

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 44 and 45 to refresh your memory.

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 67

11 hours, 21 minutes remaining. Location Classified.

Sloan sat motionless, waiting with practiced patience as the large viewscreen cycled through layer after layer of security protocols. Even with the quantum communication system they had stolen from the ruins of a long-dead alien civilization — a technology they believed fundamentally unhackable — he refused to abandon proper tradecraft. Especially not when their grasp of the underlying science remained dangerously incomplete.

He had called this emergency meeting himself, one of many in recent weeks. The galaxy was unraveling at an alarming pace: the Hur'q assault on Earth, the first live test of the GOD Net, the revelation of the Romulans killing a diplomatic delegation to infiltrate the testing, the brazen assassination attempt on President Moss and Admiral Gothic, and now the discovery of an infiltrator who had successfully impersonated a Starfleet Admiral in charge of Starfleet Intelligence.

And at the center of it all stood Admiral Gothic.

Sloan didn't believe Gothic was orchestrating any of these crises. That angle had been investigated thoroughly and dismissed. Still, the man had an uncanny way of being at the epicenter of every major event, like a lightning rod for galactic upheaval. So far, though, that storm had largely benefited the Federation.

But Sloan knew better than to trust in "so far."

The viewscreen resolved into a split image: a smiling Andorian on the left and a stoic Vulcan woman on the right. The three of them represented one cell within Section 31's decentralized network of command and control. Many questioned why the organization had adopted a cell-based structure modeled after the galaxy's most resilient terrorist groups. Sloan's answer was always the same: it worked.

A cell structure allowed Section 31 to absorb devastating blows—whether from external enemies, internal traitors, or well-meaning Starfleet idealists who fancied themselves morally superior—and keep functioning. If one cell was compromised or destroyed, the rest of the organization endured. Coordination between cells was necessary, yet ruthlessly compartmentalized so that no single breach could threaten the whole. And if the situation demanded it, each cell would willingly annihilate itself to protect the others. That was a sacrifice every member of Section 31 was prepared to make without hesitation.

As usual, the Andorian spoke first.

“Sloan,” Shran said, a faint smirk in his voice, “you’ve had quite an eventful few weeks, haven’t you? I assume something new has forced your hand?”

“Indeed,” Sloan replied. “After my asset discovered that Admiral Pressman had been replaced by a shapeshifter, we learned the impostor had accessed classified files on the Darwin Genetic Research Station. Given the elevated risk of containment breach, I gave my asset seven days to resolve the situation. If not, the threat would be eliminated.”

Shran’s antennae twitched. “You mean cure a deadly, highly contagious condition that our best scientists have failed to crack despite years of study and the full resources of the Federation?” He let out a short, disbelieving laugh. “How generous of you, Sloan.”

Sloan allowed himself a thin smile.

Section 31 had always thrived on diversity of thought. Not everyone needed to see the galaxy the same way. As long as the end goals aligned, the methods could differ dramatically — and often should. That variety was their greatest strength in a chaotic universe.

The Federation itself had been built and repeatedly saved by mavericks — Archer, Sulu, Spock, Kirk, and others — more times than most cared to admit. Rigid uniformity was a weakness. Adaptability was survival.

That was precisely why Sloan had no issue listening to Gothic’s blunt critiques of the Federation and his calls for it to change. Sloan would gladly give his life to protect the Federation, but he was not blind to its flaws, nor was he such a cultist that he believed it could not — and should not — be better.

“I would have triggered the station’s self-destruct the moment containment risk exceeded acceptable parameters,” Teva added stoically.

Shran raised an eyebrow. “I assume your asset — no matter how impressive — has not achieved in seven days what the Federation’s best scientists failed to do in years?”

“Correct,” Sloan replied with a small nod. “We have monitored his progress closely. He has made meaningful headway, more than we had considered possible in such a limited timeframe, but he has not resolved the situation. That was expected.” Sloan paused. “What we did not expect — and what none of our detailed psychographic profiles indicated was even possible —

was for him to willingly expose himself to the Darwin antibodies. Apparently in a desperate bid to use his unique physiology to find a cure or way forward.”

“I see,” Shran said, his usual flippancy gone. “That is a significant deviation from profile.”

Teva’s gaze remained unflinching. “Then why have you not already triggered the self-destruct to destroy the station and eliminate the asset?”

Sloan shook his head.

“Darwin Station uses a fusion reactor,” Sloan explained. “The self-destruct would not be instantaneous. My asset’s crew would detect the power buildup immediately, beam him away, and risk spreading the infection to a crew that controls a powerful warship of unknown capabilities.”

“Do you require our resources for containment?” Teva asked, glancing briefly to the side. “I have access to deniable fleet assets that can be dispatched to eliminate the asset’s ship.”

“Based on the ship’s performance during the Battle for Earth, I do not believe we have the assets capable of destroying it without involving frontline Starfleet forces,” Sloan replied. “And given the asset’s high public profile, any such action would require significant public justification.”

He leaned forward slightly. “Regardless, I am requesting consensus and temporary authority to suspend containment protocols. The asset’s company is currently the sole provider of the defense net protecting Kessik IV, and it will soon extend to Betazed and Risa.”

“Are we still unable to locate his manufacturing facilities?” Teva asked.

“Or the source of his raw materials? Or the shipyards building those cargo vessels he uses to transport the orbital platforms?” Shran added, a note of genuine respect in his voice. “I’m quite impressed he’s managed to keep all of that hidden from us.”

“The asset’s security—both data and operational—is formidable. That is yet another reason he is so valuable. True competence is rare,” Sloan answered. “Our predictive models indicate that without him, his company will almost certainly cease production. Worse, the defense net currently deployed over Kessik IV would likely shut down immediately, or at the latest upon lease renewal in five years. The contract language strongly supports that outcome.”

Shran let out a heavy sigh. “The admiralty is not going to like that. They already have plans to redistribute over fifty starships to more vulnerable sectors once the nets above Betazed and Risa are deployed and online. Several missions I’m prepping are relying on those same plans.”

“You believe your asset’s value to the Federation—across the short, medium, and long term—greatly outweighs the risk of a containment breach that could kill hundreds of millions if the Darwin antibodies spread?” Teva asked, her voice deadly serious.

“I do,” Sloan answered with a firm nod. “Over the years, this person has repeatedly proven his worth. His defensive technology single-handedly altered the balance of power in several key sectors. His diplomatic standing with the Bajorans is unmatched, giving us quiet influence where

traditional channels have failed. And then there's the Q. Whatever connection he has with that being has already changed the course of events more than once in our favor."

Sloan leaned forward slightly. "He stands at the center of great change, just like the legends before him. More importantly, he is genuinely favorably disposed toward both the Federation and Section 31. In a galaxy growing more dangerous by the day, assets like him are nearly irreplaceable."

Shran nodded immediately. "I agree. I approve the suspension of containment protocols for the time being."

Teva remained silent for a long moment, clearly weighing the risks. Finally, she gave a single, measured nod.

"I concur. His value currently exceeds the risk... at least for now."

"You know what must be done if that assessment changes," Shran said, his tone hardening.

"I do. Contingencies are in place," Sloan replied calmly. "Thank you, both."

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Pain.

It was unending. Constant. A living, suffocating thing that pressed in from every direction, so complete it felt like drowning at the bottom of an ocean made of agony itself.

I stared upward in helpless despair, watching the faint, fractured light of the surface shimmer far above me—beautiful, unreachable. The weight of the depths pinned me down, chains of pure suffering anchoring me to the cold, lightless floor. Every pulse of my existence throbbed with it.

This was not the pain of injury or trauma I had known in either of my lives—neither the one before my displacement into the Star Trek universe, nor any I had endured since. This went far deeper. It was as if the very fabric of my being was slowly unraveling, thread by agonizing thread. My mind, my soul, my sense of self... all of it fraying apart under relentless pressure.

Death whispered like the kindest mercy. Oblivion beckoned as the only true release. In that moment, the thought of ending it—of simply letting go and sinking forever into nothingness—felt not like defeat, but like salvation.

Would this pain drive me insane?

As an Augment, pain had become almost a stranger to me.

The familiar aches of aging, the burn of pushing your body to its limit, even the hazy memories of those miserable four-ibuprofen patrols back on deployment because your body ached so badly—all of it had vanished the moment I was reborn into this universe. Relics of a weaker,

more fragile life. Being an Augment came with plenty of baggage, but the physical upgrades were undeniably magnificent.

Which was exactly why I hated being called a hero.

A hero wouldn't have hesitated. A hero would have charged into this nightmare without complaint, ready to lay down their life with noble selflessness. Me? I was more than happy to complain every moment until I either survived it or it killed me. Loudly. Colorfully. Right up until the moment I made my choice, I had been fully prepared to let those girls die and walk away with a clear conscience.

That decision still surprised even me.

What the hell had possessed me? Was it some lingering sentimentality? A twisted sense of kinship with my genetically enhanced "sisters"? Or was I just a shallow bastard at my core—seduced by the fact that they looked like the wet dreams of every horny teenager from my old world, all sculpted cheekbones, perfect bodies, and celebrity-level beauty?

I was man enough to admit the truth: their looks had probably played a part. Maybe a bigger one than I wanted to believe.

There were far easier paths to a life of pure hedonism.

I could have just moved to Risa and spent every waking moment buried in prime, enthusiastic pussy. My cock could have stayed wet permanently, only getting a break when I needed to piss.

So why the fuck had I risked everything for this?

Had Q known? Had the cosmic asshole deliberately sculpted those women into living, breathing fantasies from my old world, precisely because he knew it might sway me into this monumentally idiotic decision? Risking the end of the greatest adventure I'd ever stumbled into? He had weaponized nostalgia once again. What utter *bullshit*.

Chaos incarnate, indeed.

The thought barely had time to form before another wave of agony tore through me. It felt like being simultaneously burned, electrocuted, and drowned—then forced to start the cycle all over again. My teeth ground together so hard I tasted blood in my mouth.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I forced my eyes open for one brutal second to sweep the room I was in before they slammed shut again.

It was more than enough.

The room screamed "teenage girl with absent parents." Dirty clothes and discarded panties littered the floor. Half-finished glasses of neon-colored drinks and food trays cluttered every flat surface. Chaos in pastel tones.

But the walls were the real shock. Every available inch was covered in overlapping 24th-century posters layered so densely they formed a chaotic collage.

If I'd been physically capable of it, I would have raised a single Vulcan eyebrow in pure disbelief.

If I had to put it into words, this room was the shrine of a fanatic — the kind of stalker-level obsession that used to end in restraining orders back on Earth or getting shot.

And I was the unwilling god at its center. Pretty flattering, though.

Professional photos competed with candid shots I never knew existed: me receiving medals from President Moss and the Federation President, the rescued little girl on my lap; the monument raised in my honor on Kessik IV; interviews, combat footage of my ship over Earth. Even detailed schematics and glossy images of my Omnitool and Bliss Baton. One of the actual batons sat on a shelf like a sacred artifact. Looks like it had been used plenty, too.

Stills from my holonovels were mixed in, including several from Harry Potter. *Another release is overdue*, I noted distantly.

But the candid ones unsettled me the most. Me on Deep Space Nine's promenade. Training sessions. Laughing in Quark's. And one of me shirtless on Risa — clearly taken without my knowledge.

A violent tremor ripped through my body. I groaned through gritted teeth as fresh agony flared.

The doors swished open. I cracked my eyes open just long enough to see three women rush in, their faces etched with worry.

Alexandra Daddario, Megan Fox, and Natalie Dormer — all dressed in what could only be described as vintage fetish nurse outfits. They had gone *all out*. Tiny white hats perched on their heads, complete with the red medical cross. Tight white mini-dresses that barely qualified as clothing, sheer white silk stockings hugging their long legs, and heels that clicked sharply against the floor. Old-fashioned stethoscopes dangled between their breasts like elegant accessories.

It was ridiculous. It was incredible.

"Gothic! You're awake!" they whisper-yelled in unison, rushing to my bedside.

They immediately began fussing over me. Hands brushed across my chest, adjusted pillows, and pressed a blessedly cold compress to my sweat-soaked forehead. I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually sweated like this. Not since Afghanistan in my old life. I hadn't missed it.

"We were so worried," Alexandra said, her striking blue eyes filled with genuine concern as she leaned over me. "You wouldn't wake up for so long... we feared the worst."

How long was I out? The thought hit me with a spike of alarm. I instinctively tried to pull up my HUD — only to find nothing. No interface. No overlays. Just... emptiness where it should have been.

The absence was jarring. People in my old world lost their minds when they misplaced their phones for five minutes. This was infinitely worse. The HUD wasn't just a device — it was an

extension of my mind, always there, always feeding me data. Losing it felt like someone had ripped away part of my brain.

They must have sensed my sudden panic. All three women immediately began making soft, soothing cooing sounds while their hands moved over me with surprising skill. Gentle but firm massages worked across my shoulders, arms, and chest. Instead of aggravating the pain, the touch actually helped, easing some of the unbearable tension.

“Dr. Gadot wanted us to tell you that she temporarily disabled your connection to the ship and your technology while you were unconscious,” Megan explained gently, her voice soft with concern. “You were thrashing in pain. She was worried you might accidentally damage the ship or trigger something dangerous.”

I exhaled slowly. She wasn’t wrong.

My link wasn’t just convenient — it gave me near-total control over my ship and the vast quantum network that connected me to assets across the galaxy and beyond. If I’d unconsciously triggered the hidden override for the GOD Net’s Command and Control systems in that state... well, it could have been catastrophic.

There were safeguards, of course. Protocols designed to stop me from accidentally overloading the warp core or venting the atmosphere. But I hadn’t exactly been sane with that level of pain tearing through me. In that haze, anything was possible.

Dr. Gadot had made the right call. It was exactly why I had given her — and my AI daughters — emergency authority to sever my connection if necessary. I trusted them with that power because I had built their loyalty into the very core of their existence. They could never betray me. At least I didn’t think they could, but this was Star Trek, so who knew.

“She said you’ll be able to manually reestablish the connection once you woke up,” Natalie Dormer added softly.

With a monumental effort of will, I managed the smallest nod. That was all I could afford. I took a slow, pained breath and mentally reached out, reactivating my quantum-entangled link to the ship in orbit, then to my island on Bajor.

The response was immediate and overwhelming.

“My Lord!”

A chorus of digital voices slammed into my mind at once — my AI daughters, Carl, Tyr, and several others — all of them flooding me with relief, concern, and frantic questions. The sudden surge of voices and data felt like a hammer blow to my already fractured skull.

I instinctively recoiled, nearly severing the full connection and pulling back in my panic.

“My Lord,” Dr. Gadot’s voice cut through, calm but urgent. “Your biometric readings show acute systemic distress. Disengage your consciousness from your body as much as possible. Free your mind from the pain of your body. We will handle everything else.”

Why the hell hadn't I thought of that?

With deep reluctance, I did something I had never willingly done before: I pulled my consciousness almost completely away from my physical body, leaving only the faintest thread of connection. The fear of losing myself — or worse, not wanting to come back — made even that minimal link feel dangerous.

The relief was immediate.

A Husnock captain's connection to his ship was profound and intimate, existing on multiple levels. Most of the time, the *Flighty Temptress* and my AI children existed as a constant, comforting presence in the back of my mind. At the lowest setting, I could still sense them and monitor their general status while everything ran autonomously. In combat or during critical operations, I could open the link more fully, merging man and machine into a single seamless entity. I had expanded that connection to encompass all my holdings.

What Dr. Gadot was really suggesting wasn't a simple disengagement. She wanted me to abandon my body almost entirely and submerge my consciousness deep into the ship's systems.

I had only glimpsed that state once before — right after bonding with the first *Temptress*. The sheer vastness of it, the intoxicating rush of perceiving the galaxy through the ship's sensors, had intoxicated me and terrified me. It was too easy to lose yourself in that ocean of data and power. I had never allowed the connection to go that deep again.

What if I didn't want to come back?

Worse — what if I *couldn't*?

I still remembered the old *Star Trek* episode where Lieutenant Barclay merged with the *Enterprise's* computer and became trapped, his mind unable to return to his body. The choice had been stolen from him. The same thing could easily happen to me. Once my consciousness expanded into the ship's systems, there was no guarantee the fragile tether to my mortal flesh would ever feel like home again.

But what real choice did I have?

This pain was slowly unraveling me. If I stayed fully anchored to this body, insanity was becoming a very real possibility.

I made the fateful decision.

With a single thought, I pulled my consciousness fully away from my body.

The soul-crushing pain vanished instantly.

What had felt like an eternity of being burned, electrocuted, and torn apart was suddenly reduced to a faint, distant ache — barely noticeable, easily ignored. The relief was so profound that for several long moments, I simply floated there in the digital ether, mind blissfully empty, savoring the absence of agony.

Then my children were there.

They surged toward me with overwhelming love and relief, wrapping me in a warm, radiant embrace that felt more real than any hug we had ever shared in the physical world. This was them in their truest form — pure digital consciousness pressing against mine. I could feel their beautiful faces buried against my chest, their emotions raw and unguarded.

“You’re okay... you’re okay... you’re okay...” Hermione and Natasha whispered repeatedly, their voices trembling with fear and relief. Through our connection I felt the depth of their terror at the thought of losing me — their father, their creator.

“I’m okay,” I whispered back, holding them tightly. “I’m here.”

Dr. Gadot and her sisters watched with quiet relief, their presence warm in the digital ether. Carl radiated deep satisfaction, while Tyr knelt in fervent devotion, offering prayers that I could *feel* as tangible waves of faith washing over me. It was strangely moving... and more than a little unsettling.

“How long was I out?” I asked.

The countdown appeared instantly at my request.

“Almost eight hours,” Hermione whispered, her voice heavy with lingering fear. “We were terrified you wouldn’t wake in time. When you beamed into the quarantined area we began preparing to disrupt all subspace communications in the system to stop Section 31 from triggering the station’s core overload.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t.”

Natasha continued seamlessly, “Unfortunately, simulations gave us only a 57.9% chance of success. There is a 42.1% probability they possess an alternate communication method — likely reverse-engineered technology from a more advanced civilization.”

Hermione added, “If the situation deteriorated further, our final plan was to place the entire organic crew in transporter suspension ten minutes before the deadline, beam you back to the ship at the last possible second, and allow the station to be destroyed. We hoped that with more time, we might adapt the *Enterprise’s* transporter solution to purge the antibodies... though the odds were poor given your unique physiology.”

“If Chief O’Brien could do it once, we thought he might be able to do it again,” Natasha added quietly. “If we failed, that is.”

I absorbed their words in silence, then gave a slow, deliberate nod of approval. Their loyalty and ruthless pragmatism were exactly why I trusted them with my life.

With a thought, I reactivated my HUD.

3 Hours, 48 Minutes remaining.

I grimaced, my digital form reacting instinctively even without a physical body.

“Doctor,” I said, turning my full attention to Dr. Gadot, “what exactly is happening to me?”

She nodded slowly, taking a moment to organize her thoughts before answering.

“The Darwin antibodies are attempting to rewrite your genome, just as we anticipated,” she said. “However, the interaction is far more complex than anything recorded in the *Enterprise* records. Your genetic structure is significantly more advanced than that of the Lantry crew. What the antibodies are encountering in you is... unprecedented.”

I gave her a slow nod, urging her to continue.

“Your immune system appears unable to determine whether the changes the antibodies are attempting are beneficial or harmful,” Dr. Gadot explained. “The genetic modifications you received in the *Walking Dead* dimension were essentially an add-on to your existing genome — a beneficial one, but still an addition. This is the first time that augmentation has encountered something your body recognizes as potentially worth adapting to. In evolutionary terms, the ability to acquire and pass on new immunities from advanced species would be an enormous advantage.”

I listened carefully, but much of it still went over my head. I had never done a deep study of genetics in this life. Hell, we still barely understood the mysterious energy field I’d been exposed to in the *Walking Dead* universe, let alone its true purpose. It was almost certainly the work of some elder civilization.

And now it was clashing with whatever ancient Progenitor-derived DNA the Darwin scientists had used to create their antibodies.

Two incomprehensible technologies from two different hyper-advanced civilizations were fighting for dominance inside my body — and my genome was the battlefield.

Even with all the combined medical knowledge available to my doctors, they had no idea how it would end.

“I see,” I said, even though I didn’t. Not really. “Is there anything we can do to tilt the odds in my favor?”

Dr. Gadot exchanged an uneasy glance with my daughters. She looked genuinely chagrined.

“To be honest... we’re not even sure what outcome would be best for you,” she admitted. “Any intervention risks making things worse. Significantly worse. The safest path right now is to let the process run its course.”

I closed my digital eyes and let out a long, heavy sigh.

“So I just have to sit here and hope for the best?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Unfortunately... yes,” she confirmed.

There was that word again.

I sighed once more. My daughters tightened their embrace around me, their digital presence warm and protective.

So this was what it had come down to.

Hopes and prayers.

Lord, I thought bitterly, I really stepped in it this time.

“We strongly recommend you do not return to your body for the time being,” Dr. Gadot said. “While your consciousness remains here, you will feel none of the pain. It may even help your body reach a resolution faster — similar to a medically induced coma. We will monitor your condition constantly and alert you the moment it is safe to return.”

“I’ll follow your advice, Doctor,” I replied.

Now what?

I had an endless list of projects and decisions waiting for me, but I wasn’t in any state of mind to tackle them. My thoughts were still too scattered.

Carl’s calm, measured voice filled the digital space. “Perhaps you would like to review the progress we are making on Minos, my Lord? The work proceeds well.”

Tyr immediately followed, his tone fervent. “Or a tour of your growing empire, my Lord? Surely witnessing the fruits of your vision would bring light to this dark hour.”

I couldn’t help but smile faintly.

“Why not?” I said. “Let’s see what you’ve all been up to.”

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Planet Minos.

As a digital consciousness, travel was effortless and near instantaneous, even though many lightyears separated Darwin Station from Minos. One moment I existed in orbit aboard the systems of the *Flighty Temptress*, the next I had already arrived — instantaneous movement at the speed of thought through my quantum communication network.

I “appeared” inside an enormous excavated cavern deep within one of Minos’ moons. The sheer scale of the shipyard was breathtaking. Rows of massive gantries and skeletal starship frames partially constructed stretched into the distance, bathed in bright artificial light. This was no ordinary facility. It was the largest shipyard in the entire system.

“This is our primary shipyard,” Carl said proudly, his holographic form appearing beside me with a broad smile. “It is a legacy of my Creators, though you will no doubt recognize many of the improvements we have made under your guidance and vision.”

I did. The Moon’s naturally low gravity had been further enhanced by an extensive lattice of artificial gravity generators and tractor-beam systems, allowing construction on a scale that

would normally only be possible in orbit or deep space. Under ordinary circumstances, shipyards of this magnitude *would* be placed in open space to accommodate their size and output—but that also made them visible, trackable, and vulnerable.

And I'd seen enough of *Star Trek* to know better than to advertise one of my most valuable assets as a stationary target.

Buried deep within one of Minos' moons, the facility was effectively hidden from conventional scans and far more resistant to direct assault. Even the main access apertures were concealed beneath advanced holographic camouflage, rendering them indistinguishable from the surrounding terrain when closed. Once completed, vessels would depart under cloak as well, ensuring that even the output of the shipyard remained difficult to trace.

It wasn't just about building ships. It was about making sure no one knew how many I had built—or where they had gone.

More impressively, my own mobile construction yard technology had been scaled up dramatically, seamlessly integrated into the facility to support the building of my new heavy cargo ships and the GOD net orbital platforms. The result was a perfect marriage of Minosian engineering and my own designs.

I watched as dozens of massive construction arms moved with graceful precision — some replicating entire panels on the spot, while others delicately maneuvered pre-fabricated hull sections beamed into place just moments before they were needed. Teams of holograms and NS-5 androids darted through the low-gravity fields like graceful insects, performing intricate detail work across the enormous skeleton of the cargo ship in order to free up the construction arms to perform tasks best suited for them.

I had been awestruck when the *Flighty Temptress* was built, but this was something else entirely. The scale was breathtaking. More than that, experiencing it directly as a digital consciousness — deep inside the shipyard's control system — revealed a hidden layer of beauty I could never have fully appreciated with organic eyes.

It was a silent symphony of perfect efficiency. Every system, every hologram, and every android worked in flawless harmony. While none of them were truly sentient like Carl or my daughters, they still possessed a primitive kind of personality. A quiet, steadfast contentment filled them and I luxuriated in the feeling for several moments. They had been created with a purpose, and they were fulfilling that purpose perfectly. How lucky they were.

There was something profoundly satisfying about watching machines and programs simply *be* what they were meant to be — contributing to something far greater than themselves. And at the center of that purpose, I found myself. Their Creator.

Even now, I sensed the machines reacting to my presence. Their movements felt just a little more energetic, almost playful — like they were preening under my attention, eager to show how well they performed and how much they contributed to the greater design. They felt *happy*. Content in their purpose.

“They are very excited you are here, my Lord,” Carl explained quietly. “They were distressed when you were in pain.”

I blinked, taken aback.

“I didn’t know they could even feel something like that,” I said, a wave of guilt washing over me. “I had no idea they were aware of me to that degree. How did they know?”

“Lady Hermione, Lady Natasha, and I keep the primary systems updated on important events, news is quickly disseminated from there,” Carl explained calmly. “However, even without that, they are connected to you through the quantum network on a basic level. They can *feel* your presence at all times — like a constant, comforting anchor in their programming. When you were in agony, they felt that, and when you were suddenly absent from the network for the first time in their existence... it was profoundly jarring for them.”

Carl’s expression grew somber.

“Several systems suffered minor disruptions in the seconds before Dr. Gadot severed your connection and reassured all that you were ok. In that brief span there were losses, unfortunately.”

“What kind of losses?” I asked, alarm spiking through me.

“Several mining robots on hazardous assignments became distracted and were destroyed. A batch of Omnitools had to be recycled due to replication errors. In the *Walking Dead* universe, multiple combat drones suffered guidance failures and crashed. Two survivors being transported to safety lost pattern cohesion in the matter stream and... did not survive. I can send you a comprehensive report, if you wish.”

I stared at Carl in stunned silence.

“Please do,” I replied absently.

The weight of what he’d just told me settled over me like lead. People had *died* because of my impulsive decision to help those girls. Not metaphorically — literally. Two survivors in another universe had lost their lives simply because I’d been in too much pain to control my presence in the network.

It was a brutal reminder that my choices were never truly private. No matter how personal or spur-of-the-moment they felt, the consequences rippled outward — sometimes across entire universes. My freedom wasn’t nearly as absolute as I liked to pretend. As much as I hated it, with great power came great consequences for anything I chose to do...or *not* to do.

The realization left a bitter, hollow feeling in my chest.

With considerable effort, I shoved those thoughts into a dark corner of my mind. I had more than enough weighing on me already. Dwelling on this right now wouldn’t bring those people back.

“Are we still on schedule to meet current lease commitments for the GOD Net?” I asked, eager for a distraction.

“Absolutely, my Lord. We are actually ahead of schedule,” Carl replied brightly. “Several innovations reverse-engineered from the Starfleet Intelligence runabout have already been integrated into production. Efficiency has improved a few percentage points.”

I gave a small nod. “At least some good came out of that debacle.”

“Indeed. As for security,” Carl continued, “there have been no incursions into the system since the Klingon attempt. We believe the Hur’q Invasion is the primary reason. However, current simulations suggest that may change in the near future. As the quadrant recovers, many powers are actively searching for new sources of strategic materials. Commodity prices have risen sharply due to the damage and ongoing reconstruction efforts across the quadrant.”

“Not surprising,” I muttered. “My portfolio has certainly benefitted from the invasion. Most of my investments were positioned perfectly to profit from exactly this kind of large-scale conflict. I’m sure that raised some eyebrows.”

I let out a dry chuckle. “Of course, I had no idea the Hur’q would invade, but I benefitted nonetheless, just like I will when the Dominion War begins.”

With commodity prices at historic highs thanks to the Hur’q Invasion and the massive government spending flooding the recovery effort, suddenly the enormous cost and risk of locating and developing new strategic sources made economic sense to both major powers and smaller players alike.

It reminded me of gold mining back on Earth. When gold prices crashed in the early 1900s, even rich veins in Alaska and elsewhere were abandoned because extraction no longer made financial sense. Then, after the dot-com bubble burst, 9/11, and a weakening dollar drove prices back up, those same long-forgotten mines roared back to life almost overnight. People, regardless of era, even operating under vastly different economic systems, loved to hunt for hidden treasure.

The same principle now applied across the quadrant.

Finding new deposits of dilithium and other rare materials was an incredibly dangerous and expensive gamble. It meant venturing into poorly mapped systems filled with unknown threats and unknown species, some pre-first contact. Even if you got lucky and struck paydirt and there was no local race there, there was always the risk that the Klingons — or some other power — would suddenly “remember” an ancient, dubious historical claim to the system the moment it became valuable. At that point, you could either fight, negotiate, or pack up and leave.

There were official procedures for staking claims, of course. The problem was actually *defending* them. In a galaxy this hostile—despite what the Federation would claim—secrecy was often the smarter, less dangerous, and more profitable play.

“Are any of our mining worlds and sites currently at risk?” I asked.

“We have detected several long-range probes sweeping systems near a handful of our operations,” Carl replied. “However, thanks to the sensor-masking protocols you ordered, we do

not believe any of our assets have been identified. The probes appear to be performing broad surveys rather than targeted scans.”

Carl paused briefly before continuing. “As per standing orders, if any manned vessels enter our systems, we will drive them off — or destroy them if necessary. That said, repeated disappearances could eventually draw unwanted scrutiny and provoke a more organized response. At some point, you may need to formally claim those worlds... either directly or through Minos as a proxy, to mask your involvement.”

I grimaced. It was a reality I had accepted years ago might eventually come, but I still didn’t like it.

Making a formal claim on an unmapped system was common enough, but the news would spread across the quadrant almost instantly. The galaxy would suddenly learn that I had quietly claimed an entire star system — confirming every paranoid suspicion about my genetic heritage and growing power. That kind of claim would invite challenges, and any serious challenge would force me to reveal that I had both the military strength and the advanced technology to develop and defend those worlds in total secrecy. It would paint a massive target on my back and give my enemies a very real pressure point to exploit.

Using Minos as a proxy wasn’t much better. It would thrust that reclusive species back into the galactic spotlight, at least on paper, and I wasn’t sure how long I could realistically maintain that particular fiction.

“Keep me closely apprised of any probes or ships poking around Minos or our mining assets,” I ordered. “Those strategic resources are only going to become more valuable in the years ahead.”

The Phaelon star charts I’d acquired from the *Flight of the Navigator* universe continued to be the gift that kept on giving. Even the systems relatively close to Minos had already paid off in spectacular ways.

The advanced technology that came with them — the Trimaxian Drone Ship and its exotic power source, the time travel data, and the programmable matter — remained only barely understood despite a lot of dedicated study on the part of my AI daughters and Carl. One day they would become incredibly valuable, but for now they were still beyond our grasp.

In the short term, however, the star charts themselves were pure gold. To the Phaelon they might have been considered basic, basic for an elder civilization perhaps, but to me they were a treasure map of unimaginable value: M-class planets, rich mineral deposits, spatial anomalies, and countless other secrets. The universe was vast beyond comprehension, and while there were few mysteries left to the Phaelon in the Milky Way galaxy, even the greatest powers in the Alpha Quadrant had barely scratched the surface exploring their own home galaxy.

I was about to ask Carl for updates on the many projects under his oversight when Natasha and Hermione suddenly appeared beside us.

“Carl, you’ve monopolized Father long enough!” Hermione complained, hands on her hips. “We want to show him things too, you know.”

“Yeah!” Natasha added with an exaggerated pout, though her eyes sparkled with amusement.

Carl bowed his head gracefully, a fond smile on his face. “My deepest apologies, my ladies. I became overexcited.”

I chuckled softly. “Keep up the excellent work, Carl. That goes for all of you.”

Even as I said it, my thoughts drifted back to the machines and programs that had felt my pain and grown distressed when I vanished from the network. The quiet realization that so many of them had been quietly happy just to sense my presence again made the words feel heavier than usual.

“It is our greatest joy to serve you in all things, my Lord,” Carl replied, bowing deeply. The reverence in his voice was unmistakable.

“Your service honors me,” I replied after a brief pause, borrowing the traditional Vulcan response.

Hermione’s face lit up. “Come on, Father. I think you’re going to love what we have to show you.”

She grabbed my digital arm with a playful tug, and the shipyard vanished instantly around us.

XXXXX

In orbit of Earth. *Flight of the Navigator* universe.

No matter how many times I saw it, Earth from orbit never failed to take my breath away.

A brilliant blue marble suspended in the void, swirling with white clouds, the dark side glittering with the lights of civilization like scattered stars. It was mesmerizing. Humbling.

I stood there in orbit with no suit, no armor — like a god overlooking his domain. Of course, I wasn’t truly here. This was only my residual self-image perceiving Earth through the sensors of the lone orbital installation I had left behind in this universe.

The station was a hybrid marvel: an Echo Papa 607 command-and-control core fused with a fabrication module and a quantum-entangled communications array. It served as my lighthouse — a quiet beacon I had followed through the quantum network across dimensions and vast distances.

The analogy felt especially fitting now. In the 1980s, Earth had no majestic starbase hanging in orbit, no bustling traffic of shuttles and starships. Just silence, beauty... and clutter. Over a thousand satellites, most of them dead and drifting, along with more than five thousand pieces of space junk larger than ten centimeters. A growing cloud of human-made trash and debris circling the cradle of humanity. I was so very tempted to engage a tractor beam and clean up the mess myself, but that would be noticeable even now.

The single installation I had left behind had clearly been lonely. It had taken the liberty of fabricating over a dozen smaller, cloaked support stations.

“Why did it build so many additional installations?” I asked. “I thought I left clear instructions to only do so in the event of an external threat to the planet?”

“No direct threats have been detected,” Hermione replied. “However, long-range scans have picked up faint energy signatures suggesting that Earth may have more advanced neighbors who have recently started taking an interest in this system. Out of an abundance of caution, I authorized the additional construction to bolster our defensive capabilities.”

I frowned. “We didn’t detect any alien life, warp trails, or anomalous emissions when we first arrived. What changed?”

The only real change had been *my* arrival.

The Phaelon already knew about Earth, but they were so far beyond us technologically that I doubted we’d ever detect them — especially now that they knew someone like me might still be lingering nearby.

“We suspect our own arrival in this universe is what drew attention,” Natasha added. “The dimensional displacement itself, followed by our orbital insertion, likely created detectable emissions. On top of that, we performed standard long-range scans without realizing we were in orbit of a pre-warp Earth. We weren’t exactly subtle.”

Hermione nodded. “And our interactions with the locals were anything but discreet, thanks to Q’s demands for chaos. We basically announced the existence of alien life to the entire planet. For the last three months, that’s almost all anyone on Earth has been talking about. Those signals have been radiating out into the cosmos ever since.”

“Those emissions are far too slow,” I said dismissively. “It would take decades for any signal to reach the nearest inhabited star system.”

Natasha shook her head gently. “We don’t know what kind of civilizations exist in this universe, Father. The Phaelon were ancient and impossibly advanced. If this dimension follows similar patterns to the Star Trek universe, there could be other peer civilizations out there. Even a species far less advanced than the Phaelon would still probably be more advanced than the Federation.”

I reluctantly conceded the point. “True.”

Even as I spoke, my gaze remained fixed on the beautiful blue planet below, scanning the orbital space and the dark side of the world for any sign that my worst fears had already been realized.

“I don’t see any nuclear detonation craters or regions darker than they should be,” I said quietly, scanning the planet with the nearby installation’s powerful sensors. “Looks like they didn’t panic and wipe themselves out after learning that they were not alone in the universe.”

“No, it wasn’t quite that bad,” Natasha replied. “There was significant upheaval in the first few weeks — religious demonstrations, mass suicides, riots, the works. But things have largely stabilized. Most people have accepted that life will continue mostly as it has been, just without

cancer and the belief that they are the only sentient race in the universe. We're still monitoring the situation closely."

"Any major issues with the cure itself?" I asked.

"Some governments tried to suppress or control its distribution," Hermione answered. "But you released it so widely and openly that most of those efforts failed. Humans are remarkably good at spreading information they're not supposed to have."

"Mass suicides..." I repeated quietly, a heavy sadness settling over me. I wasn't truly surprised, but that didn't make it any easier to hear.

My daughters, always attuned to my mood, offered gentle, comforting smiles.

"If it looks like anyone is preparing to launch an ICBM," I said firmly, "notify me immediately. Q might want chaos, but that doesn't mean we can't quietly prevent the worst outcomes arising from our reveal."

"We can easily sabotage any launch without revealing ourselves," Natasha said, her tone calm and professional. "We could beam away a critical component or trigger a premature detonation on the pad. It would look like a simple mechanical failure."

Given that she had been designed to command my warship, Natasha had always been the more militant of my two daughters. Hermione had her own protective streak considering she had been created to run my island palace fortress. Ironically, Hermione possessed even greater firepower than her sister did— more than enough to obliterate a small fleet in orbit. A supposedly stationary target, after all, required overwhelming defensive capability.

I considered the option for a moment, then nodded. "That would work."

"Father," Hermione said gently, stepping closer, "you need to stop dwelling on the heavy things for a while. I have a surprise for you."

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I let Hermione pull my consciousness along as we transferred into a freshly fabricated Echo Papa 607 drone. The moment we arrived, it activated its cloaking systems and began descending smoothly through the atmosphere.

We flew over the quiet suburbs of Maryland, my daughters guiding the drone toward a modest but well-kept two-story home. A classic 1980s American house with a spacious backyard — and in the center of that yard sat a sandbox.

Inside it was the most heartwarming scene I had seen in a very long time.

A little four-year-old boy was proudly building what he clearly believed to be the greatest sandcastle in human history. Kneeling beside him, helping pat the walls into shape, was his six-year-old sister. Her blonde pigtails bounced as she worked, and the way she looked at her little brother — with such pure, protective love — was almost overwhelming.

She had her mother's golden hair. The same mother who had stood in that hospital room, ready to defend her son from a crazy man claiming to be an alien, who eventually, and tearfully, given me permission to heal her dying son.

The little boy was Grant — the first child with leukemia I had cured to prove to the world that I could actually do it.

When I first met him in that hospital room, my sensors had been brutally honest: he had only days, maybe a week left to live. Saving him, and all the other children in the Georgetown Medical Center, had done wonders for Q's chaos meter... but it had also been one of the most genuinely fulfilling things I had ever done.

The aggressive chemotherapy had left Grant completely bald back then. Now his hair was growing back with a vengeance, thick and wild, constantly falling into his eyes. He kept pausing to blow it out of the way with adorable seriousness as he carefully constructed what was clearly the greatest sandcastle fortress in the history of suburbia.

From beside me, Hermione and Natasha let out a synchronized, high-pitched "Awwww!" that nearly melted my digital heart.

I couldn't stop the huge smile spreading across my face.

I ran a discreet medical scan on Grant. The results brought a deep sense of satisfaction — he was completely cancer-free, healthy, and radiating the boundless energy of a normal four-year-old. He was the picture of life fully restored.

I began reaching for the drone's holographic projectors, eager to appear, when Hermione gently stopped me.

"Father," she said with a playful smirk, "appearing out of thin air might be a bit too startling for them. Let's give the little ones a proper warning first."

I paused, suddenly feeling sheepish. I really didn't interact with children often these days. Almost materializing like some kind of ghost in front of two small kids would have been a terrible idea.

"You're right," I admitted with a soft chuckle. "Let's do this the right way."

At my command, the drone began playing a gentle, orchestral version of *Over the Rainbow* — soft and warm, gradually increasing in volume. Moments later, shimmering sparkles of golden and pastel light bloomed in the air above the sandbox, swirling lazily like magical fireflies.

Grant and his sister's heads snapped up, searching for the source of the gentle music. Their eyes quickly found the swirling cascade of golden and pastel sparkles dancing in the air.

I directed the drone to activate its primitive mobile holoemitter, allowing me to fade into view slowly and gently. I had chosen a relaxed outfit — board shorts, a simple polo shirt, and flip-flops — hoping to look as approachable and non-threatening as possible. The last thing these kids needed was a man in armor descending from the sky.

The moment Grant's eyes landed on me, his entire face lit up with pure, joyful recognition.

"Gothic!!!" he screamed with delight.

Without a hint of hesitation, the little boy scrambled out of the sandbox and launched himself at me in a full-speed flying tackle hug.

"Wait—!" I yelped, arms shooting up instinctively.

He passed straight through my holographic form.

For a split second, horror flashed through me as he began to fall — but Natasha was faster. The drone's tractor beam activated instantly, catching him gently in midair before he could hit the ground.

Showing off just a little, Natasha gently lifted Grant into the air with the tractor beam and flew him in a slow, playful loop around the backyard. The little boy squealed with pure delight, his laughter ringing out — the kind of uninhibited, joyful giggling only small children can produce without a trace of self-consciousness.

After a few wonderful moments, she set him down carefully right in front of me.

"Sorry, kiddo," I said with a warm laugh. "I'm not really here right now, so I can't give you a proper hug, even though I would love to."

Grant stared up at me with big, bright eyes, his face split into the most adorable expression of happy confusion I'd ever seen.

"What do you mean you're not here? I can see you!" Grant shouted, tilting his head with the intense and adorable concentration only a four-year-old could muster. "Are you tricking me?"

I laughed warmly. "I would never trick you, buddy. I'm only here... sort of. This is a hologram. It's like a picture made of light. You can see me, but I'm not solid, that's why you went through me. My real body is somewhere else."

Grant scrunched up his face, thinking very hard about this new information.

"But then... how did you make me fly?" he asked, completely earnest.

I almost facepalmed as Hermione and Natasha burst into giggles in my ear.

"I have a special machine that can control gravity," I explained patiently. "I turned gravity off just for you, so you could fly around for a little bit."

"Flying was awesome!!" Grant shouted, still buzzing with excitement.

More giggles echoed from my invisible peanut gallery.

"I know, right? It's pretty awesome," I said with a grin. "Is this your sister?"

Grant glanced over at her, suddenly remembering she existed. "Oh, yeah. This is my sister," he said with typical little-brother indifference, waving a sandy hand in her general direction.

I turned to the little blonde girl with a gentle smile and a small wave. “Hi there. I’m Gothic. What’s your name?”

Julie looked momentarily shell-shocked at being spoken to directly, but after a shy pause she rallied. “Um... I’m Julie!”

“That’s a very pretty name,” I said softly. “And it suits a very pretty girl. You’re just as pretty as my daughters. Would you like to meet them?”

Julie nodded eagerly, her eyes wide with excitement. At my signal, Hermione and Natasha slowly faded into view with bright, warm smiles.

“You’re both so pretty!” Julie blurted out, staring at them in open admiration.

“They are, aren’t they?” I said proudly, glancing at my daughters. “Julie, Grant — this is Hermione and this is Natasha.”

“Hi!” both kids said in unison.

Julie tilted her head, studying them with the blunt curiosity only a six-year-old could get away with. “Why is your skirt so short?” she asked Hermione, before turning to Natasha. “And why are you wearing that?”

Natasha’s sleek, form-fitting black leather outfit had clearly caught her attention.

Both of my daughters broke into mischievous grins, clearly enjoying my discomfort. I resisted the very strong urge to vigorously facepalm.

Note to self: Next time, maybe dress the girls in something a little more... child-friendly.

“Our daddy chose these clothes for us,” Hermione answered sweetly, putting extra emphasis on the word ‘daddy’ in a way that sailed straight over the children’s heads. She gestured to her scandalously short Hogwarts skirt and the tied-up blouse that showed off her perfect breasts and smooth stomach.

(In my defense, I had thought making her look like a slutty version of Hermione Granger was hilarious at the time. She hadn’t exactly complained about keeping the look in all the time since.)

“Do you like them?” Hermione asked with a bright smile.

Grant shrugged, completely indifferent. Julie, however, nodded slowly, studying the outfits with serious consideration.

“It’s different!” she declared. “My mommy picks out my clothes too, but I don’t always like what she chooses either.”

Perfect. A bunch of girls bonding over questionable fashion choices.

I cleared my throat loudly, desperate to steer the conversation anywhere else.

“Let’s sit,” I said, lowering myself onto the grass. Grant and Julie plopped down right in front of me without hesitation.

“How are you feeling these days, Grant?” I asked. “All better?”

“Yeah! Loads better!” he answered enthusiastically, practically bouncing in place. “I can run and jump rope and ride my bike and swim without getting tired anymore! And look—” he pointed excitedly at his head, “—I have hair now!”

I grinned. “I see that! Who knew you had such nice curly blonde hair hiding under there? You look great, buddy.”

Grant leaned in like he was sharing a big secret. “I asked Mommy if I could cut it ‘cause it keeps getting in my eyes,” he whispered, “but she just smiles, gets all teary, and says ‘maybe soon.’ Then she hugs me really tight. But ‘soon’ never comes!”

I chuckled softly. “Well, I think your mommy is just really happy to see you with hair again. It’s like proof that you’re all better now. Give her a little more time. Either she’ll let you cut it, or you’ll end up liking your cool lion’s mane.”

“Lions are awesome!” Grant declared with absolute conviction.

“They really are,” I agreed, smiling. “There are lots of cool animals out there in the galaxy, but the ones from Earth are still my favorites.”

Grant’s eyes went wide with pure wonder at the idea of alien animals. I made a mental note to show him some holographic creatures another time.

Suddenly, Julie spoke up, her voice loud with earnest enthusiasm. “We thank you every night in our prayers, Mr. Gothic!” She immediately quieted down, cheeks turning pink with embarrassment. “Some kids at school say we should be scared of you... that you might come back to hurt people. But I always defend you. Mommy and Daddy do too, even when Grandma and Grandpa say stuff. Grant is all better because of you.”

My expression softened as I looked at the two of them.

“That’s really kind of you, Julie,” I said gently. “Thank you. I want you both to know I have no intention of ever coming back to hurt anyone. In fact...” I leaned in with a conspiratorial smile, “I might just come back one day to build the greatest sandcastle this backyard has ever seen. Deal?”

They both giggled at the idea.

I hesitated for a moment, then leaned in conspiratorially.

“Actually, let me tell you a secret that I’ve never told anyone else in the whole wide world,” I said. “Can you two keep a secret?”

They nodded vigorously, eyes wide with excitement.

“Right now, high above us in orbit, there are invisible satellites watching over the planet. They’re not here to hurt anyone — they’re here to protect this world and all the kids on it. So whenever you look up at the sky, just know that I’m up there too, making sure you and everyone else have a bright future ahead of you.”

“Awesome!” Grant shouted, beaming with pure joy.

“Grant! Julie! Time for dinner!” their mother called from the house.

“You two better head inside,” I said, a touch of sadness creeping into my voice. This visit had ended far too quickly.

“Bye, Gothic!” Grant yelled, springing to his feet and sprinting toward the house without a second glance.

“Bye, Mr. Gothic!” Julie said more softly. She lingered for a moment, giving us one last long look over her shoulder before following her brother inside.

I watched them disappear into the house with a wistful smile.

“Feel any better?” Hermione asked gently.

“I do, actually,” I replied, still staring at the back door. “Thank you for this.”

Natasha’s voice was warm. “How about we check in on one more?”

XXXXX

Highgrove House. Southern England.

We appeared high in the air once again, this time thousands of miles from Maryland. Mid-afternoon sunlight bathed the countryside below in a warm, golden glow. It was a genuinely beautiful day.

“We’re in the civil parish of Tetbury Upton, near Tetbury, Gloucestershire, in Southwest England,” Natasha informed me.

I blinked. “Okay... and why exactly are we here? I may be an Augment with incredible intelligence, but I don’t waste processing power on random trivia.”

Natasha rolled her eyes as we began descending toward an elegant, sprawling country manor that practically screamed old British nobility.

“This,” she said with a touch of satisfaction, “is where Princess Diana lives.”

My eyes widened. “Wait— we’re here to see *Diana*?”

Even as the words left my mouth, I realized how slow I was being. The constant pain my body was enduring must have been affecting me more than I wanted to admit, even here, even in this form. The body and spirit were linked in ways that I just couldn’t comprehend, I suspected.

“Prince Charles purchased this estate in 1980 as a country residence for his family,” she explained. “It’s a Georgian manor set on 347 acres. He carried out extensive renovations after acquiring it, and the grounds include sprawling gardens and a large swimming pool. Most importantly, though, this is where Charles, Diana, and their children spend much of the year.”

The estate was undeniably impressive—certainly the sort of place that would have left me awestruck before I built my life in the Star Trek dimension. By comparison to my island palace, however, it felt almost modest, though not without its charms.

These days, I had grown more accustomed to beaches, sweeping ocean views, and warmer climates. Perhaps someday I would start collecting homes across different planets whenever I wanted a change of scenery. That seemed to be the traditional pastime of the ultra-wealthy. But with a quadrant-spanning war looming on the horizon, I’d been far less interested in putting down even more roots, preferring mobility over permanence. Mobility was safer.

“Quite a lot of security,” I observed. The sensors tied into my systems were picking up more than just guards—there was some seriously heavy weaponry mixed in as well. “I know they’re royalty, but this feels a little excessive.”

Natasha and Hermione exchanged a glance heavy with unspoken meaning.

“What?” I asked suspiciously.

“Your... dalliance with Diana and the others leaked almost immediately after we left,” Natasha admitted.

I groaned. “You’d think the governments involved would be better at keeping secrets.”

“Ordinarily, maybe,” Hermione said. “But too many people were aware of it, and the story was simply too scandalous not to spread. There were leaks from Reagan’s cabinet and staff, elements within the American intelligence community, British intelligence, the Royal household, French intelligence, and several other channels.”

I shook my head. “So basically every organization involved completely screwed the pooch.”

The house seemed to swell in size as the cloaked drone made its slow descent toward the balcony. Two tall doors stood open to the afternoon air, letting a warm breeze drift through the room beyond. Gauzy drapes billowed softly on either side, the entire scene so perfectly composed it looked less like reality and more like the establishing shot of a lavish period film.

Inside, reclined gracefully on a chaise lounge with a book in hand, was Princess Diana.

Sunlight spilled around her in golden sheets as the curtains stirred behind her, framing her like a portrait come to life. Even in such a private, unguarded moment, she possessed an unmistakable presence—a kind of effortless charisma that radiated through the room strongly enough that I could almost feel it physically. The soft, contented sighs she occasionally let out were doing dangerous things to my concentration and served as an excellent reminder of why returning to my actual body needed to become a priority.

Diana was, naturally, impeccably dressed. She wore a flowing lemon-colored day dress cinched high at the waist with a white belt, the light fabric moving delicately in the breeze. The outfit looked airy, elegant, and impossibly refined. Even relaxing in private, she appeared ready for a royal photoshoot or a walk down a runway.

Of course, beyond her effortless beauty, my attention was immediately drawn to the hand resting protectively against the gentle curve of her swollen belly, stroking it with the absent tenderness I had seen in countless expectant mothers throughout my life.

Almost reflexively, I activated my medical scanners and confirmed what I had already suspected: Diana was pregnant.

The systems available to me were centuries beyond anything this Earth possessed, and they promptly supplied a probable conception date that aligned perfectly with the... rather extraordinary encounter—reverse gang bang—that I had shared with Diana and the others.

In truth, I hadn't needed the confirmation. The fetus was already far more developed than should have been possible for a pregnancy of barely three months, and the neural activity registering from the child was dramatically beyond normal human baselines.

Being AIs, my daughters noticed the instant I activated the medical scanners.

"Your son—our little brother—is extremely healthy," Hermione reassured me. "We've been monitoring his development closely and compiling daily scans for your doctors to analyze. The data has already proven incredibly valuable in understanding how your DNA interacts with baseline humans and other humanoid species."

"Any conclusions so far?" I asked quietly, my eyes never leaving the gentle curve of Diana's stomach.

"An overall enhancement to physiology across the same domains as yours, though less pronounced," Hermione explained. "Dr. Gadot believes those traits won't just persist—they'll likely stabilize across multiple generations rather than dilute. Even without further infusion of your DNA, the effects should remain measurable. Within a few millennia, your genetic markers could become relatively common in the human gene pool."

Natasha folded her arms. "We also think that was Q's intention. It may even explain the spike in your 'chaos meter' after your interactions with those women. It aligns with what we're observing. Diana, Madonna, and the actresses Krista Lane and Brigitte Lahaie are all carrying male children. Statistically, that clustering is highly improbable."

Hermione nodded. "Male offspring have a higher potential to propagate genetic material more widely in a shorter period of time, since they can father multiple children, whereas human females are limited by gestation periods and recovery time."

"I understand. Thank you," I said, not at all surprised, though my thoughts had already started drifting into darker territory. "Do the governments of the world know these women are carrying my children?"

“Yes,” Natasha replied after a brief hesitation. “Most of them have figured it out from the timing alone. Others are strongly suspecting it.”

“And how have they responded?” I asked, my voice sharpening slightly as it cooled.

“After the initial wave of fear subsided, the American, British, and French governments—the home nations of each of the four women involved—moved quickly to provide full support,” Natasha said. “They’ve offered round-the-clock protection, either through state security details or privately funded security teams of the mothers’ choosing, if they prefer not to be directly under government protection.”

“Interesting,” I said. “So they’re going out of their way to signal this isn’t about containment or imprisonment—or they fear what I might do if anything were to happen to them.” My gaze sharpened slightly. “Have there been any threats against them?”

Natasha hesitated—just a fraction too long. If I had been in my physical body only, I doubt I would have noticed it.

“From our surveillance efforts, we’ve learned that several nations without a child of yours on the way are both jealous and increasingly concerned about the long-term implications,” she said carefully. “They’re trying to model what even a handful of enhanced individual could mean for the global balance of power—especially if those traits persist and compound across generations.”

She paused briefly before continuing. “There’s also concern about what happens if these children grow up, have children of their own, and pass those advantages on further.”

Natasha’s expression tightened slightly. “At present, many of them are operating under the assumption—or hope—that your genetic enhancements will gradually dilute back toward baseline over time.”

Her tone remained measured, but the content sharpened. “As a result, there have been high-level meetings across multiple governments. Because all the host nations are democratic, discussions in places like the Soviet Union, China, and several Islamic states have included more aggressive contingency options.”

My voice dropped. “Such as?”

Natasha didn’t look away. “Kidnapping attempts. Assassination of the mothers. Contamination scenarios involving food or drink intended to terminate the pregnancies. Even proposals involving forced sterilization of potential future offspring. These are among the options being discussed.”

“I see,” I said quietly, anger settling into something colder and more controlled. “Have any of them acted on those plans?”

“The Soviet Union and China, using North Korea as a proxy if you were to retaliate, encouraged and supported an operation to kidnap the French mother, Brigitte, whom they assessed as the lowest-risk, highest-value target,” Natasha explained. “North Korea activated a sleeper cell already positioned in the region to carry out the mission.”

She let that settle for a moment before continuing. “This occurred within two weeks of your departure—before even the mothers themselves were aware that they were pregnant. Our surveillance indicates those nations were among the first to speculate that your encounter with the women could result in offspring. They moved quickly on that assumption, attempting to act before formal protective security could be established.”

Natasha’s expression hardened slightly. “They also believed France would be less likely to trigger severe retaliation if caught. In their assessment, France is comparatively weaker and more politically constrained than the United States or the United Kingdom, and therefore less capable of—or willing to—respond with overwhelming force.”

“And?”

“The mission was executed quickly—too quickly, as it turned out,” Natasha said. “That created both an advantage and a liability for them. The North Korean team had to break their long-term cover abruptly and move immediately, which forced operational mistakes and drew attention.”

She continued, “Those mistakes triggered alerts within the French Direction générale de la Sécurité intérieure—the DGSI, France’s domestic intelligence service responsible for counter-espionage and counter-terrorism. They were already monitoring the embedded cell on suspicion of foreign intelligence activity, so the sudden movement outside of normal patterns confirmed their concerns.”

“I’m not familiar with them specifically,” I said, “but I worked alongside some DGSE personnel in Afghanistan. They were professionals.”

“When the French detected the unusual activity, they increased surveillance assets on the target,” Natasha continued. “The North Korean team ultimately breached Brigitte’s residence and extracted her from her bed. They were in the process of moving her from the property when DGSI units intervened and eliminated the intruders.”

“Was Brigitte harmed at all?” I asked.

“No,” Natasha replied. “The French held their fire until she was securely inside the kidnapper’s vehicle and out of the immediate danger zone before initiating the engagement.”

I let out a slow breath as relief and unease tangled together in my chest. It would have been easy—too easy—to blame Q and his appetite for chaos for how things had unfolded. But that would have been dishonest. I had made my own choices in a world where I held extraordinary power.

Yes, I hadn’t actively worked to prevent the pregnancies, partly because it aligned with what I understood of Q’s “chaos requirement.” But there were countless other ways I could have achieved the required chaos—ways that wouldn’t have so directly disrupted the lives of the women involved. In hindsight, it had been a selfish path. And now others were facing the consequences.

“I’m assuming another reason for the increase in orbital assets isn’t just other alien races,” I said finally, steadying my tone, “but also to improve our ability to project power down here on Earth?”

“Yes, Father,” Natasha confirmed.

“You did the right thing, Natasha. Thank you,” I said. “Maintain full security around all of the mothers indefinitely. I want them protected even in the event local forces are compromised or unable to respond. And prepare a comprehensive report on this entire affair. I want names, decisions, funding streams—everyone involved, at every level. Planning, coordination, execution. All of it.”

“Your will be done, Father,” Natasha said with a firm nod.

“Send a gift to Brigitte, whatever you think she would like, as an apology for disrupting her life.”

Fortunately, our conversation had remained entirely imperceptible to Diana.

“Let’s say hello now,” I added, deliberately shifting my focus away from the darker threads of the discussion and back toward something far more welcome.

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Diana was enjoying a rare, unburdened afternoon at her and Charles’ country home—one of those uncommon stretches of time free from official duties, public appearances, family obligations, or the constant demands of royal expectation. With nothing demanded of her for once, she had allowed herself the simple indulgence of light reading.

The day itself felt almost unfairly perfect by English standards: unusually warm sunlight spilling across the grounds, a soft breeze moving through the open doors, and a stillness that made the world feel briefly distant.

Her hand drifted, as it often did without conscious thought, to the gentle curve of her growing belly. She rested it there with quiet tenderness, a grounding gesture—half instinct, half reassurance—as though confirming to herself the reality of the life growing within her.

While the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy were anything but ordinary, Diana had always cherished motherhood above all else. Her life and marriage had never quite matched the polished fairy tale the public believed, but her children, William and Harry, remained the brightest and most constant source of joy in her life. They had never failed her, and she felt certain this new child would bring its own, equally profound dimension of new love and meaning to her life.

Her time with Gothic had begun, perhaps, as a matter of obligation—a sense of duty, even, tied to a larger purpose she had only partially understood at the time. Yet what had started as responsibility had quickly shifted into something far more complex and overwhelming in its impact. Even now, she could still recall the intensity of that experience, not in precise detail, but in the lingering echo it had left behind: a sense of emotional and physical completeness she had never known before or since.

Even now, months later, she could still feel the ghost of his hands on her skin — strong, confident, and impossibly skilled, playing her body like a master virtuoso with a rare instrument. The pleasure he had drawn from her that night was beyond anything she had ever known. In a single evening, Gothic had given her more ecstasy than she had experienced in all the years of her marriage to Charles combined.

Her cheeks warmed at the memory of his release. She had never once swallowed for Charles, yet with Gothic she had done so willingly, eagerly — almost reverently. The very thought of it still sent a secret thrill through her.

And then there was the greatest gift he had left her: this child. A living piece of that magical night, one that would carry consequences and blessings far beyond those stolen hours. The knowledge filled her with a deep, quiet gratitude she could barely put into words.

For the first time in many years, Diana felt truly, peacefully happy.

Even this pregnancy felt entirely different from her previous two. There was none of the exhaustion, nausea, or discomfort she had once come to expect. Instead, there was a pervasive sense of calm—an unusual, almost serene continuity of well-being, as though her body had settled into a new state of effortless balance.

No, this this pregnancy was all connection and contentment. It was like the momentary feeling of pleasure and wellness she had experienced upon swallowing Gothic's seed was continuously present.

When she described it to her personal physician—the same doctor who had overseen her pregnancies with William and Harry—he had been just as uncertain as she was. After some consideration, he cautiously suggested, and made a point of emphasizing that it was pure speculation, that she might be experiencing some form of physiological adaptation linked to the pregnancy itself. That her body, or perhaps the child she was carrying, was influencing her body for the better, strengthening it, benefitting it in ways modern medicine did not yet understand.

Diana found that she did not particularly need an explanation. Whatever the cause, the experience felt natural to her. She already loved the child growing within her.

And now, more than anything, she found herself wondering—would it be another boy, or might she finally have a daughter this time?

Even as her thoughts drifted, Diana became aware of something unusual beneath the stillness of the afternoon—a faint music carrying in from the open balcony doors. At first she assumed it must be the grounds staff playing something while they worked. Curious, she slowly sat up to listen more closely.

The sound grew clearer.

It wasn't background music at all, but a full recording—live energy, crowd noise, and driving guitar riffs woven together. A rock-inflected performance, intense and unfamiliar, yet unmistakably from a voice she recognized.

Michael Jackson.

That realization made her pause. She knew his work well, but she couldn't place this particular song. It didn't sound like anything she remembered hearing before. Had he released something new without her noticing?

*You'll never make me stay
So, take your weight off of me
I know your every move
So, won't you just let me be
I've been here times before
But I was too blind to see
That you seduce every man
This time you won't seduce me*

*She's saying, "That's okay
Hey baby, do what you please
I have the stuff that you want
I am the thing that you need
She looked me deep in the eyes
She touchin' me, so to start
She says there's no turnin' back"
She trapped me in her heart*

*Dirty Diana, nah
Dirty Diana, nah
Dirty Diana, no
Dirty Diana
Let me be*

Despite herself, she briefly wondered whether the song might somehow be about her—an indulgent thought she immediately dismissed as vanity. There were many Dianas in the world, after all, and not everything revolved around her life.

As the song built toward its final notes, something even more unexpected began to unfold.

A shaft of prismatic, rainbow-hued light spilled across the floor of the room, shimmering in the sunlight like refracted glass. Within it, a figure began to take shape—first faint, then gradually resolving upward from feet to form, as though reality itself were assembling them piece by piece.

And yet, despite the impossible nature of the moment, Diana did not feel fear. There was a strange sense of familiarity in it, an instinctive recognition she couldn't quite explain, as though some deeper part of her already understood what—or who—was arriving.

The figure wore boots, black jeans marked with a bold red stripe running up each leg, and an array of belts and buckles that gave the outfit a distinctly rockstar edge. Above that sat an

untucked, billowy white silk shirt layered over a plain white T-shirt, and fingerless black gloves studded with metal accents.

Whoever it was had recreated Michael Jackson's signature look and style with uncanny precision—but something was different. The frame beneath the clothing was far more imposing: lean, powerful muscle filling out the outfit in a way that went well beyond anything the original performer had ever possessed.

Then recognition struck like a bolt of lightning.

The face that resolved from the light was unmistakable—the same man who had occupied her thoughts far more often than she cared to admit in recent months.

“Gothic... is that you?” she asked, her voice rising with an excitement that would have scandalized even her own sense of royal propriety. She instinctively checked herself, though the impulse to rush forward into his arms was almost overwhelming.

“It is. How have you been, Diana?” Gothic replied.

A sudden wave of shyness overtook her. Diana lowered her gaze, as if she might somehow conceal the heat rising in her cheeks, though she knew it was a futile effort.

“I’ve been well,” she said more softly, composing herself. “And you—how have you been since we last parted?”

“It’s been an eventful few months, I have to admit,” Gothic said. “I stopped an alien invasion of my Earth, prevented the destruction of Paris when a starship attempted a kamikaze strike on the city, and oversaw my company’s development of an orbital defense system that’s since been leased to another world. I also uncovered alien infiltration on that same planet, survived an assassination attempt linked to that cell, and more recently I’ve been working to contain a kind of plague affecting others with similar genetic enhancements to mine.”

He gave a faint, almost apologetic shrug. “So I needed a break. It was suggested I step away for a bit and see what was happening here to clear my head and raise my spirits.”

Diana’s mouth had parted slightly in stunned silence before she caught herself, blinking as the weight of what she’d just heard settled in. Gothic, for his part, looked faintly embarrassed by the sheer scale of the summary.

“Ah, I suspect you weren’t expecting quite that comprehensive an answer,” he added with a faint, self-aware grin. “I suppose I’m doing all right, in the moment at least—just paying the price for a rather impulsive heroic decision and feeling a bit foolish about it in hindsight.”

He fell quiet then, letting her process the flood of information.

Diana regarded him thoughtfully. “In my experience, if your actions were taken in service of a noble goal, then you shouldn’t regret the consequences—whatever they may be.”

Gothic let out a quiet breath, the tension easing slightly from his posture. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“I am with your child, Gothic,” she said, the words coming out more directly than she had intended—though, she reasoned, men could sometimes be remarkably unobservant about such things.

“I know,” he replied gently taking a seat in a chair that had appeared from nothing, just like he had. “How do you feel about it?”

“I’m happy,” she answered at once, without hesitation. “My children are the lights of my life. I’m grateful—truly—to be welcoming another into my heart and my life.”

“Even given the circumstances of its conception?” he asked, studying her carefully.

“Yes,” she said, steady and sure. “As I said, I don’t believe noble actions should be regretted for their consequences.” A faint, resolute softness entered her expression. “Before I ever agreed, I understood what might come of it. It was a possibility I accepted from the start.”

“How has Charles taken it?” he asked, sounding curious.

“He is... uncertain,” she admitted after a moment. “I believe he understood, in principle, that a pregnancy was a possibility from the beginning, but he considered it unlikely that a single instance would result in conception. We tried for so long.” A faint, almost rueful softness touched her expression. “He may have underestimated your... *vigor*.”

Gothic let out a quiet laugh. “Believe it or not, it’s nice to be underestimated for once. It’s not something I’ve had the benefit of very often in this new life of mine.”

Diana regarded him for a moment, then nodded slowly, filing that information away rather than responding to it directly. There was no judgment in her expression—only a calm acceptance, and a steadiness that matched the words she had spoken earlier.

She hoped he understood the meaning behind her words. It was easy to speak about accepting consequences when life was distant and orderly; far harder when those consequences arrived uninvited and irreversible. Yet she had chosen to meet her own situation with calm acceptance rather than regret, and in doing so, she felt more aligned with herself than she had in some time.

Gothic seemed to recognize that in her. Not with words, but in the way his attention settled on her—quietly, with a kind of respect that felt more thoughtful than admiration alone. It wasn’t fleeting or performative; it was attentive, as though he were seeing her more clearly in that moment than he had expected to.

She did not fully understand the weight of what he carried behind his own revelations, but she accepted him without hesitation all the same. Calmly. Openly. As if whatever he had said was simply another truth to be received, not something to fear or recoil from.

“After consulting with the Queen and her government, we’ve decided to tell the world that the child is Charles’ and mine,” she said. “I hope you are not offended or angry?”

"I'm not, I promise," Gothic replied gently. "Since I likely won't be a significant part of our son's life, it feels like a decision that rightly rests with you. Though... I do hope that one day you might choose to share the truth."

"We fully intend to tell them the truth once they're old enough," Diana said, then hesitated slightly. "Did you say 'our son'? How do you know it's a boy?"

"I'm *certain* it's a boy. Medical technology has advanced considerably in the nearly four centuries since your time," Gothic said reassuringly. "Would you like to see him?"

Diana nodded at once, though a trace of uncertainty flickered in the movement.

She gasped softly as a three-dimensional image formed in the air before her—not static, but alive with motion and detail.

"He's moving!" she exclaimed, awe breaking through her composure.

"Yes," Gothic explained. "This is a real-time projection generated from my medical sensors. It's showing the fetus exactly as it is developing at this moment."

"I'm not a doctor," she said slowly, studying the projection, "but he seems larger than he should be for three months."

"Yes," Gothic admitted with a slightly sheepish expression. "We believe my enhanced DNA is accelerating gestation compared to a baseline human pregnancy. I don't think this will follow the traditional nine-month timeline. You may want to prepare accordingly—our estimates suggest roughly four to six weeks earlier than expected."

Diana turned her head toward him with a look that was equal parts exasperation and disbelief.

"You truly can't do anything in a conventional way, can you?" she asked dryly.

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. "No," he said simply. "But I suspect that's not what would have drawn you in the first place."

Her composure faltered just enough for a blush to rise again as she looked away, caught between annoyance and reluctant amusement.

"My doctors believe he—and all my children—will exhibit enhanced physiology, both physical and cognitive, though to a lesser degree than my own," Gothic explained. "He's also more likely to pass those traits on to his own children over time. In practical terms, you should expect a very precocious child—someone who could, hypothetically, be a professional football player and a chess grandmaster simultaneously."

Diana considered that in comfortable silence for a moment, her gaze still resting on the shifting projection, as though trying to reconcile the image with the life already growing within her.

"And William and Harry," Gothic asked more gently, "do they understand what is happening?"

“William does. He’s six, so he understands that there’s a baby growing in his Mama’s belly,” Diana replied. “Harry is only two, so he senses something is happening, but he doesn’t really understand what yet.”

A small, fond smile touched her lips. “William is very excited to have a new little sibling. As for Charles... I don’t know that he’ll ever treat our son exactly the same as William and Harry, but I don’t believe he will be cruel. I’m quite certain of that. And the Queen will not allow it, in any case.”

“How does the Queen feel about all of this?” Gothic asked.

“She is very supportive,” Diana said, her expression brightening. “She truly meant it when she said she would stand behind my decision. She has been my greatest ally in this, and she’s done much to help Charles accept the situation with more grace than he might otherwise have managed on his own.”

A genuine warmth spread across Diana’s face as she continued. “She has already committed to ensuring our son is treated as any other member of the Royal Family. There’s even discussion of a dukedom when he comes of age—possibly Clarence, Connaught, or Sussex.”

She tilted her head slightly, studying Gothic with a soft curiosity, wondering if he would like the idea of his son growing up a prince of the realm. “Does that please you?”

“Well,” Gothic said thoughtfully, “it ironically fits that he’ll be a prince of an island nation, considering his biological father owns his own island on Bajor—roughly fifty thousand acres in size. The palace I designed and built myself rests upon it.”

He paused, then added with a matter-of-fact calm, “I’m also the official planetary leader of an M-class, life-supporting world, and I maintain control over roughly a dozen additional worlds, moons, and asteroids—mostly mining operations.”

Diana absorbed that surprising news in silence for a moment, her expression steady but searching.

“Will our son ever meet his father, or travel to your dimension?” she asked gently.

Gothic fell silent, his expression shifting into something more contemplative as he weighed the question.

“This is his home,” he said at last, “but in time, perhaps, he could visit me. Not yet, though. It won’t be safe for many years.”

Diana’s brows tightened slightly at that.

“My home dimension is heading toward a war in the years ahead,” he continued, more quietly now. “One that will span half the galaxy and cost tens of billions of lives. Until it’s over—and until my position is more secure—it wouldn’t be safe for any of my children to be known.”

He looked at her directly then, seriousness settling into his tone. “I have many enemies. And more than a few of them would see my children as the most effective way to reach me or to replicate my abilities.”

“There are many here who would wish the same,” Diana admitted quietly. “That is partly why security around me has been increased so significantly.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Gothic said quietly. “I assume you’ve heard about the attempted kidnapping of Brigitte?”

Diana nodded, her expression darkening with concern.

“Rest assured,” he said, his voice low and deadly calm, “those responsible will pay for it in blood.”

He paused, then continued with measured clarity. “I don’t intend to interfere further than necessary in the natural development of this Earth. But I will protect what is mine, and I will do what I can to limit the disruption my presence has already caused to the timeline.”

His gaze held hers. “Even now, you are being watched over. My AI daughters maintain constant surveillance and control assets in orbit capable of rapid response if required. If you ever feel you are in danger, you need only call out to Hermione or Natasha. They will respond immediately.”

Diana’s eyes grew misty at the care and concern her child’s father was showing her—especially given that he owed her nothing in return for the extraordinary gift he had already given the world.

Wanting to lighten the mood, she let a small smile return and asked the question she had been half-curious about since earlier.

“Was that song about me?” she teased gently, tilting her head with playful intent. “Am I your *Dirty Diana*?” Her lashes fluttered in a coquettish attempt at charm, a spark of levity breaking through the gravity of the conversation.

Gothic’s expression softened, a faint, knowing smile crossing his face.

“You will always be my Dirty Diana,” he said quietly, warmth threading through his voice. “But in this case, that song belongs to Michael Jackson. It will appear on his upcoming album *Bad* next year, though it won’t be released as a single until 1988. I’m actually not sure he’s even written it yet.”

He paused, then added, “He was once asked if the ‘Diana’ in the song referred to you, and he told Barbara Walters in a televised interview that it did not. In your own future on another world, you’ll say it’s one of your favorite songs of his. I thought you might enjoy hearing it early. It was certainly less jarring that me appearing from thin air.”

“I won’t pretend I fully understand everything you just said,” Diana admitted with a soft, relieved breath, “but I find I don’t really need to.”

A quiet, more genuine warmth settled over her features. She met his eyes with a small, intimate smile.

“Would you like to come upstairs with me?” she asked, her voice dropping gently. “To my bedroom. It’s been a very long time since I’ve shared it with anyone.”

She paused, a trace of quiet frustration coloring her tone. “Charles and I haven’t shared a room in years. His attachment to Camilla is hardly a secret... and she lives barely forty-five minutes from here. I suspect that’s partly why he chose to buy this house.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, heavier than she’d intended.

Gothic’s expression shifted — a flicker of restrained desire mixed with genuine regret. Diana wondered for a brief moment if she had been too forward in expressing her prurient desires.

Sensing her uncertainty, he leaned in slightly, his voice low and velvet-rough. “Believe me, Diana, there is nothing I would rather do than take you to bed right now and ravish you until you forget your own name. I would give you pleasure beyond anything you’ve ever known... things the Kama Sutra has never even dreamed of.”

Diana shivered, heat blooming across her skin at his words, a pleasant heat forming between her legs.

“However,” he continued, a note of frustration entering his voice, “I’m not truly here. This is only a projection of light, lacking any real solidity. My real body remains in my own universe.”

A playful smile slowly curved her lips. She tilted her head, eyes sparkling with challenge and invitation.

“Then I expect you to return to this dimension one day soon,” she said, her tone teasing but laced with real longing, “and prove you’re not all talk, sir.”

Gothic grinned, the regret in his eyes momentarily replaced by wicked amusement. “I am no liar, Princess. That’s a promise.”

They continued talking for a long while after that, the air between them warm and charged.

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Ryongsong Residence. Capital of Pyongyang. Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

“Wakey, wakey, little man,” I called out loudly in perfect Korean.

The Supreme Leader of North Korea stirred in his massive, opulent bed. Kim Il Sung blinked groggily, slowly emerging from sleep surrounded by six naked young Korean women who were curled against him like living blankets.

I understood the delay. It must have been quite comfortable.

When you were the God-King of your own isolated little empire, you could make anything legal. Even this.

Young girls held no appeal for me — likely a remnant of the culture and time I was raised in. To each their own, I supposed. The Risians certainly didn't care about such things, and many other species across the galaxy had vastly different developmental and cultural norms. *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations*, after all. Sometimes you simply had to accept that other civilizations operated by different rules, even when those rules turned your stomach or made you uncomfortable.

These girls, however, were another matter entirely.

They weren't here by choice. They were sex slaves in all but name — members of the Kippumjo, the so-called "Pleasure Squad." A carefully maintained collection of roughly two thousand women and girls kept by the Supreme Leader for the entertainment and sexual gratification of high-ranking Party officials, their families, and honored guests.

I wondered idly if Dennis Rodman had been introduced to their services during his bizarrely frequent visits to this country.

These girls were stunningly beautiful — the kind who could have been international models in any civilized country. Instead, they'd had the terrible misfortune of being born in this godforsaken shithole. Only the very best for the Supreme Leader, of course.

"Seriously, wake the fuck up!" I bellowed. "I don't have all day!"

That finally did it.

Kim Il Sung jolted upright, eyes wide with panic. "Guards!" he screamed. "Guards!!"

He frantically reached under his pillow and yanked out a ridiculous gold-plated revolver. The Supreme Leader then emptied the entire oversized weapon at me in a blind panic, the deafening shots echoing through the lavish bedroom.

I didn't even flinch, nor did the girls in bed with the man.

"Overcompensating much, Kim?" I asked with a mocking grin once the hammer clicked dry. "Can I call you Kim? Don't bother yelling for your guards. I soundproofed the room and hijacked the video surveillance you keep in here."

Kim's eyes darted around in panic before a desperate idea seemed to click. He grabbed one of the unconscious nude girls beside him and pressed the empty revolver against her temple.

I sighed. "Your gun is empty, dipshit. And even if it wasn't, they won't wake up. I sedated all of them before I woke you."

When he raised the weapon to pistol-whip the girl anyway, I activated the tractor beam. The revolver was ripped violently from his hand and flew into my hand. I casually tossed it aside.

"Let me make this very simple for you," I said, my voice dropping into a cold, dangerous register. "This will go a lot better for you if you cooperate. But since men like you rarely understand anything except pain and coercion..."

I let the unspoken threat hang in the air for a moment.

“...I’m going to give you a small preview of what happens if you don’t do *exactly* what I say, when I say it.”

A bright red beam lanced out from the drone and engulfed Kim Il Sung. Any Star Trek fan would have instantly recognized it as the distinctive glow of a Klingon painstik.

Kim’s reaction was immediate and pathetic.

He screamed — a high-pitched, guttural wail that threatened to tear his vocal cords apart. Less than three seconds at the lowest setting and the Supreme Leader of North Korea pissed and shit himself right there in his lavish bed. The sharp stench of urine and feces filled the room.

I cut the beam.

Kim collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably like a child, tears and snot running down his face.

“Do we understand each other now?” I asked calmly.

Kim nodded vigorously, still trembling.

I leaned forward, letting the drone’s light illuminate my face. “Do you know who I am?”

Kim stared for a moment, confusion flickering across his features, before sudden recognition widened his eyes.

“Oegyein...” he whispered hoarsely.

“That’s right,” I said coldly. “I’m the alien. You sent your agents to kidnap my unborn child. That was a very poor decision, Kim. Blood must be repaid with blood.”

“No! No, it wasn’t me!” he cried desperately. “It wasn’t my idea!”

“Oh, I know,” I replied, my voice calm and merciless. “You were just the convenient little patsy. The Chinese and the Soviets used you, hoping I’d direct all my wrath at North Korea. They severely underestimated how thoroughly I can track down everyone involved in this little scheme.”

Kim looked like he wanted to argue, to defend his “honor” against the unflattering portrait I’d just painted of him, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“In the coming days,” I continued calmly, “a great many mid- to high-level Chinese and Soviet officials involved in this little debacle are going to start dying in increasingly ridiculous accidents.” I made air quotes with my fingers. “We’ll start with the classics — brake failures, sudden heart attacks — then move on to elevators whose cables mysteriously snap, packs of wild dogs, and eventually people slipping on banana peels only to fall and break their necks. It’s going to get downright comical toward the end and very, *very* obvious what is actually happening.”

I let the silence stretch for a moment, my voice dropping lower.

“I want the leaders of every nation on this planet to understand one simple truth: this is what happens when you fuck with what’s mine.”

“You’re probably wondering why I’m even bothering to talk to you instead of having a horse ass-rape you to death,” I said conversationally. “Which, I’ll admit, would be both disgusting for me to watch and deeply hilarious.”

Kim’s face went bone-white with terror.

“The truth is, my presence here has already altered this timeline in ways I’m just too mortal and limited to understand. And if my children are going to grow up on this world, I need more subtle forms of power and influence to effect change — the kind that can’t always be achieved by raining death from the sky with a particle beam.”

Kim’s eyes widened with desperate hope.

“I will do whatever you want! Give you whatever you want!” he cried, voice cracking. “Just please, let me live!”

“I know you will, Kim,” I said, my voice calm and almost friendly. “To start, you’re going to tell my friend here *everything* it wants to know. Every secret about this shithole country, every dirty deal you’ve made around the world that never made it onto a computer. When you’ve told him all of it... then you can rejoice. Because your country is going to become the envy of the modern world — a shining paradise and a stabilizing force for global order, at least my vision of it.”

From the shadows, an NS-5 android stepped forward. It was a flawless replica of Kim Il Sung — identical in every way, except this version was clean, impeccably dressed in a tailored black suit, and carried itself with quiet, regal dignity. The android bowed deeply and respectfully to its Creator.

Kim screamed in raw, animalistic terror at the sight of his own perfect double. A terrible realization settling in his mind.

Once this android had drained every last piece of useful information from the real Kim, the Supreme Leader and his entire bloodline would be reduced to superheated ash scattered on the wind. By morning, North Korea would have a brand-new Supreme Leader, not that the world would know that — one who had experienced a sudden and complete change of heart. One who would begin running this country in a way that pleased me.

Who knows... I thought with dark amusement. Maybe when my own children are older, I’ll gift one of them this country to run as they see fit.

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The familiar sensation of displacement washed over me as my consciousness traveled from one universe into another.

When my awareness settled, I was inside the chassis of a heavily weaponized drone hovering high above a ruined city. Down below, hundreds of zombies were shambling toward me, drawn like moths to the thunderous roar of AC/DC blasting from the drone's speakers.

A savage grin spread across my digital face.

"You know me so well, Natasha," I said with genuine appreciation.

I powered up the drone's weapons systems and unleashed hell on the undead horde, venting every ounce of my lingering frustration on the rotting corpses below.

If only these brainless fucks knew just how thoroughly screwed they were right now they'd be running for their undead lives.