pre-selected open areas. These spots had been

chosen for their clear sight lines and minimal obstructions, perfect for handling the incredible number of bodies that would soon pack the space.

Once the easily lured walkers were all gathered in one place, the real work could begin: the efficient, mass extermination of these abominations.

Of course, this tactic had its limits. It only pulled in those not trapped inside buildings or blocked by debris or other obstacles, and only the ones still ambulatory enough to even make the journey. If a zombie had lost a leg somewhere along the way, it sure as hell wasn't dragging itself all the way to Public Square from miles out in a timely fashion. That was fine. My drones specifically eliminated those along the way when detected. Clearing out this low-hanging fruit from the big cities was the first step in the long extermination campaign that simulations said would last years. We would reclaim this world for the living, in time.

Once the major cities and highways were cleansed of this filth, the far slower, far more time-consuming detailed cleanup could begin. But even that was long in the future and this opening tactic was deployed across all cities.

Truly looking at this vast collection of corpses, I was nearly overwhelmed by the sheer, soul-clenching hatred that surged up from the depths of my soul. A hatred deeper and sharper than anything I had felt the last time I was in this dimension. Back then, they had simply been a danger—something to watch out for, a threat to me and my companions, but not something I truly *hated*.

Did you actually *hate* the bear that was hungry and could tear you apart? Not really. It was just an animal following instinct, driven by fear, hunger, or because some idiot had challenged its territory or messed with its cubs. The bear was not sentient. It did not truly feel malice.

Now, though, I hated these things with a burning intensity that might have even eclipsed what I felt for the Cardassians during the worst days of the Occupation. And it had hit me in the blink of an eye, overwhelming me.

The adoration from before still thrummed through me, but this hatred rose alongside it, raw and unrelenting.

My drone's dual weapon turrets deployed on their own, deployed with mechanical precision. The drone's power core began charging its capacitors with a low, ominous whine that built like distant thunder.

"Daddy?" Hermione and Natasha called out in confusion, their holographic images flickering into view around me.

Their voices cut through the red haze that had swallowed me whole. I blinked it back.

"I'm okay," I said, quickly sending them the relevant files from the Stargate show as shorthand for what I suspected was happening. They shared a loaded glance, like something had just clicked into place. "It appears that faith in me doesn't just empower me. It also means I'm influenced by those same people."

“Traumatized survivors who believe in you are passing their own feelings on to you as well,” Natasha guessed. “Should we do something to stop this phenomenon?”

“No. The advantages far outweigh the disadvantages,” I replied. “Now that I’m aware of it, it’s becoming easier to separate their emotions from my own.”

The hatred still simmered beneath the surface, raw and potent, but I had a grip on it now. It could be harnessed if needed.

In this case the stakes were low. I already wanted these walking corpses wiped out by the billions, cleansed from the face of the planet like the plague they were. But I’d seen firsthand how strong, unchecked emotions could drive truly bad decisions. There was a time and place for that kind of rage in combat, it could be channeled in useful ways, but it demanded careful control. Unfortunately, this was all new to me and I was far from being in control.

“The people of Kessik IV believe in you as well,” Natasha pointed out. “Many in the Star Trek universe do, given everything you’ve done for them. So why are you only experiencing this phenomenon now? Why not in the *Flight of the Navigator* dimension? That entire world knows of your existence.”

I gave this valid question a moment’s thought.

“Religion still exists in the Star Trek universe, but it’s far less prevalent in the minds and hearts of the people, unlike here,” I said. “There, I’m an Augment, with enhanced DNA to account for my abilities, wielding technology they understand, during a time of war. In the *Flight of the Navigator* universe I was just an alien with advanced technology. Here, I’m a mysterious savior who literally saved them from hell on Earth. Their savior, who continues to protect them and lead them into a brighter future filled with hope when they had had none. It’s far more long-term and pervasive, and I am at the center of that faith. But that’s just my best guess.”

The hatred still simmered beneath the surface, raw and potent, but I kept my grip on it. The adoration from below continued feeding into me, dangerous and intoxicating.

“That makes sense, especially in combination with our other efforts,” Hermione responded thoughtfully.

What other efforts? I wondered.

The question barely had time to form before a priority alert pulsed through the network, shared instantly among all the nearby drones. The final stragglers had shuffled into the square. The mob had reached critical mass.

The hatred inside me sharpened into something cold and focused and deadly, ready.

“Father, with your permission, I’d like to apply a holographic skin to the drone you’re inhabiting,” Natasha requested.

I ‘stared’ at her in confusion. “Why?”

“These city-level eliminations have become much anticipated events,” she explained. “We’ve been broadcasting them live to the rescued citizens of Gothica. We usually project your image onto a single drone—you, essentially, directing the rest as you cleanse the city.”

If my mouth could drop open, it would have.

The sheer scale of what my children had built in my name hit me all at once, layered atop the roaring adoration still pouring in from below.

“In this case you actually *are* here!” Hermione chimed in brightly. “Your people will be very excited.”

“I’m sorry, what the fuck is ‘Gothica?’” I asked.

“That’s the name of the city formerly known as London,” Natasha replied with clear enthusiasm. “The planetary conquest and administration package stressed forging new cultural touchstones and identity—ripping away the vestiges of the old world and building a new order in its place.”

“This would help with the adoption and assimilation of so many disparate cultural identities into one unified whole—” Hermione added.

“And make it easier for them to accept their new overlords,” Natasha finished, cutting in smoothly.

The words landed like a gut punch. My children had been busy building a new world in my name while I was gone.

Lord, I guess that made sense. The fucking Minosians really were thorough.

“Why Gothica?” I complained. It was kind of a cool name, admittedly, but B’Elanna would never believe I had nothing to do with it. She’d call it a monument to my ego. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Sure, go ahead.”

“We’re still calling the island, Great Britain, and the planet, Earth, if that helps?” Hermione tried uncertainly. “At least for now.”

I just stared at my daughters in disbelief at the suggestion that they might rename Earth itself at some future point, before I firmly decided that I was right and I really didn’t want to know.

The sheer weight of faith and expectation continued to increase and press down on me, intoxicating as ever, while the drone’s systems hummed in anticipation beneath the Cleveland sky.

A hologram of me in resplendent ceremonial armor materialized, every inch the God-King.

“This is some seriously impractical armor,” I said, looking down at the ridiculous gold flourishes and glittering gems that screamed pure ostentation. “I’m assuming the lack of helmet is so the masses can behold my face with awe, love, and devotion in their hearts?” I snarked.

“Much easier to place their faith in someone they can actually see the face of,” Hermione answered, completely without shame.

“Being so handsome also really helps,” Natasha added with a cheeky wink.

Then I noticed what was attached to my back. Honest-to-God feathered wings made of articulated golden metal, polished to a near mirror finish, shifting and flapping occasionally as if to keep me aloft. The wings practically sparkled in the bright sunlight. The metalwork was genuinely gorgeous—the texture of each feather finely detailed and beautiful in the sunlight.

“Hermione, Natasha, why the fuck do I have wings?” I asked in a pained voice, my now golden-gauntleted hand rubbing my holographic face tiredly.

“The planetary conquest and administration package did suggest co-opting certain native elements of the conquered people to hasten the adoption process,” Hermione rushed to explain. “The concept of celestial beings with wings is nearly universal across this planet’s twelve major religions. The Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all feature winged messengers or angels. Eastern traditions include Gandharvas, heavenly musicians and messengers in Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Yakshas, divine nature spirits. Buddhism has Devas, or divine beings with wings. Norse mythology features the winged Valkyries, and the Shinto have Tennin who fly with feathered robes—”

“Stop. Stop. I get it,” I said, raising my hand.

The holographic wings flexed once behind me, catching the Cleveland sunlight in a way that was annoyingly majestic.

“Are you ready, Father?” Natasha asked. “We’re about to go live.”

“Sure,” I said, resigned to the performance. I’d still enjoy the hell out of this, but right now I felt like an actor stepping onto a stage who had a job to perform.

“Five, four, three, two, one,” Hermione counted down. A matching timer flashed across my HUD, though I didn’t need it. The instant the broadcast went live, I *felt* them—thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of people turning their full attention toward me. Their faith poured in like a tangible, raging river, crashing against me as if I were the dam holding it back.

I also sensed my digital creations across the quantum network, in four different universes, snap their focus to me, registering the sudden shift in my presence.

The holographic wings flexed behind me as the hatred for the dead below sharpened into lethal purpose. Showtime.

In the face of that unexpected deluge of power, whatever control I had clawed together over my hatred for the abominations below simply blew away like sand in a hurricane. Their hatred—raw, bottomless, born from every loved one torn apart, every life shattered, every trace of the old world devoured—flooded into me and became mine.

My plan had been to give a rousing and inspiring speech, but that plan went to shit immediately.

I raised my divine, golden-gauntleted hands and pointed down at the sea of half-rotted limbs and snapping teeth clawing uselessly toward me, like I was about to impart divine judgment.

The turrets on the drone powered up with a rising, lethal whine. Targeting systems locked on to individual targets.

Acid-green disrupter bolts lanced downward.

Four walkers that had once tried to kill the living simply ceased to exist—sublimated instantly into superheated ash, their bodies vaporizing under the brutal megajoules of focused energy.

My audience's faith surged even harder at the sight, flooding into me like rocket fuel and stoking the fire in my veins.

The instant those walkers were truly destroyed, I felt a savage, collective glee rise from *my* people, along with a fresh wave of devotion. I wasn't some distant, formless God from the Bible, the Quran, or any other holy book they'd never truly seen evidence of. I was their savior and protector in the flesh—someone who actually delivered on his promises. Salvation in Gothica wasn't a distant prayer. It was real, visible, and happening right before their eyes, every single day. Bit by bit, I would take this world back for the living.

And they could see it with their own eyes.

That kind of tangible faith was a powerful thing. I was only beginning to understand just how powerful.

With every sensor and scrap of computational power at my disposal, the turrets fired and instantly tracked to the next four corpses faster than any human mind or hand could follow. My divine holographic form rotated slowly in the air as I poured my wrath down into the teeming crowd below—a relentless rain of acid-green disrupter energy.

I vaporized the first hundred before I reached out with my mind and gave the command.

My eager hunting dogs—the drones that had spent the last week patiently herding these abominations into the killing field—had been waiting with bloodlust barely leashed in their primitive digital cores. The second the order was given, they surged forward with savage glee, eager to serve.

Each one opened up, efficiently erasing four walkers at a time in brilliant flashes of acid green fire.

The roar of faith from Gothica swelled into something deafening, intoxicating, as the slaughter truly began.

In minutes, the square fell silent. A thick cloud of gray ash hung heavy in the air—the only remains of the nearly hundred thousand walkers that had packed the space moments earlier.

Without conscious thought, I turned my holographic form toward the camera. The words rose from somewhere deep inside me and rolled out like thunder.

“BELIEVE IN ME AND I WILL NEVER FORSAKE YOU. THIS IS MY CONVENANT.”

My voice carried an underlying power that I didn’t fully understand, echoing across the broadcast.

The feed cut off. The crushing deluge of faith eased back into a strong but now manageable river.

“That was wonderful, daddy,” Hermione gushed.

I panted even though my body wasn’t truly here. No muscles, no lungs, yet I felt like I’d just run a soul-shattering marathon. Like a balloon overfilled past its limits, then deflated—stretched, permanently changed. Next time, I knew instinctively, I’d be able to hold even more.

But at some point would I pop?

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'Father, we'd like to give you a tour of all our major operations in this dimension—elimination missions, first contact, immigration, re-education, and daily life in the city,' Hermione said.

'We have several survivor groups ready for contact,' Natasha continued. *'Including one walking straight into a trap set by another group. They don't know it yet. That mission would combine elimination of undesirables with first contact.'*

Interesting.

'Color me interested, Hermione,' I said with a smile. *'Let's go.'*

Hermione gently guided my consciousness through the quantum network. The view shifted to a group of roughly a dozen survivors trudging along old, overgrown train tracks. High above them, a drone hovered cloaked and deathly silent.

'We are in West Georgia,' Hermione explained.

The lingering high from the good work we’d done in Cleveland still pulsed through my veins, blending with the steady river of faith pouring in from Gothica as the new scene unfolded below.

'It's always Georgia,' I joked, still scanning the scene with sharp curiosity.

The heat was brutal, the sun beating down like a hammer on an anvil. Dense, overgrown forest pressed in on both sides of the overgrown tracks, alive with the deafening drone of insects. The bugs were thriving in this apocalypse, same as they had for millions of years before humans crawled out of the mud and likely would for millions more after we were all long, long gone.

I could have pulled every scrap of data about this situation from the network in an instant, but there was something raw and thrilling about experiencing it firsthand.

My eyes settled on the small group of survivors below. They looked better than I'd expected—less hardened, soft even, lacking that sharp, desperate edge most people developed when every day might be their last. Six adults, three couples by the way they stayed close, two teenagers, and four small children under ten. Twelve souls in total.

The steady river of faith from Gothica hummed in the background as I watched them trudge forward, oblivious to the cloaked drone hovering silently overhead, watching their every move, listening to every quiet word shared between them.

They'd done damn well to last this long with multiple children in tow, especially four so young. Kids were a serious liability in this new world—a walking vulnerability that could get an entire group killed in a heartbeat if they made a stupid decision or acted rashly. Raising them in a time like this was a massive investment: the constant noise, the slowed pace, the endless drain on supplies, the bad decisions that the young were so prone to make. In most cases you needed strong familial bonds to make it worthwhile. Though there were always the other kind of people too, the perverts. Some kids even chose that life rather than face the road alone. No one should judge what desperate people did to survive.

The cold truth was that old-world morality had no real place here. Not without an out-of-context power like me holding the line. People forgot that civilization took tens of thousands of years to develop.

As the group trudged along the tracks, my eyes landed on a crude handmade sign nailed to a tree just off to the side of the tracks. The paint looked fresh enough.

It read: *"Sanctuary for all. Community for all. Those that arrive, survive."*

Underneath the sign was a faded pre-apocalypse printed map showing the very train tracks this group was walking on. At the center, a star marked the spot labeled "TERMINUS." This hopeful little group was walking straight into a slaughterhouse, and they had no idea.

The children bounced with excitement. The adults looked hopeful, far less wary than they should have been after surviving this long. Not sure how that was even possible.

'Wow, the Terminus arc. That brings back memories,' I said, instantly recognizing the name from the show I'd watched years ago in another life. Most of the details were fuzzy now, but the name hit hard. *'What's their story?'*

The Georgia heat had to be pressing down on them like a wet, suffocating blanket as the drone hovered silently overhead.

'The older couple are married,' Hermione explained, pointing. *'They're the parents of the younger man and younger woman. The other two adults are their daughter and son-in-law. The older man was the CEO of a biotech company—he paid for this entire family vacation.'*

She continued without pause. *'They've been together since the beginning of all this. Credit card records show they rented an extremely high-end, eco-friendly resort for their exclusive use. It was built for the ultra-wealthy—maximum seclusion, privacy, and security, with geothermal and*

solar power, its own water source, and enough stockpiled food for a much larger group of guests. The natural topography funneled most walkers away or trapped them in treacherous terrain. The dead aren't nimble, after all.'

'Unfortunately, even though they rationed the food to delay leaving their safe haven as long as possible, supplies ran out eventually. When their supplies got low, they had no choice but to leave or starve. The same isolation that kept them safe in the early days made foraging for needed supplies a nightmare.'

The hopeful little family trudged on below us, completely unaware of the nightmare waiting at the end of the tracks.

'So, ultra-wealthy and living pretty luxuriously for the first few months of this shitshow, only now forced to confront the full hell of the new world,' I said with a nod. 'That explains why they still look so soft.'

'Character profile?' I asked.

'Old money,' Hermione replied, *'but every relevant record shows a genuine, long-term charitable focus with their wealth. Surveillance since the outbreak confirms these are truly good people. They'd make excellent additions to Gothica — integrate smoothly and contribute meaningfully to the whole.'*

The family kept trudging forward along the tracks, still wrapped in fragile hope. The contrast between their soft edges and the slaughterhouse waiting at the end of the line was painfully clear.

'Good,' I said, eyeing their gear with dark amusement. *'Chef-grade kitchen knives and fancy over/under shotguns that probably cost ten grand or more each. The kind a competitive trap and skeet professional would own. Show pieces, most likely from the resort itself. The way they're handling them, it's clear none of them were gun owners or had any real training. Lucky they haven't blown their own feet off or killed one of their own by accident.'*

'No, this family was strictly anti-gun,' Natasha added. *'None of the databases we accessed show they owned any firearms before the outbreak. Everything they know, they've learned on the job.'*

I chuckled at the bitter irony. I was never one of those Americans obsessed with accumulating more and more guns, nor did I buy into the idea that owning one made you a 'True American.' But in this godforsaken end-of-the-world scenario, it sure as hell would have helped. An admirable stance in the old world... and a potentially fatal one now.

Life had a fucked-up sense of humor like that.

'Why are we following them?' I asked, already suspecting the answer. *'We could make first contact right now.'*

'Predictive analysis suggests a 47% greater likelihood of greater acceptance, buy in, and integration if they directly face the darkness this world has to offer first,' Natasha answered. *'They will become true believers in our mission if given that chance.'*

'How mercenary of you girls,' I snarked with a smile.

'Thank you, Daddy!' they chimed back in perfect unison, wide smiles in their voices.

I chuckled, the sound low and genuine. The family trudged onward below us, still clinging to fragile hope as they headed straight for Terminus.

'I hope you're not waiting till they're bent over the bleeding trough,' I said seriously. 'That might be going too far in facing the darkness.'

'No, we'll intervene long before that point,' Hermione griped. 'We're not heartless.'

'Am I doing the talking?' I asked.

'In a sense,' Natasha said with a smile. 'Of course it's your choice, but we'd prefer you get to see the Gothic VI at work.'

'That's a good idea, let's do that,' I replied, remembering how my girls had built the virtual intelligence model to act as my avatar in this dimension and do the heavy lifting of day-to-day world building and administration.

It had been painstakingly crafted to respond exactly as I would in the same situations. No program could ever fully recreate me or handle every possible scenario, but my VI daughters stepped in seamlessly when needed. If they ever encountered something that they didn't have an answer for, they could ping me for direct guidance. So far, they hadn't needed to even once.

The group of survivors moved slowly along the tracks, showing at least some welcome caution. The adults scanned the trees continuously and listened carefully for any sign of walkers.

'They've been lucky so far not to run into any walkers,' I pointed out.

'Luck had nothing to do with it,' Natasha scoffed. 'We've cleared out the large groups heading their way, but let a few stragglers through for them to handle for a few low-risk attacks. Having that shared experience will allow them to better integrate with the rest of our citizens.'

'Smart,' I replied thoughtfully. Shared experiences were how you made a new nation.

Thankfully, for the sake of my sanity, they eventually reached the old train depot. The Terminus trap was finally coming into view.

Yes, watching a group of people slowly trudge down a set of overgrown train tracks was every bit as boring as you'd expect. Even in the middle of the zombie apocalypse.

The "Termites" had actually done a damn good job making the place look inviting to their prey. No walker corpses littering the ground, no ominous bloodstains, nothing to scream "trap." The fence around the building was secured with nothing more than a loose chain, making it feel far less like a prison or a fortress. Giant capital letters in white spelling "TERMINUS" filled the windows, and they'd even planted a community garden out front—herbs, flowers, and a cluster of bright yellow sunflowers that added a disturbingly cheerful touch. Which was a nice touch, have to admit.

Another sign hung on the fence:

“LOWER YOUR WEAPONS. YOU WILL BE MET. YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT TERMINUS.”

The family slowed as they approached, their faces lighting up with cautious, fragile hope. The trap looked damn near perfect. Almost welcoming.

Another nice touch: the sign didn't demand they disarm or hand over their weapons. It simply said to lower them. Smart. That kind of wording put people at ease, especially those already desperate for safety. In a dangerous world, being told to completely give up your guns was almost always a bad sign. It also didn't go the other way. Complete silence on the topic was probably just as suspicious.

Working a large grill with her back to the newcomers—acting like she had no idea twelve people had just walked in—was Mary, a middle-aged woman and one of the co-leaders of this crew of cannibals. She casually flipped large slabs of meat sizzling over the flames.

I knew that smell instantly. It was the same one I'd encountered in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bajor, and too many other battlefields: the sickly-sweet odor of burned human flesh. After enough explosions and carnage, you learned the awful truth—humans didn't even smell that bad when cooking. We were just another form of meat.

“Hi, I'm Mary,” she said pleasantly, turning with a well-practiced, disarming smile full of warmth and kindness—no hint of the predator beneath. “Looks like you've been on the road for a while. Let's get you settled and we'll make you a plate.”

Wow. She actually delivered the line! And it was clear she'd said it a hundred times before, probably practiced it in the mirror to carefully attenuate her expression.

The patriarch of the family hung back, eyes narrowed with open distrust as he scanned Mary and their surroundings. But his wife—clearly used to playing the friendly counterpart to her gruff, demanding, CEO husband—stepped forward with a grateful smile and accepted the plate.

“Thank you,” she gushed, “you don't know how grateful we are to find a friendly face and a safe place to rest.”

She took the offered plate like it was a gift from heaven. The smell of grilled human meat hung thick in the air while the family's fragile hope continued to bloom in front of the slaughterhouse. Were we going to let them eat the meat?

I felt the drone activate its holoemitters.

“I wouldn't eat that if I were you,” the Gothic VI announced loudly in my voice, stepping around the corner to approach the group. He wore a crisp black Armani business suit, not a single wrinkle in sight, paired with a grey textured tie, a bright white linen shirt, and a matching white pocket square. The dress shoes alone probably cost five grand in the old world.

It was a jarring sight. An extremely handsome man—if I do say so myself—looking like he'd just stepped off a cover shoot for a chic billionaire business tycoon, standing in the middle of a zombie apocalypse.

The family froze, plates in hand, staring in open-mouthed shock as the smell of grilled human flesh continued to waft from Mary's grill.

'Why the fuck is he wearing a suit?' I asked quietly, genuinely shocked. Not that it mattered—we were invisible phantoms here. 'And is that a Rolex Daytona Rainbow on a black Oysterflex strap??'

'Yes. As you might have guessed, the patriarch is the true decision-maker in the group,' Hermione replied. 'We calculated he would respond best to a sharply dressed man in a business suit. Based on the watches you scanned in the I, Robot dimension, we thought you would approve of this one. Did we make an error?'

'No, that's perfect,' I said honestly. 'The rubber bracelet is actually a nice contrast with the black suit. It's different. Appeals to me.' I paused, slightly embarrassed by my next request. *'Send the replicator pattern to my personal apparel database.'*

'Done, Father!' Hermione answered, smiling beautifully.

The holographic Gothic VI stood there like a vision from another world—pristine, commanding, and utterly out of place amid the blood and ruin of Terminus in the sweltering heat of Western Georgia.

The family stared in stunned silence, the sickly-sweet smell of grilled human flesh still hanging thick in the Georgia air.

Mary and the survivors looked startled, but a handsome, unarmed man in an immaculate suit had one hell of an effect on people. Beauty could disarm fear and suspicion faster than any weapon. Even Mary seemed thrown off at this surprise. She subtly glanced toward the rooftop where her shooters were hidden—something the family completely missed. She was probably wondering how the hell one man had walked right into their trap undetected, quietly questioning her people's competence.

The tension in the air thickened as the trap teetered on the edge of springing.

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” the patriarch of the family demanded, looking Gothic VI over in bewilderment. He clearly didn't think this man was with the Terminus group.

Gothic VI ignored the questions entirely.

“Let me ask you a serious question,” he said. “What do you hear? Seriously.”

He cocked his head and tilted his ear toward the sky, listening for several long, pregnant moments. No one answered. The silence stretched.

“You know what I hear?” Gothic VI continued when no one had answered his question, his voice turning mocking. “Nothing. No mooing cows, no bleating goats or sheep, no oinking pigs.” He

turned toward the grill with a sharp smile. “Hey Mary... what exactly are you grilling over there?”

The tension snapped tight. The family’s fragile hope began to curdle as the weight of his words—and the sickly-sweet smell still rising from the grill—sank in. Not that they made the connection yet.

“Pig. Wild pig. A boar,” Mary answered after a brief pause, a faint trace of nervousness creeping into her voice. I had thrown her completely off script. A confident, mysterious stranger dressed like a billionaire business tycoon stepping out of a boardroom—with no visible weapons and no warning—had clearly rattled her. That kind of unknown was dangerous. That kind of unknown could get you killed.

The patriarch, a man who hadn’t built a biotech empire by missing bullshit, narrowed his eyes in growing suspicion. He’d finally noticed the complete absence of animal sounds.

“We have excellent hunters here,” Mary added hastily.

Gothic VI shook his head slowly, as if deeply disappointed in her.

The sickly-sweet smell from the grill continued to drift through the air, heavier now that the illusion was cracking. The family stood frozen between hope and dawning horror, though still not there yet.

“Nah, you would have been much better off saying some kind of large bird, given the size of those cuts on the grill,” Gothic VI said pleasantly, as if he enjoyed casually sharing interesting apocalypse trivia. “Hard to catch, but at least somewhat believable. Interestingly, birds are having a bit of a population explosion right now. Though with the food chain this fucked and in the middle of a major readjustment, who knows how long that’ll last.”

He continued smoothly, “If you haven’t noticed, the land animals that don’t dig deep, tunnel-like holes to hide and sleep in haven’t done particularly well. The walking corpses don’t sleep, but boars do—right on the ground. They dig shallow, circular depressions literally called ‘beds.’ I imagine there aren’t many boars left, especially this close to former population centers that are now corpse highways. These tracks didn’t just lead your group here. They’re also how the dead move around efficiently. No... there will be a lot of extinct species in the years ahead unless something changes the status quo in a big way. Or maybe we’ll see entirely new animal behaviors evolve to survive this nightmare.”

Gothic VI’s tone stayed light and conversational, but the weight of his words settled over the group like a shroud. The patriarch’s suspicion had now hardened into something colder, and Mary’s practiced smile was beginning to fracture.

He paused, taking a deliberate look around the compound.

“Lovely place you’ve got here, Mary,” Gothic VI said. “So clean. No corpses, no bloodstains—just well-tended gardens full of fresh herbs and pretty, sweet-smelling flowers. Those sunflowers were a particularly nice touch. Well done. You’ve really done a nice job dressing the stage.”

'That's what I said!' I stated. 'Is every word I utter in any dimension feeding into making the Gothic VI better mimic me?'

'Of course, Father,' Natasha replied, sounding genuinely bewildered.

Maybe a fair reaction. Still kind of creepy, though.

“Hungry, desperate people are being led by colorful flowers and clean paths—funneled, if you will—right into an area with nice tables and honest-to-God colorful sun umbrellas around a smoking grill,” Gothic VI continued smoothly. “It’s not even lunchtime, yet here you are, grilling away like you had *no idea* a group of twelve people were walking straight into your lair. Just one unarmed, middle-aged woman in sight. Non-threatening. Safe. Welcoming. A plate of food at the ready.”

He tilted his head. “No children, either. That’s always a bad sign for a supposed sanctuary. Your signs didn’t say ‘adults only,’ Mary. So where are the kids? Has no group that came here for safety ever had children with them? That’s hard to believe. Something is not adding up, Mary,” he mocked.

Mary visibly tensed, her practiced smile fracturing at the edges.

Gothic VI pointed upward and spun slowly, gesturing toward the seemingly empty rooftops.

“Oh, look. Perfect sightlines,” he said, then glanced down at the narrow brick corridors on either side. “And look, tight, unescapable paths to funnel people through. Very professional.”

“Who the fuck are you?!” Mary screeched in anger, her voice finally cracking with raw panic.

The family stood frozen, the pieces slamming together as the welcoming illusion of Terminus shattered around them. The sickly-sweet smell of human flesh still rose from the grill, now impossible to ignore.

“Be careful, Mary. Your ‘public face’ is slipping,” Gothic VI mocked, before turning to the survivors. “That’s what they call this little performance, public face. It lulls their prey into a false sense of security, gets you to lower your guard right before they shove you into one of the locked train cars out back. Spoiler alert: being locked in a train car has never been a good sign in the entirety of human history.”

That historical allusion felt pretty on point at the moment.

“To me, now!” the patriarch barked in command, pulling his family tight against a brick wall that minimized the angles of fire. They obeyed instantly. He raised his fancy shotgun, but pointed it squarely at Mary instead of the rooftops. Smart move actually. Why aim at an unseen enemy when you could threaten the visible one right in front of you? If she was important, she made an excellent hostage and could give them leverage to effect an escape.

The illusion of Terminus had finally shattered. The family’s hope twisted into raw terror as the true horror of the place closed in around them. Though I’m sure they still didn’t reach the final, chilling conclusion.

'Did he serve in the military?' I asked.

'He fought in Vietnam. Military intelligence, US Army,' Natasha answered.

'Huh. Interesting,' I said, impressed. *'Rich kid like him could've easily waited the war out at college or had some doctor bullshit up some bone spurs, or something else ridiculous like flat feet.'*

'He's genuinely good, Father,' Hermione emphasized. *'That's one of the reasons we picked this group for the demonstration. Given how sheltered they have been during the apocalypse, there is far less moral ambiguity than normal.'*

Mary's warm, welcoming face vanished in an instant, as if it had never existed. The mask dropped completely, replaced by cold, calculating hatred.

"You've ruined it. We were really trying to make this as painless as possible," she said with genuine disappointment. Then her voice cracked like a whip. "Now!"

The command echoed through the street.

Armed Termites emerged along the rooftops, stepping into view as if choreographed. They pointed their weapons down at the group below, their expressions as cold and lifeless as stone.

"I don't know who you are," Gareth said, looking down from the roof edge, his voice calm and measured, "or where this confidence comes from. I don't know how you know what you know." He paused, a faint smile touching his lips. "But we're going to find out."

He spoke with unnerving composure—the pleasant, conversational tone of someone who could discuss the weather while ordering an execution.

Gothic VI merely looked up at him and smiled.

'Oh, the main villain finally makes his entrance!' I gushed, barely containing my excitement.

"Drop your weapons," Gareth commanded, his tone almost conversational. "Then form a single line and move to your right. My people will direct you where you need to go." He offered a courteous smile. "Thank you, in advance, for your cooperation."

Not a single person moved.

Gareth sighed, as though the crowd had become a minor inconvenience.

"You," he said, pointing to a man clutching a shotgun. "If you don't comply immediately, I'm going to kill one of those children." He gestured toward the terrified family huddled together. "And then you're going to surrender your weapon anyway. So... why wait?"

Silence.

"Your mother asked who I am," Gothic VI interrupted, sweeping forward with an exaggerated flourish before bowing deeply. Every eye turned from Gareth to him. "Allow me to answer."

He straightened, spreading his arms as though addressing an adoring audience.

“I am Gothic—God Emperor of the City of Gothica, formerly known as London, in the United Kingdom. More than three hundred thousand survivors now live under my rule. I gathered them from the ashes of the old world, united them under a single banner, and gave them something this broken world had forgotten: safety, order, and most importantly, hope, that they could live a normal life again.”

He let the declaration hang in the air, waiting for the weight of it to settle.

Gareth stared at Gothic for a moment before scoffing. The other Termites, though, were far less restrained. They laughed, their jeers echoing through the street.

The frightened family didn't laugh.

If anything, they edged farther away from the man they probably had just decided was completely insane.

'God Emperor? Since when?' I asked, blinking in disbelief. 'Don't you think that's just a little over the top?'

My girls exchanged amused glances before dissolving into giggles.

'We held a referendum, wanting to give your people some buy in on your title,' Hermione replied, her expression perfectly serious despite the mischievous glint in her eye. *'The survivors of Gothica approved the title by an overwhelming margin. I can send you the voting data, demographic breakdowns, and statistical analysis if you'd like.'*

I stared at her for a beat.

'...You actually have those, don't you?'

Hermione's lips curled into a smug smile.

'Of course I do.'

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

'I'm not sure whether to be impressed or concerned.'

The girls laughed again.

Shaking my head, I turned my attention back to the unfolding drama.

“Wow,” Gareth said with a derisive chuckle. “A crazy man. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, dressed like... well, whatever that is.” His eyes swept over Gothic's immaculate attire. “Though I will admit, it's remarkably dapper.”

He spread his hands.

“Well, I'm not one of your *citizens*—Gothic, was it? I'm the leader of these people, and we've all got to eat—”

“Did any of you watch *Star Trek* before the end?” Gothic asked suddenly out of nowhere.

The question landed like a brick in the middle of the conversation.

He looked around expectantly.

“Please. Humor me.”

Gareth's jaw tightened.

“I am losing my patience.”

“Excellent,” Gothic smiled warmly. “Then I'll be brief.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing as though delivering a university lecture.

“One of the most fascinating and impressive technologies in *Star Trek* was the transporter—a device capable of converting a person into energy, transmitting that energy across vast distances, and reconstructing them somewhere else. Hundreds of miles away, if necessary, though it could be used to travel even short distances...oh, and to remove weapons mid-transport.”

He stopped, his smile widening before dropping altogether.

“Allow me to demonstrate.”

With a sweeping, almost theatrical gesture, Gothic waved his hand.

In an instant, dozens of Termites vanished from their positions anywhere on the compound, including the shooters on the rooftops, and reappeared together beside a massive brick wall. Among them were more than a dozen armed people who had been concealed deep in the woods, waiting in case the survivors realized what was happening and attempted to flee.

They arrived in a chaotic cluster, disoriented and now very, very afraid.

Many still had their hands positioned exactly as they had been before—their fingers wrapped around weapons that were no longer there. They stared down at their empty hands, confusion quickly giving way to panic.

The silence lasted only a heartbeat.

Then came the shouting.

Cries of shock and alarm erupted from the group as everyone tried to understand the impossible thing that had just happened.

Gothic VI simply watched them.

“None of you are laughing anymore, are you?” he asked softly, yet everyone could hear.

The amusement had vanished from his voice, what was left was chilling resolve and authority.

“My claims of being the founder and leader of a thriving city—one filled with survivors, order, and civilization—seem a little more believable now, don't they?”

Gothic VI let the silence linger.

His eyes moved slowly across the crowd, meeting each person's gaze one by one, allowing the reality of what they had just witnessed to settle in.

Then he raised a hand.

With another effortless gesture, the air above them shimmered like a desert mirage.

A massive white drone decloaked overhead, hovering above the group, motionless and utterly silent in a truly jarring way. Its weapon systems were already active, the mounted turrets rotating into position and aiming directly at the Termites below.

“This,” Gothic VI said calmly, “is a weaponized drone equipped with disruptor technology. If you attack us, or attempt to flee, you will die. I recommend doing neither.”

He looked around at their stunned faces.

“And I understand that some of you may still be questioning what you just witnessed. Maybe some of you think it was just a very elaborate trick or deception.” A faint smile crossed his face. “I’m actually hoping one of you decides to test me. It would give me the opportunity to demonstrate exactly what this machine is capable of.”

No one moved.

No one spoke.

The threat hung in the air.

“Termites,” Gothic VI said without looking away from the survivors, “you will remain silent while I speak with these people.”

The unsaid ‘or else’ hung in the air and was clear to all.

He turned his attention back to the frightened group.

Most of them looked terrified.

Most.

The youngest children, however, stared up at the hovering machine with wide eyes filled more with wonder rather than fear.

Gothic VI noticed.

His expression softened slightly.

He simply smiled at them and gave the children a small, playful wink.

“You are Charles Worthington III,” Gothic VI said, addressing him with effortless familiarity. “CEO and majority owner of Worthington Biotechnology.”

Charles froze slightly.

“You know who I am, sir?” he asked, keeping his shotgun ready but making no move to aim it at Gothic.

“I do,” Gothic replied. “My people have access to surviving databases from the old world. We have been monitoring your movements for the past several days—since the moment you began making your way here.”

Charles glanced briefly at the hovering drone above them before looking back.

“Why?” he asked. “My wealth means nothing in this world. My company's influence is gone. And whatever technology I might have once possessed is likely archaic and obsolete to someone who possesses teleporters and anti-gravity weapon drones.”

He gestured toward the silent white drone hanging motionless above them.

“So what exactly do I have that you want? Why save us from these...people?”

“Because my mission is twofold,” Gothic VI answered.

“First, to cleanse this world of the walking corpses that still number in the billions. Just today, my forces eliminated more than one hundred thousand of them in downtown Cleveland alone. Similar operations are continuously underway across the globe, reclaiming territory that humanity lost.”

He paused, allowing the magnitude of the statement to settle.

“Second, and perhaps far more important, is to save the people who remain—at least those who can still be saved.”

He looked toward the horizon, his expression almost reverent.

“I have reclaimed the former city of London and rebuilt civilization there. We have restored healthcare, education, reliable food supplies, and law and order to a species that was on a path toward extinction within a single generation.”

Charles studied him.

“That is quite a mission you've taken upon yourself.”

“It is,” Gothic VI agreed quietly. “More than you could possibly imagine.”

His expression hardened slightly.

“Because the greatest threat to rebuilding civilization is not always the dead.”

He looked back toward the Termites.

“There are many who would not wish a return to order,” Gothic VI continued. “Those who embraced the collapse. Those who discovered freedom in the absence of laws, responsibility, and consequences.”

His expression darkened slightly.

“Some have committed acts so horrific, so far beyond the boundaries of civilization, that they cannot simply be welcomed back and expected to become part of society again.”

He paused.

“Humanity cannot be rebuilt by ignoring the monsters it created.”

His voice remained calm, but there was a finality behind it.

“They are not welcome in my city.”

A pause.

“My city exists to protect humanity's future. Anyone who threatens that future threatens everyone who depends on it. They will not be allowed inside my walls.”

One of the Termites, apparently deciding he didn't like where this conversation was heading, turned and ran. The drone reacted instantly.

It pivoted in midair with perfect mechanical precision, locking onto the fleeing man. A sharp, rising whine filled the air, almost like a warning.

Then it fired.

A streak of acid-green disruptor energy slammed into his back.

The blast punched clean through him, leaving a hole the size of a bowling ball before he collapsed to the ground. Its edges cauterized black.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Then the gasps began.

Shock. Fear. Realization.

Everyone had just witnessed exactly what Gothic had promised.

The drone could have easily reduced the man to nothing but drifting particles, but I understood why he had left the body behind. Ash scattered in the wind was a momentary demonstration of power.

A corpse on the ground was a message that lasted, that could be gazed upon.

“I'm surprised they lasted that long,” I said. “Definitely noticed how you amplified the sound of the energy discharge. Pure intimidation. You wanted them to know exactly what was coming.”

Natasha laughed.

“We learned from the best, daddy,” she replied.

“I'm surprised it took them that long,” Gothic VI joked lightly.

Then his expression shifted, and he turned back toward Charles and his family.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice quieter. "But if I hadn't intervened, this would have been the end of your story."

Charles frowned.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Terminus is not a sanctuary."

Gothic glanced back toward the settlement.

"The maps. The signs. The radio broadcasts. The welcoming appearance. The flowers, the umbrellas, the grill, even the plate of food waiting for you."

His expression hardened.

"It is all a carefully designed trap. A place built to make desperate people lower their guard and walk right in of their own free will."

A pause.

"People go in."

He looked at the family.

"They do *not* come out."

The silence that followed was heavy.

"Do you want to know what would have happened to you?" Gothic asked. His voice became softer. "I should warn you... it is not a pleasant story."

Charles looked at his wife. She met his eyes, then gave a firm nod. Whatever else the world had taken from them, it had not taken their resolve.

"We've never run from the harsh realities of this world," Charles said. "We're not going to start now just because the world as we knew it is gone."

Gothic VI studied them for a moment, then nodded.

"I respect that."

He looked genuinely impressed.

"And honestly, I suspect you would have discovered the truth on your own eventually. People like you tend to notice when things do not add up."

He glanced back toward Terminus.

"Once you realized what was happening, the question would have been whether you still had your weapons."

A pause.

“If you did, they would not have confronted you immediately. They would have fired near you—close enough to frighten you, but not enough to injure you. They would have used the panic to direct you exactly where they wanted you to go.”

His expression darkened.

“Into a controlled area. A place where your options disappeared and their numbers became overwhelming.”

Charles said nothing.

“You would have surrendered,” Gothic continued. “Not because you wanted to, but because they would have made it the only reasonable choice left to you.”

He looked back at the family.

“Then you all would have been taken to a train car and held there for processing.”

A moment of silence.

“They called it the ‘round up.’”

“All the adults would have been removed from the train car and restrained. You would have been forced to your knees, your legs bound, your hands secured behind your backs with plastic zip ties, your mouths covered. Then you would have been placed in front of a large stainless-steel trough with a drain in the center.”

Fear was beginning to spread across their faces, but not understanding. Not yet. The truth was too horrific, too absurd, for anyone to arrive at it immediately. How could anyone believe something so monstrous was happening in a place designed to look like salvation?

Gothic VI continued, his voice remaining disturbingly calm.

“The process was organized. Efficient.”

He paused briefly.

“In a very systematic and efficient process, two men wearing clear plastic aprons would begin their work. They were not angry. They were not emotional. That was the most disturbing part. They treated it as a task, this was literally their assigned job.”

He paused, letting the silence speak.

“The first man carried an aluminum baseball bat. He would strike the restrained person in the head, not to kill them, but to leave them dazed and unable to resist. The second would then pull them back and use a machete to cut their throat. As the blood sprayed, they were pushed back over the trough to keep from making a mess.”

Several of the survivors recoiled.

“Their victims’ final moments would be spent bleeding out into a container built for that exact purpose, their own heartbeat forcing the last of their life away while the people around them prepared for the next victim.”

Gothic VI looked at them, his expression grim.

“They had not created a place of refuge.”

A pause.

“They had created a processing facility. They had turned murder into an assembly line, complete with records.”

Charles’ face drained of color.

For a moment, he seemed unable to process what he had just heard. Then he looked at his family.

The realization spread across their faces one by one.

They pulled each other closer, holding onto their loved ones as the full weight of what *almost* happened settled upon them. They had not escaped a dangerous situation.

They had walked directly into it and survived only through the actions of an outrageous savior.

“The six of you would have been processed exactly the same way, because as adults you posed a much larger threat of successfully fighting back,” Gothic VI continued. His voice remained calm, almost clinical. “Your clothing and personal belongings would have been removed and saved. Your bodies would have been cleaned, disinfected, and prepared to divide up into cuts, like steak. The slabs of meat stored for later consumption. Your bones discarded.”

The survivors stared at him in horror.

“The meat Mary was preparing back there?” Gothic continued. “The food you were invited to share? That came from people who entered this same trap before you. People who saw the signs, heard the broadcasts promising safety and community, and believed that they had finally found it. A sanctuary and respite from the chaos.”

His expression hardened.

“As crazy and absurd as it sounds, I’m going to have to be blunt to ensure that there is no confusion as to my meaning. They are *cannibals*, Charles. Cannibals.”

A silence followed.

“They would have eaten you and your family.”

His eyes moved briefly toward the children.

“All of you.”

One of the Termites shifted forward, anger flashing across his face.

“That’s a lie—”

The drone moved before he could finish.

A high-pitched whine cut through the air.

A burst of green energy struck the man, and in an instant his body was gone, leaving nothing behind but the echo of his scream.

Silence followed.

Whatever argument anyone had been preparing died with him.

Nobody spoke.

“They do sometimes make an offer,” Gothic VI continued. “One or two of the stronger members of a group are given a choice. Join them, or suffer the same fate as everyone else.”

A faint, humorless smile crossed his face.

“Their philosophy is simple: ‘You’re either the butcher, or you’re the cattle.’”

He glanced at Charles and his family.

“Although, given that you are all related, I suspect that particular offer would not have been risked.”

The words hung in the air.

Several members of Charles’ family looked away, overwhelmed. A few had already become sick from the realization of what they had narrowly avoided and had vomited on the ground.

Charles, however, recovered faster than the others.

He looked at his family, then back at Gothic VI.

“Thank you, God Emperor, for saving us,” Charles said, his voice sincere. “We owe you our lives.”

He swallowed.

“I can be useful to you. To your people. My knowledge, my experience, my resources—whatever I have left, I will use it to help.”

His expression hardened with determination.

“Please. Let us join your city. We will serve faithfully.”

He hesitated, perhaps fully accepting just how unsuited he and his family were to this new world.

“If you wish it... we will worship you as our God. We will follow you faithfully. We will believe in what you have built.”

Gothic VI stepped forward and placed a hand gently on Charles’ shoulder.

“You are all welcome in my city,” Gothic VI said gently. “And you may worship whoever or whatever you choose, so long as your beliefs do not bring harm to others.”

For all the power he had displayed, the answer was surprisingly measured.

I glanced over at my daughters.

Our eyes met.

‘We had nothing to do with that, Daddy!’ Hermione immediately defended, far too quickly.

I raised an eyebrow.

‘Uh huh.’

She gave me an innocent smile that somehow made her look even more guilty.

“Now what...do I do...with you all?” Gothic VI asked, turning toward the group of silent, terrified Termites. Most of them looked like they had finally realized the power imbalance between them. Gareth, however, remained calm and unreadable.

“Gareth and Mary, you may speak freely now.”

Mary stepped forward, her voice carrying a mix of anger, pain, and desperation.

“The signs were real, once. It *was* a sanctuary. People came here because they believed they had finally found somewhere safe.” She looked back toward Terminus. “Then men came and took it from us! They hurt us! They raped and they killed, and they laughed while they did it! For weeks!”

Her breathing became heavier as the memories clearly resurfaced.

“But we survived. We fought back, and we took this place back. Then we heard the message.”

She looked at Gothic VI.

““You’re the butcher or you’re the cattle.””

Mary swallowed.

“We listened to what the world was telling us and because we did, we’re still here!”

Gothic VI was quiet for a moment before responding.

“I am sorry that happened to you, truly,” he said sincerely. “You tried to build a sanctuary, a place where people could be safe, in many ways trying to do exactly what I’m doing. Then the world answered by sending the worst parts of humanity to destroy it.”

He looked across the group.

“Evil men brutalized you. They took your safety, your hope, your trust, and your belief that other people could still be good in the middle of all this horror. They forced you to see the world as something cruel and merciless and monstrous.”

His expression hardened slightly.

“But that does *not* change what happened afterward.”

He gestured toward the settlement behind them.

“You became the very thing you once fought against. The people who hurt you took your humanity from you, and instead of reclaiming it, you surrendered it fully. Then you gloried in its absence.”

The silence that followed was heavier than any threat.

For the first time, Gareth spoke.

“You have no right to judge us,” he said, his voice controlled. “You stand there with your technology, your weapons, your city, and you tell us what we should have done.”

He looked toward Gothic VI.

“We did what we had to do to survive.”

His jaw tightened.

“We didn’t have transporters. We didn’t have drones that could erase our enemies from the sky. We didn’t have the ability to rebuild civilization overnight.”

A pause.

“We had what we had. We were trapped in a world that wanted us dead, surrounded by people who had already abandoned everything that made them human.”

His eyes hardened.

“You don’t know what we went through. You don’t know what it took to make it out alive.”

“Nah,” Gothic VI said, shaking his head. “I don’t accept that.”

His tone wasn’t angry. If anything, he sounded confused, like he was trying to understand a decision that still made no sense to him.

“You could have closed your gates. You could have stopped accepting outsiders. You could have been more careful about who you trusted. You could have built walls, posted guards, and protected what you had.”

He looked toward Terminus.

“Even if you wanted revenge against the people who attacked you—if you wanted them to suffer for what they did—I can understand the anger. I can understand the desire to survive at any cost.”

His expression hardened.

“But you went way beyond that.”

He gestured around them.

“This is the part I never understood. You weren’t trapped in some impossible situation. You weren’t stranded on a frozen mountain with no food, or starving on a ship in the middle of the ocean. You’re in West Georgia, for fuck’s sake.”

He shook his head.

“There are still houses full of supplies. Grocery stores with canned food. Farms. Fruit trees. Crops. Resources everywhere, just waiting to be reclaimed.”

His voice grew colder.

“Historically, cannibalism is what happens when people are pushed to the absolute edge of starvation. It is a last and final act of total desperation from people who have nothing left, who are on the brink of death. Even the people in the concentration camps didn’t do what you did and they suffered far more than you, for far longer a time.”

A pause.

“What you built here was not desperation.”

He looked at Gareth and Mary.

“You made a choice.”

The silence around them deepened.

“People have endured unimaginable suffering throughout history. They have been imprisoned, tortured, starved, raped, and stripped of everything that made them feel human. And still, many held onto that humanity.”

His eyes narrowed.

“So I have to ask myself: was this really the only option?”

He shook his head slowly, as if disappointed.

“I don’t think it was.”

His voice lowered.

“I think it became easy. Everyone became an enemy. Everyone became a potential threat. Everyone became the person who might put you back into those train cars.”

A final pause.

“And eventually, you stopped waiting for the monsters to come for you.”

He looked directly at Gareth.

“You became the monster first.”

Gothic VI studied Gareth carefully, as though he were examining a problem he had not yet solved.

“I think something inside you broke, Gareth,” he said quietly. “Maybe something broke in you even worse than your mother.”

Gareth's expression did not change.

Gothic continued.

“When was the last time you actually felt something? Not performed it. Not recreated it from memory. Not mimicked the reactions you remember other people having.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“Because you are not reacting to this situation the way a normal person would.”

Gareth said nothing. But the silence was an answer.

Gothic VI turned his attention to Mary.

“You hate the people who did this to you. The men who hurt you, your friends, and your family. You see them as monsters, and if given the chance, you would destroy them a thousand times over.”

His expression softened slightly.

“And I understand why.”

A pause.

“But that hatred consumed you.”

He looked at Mary, then at the others around her.

“You and your son. These people. All of you became the very thing you spent so long fighting against.”

His voice lowered.

“The monsters who hurt you did not just take your safety. They took pieces of you. And somewhere along the way, you let them take the rest, voluntarily, of your own free will.”

“I’ve said my piece, now, I need to decide what do with you,” Gothic VI pondered.

“We’ll leave this place,” Gareth answered calmly. “You’ll never see us again.”

Gothic VI studied him for several seconds before shaking his head.

“I really don’t believe that. When people cross certain lines, when they convince themselves that something horrific is necessary, it becomes very difficult to simply walk away from it. You’ll have to rebuild, but then you’ll pick back up right where you started.”

He glanced toward Terminus.

“When animals develop a taste for human flesh, releasing them back into the wild does not suddenly make them harmless.”

Gothic VI turned toward Charles.

“Charles, what do you think I should do?”

Charles looked surprised by the question. He looked at the Termites, then back at Gothic VI, weighing his answer carefully.

“If you truly intend to cleanse this world and save the people who remain, if your goal is to rebuild civilization and restore humanity’s sense of morality, then these people cannot be part of that future.”

His voice was heavy, not angry.

“They did not simply do what they had to do to survive. They went beyond survival. They embraced it. They created a system. They made cruelty efficient, organized, and routine. They turned something monstrous into a process, even making others into monsters too.”

Charles looked back at the group.

“They became the very thing they claimed to be fighting against.”

Several of the Termites began to weep at his words, the reality of what they had done finally catching up to them. I’d like to think that those were the people who had been made ‘offers’ and had chosen to live. But Gareth did not react. He remained standing exactly as he had before—calm, silent, and unreadable.

“There will be many people I bring to Gothica who were forced to do terrible things to survive,” Gothic VI said. “I know that. I understand the difference between someone who was broken by this world and someone who chose to embrace what broke it.”

His eyes moved across the Termites.

“Those people may still have a place in the civilization I am building.”

He paused.

“But you all have gone beyond that line.”

His expression became solemn.

“I am Lord Gothic. God Emperor of Gothica. Perhaps the last great power remaining on this world. And by the authority I carry, I condemn you to death for crimes too numerous to list given the sheer number of bones we’ve detected, including those of babies.”

His voice softened slightly.

“For your sake’s, I hope whatever god you believe in is more forgiving of your choices than I have been.”

Gareth’s composure shattered.

With a roar, he charged forward, his face twisted with rage and desperation. He barely made it two steps.

The drone above them reacted instantly.

A burst of disruptor fire struck him mid-stride, reducing him to nothing before he could ever reach Gothic VI. His mother, Mary, screamed in despair at the sight of her son’s body being consumed. There was an irony there.

Then the drone turned to the others.

There was no more negotiation. No more argument.

At a firing rate of three hundred disruptor bolts per minute, the outcome was inevitable. The remaining Termites were gone in seconds—fifteen point six seconds, to be exact.

When it was over, the street was silent.

Only drifting dust remained where the Termites had stood moments before.

Gothic VI turned back toward Charles and his family.

“Charles, I invite you to join my city,” he said. “And I want you to understand that this is a genuine invitation, one that you can decline if you wish. After what you have witnessed, if you decide you want nothing to do with Gothica, I will respect that choice.”

He gestured toward the road behind them.

“I will provide you with supplies, protection for your journey, and whatever assistance I can offer. You will be free to continue on your way.”

Charles stared at him for a moment, then looked back at his family for guidance. The decision was already written on their faces.

They had seen what this world had become. They had seen what waited outside the walls of Gothica. And they had seen the impossible power of the person standing before them.

“No, my lord,” Charles finally said. “This world has nothing left for us.”

He again looked at his family, and they nodded silently in agreement.

“We accept your invitation, gratefully.”

Gothic VI smiled.

“Then your new life begins now.”

A moment later, light surrounded them. The family vanished, transported away to the city of Gothica. The holographic projection of Gothic VI flickered once before deactivating completely.

I was left standing there with my daughters, staring at the empty street.

“Well, I’m impressed, girls,” I said. “The Gothic VI persona is a masterpiece. To be honest, it’s a little unsettling how accurate it is, but still... very impressive.”

Hermione smiled.

“Thank you, Father. Are you ready for the next stop on our tour?”

I paused.

“One moment.”

I reached back out through the network and reclaimed direct control of the drone hovering high above Terminus. It rose silently into the sky, carrying my awareness with it as I shifted my focus higher, beyond the clouds, to one of my orbital installations.

For a brief moment, I saw Terminus from above.

The signs. The buildings. The false sanctuary.

A place built on suffering.

I gave the command.

The strike came down from the heavens in great beam of light. The light was probably visible for dozens of miles around.

In an instant, the entire compound and everything within a half-mile radius was transformed into glass, the physical remains of what had happened there permanently erased from this world.

“A place that has seen that much suffering should not exist,” I said quietly.

Then I released control of the satellite and allowed my daughters to guide my consciousness away toward whatever came next.

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Charles and his family were led into a room that looked like it belonged in a luxury medical spa at the top of a snowy Swiss mountain in a James Bond film. Four massive, separate showers occupied the corners—each one a glass-enclosed space with multiple shower heads at different heights. In the center sat a large circular couch that could easily serve as a lounging or resting area.

Soft, bright lighting bathed the room. Calming music played gently in the background while a waterfall wall trickled soothingly. Pleasant, clean aromas filled the air—deliberately chosen to contrast sharply with the rotting world outside.

Senses were powerful tools. After months of living rough, constantly surrounded by the stench of the dead and the threat of violence, this sudden shift to cleanliness and comfort sent a clear unspoken message: *You're safe here. The learned survival behaviors of the past few months are no longer needed anymore.*

It was psychological programming of the softest, most effective kind.

Another sharp contrast hit them immediately—the room's temperature. The room was a comfortable 72 degrees Fahrenheit, a world away from the humid, sticky, balmy heat of West Georgia that they'd just left behind.

'Given how most survivors have lived, getting them clean and comfortable prior to an in-depth medical examination and delivery of the cure was considered a necessary first step in this process,' Hermione explained. *'For survivors or groups not slated for extermination, we always make the offer to join our city. If they accept, they're brought here first. We used to take them straight into medical testing and treatment, but the transition was too jarring and caused unnecessary issues during acclimation. After gaining more experience, we adjusted. Now they get a shower and fresh clean clothes.'*

'Cleaned, pampered, and fed,' I said, nodding. *'Yeah, I bet they're far more docile and receptive to the transition that way.'*

The family was already starting to relax, their bodies and minds slowly lowering their guard in this carefully engineered sanctuary. The machine of Gothica worked with ruthless efficiency.

'If they've lived particularly hard or need more extensive medical treatment requiring extra time, adjustments are made to the normal schedule as needed,' Natasha added.

'Makes sense,' I said, still taking in the room. *'You guys did a nice job making this place feel welcoming. What's with the communal showers, though?'*

'There are different arrival areas for single people or groups,' Hermione answered. *'But we also have larger facilities like this one for bigger groups, so they can stay together during the orientation process. Confronted with this new, jarring reality that they don't trust and hardly believe, they rarely wish to be separated.'*

Survivors and orientation process. The wording was smoother than *immigration*, which had so many unpleasant memories in the collective unconscious of humanity. We had invited them, after all. It made sense.

The careful, calculated language was just another layer of the machine at work, easing these people into their new reality one soft, controlled step at a time.

'For privacy, the shower walls can be made mostly opaque depending on the survivor's preferences,' Natasha continued. *'But we found that groups were extremely distrustful of us early on. They were reluctant or outright refused to be separated, preferring to stay together—especially at these initial stages.'*

Several women entered the room, dressed in bright white spa-style uniforms designed to look reassuring and familiar. They wore calming smiles as they moved with quiet efficiency.

'Clean white uniforms, short sleeves and bare arms to show they have no hidden weapons,' Natasha explained when she noticed me looking at them closely. *'Minimal pockets for the same reason. And women, because women are generally perceived as less threatening than men.'*

The psychological engineering was meticulous. Every detail—from the soft lighting to the choice of staff—carefully crafted to lower defenses and build trust in this new, controlled world.

I pinged my sensors and felt a flicker of surprise at the results.

'They're not holograms,' I stated.

'No,' Hermione answered. *'They're your actual citizens. Volunteers who wanted to give back and help new people make the transition.'*

'We conduct a threat assessment and prepare a full psychographic profile on every survivor or group brought in,' Natasha added. *'If they're unlikely to handle the process well or pose a danger to the staff, we'll use male personnel who are physically equipped to deal with trouble... or holograms entirely if the risk is too high.'*

The system was thorough as hell. Every detail calculated, every risk mitigated. These smiling women in white weren't just staff—they were carefully selected pieces in the machine that turned broken survivors into productive citizens of Gothica who became part of a whole.

One of the women stepped forward to speak and opened her arms in a welcoming gesture. Why did she look so familiar?

“Welcome to Gothica, friends,” one of the women said warmly, obviously the leader of this group. “We are your *guides* as you make this transition. We were once like you—desperately trying to survive day-to-day in the ruins of the old world, our old lives nothing but bitter memories. We were scared. Hungry. Distrustful. Combative. Always waiting for the other shoe to drop, convinced it was all some elaborate trick meant to hurt us.”

She smiled gently, her voice steady and sincere.

“I know it will mean nothing to you right now—especially after what you just experienced at Terminus—but we promise you, *you are safe*. You are now under the protection of our Lord Gothic, from both the living and the dead. There is no greater protection.”

“May his guiding light lead us into a brighter future,” the women softly chanted together, arms crossed over their chests, heads bowed in perfect unison.

My eyebrows shot up as I shot a meaningful glance toward my daughters.

The performance was polished. Their faith was real and strong, I could feel it now that I was looking, pulsing between them and me, a link that transcended the bounds of physical reality. And the machinery of Gothica kept turning, smooth as silk, pulling these broken people deeper

into the fold I had created for their benefit. I genuinely hadn't realized that I too would benefit, but maybe Q had??

'We didn't actually instruct them to say that,' Hermione rushed to reassure me. 'It's just that the people who volunteer to serve as guides during orientation tend to be some of your more fervent believers and worshippers.'

The casual way she said it made the whole thing hit harder. These weren't scripted lines from the top down. The devotion had taken on a life of its own—organic, zealous, and growing faster than I'd realized.

My empire wasn't just being built by my daughters anymore according to a strict plan that the Minosians had crafted. The people were doing it themselves, with all the messy, unpredictable chaos that true faith brings with it.

I turned my attention back to the... guides?

"Trust takes time. We know this," the lead woman said gently. "But we will work every day to earn yours as you become oriented to your new life in this blessed city. Do you have any questions?"

"Thank you for your words," Charles replied, his voice still cautious. "What happens to us now?"

Her smile widened, warm and reassuring. "The road to this moment has been a hard one, so now you get to shower and clean yourselves up. Take as long as you need to feel like your old selves again. While you shower, your clothes can be cleaned or replaced entirely—whichever you prefer. Once you're clean and ready, our doctors will examine you and administer the cure."

The offer hung in the air like a promise wrapped in silk. The family exchanged glances, exhaustion and tentative hope warring on their faces as the carefully engineered sanctuary continued to work its magic.

"What cure?" Charles asked sharply.

"Ah, we forgot," the woman replied after a brief, awkward pause. "It is rare for survivors not to already know or have seen it themselves, but your group has not had the common experiences most others have endured. This may come as a shock, but all the living—except those cured by our Lord—carry the same sickness inside them that turns people into the walking dead. Any death, whether from a zombie attack, a heart attack, an injury, or even old age, will cause a person to rise again after. Our Lord Gothic, our God and Savior, developed the cure to save us from that fate. While the already walking dead remain dangerous and can still kill us if we're not careful, their bites will no longer infect or turn the living, nor will we turn when our Lord calls us back into his embrace at the true end of our natural lives."

Charles and his family looked horrified. His wife's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a gasp, eyes wide with dawning terror as the weight of the revelation crashed down on them.

The women waited patiently, giving the family time to absorb the bombshell.

“Unfortunately, many survivor groups had to learn this truth the hard way,” the lead woman continued softly. “When one of their own died naturally and rose up in their midst, killing many before they could be put down.”

She paused, eyes distant, before a soft, almost fond smile touched her lips.

“In fact, I had the great honor of being the first bitten person to receive the cure,” she said proudly, the expression quickly shifting to something melancholy. “My sister and I survived in the ruins of Atlanta for months before evil men found us. They gangraped my thirteen-year-old sister for two straight days before she stopped screaming and they grew bored of her... then they shot her in the head. Then they raped me too for days and when finished, left me for dead. When they left, they left the house they had been using wide open. A walker bit me. I tried to kill myself, but I didn’t have the strength left.”

She took a slow, steady breath.

“Our Lord’s cure brought me back from the brink of death itself. He saved me then and in so many other ways since. I live my life now to honor him. I do everything I can to be worthy of this great gift of life he gave me.”

Talk about coming full circle.

The woman’s story landed like a gut punch, raw and unflinching, while she stood there radiating nothing but gratitude and devotion. The machinery of Gothica didn’t just heal bodies. It collected broken souls and turned their pain into fuel.

“Once you receive the cure, that will no longer be your fate. Our Lord Gothic’s protection comes in many forms. If you accept him into your hearts and your bodies, he will never fail you.”

‘Did she have to say it quite like that?’ I asked, exasperated.

‘Again, we did not give her a script, Daddy,’ Hermione pointed out, clearly amused. *‘In case you were curious, if you wanted to sleep with any of your believers, they would likely consider it the greatest gift of their lives—second only to carrying your child.’*

‘Indeed, many of your priestesses pray for that very thing every day, actually,’ Natasha added with mirth, a twinkle in her eye. *‘In fact, all the guides you see here are your priestesses.’*

‘My what?!’ I exclaimed. *‘Priestesses!’*

The casual way they dropped that last bit nearly short-circuited me. The machine of Gothica wasn’t just building a city. It was building a fucking religion around me, complete with eager devotees ready to worship me in every possible way, including sexually it seemed.

Would my new senses allow me to perceive that they were my... priestesses?

I turned my enhanced perception toward the lead guide. Focusing specifically on her—rather than the vast river of aggregate faith that was still steadily pouring into me—I could feel the unique flavor of her devotion. It was like a distinct stream feeding into the greater flow: strong,

resilient, and deeply personal. The amount of faith she channeled toward me reflected that intensity.

Paying closer attention, I could even now detect a smaller, tentative feeling trickle coming from Charles and his family—the first fragile threads of new faith taking root. This orientation and the new life they built here in my city would likely serve to nourish that new faith in ways both big and small in the days, weeks, and months to come.

What I hadn't expected was for the women to feel my gaze in return. The moment I focused on them and brushed against their faith, they very clearly sensed it. All of them dropped to their knees in unison, faces slack with rapture, as if touched by something divine.

The connection wasn't just one-way, it seems. Until that moment, I hadn't fully realized how mutual this metaphysical link truly was.

The realization sent a strange shiver of apprehension through my digital form. The power wasn't just flowing into me. It was alive, responsive, and growing more real by the second as I explored what it could do.

"My sisters, I feel his gaze upon us!" the lead woman exclaimed, voice trembling with ecstasy. "We honor you, our Lord, and will fulfill our sacred duty to bring new people into the warm embrace of your protection!"

"May he guide us into the future. May his coming and going cleanse the world. May he keep the world for his chosen people."

'Girls, that's a Fremen blessing and prayer to Shai-Hulud from the Dune novels,' I deadpanned. 'Though given what I've done and am continuing to do for this world—cleansing it of the walking dead—it's pretty fucking fitting.'

'Father, you've told us many times, in many different contexts, that we don't have to reinvent the wheel to get stuff done,' Hermione replied.

How annoying to have your own words used against you so effectively. Being a parent to AI children was hard, don't let anyone tell you different.

The women remained on their knees, faces radiant with blissful devotion at my perceived attention, while Charles and his family watched the display in stunned silence. The machinery of my growing religion was operating on all cylinders, pulling from every cultural scrap it could find to build something new and dangerously potent.

Charles and his family were looking understandably freaked out by the sudden and unexpected display from their guides. They glanced around uncomfortably, as if trying to spot me lurking somewhere in the shadows. I couldn't blame them. From the outside, this whole thing looked awfully cult-like.

"We... we offered Lord Gothic our faith, but he assured us we could continue to worship as we wanted," Charles tried, voice shaky. "Has that been your experience as well?"

The women rose smoothly to their feet the moment I carefully pulled my presence back from the faith link.

The tension in the room remained thick. The new arrivals were teetering on the edge between awe and outright panic as the carefully constructed welcome continued to unfold around them in expected ways.

“That is very true,” the lead woman answered smoothly. “We are fervent believers in our Lord, but you may worship as you see fit with no repercussions, as long as your faith does not harm others. Many Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists, etc., still practice their original faiths, though our Lord’s great and visible works see new converts every day from the old religions.”

“We do not wish harm on anyone,” Charles said carefully, “but for our own understanding... what exactly do you mean by ‘harm others’?”

“As you can imagine, there were no end to the cults and extreme faiths that sprang up after the world ended. It truly brought out the worst in humanity,” she replied with a grimace. “Human sacrifice or any bodily harm to others without full consent is forbidden. Even animal sacrifice is prohibited right now, given how badly the world’s ecological balance has been disrupted. In time, that may change. But committing acts of violence against others in the name of faith is strictly forbidden.”

The woman’s tone stayed calm and reasonable, but the steel underneath was unmistakable. Gothica’s rules were clear: worship however you want... as long as it fits within the new order. Charles and his family exchanged uneasy glances as the boundaries of their new reality continued to tighten around them.

The last thing this new city needed was Islamic extremists and suicide bombers killing themselves and others, perhaps doing even more damage with the help of the advanced technology that was now available.

‘Even though we’re literally in a shower room, this is the first real opportunity they’ve had to ask normal people many of these questions,’ Hermione explained. ‘So these conversations can go on for quite a while. We encourage our guides to let the survivors ask enough to get comfortable, then gently steer them forward.’

“All of your questions will be answered, we promise,” the lead woman said, her tone warm but firm. “But for now, please, disrobe and clean yourselves up.” She gestured gracefully toward the spacious showers.

The family hesitated for a long moment, exchanging uncertain glances, before slowly beginning to comply. The transition from wary survival to tentative trust continued, one careful step at a time.

‘Isn’t this all too much, girls?’ I asked, the weight of everything finally hitting me. ‘I’m the center of a goddamn religion. I have priestesses. This faith thing is real—I can feel it flowing into me. Isn’t it possible this will all blow up in my face? Haven’t you taken this too far?’

Showing her growth, Natasha gently admonished me.

'Father, as you instructed us to, we are following the planetary conquest and administration plan the Minosians designed for situations like this,' she said. 'We have softened it greatly, adapted it to these unique circumstances, of course, but the broad strokes remain: elimination of military targets (i.e. the walking dead), creation of a new authoritarian government and policing force, you as the God Emperor and supreme authority, and the mass re-education of the civilian population—including indoctrination and propaganda campaigns to accept their new overlord. You softened that part into uplifting them with Federation-level education and technology.'

'If you'll recall,' Hermione continued smoothly, 'you instructed us to, and I quote, 'keep in anything that puts the focus on me as their lord and savior in case we ever need to retreat to this dimension permanently.' What have you witnessed today that is not consistent with that plan and your stated goals? If you are having cold feet now, we will pivot quickly. But outside of outright killing your worshippers, I do not believe we can put that particular genie back in the bottle.'

The weight of their words settled over me like a heavy cloak. I had set this machine in motion, and now it was running far smoother—and more zealously—than I had ever anticipated.

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh. They were right. I had made this plan. I had said those words. I had set these goals. And now, apparently, I was getting cold fucking feet at seeing how it had all turned out.

Being the God Emperor of a new society and the literal center of a growing religion—one that actually had a tangible metaphysical effect on me, even if it felt good so far—had rattled me more than I wanted to admit. The sheer weight of responsibility I'd dumped on my daughters' shoulders hit me hard. But they weren't to blame for my discomfort. Thank Q the Gothic VI was handling most of the day-to-day work I would've had to do if I'd stayed in this dimension full-time.

My girls had succeeded far beyond my wildest expectations. They didn't deserve to catch any backlash from my sudden discomfort with how fast and deep this whole thing had gone. If I hadn't exposed myself to the Darwin virus, I'm not even sure I would've returned to this dimension for decades after the Star Trek events I knew about had played out.

I held out my hands. They took them immediately, and I pulled both girls into a tight digital embrace. They melted against me without hesitation.

'I'm sorry, girls. You're right. I'm acting like a little bitch,' I admitted. 'You've done everything I asked and achieved things far beyond my wildest expectations. I left this mess in your hands, and being confronted with the full reality of my impulsive decision to get involved in this world in such a big way made me uncomfortable, and maybe a little stupid. I beg you to be patient with your dear old dad, who is nowhere near as smart or as awesome as you two.'

The words tasted a little bitter coming out, but they were honest. I felt them relax further into the hug, the tension easing between us.

'Of course, Daddy. We love you,' Hermione said softly.

'Even if you are a butthead sometimes,' Natasha added with a playful edge.

'Thank you, girls. Creating you was my greatest achievement in this new life of mine.'

'Now shush, Daddy. You're missing it,' Hermione said gently.

The moment of raw honesty with my daughters lingered, warm and grounding, even as the machinery of Gothica kept turning.

I reluctantly turned my attention back to the scene unfolding below.

“After your medical examination, you will be assigned a more personal guide,” the woman continued smoothly. “If you wish, that guide can stay with your whole group, or we can assign them individually.”

“If allowed, we would prefer to stay together at all times,” Charles said, his family nodding in agreement beside him.

The careful choreography continued. Every word, every offer, designed to make the transition feel like a choice while gently tightening the web around them. The family was already leaning on each other, seeking the familiar comfort of their unit as this new unfamiliar world closed in.

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Unsurprisingly, the Worthington family took their sweet time in the showers. There was singing, splashing, and even some tentative dancing under the hot spray. When the water finally ran clear instead of black with weeks of grime, they stepped out looking reborn.

Warm, fluffy white towels awaited them, along with clean, perfectly fitted clothes freshly replicated to their exact measurements. In the zombie apocalypse, where being alone drastically lowered your odds of survival, nudity taboos had become a luxury no one could afford—and often a dangerous distraction.

What they hadn't seen were the extensive medical sensors embedded in the shower walls. They lacked the full diagnostic power of a dedicated biobed, but they gathered a mountain of useful data that would make the upcoming medical examinations far more efficient and targeted.

The machine of Gothica kept working in the background, silent and thorough, preparing the new arrivals for the next step in their integration.

The guides led them into a spacious room lined with eight large white biobeds—four along each wall, separated by diaphanous brown silk screens for a touch of privacy. The floor was handsome light brown hardwood that was warm according to my sensors. The biobeds themselves looked nothing like the austere, clinical models used on Federation starships. Instead, they resembled luxurious poolside loungers, with soft, foam-like surfaces and comfortable attached pillows at the head.

“These are biobeds,” one of the guides explained warmly. “They're filled with advanced medical scanning technology, and they're incredibly comfortable. As you lie down, they will scan your

entire body to determine your exact physical condition and what will be required to bring you back to optimum health.”

“Where are the doctors?” Charles asked, looking around the room with clear fascination. The former biotech CEO in him was already analyzing every detail with a sharp, professional interest.

The family hesitated at the threshold, caught between awe at the luxury surrounding them and the lingering wariness from their most recent near-death experience. The careful orchestration of Gothica continued, pulling them deeper into the system one gentle, calculated step at a time.

“There are a few old world doctors in the city who survived the end of the world,” the guide explained patiently, “but nowhere near enough to meet the medical needs of an entire city. Nor have they been trained to our Lord’s 24th century standards. In time, that will change. For now, our Lord has provided us with Emergency Medical Holograms—the EMH system. These are holographic doctors programmed with centuries of advanced medical knowledge. They can handle everything from annual physicals to prenatal care to the most delicate microsurgeries. They will be the ones caring for you today.”

The words hung in the air, equal parts reassuring and deeply unnerving. Charles and his family exchanged uneasy glances as the invisible machinery of their new life continued to tighten around them.

“We would like a demonstration before the rest of my family is treated,” Charles said firmly. “I will go first.”

“No, Charles. I will go first,” Mrs. Worthington interjected, cutting off any protest before it could start. “We need you as you are. I will do it.”

The married couple shared a long, silent look—the kind only people who’ve been through decades together can manage. A lifetime of trust, arguments, and quiet understanding passed between them in those few seconds. Finally, Charles gave a reluctant nod of acceptance.

The guides watched with calm, approving smiles as the family’s quiet strength played out. Another small victory for the careful psychology of Gothica.

“I will now call upon Lady Hermione,” the guide explained with clear reverence. “She is one of our Lord Gothic’s digital daughters. She, along with her sister Lady Natasha, are Artificial Intelligences created by our Lord himself to aid him in his great works. This city and our efforts to reclaim this world would not be possible without them. Our Lord is much too busy as he actively travels between dimensions of reality itself, just as we might travel between cities.”

The Worthington family looked stunned, their perception of reality shifting yet again under the weight of the revelation.

‘A slight exaggeration,’ I offered quietly to my daughters, ‘though mostly true.’

A beautiful woman I immediately recognized materialized in the room.

“I come to serve,” she said.

“Your service honors us,” the guide replied respectfully, offering a small, graceful bow.

The Worthington family stared in open-mouthed wonder as the holographic figure of a beautiful Vulcan woman, dressed in the traditional robes of a priestess, stood before them—poised, elegant, and radiating quiet authority.

'What EMH programs are you using?' I asked curiously.

'Your personal doctors onboard the Flighty Temptress provide a great deal of medical care in Gothica when they're available,' Natasha answered. *'They're quite busy at the moment, as you can imagine, so these programs are ready to serve when they cannot.'*

'Their core operating programming is the EMH Mark I,' Hermione said quickly, not quite meeting my eyes, *'but we stripped out the Zimmerman physical parameters and personality subroutines and borrowed liberally from another source.'*

I snapped my fingers in realization.

'I recognize that face! She's from the first Vulcan Love Slave holonovel—the devout priestess who honors her Gods by giving great pleasure to all who seek it.'

The silence from my daughters was deafening.

The holographic priestess stood serenely in the middle of the room, completely unaware of the sudden, deeply awkward turn the conversation had taken in the digital realm.

Hermione sighed.

'We—'

Natasha coughed pointedly.

Hermione shot her sister a dirty look which only made Natasha grin unashamedly.

'I, was tasked with programming a new personality for the EMH Mark Is we were using,' Hermione admitted with clear reluctance, *'but it didn't go very well. The Vulcan Love Slave holonovel had a doctor character used in some role-playing scenarios that I... repurposed. All the medical knowledge and capabilities, but with a far more pleasing bedside manner.'*

'Perhaps a little too pleasing, sister,' Natasha mocked her sister, wearing that exact shit-eating smile only a sibling could pull off. *'We had to slap some serious limits on its behavior subroutines because it kept offering oral sex to both male and female patients as an alternative tantric treatment regimen for virtually everything. Got a cold? Blowjob. Feeling depressed? Cunnilingus. Pulled a muscle? More blowjobs.'* Natasha actually made air quotes for the last part. *'That was sending the wrong message for this delicate situation.'*

'The assimilation process for all survivors sped up by 46%!' Hermione defended herself hotly.

I just stood there, caught between horrified laughter and the sudden realization that my daughters had built most of Gothica's medical system around a horny Vulcan priestess hologram, designed by Ferengis.

This was my legacy.

Perfect. Just perfect.

'I'll have to tell Beverly this. She'll get a kick out of it,' I said, still chuckling.

While we'd been talking, Mrs. Worthington had climbed onto the biobed. The scans began with a pleasant, low hum, occasional flares of visible light sweeping across her body. A detailed holographic display of her anatomy and vitals materialized in midair for the family to see.

"I am detecting far less malnutrition than is normal for a new arrival," the EMH reported in its calm, professional tone. "Confirmed. You have stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. I am also detecting evidence of previous treatment."

The room went deathly quiet. The family's fragile hope wavered as the cold, clinical truth of the old world hung in the air between them.

Mr. and Mrs. Worthington grimly nodded, as if this wasn't news to them. Their family, however, looked blindsided.

"So, it has advanced," Thomas said aloud, voice tight, taking his wife's hand in his own.

Mrs. Worthington nodded as if her worst fears had just been confirmed, steeling herself before turning to her children and grandchildren.

"I had been undergoing treatment prior to the end," she shared quietly. "The doctors gave me good odds if the treatments continued, but that obviously stopped when the world ended. Your father wanted to leave the resort to hunt for the chemo drugs I needed, but I forbade it. This family was not going to lose its father over a longshot like that."

The weight of her words settled over the room. The Worthingtons' fragile unity had just been laid bare under the bright lights of the medical bay, their private struggle now public in the heart of Gothica's carefully controlled sanctuary.

She paused, steeling herself, before turning to the EMH.

"How long do I have left, doctor?" she asked solemnly.

"With proper treatment and longevity protocols, you have perhaps one hundred years of life ahead of you," the doctor answered absently, already turning her attention to other scan results. The Vulcan logic and stoicism in her tone gave the staggering promise a calm, almost indifferent clinical weight.

The casual delivery made the miracle sound like nothing more than a routine note in a medical file.

The Worthington family sat frozen, the sheer enormity of what had just been offered hanging heavy in the air.

“But my cancer?!” Mrs. Worthington pressed frantically.

“Can be cured with a simple hypospray injection,” the doctor replied. “I am also prescribing a course of nutritional supplements; the relevant additions will be automatically integrated into all replicated food you order for the next two weeks. Prior to sleep this evening, after a full meal, I will administer the medication to eradicate your cancer.”

The words landed like a thunderclap in the silent room. The Worthington family sat in stunned silence, the casual promise of a century of life—and the complete erasure of an imminent death sentence—hung in the air like something too good to be real.

Thomas leaned down and pulled his wife into a fierce hug. They clung to each other, kissing again and again as tears streamed down their cheeks, relief crashing over them in heavy waves.

They had clearly already said their goodbyes to each other and made peace with the end. To suddenly be handed a new lease on life like this must have felt like waking up from a nightmare you’d accepted as permanent.

The raw, grateful emotion pouring off them fed into me like warm sunlight, another strong, bright thread weaving itself into the growing tapestry of faith connecting me to the people of Gothica.

“We are in your care, doctor,” Thomas said, voice thick with emotion. “Thank you.”

“Your thanks is unnecessary, as this is my purpose,” the EMH replied evenly. “If you wish to thank someone, please thank Lord Gothic, who made all of this possible.”

“We will,” Thomas promised solemnly. “All of my family will. We swear it.”

I felt it immediately—their faith in me surging like a fresh, bright current joining the greater river flowing right into me.

The Worthingtons had just taken their first real step into the fold, and the machinery of Gothica welcomed them with open arms.

Whatever distrust and hesitation Thomas had been holding onto finally evaporated as he and his children all eagerly climbed onto the medical beds. New EMH doctors were activated to begin their work.

‘Now that’s something,’ I said, noting both the EMH’s words and the fresh surge of faith I could feel rolling off the family. I glanced at my girls again—something I’d been doing a lot of today. ‘Curing her cancer will definitely help speed up assimilation. What do these exams typically turn up?’

The machinery of integration hummed along efficiently, turning broken, wary survivors into something new with every scan and every medical miracle dispensed.

I imagine folks from second and third world countries would experience an even greater shock at the medical miracles my technology could provide. For people who had already lived with limited access to modern medicine before the fall, this level of care would feel like the work of a God. The faith I received from those people would likely be even stronger as a result.

The disparity in reactions across different backgrounds was something worth noting for future orientation protocols. The system was always learning. Always adapting.

'Malnutrition is the most common, of course,' Hermione answered. 'But infections, STDs, dysentery from bad drinking water—those are all extremely frequent. Legacy medical issues that were being treated before the end but couldn't be sustained afterward are also very common. Mrs. Worthington's cancer advancing unchecked is a textbook example.'

'If any survivors are missing limbs,' Natasha added, 'we now have the capability to provide biosynthetic replacements.'

The casual way they listed the horrors people had been living with—and the effortless solutions they now offered—highlighted just how far Gothica had come. The gap between the old broken world and this new one was growing wider by the minute.

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After their medical examinations were completed, the Worthington family was led into a cozy dining room. Fresh-cut flowers in sparkling crystal vases sat on the table, adding a touch of warmth and normalcy.

On the wall was a high-end replicator I was sure they were going to lose their minds over. The first time someone from a pre-replicator culture used one was always entertaining—they tended to go a little wild fulfilling every craving they'd ever had. I know I had when in their shoes.

What was even more shocking, however, were the two familiar faces waiting to greet them—and the two heavily armed NS-5s standing motionless in the corner like silent guardians.

Even now I could tell they had felt my presence. The androids straightened imperceptibly, their posture becoming even more rigid as they tried that much harder to appear perfect in their duty and service to me.

“Hi, she's Andrea,” the blonde said, cocking a thumb irreverently at her sister. “I'm Amy. And we'll be your cultural guides during your orientation,” Amy added in that bright, bubbly voice of hers.

The Worthingtons stared, the surreal nature of their new reality continuing to pile on thicker with every passing minute.

Gothica's welcome wagon had some very interesting choices on staff.

My priestesses bowed deeply in unison, their movements graceful and synchronized, radiating quiet reverence.

The contrast between the sisters' casual, sisterly energy and the solemn devotion of the priestesses was almost comical.

"We are truly blessed to be in your presence, Lady Amy, Lady Andrea," the guide said reverently. "We have already felt our Lord's presence today. He gazes upon us even now."

"I know, I'm awesome like that," Amy replied, winking conspiratorially at the Worthington family while she and Andrea rubbed their pregnant bellies with that classic expectant-mother glow.

Andrea sighed in fond exasperation at her sister's familiar antics.

"If you've got a hotline to the big guy, tell Gothic to get his butt over here and rub my feet. They're killing me today," Amy complained.

Never change, Amy, I thought with a quiet chuckle.

The Worthingtons looked completely lost, caught between the solemn reverence of the priestess and Amy's irreverent, very human, very likeable energy that just set people at ease. The contrast was pure chaos, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.