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The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 17

Bar. Federation Frontier Colony.

Part of me was a little surprised at just how easy it was to get off Bajor, even during the Occupation. The Cardassians certainly monitored traffic in the star system, or at least *tried* to, but space was fucking huge, even in a solar system, and there was a decent amount of traffic in and out of the system daily, including non-Cardassian ships that traveled to the planet for a myriad number of legitimate reasons.

It was certainly within their capability, but the last several years of war with the Federation had taken its toll on the Cardassian military and when resources were finite, priorities inevitably shifted. *Priority resource allocation* was the name of the game once again, which made me internally laugh. That was true for every military that ever existed, no matter the time period. Hadn't I once had a conversation with Anika about that, explaining why the Federation didn't provide personal shields to Starfleet personnel as a matter of course, even though it was within their technical capabilities?

Even just a few short years ago, the Resistance would have been hard pressed to leave and return to the planet undetected, but the war had pulled a lot of resources and attention away from the planet to fight the Federation. Like any terrorist organization, the Resistance had spotted weakness and capitalized on it to great effect. And relocating those resources made sense from the Cardassian point of view.

Yes, Bajor was a decently valuable strategic resource to the Cardassians, for many good reasons, but they knew their enemy and it just wasn't within the Federation's makeup to attack\liberate Bajor. The planet was too far behind their enemy's lines, the collateral damage to the Bajoran populace would have been inevitable, which the Federation didn't have the stomach for, and it just wasn't important enough to the Cardassian war machine to really make a significant difference in the war effort. Plus, once the Federation took the planet, their morals would require them to hold it and keep the Bajoran people safe. For the past fifty years the Federation had turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Bajoran people, so why start now?

Lifting slowly out of the atmosphere at the planet's 'northern' magnetic pole to confuse the Cardassians' sensors, I marveled at once again being in the cockpit of my ship once again, surrounded by decently advanced technology and eating delicious and filling meals from the Vulcan replicator I had purchased on Earth what felt like a lifetime ago.

This was literally the first time I'd been in my ship since I had touched down on Bajor at the start of this mission many months ago. When I had arrived on planet, I had parked my ship in a cave with walls filled with sensor dampening minerals. I had unloaded my weapons and the

Resistance had distributed them all over the area in everything from one-person Bajoran Raiders, a sub-impulse fighter craft, to the equivalent of literally honest to God horse drawn carts with a blanket on top to hide them from sight. I had, of course, replicated as much food and technology as the Shakaar Resistance cell could carry away, but that didn't last long.

If I survived this mission, maybe long in the future somebody might ask me, maybe even a Federation historian, 'Gothic, you had this powerful little ship, why didn't you use it to help the Resistance?' To which I'd reply, 'First of all, fuck you. Second, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about, so shut your mouth.'

Ha, I sounded pretty salty in the future! The bottom line was that while I could have done a lot of damage in the very, very short-term to the Cardassians with my ship, I probably would have been killed pretty fucking quickly. My ship, while pretty powerful and well-armed for its size, especially with the more advanced Minoasian weapons technology and upgrades I'd done on it, was still not a true threat to the Cardassian military stationed here in the Bajoran system. Yes, the Cardassians had stripped away a lot of ships and men from the planet and system to fight in the war with the Federation, but there were still plenty of ships left to fuck me up. Plus, the whole point of my secret mission from Section 31 was to help the Resistance succeed while *hiding* Federation assistance or outside involvement.

What do you think the Cardassians would do if they found a ship, of a completely alien and unknown design, operating on Bajor and killing their people and undermining their control of Bajor, while working alongside the Bajoran Resistance? It would have attracted an incredible amount of attention and brought the hammer down on both me and the Resistance. The Resistance, and myself, would go from a well known and underestimated threat, to something that genuinely needed to be thoroughly investigated, with all the resources necessary to discover the truth and end this new threat.

The Bajorans were not a true threat to the Cardassians. That was just a plain fact. But some other race or power operating on Bajor to undermine them? Now *that* would require an immediate and powerful response.

After a great deal of thought on just what to do with the Orb that the Prophets had put in my hands for safekeeping, I had decided leaving it with my friends on the *Enterprise* was my best option. Picard and the *Enterprise* had the devil's luck, well, at least right up to the Star Trek: Generations movie and there was no more trustworthy and honorable a man than Jean Luc Picard that I could entrust the Orb of Guidance to.

When I'd left Bajor, intending to seek out the *Enterprise* so that Picard could protect the Orb for me, I had imagined that it would take a great deal of effort to find the flagship of the Federation, an adventure fraught with peril, multiple battles with hostile alien species (including battles under the sheets with sexy alien women) and mysterious space time anomalies that needed to be avoided.

Color me disappointed (kind of) when it turned out that a freaking galaxy-class starship was pretty damn easy to find. Maybe that was the point of being the flagship?? All it had taken was a

subspace call to Data and my asking him if the *Enterprise* would be anywhere in the sector in the near future. Despite the ship's incredible capabilities and its premier captain and crew that could turn the tide of virtually any battle via their insane luck and plot armor, the *Enterprise* wasn't really participating in the Federation/Cardassian war.

Luckily or unluckily for me, I suppose, the *Enterprise* was heading in my direction, for reasons Data couldn't share with me, so I'd left Bajor, with Kira in my co-pilot seat despite intending to leave her behind, and had headed here to a star system close to the badlands, which was on the border between the Federation and the Cardassian Union. The Badlands were known for intense plasma storms and gravitational anomalies avoided by most interstellar traffic. It was an unstable and dangerous area of space to navigate for multiple good reasons and played havoc with modern sensors, which was probably why the major powers tended to avoid it and the Maquis, in the future, would use it as their favorite hiding place and staging area.

What hadn't been so lucky was then losing contact with Data. The android had stopped answering my calls, and the flagship seemed to have dropped off the radar for a while. Maybe I was going to have that adventure after all!

The lack of contact was how I'd ended up in a seedy looking bar on a frontier colony world, which was kind of like Mos Eisley from the Star Wars movies. The planet even had two orbiting suns and seemed to be mostly endless deserts.

This colony was part of the Federation only in the sense that it was within UFP space, but it was hardly the kind of place the flagship would visit. What was that line of Obi-Wan's about Mos Eisley? 'You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy!' This bar wasn't quite *that* bad, but it was close.

With that in mind it was very unexpected to actually find a member of the *Enterprise's* crew in this bar, yet Deanna Troi was right here, sitting at the bar looking mighty fine and completely out of place in the obviously freshly replicated high end clothes she probably thought made her look like one of the locals. Prophets have mercy; Starfleet officers that hadn't been specifically trained for this kind of work seemed to lack any fucking common sense. I just had to find out why she was here.

"Let me guess," I quietly said to the half human, half betazoid empath as I sat down next to her. "Picard fired you, and you've decided to change careers. You've gone from upstanding Starfleet Officer to semi-slutty looking barfly in the middle of nowhere."

Troi eyed me in utter shock for a moment, it was as if she couldn't quite process the ridiculous improbability that I was here. And to be completely fair, it really didn't seem likely that we'd just run into each other in a seedy bar in the middle of nowhere on a planet that was on the very edge of civilization. It hadn't even been that long since I'd seen her on Risa, when I'd pranked her all night long by sending bursts of lust and other sexually charged emotions during dinner to keep her panties wet and her nipples perpetually hard. I wonder what Jadzia was up to these days?

"Gothic," she finally responded, having recovered her wits. "That's not..."

She stopped speaking for a moment, and when she resumed her voice was much lower.

"I'm here on a mission," she practically whispered.

I couldn't stop my eyes rolling!

That explained why Data had stopped picking up the space phone, the crew of the *Enterprise* were up to something oh so sneaky.

"By yourself?" I asked, incredulously, casually glancing around the bar.

I would find that hard to believe. I was a badass Augment who could kill every person in this bar within a few minutes without getting a scratch on me. She, on the other hand, was a space therapist, not a secret agent.

"No, Commander Riker, Doctor Crusher, and Lieutenant Worf are nearby trying to gather information," she answered softly.

Now that made much more sense; Troi would be an asset on a team doing something sneaky due to her empathic abilities. She could sense people's feelings and could tell if they were lying or simply holding something back, scared or just nervous, etc. Helpful, if say, they were chasing a crook who felt guilty about a recent crime committed against the Federation.

"What about Picard?" I enquired. "Is the good captain around?"

I'd thought long and hard about who I could actually trust the Orb to for safekeeping. I could have taken it to Earth, but the only person I really knew on that planet was a now rather pissed off ex-girlfriend, and that wasn't the kind of person I wanted to entrust a holy relic to with honest to goodness supernatural powers, especially a relic that belonged to a group of god-like beings who existed outside time. She could try to destroy it out of spite, and it might not even be her who got smited for the act. I didn't think it likely that she'd do anything like that, but why take the chance?

My other choice was T'Maz, but she was Section 31 and while I was sure that she could adequately protect the Orb, she'd probably do that by just handing it over to the organization we both worked for. I trusted Section 31 about as much as you could trust a bunch of cold-hearted spies. I didn't think they'd really turn on me, but only because I was too useful to them at the moment. This could change in the blink of an eye if the right circumstance came along. That was one of the reasons why I was so eager to improve my ship, my weapons, and my armor, as well as my overall knowledge base and bank account. More of all of these meant independence and freedom, and a much better chance for not only my survival, but my thriving in this galaxy.

Of course, I had considered just giving the Orb to Section 31, saying it was part of my mission and a way to deeply ingratiate myself with the Bajorans. They'd certainly be able to keep it safe, but I'd likely never see it again once they realized just what it could do. They'd study it and then lock it up somewhere I would never be able to find. Section 31 wasn't exactly your clueless

friend that you could ask to ‘hold a package for a little while, but you know, don’t open it and don’t ask any questions.’

That left the *Enterprise* as my best and perhaps only real option for active protection, rather than simple obscurity, that would end up with me being given back the Orb when it was time. I figured that while Picard might carefully study the Orb, as he did rather like ancient things, he wouldn't abuse its power or refuse to give it back when the time was right. He'd understand the importance of returning the Orb to the Bajoran people and had the integrity to carry through on it. He also had the necessary power and influence to protect it in the meantime. Plus, he had some experience with time travel (or would) so he also wouldn't just open up the box on a whim, he'd understand just how dangerous such foreknowledge could be. I struggled with that problem every day, but a lot of my current difficulties was wrestling with the question of risk versus reward.

"Captain Picard has been missing for over a week," Deanna informed me quietly. "That’s really why we’re here."

I was startled at this because I didn't recall Picard going missing on a mission at this point in the timeline and I remembered the overall timeline of TNG rather well. Of course, this timeline was not playing out entirely the same as the one seen on TV, the lack of any huge Borg attack at Wolf 359, on account of that villain being defeated centuries ago, was proof positive of that. That said, this whole situation seemed very familiar. For some reason, it felt like I should know, but was being prevented.

"From your presence here, can I assume that this was the last place he was seen?" I asked, now carefully looking around, taking in every little detail, hoping to jog my memory in case this was some later season episode playing out far earlier than it was supposed to.

Picard was a private person, not the kind of guy to hit up a bar, and even if he inexplicably did want to do something like that, he wouldn't come to this *particular* watering hole. He was a bit of a snob and this place was like the sweaty, semi-crusty armpit of the galaxy. I think he would look at these humans and be almost disgusted with his race. It was so much easier to recognize and acknowledge the failings in other races, it was far harder to do that in your own, especially when it was so contradictory to Federation cultural propaganda. No, when you drank the Federation Kool-Aid, you went out of your way to avoid seeing anything that didn't mesh perfectly with the marketing. Therefore, he must have come here as part of an investigation, official or otherwise, or an undercover mission. That narrowed down the list of TNG episodes significantly.

"Yes," Troi confirmed.

She then moved her stool closer to me. Was she making moves on me? Because if so, I was not going to play all that hard to get. I had already banged her mom, that sexual tigress, maybe the apple didn't fall far from the tree?

"Do you have any idea where he might be?" she wondered. "Or have any information that would help our investigation?"

It was smart of her to ask, as while I had just arrived, she didn't know that, and this bar and these kind of people was something I was far more comfortable with than her. I certainly blended in far better in the same clothes that I routinely wore on Bajor to avoid attracting attention. They were hardy and worn in all the right places, and not perfectly clean and pressed, looking like it had just come straight from a replicator like hers did. Though I had had to do more than dress down to better blend in while on Bajor. Who knew being so attractive and muscular by humanoid standards would be a detriment to the mission?

It was almost comical how Troi thought she looked the part here, though her tits did look rocking in the blue dress she was wearing. It was like she was an actress in a movie trying to appear like a criminal but failing so spectacularly at it that it was almost absurd. Even Kira fit in rather well here. She was currently playing a game of chance with some fellow Bajorans who had fled their home world and somehow ended up out here. I had expected her to go over and berate them for abandoning Bajor during its time of need, but she hadn't, and for that I was extremely grateful as I didn't want her making a scene and drawing all the wrong kinds of attention.

"I've just gotten here myself," I admitted in answer, my eyes dropping to her outfit. "I think you can blame your lack of progress on that get-up of yours. It's kind of funny actually how much you stick out. It's just so...*clean* and sophisticated."

This place wasn't dirty per se, it was just rough. The people here had access to some modern amenities, like sonic showers, though few had replicators. They wore durable and long-lasting clothes meant to stand up to a harsh desert world that regularly had sand storms that could strip the paint from metal. It was function over form. That meant thicker, heartier materials with dull colors, not nice new blue dresses.

"Possibly," she admitted, after glancing around at the bar's other customers and being self-aware enough of her limitations to admit to it. She leaned in even closer. "Maybe we'd be able to blend in better if..."

I stopped her right then, before she could say anything that might be considered insulting towards me, though, I admitted, it made sense from her perspective. As far as she knew, I had been resettled on Earth, set up with a 'good' job and a fancy apartment, and yet here I was in the middle of nowhere, seemingly by choice. She, of course, had no idea I had been recruited by Section 31 and had already, arguably, saved the galaxy from extradimensional invaders and was on another mission that would have galaxy-wide implications.

"I know what you're thinking," I said. "Here's a guy who could have been nearly anything he wanted to be back on Earth, mostly, and instead, here I am slumming it with the dregs of humanity and the scum of the galaxy."

"But you know why I chose this life, Counselor?" I asked. "Why I'm here, in the armpit of the galaxy instead of taking it easy on Earth?"

She shook her head.

"The truth of the matter is that if I had to choose between poverty and *freedom* out here or wealth and what you call freedom in the Federation, I would pick the former every, single, time. I'd rather live my life by my own rules," I told her.

Of course, I chose to exercise that freedom by seeking out wealth, power, and adventure, but she didn't need to know that. She probably also didn't need to know about my plans to bang a hot ass woman from every sexy humanoid species I could either. So far I could cross off human, Betazoid, Risian, Trill, Vulcan and Bajoran. A mysterious little smile lit up my face at the thought of all the humanoid alpha quadrant species that I'd yet to pleasure in the bedroom.

"Even if it means living like this?" Troi asked, while subtly gesturing around, which, was by Federation standards at least, pretty much a cesspool.

I soon gave her an answer.

"Well, I was an outcast even in my own society and time," I told her, really leaning into this Libertine persona. "Not like a crook criminal or some weird hermit person, but I never really fit in, and that hasn't changed despite everything that has happened to me since."

Troi nodded, perhaps she could understand my reasoning or my way of thinking, or had dealt with similar enough types who were attracted to the lives one could only have on a brand-new colony world. While she might not agree with my life choices, they were mine to make and she was too much a consummate professional to condemn me for them.

"I think you could have flourished on Earth, if only you had given it a real chance, but you do seem to fit in well here," she reluctantly admitted.

She moved away a little and continued to act as if we were having a casual conversation. Which, arguably, we were.

"What is it exactly you do for a living now?" she asked curiously.

I couldn't tell her the truth. She didn't even know that Section 31 existed, and hopefully never would. Maybe I should ask Sloane to get me some civilian consultant credentials for Starfleet Intelligence, it'd make things so much easier in situations like this when dealing with Starfleet officers. Civilian consultants existed in this time and official credentials like that could be useful to explain away a great many things.

"Mostly, I've been travelling," I answered the half-alien with a half-truth. "I think we talked about this on Risa, but I have my own ship and the licenses to carry paid passengers and cargo. I've ferried a few people around and transported a bit of cargo to a planet called Bajor. Some farming equipment, I believe."

And I had. If she checked out my story she'd find proof of those claims in a dozen different official databases including flight plans and purchase invoices and even the correct taxes and duties paid to the relevant authorities. When Section 31 built a cover story, they didn't fuck around. There was an entire department within the organization that handled that, and that's all they did.

A man dressed similarly to me, only without the good looks, badass weapons, and hardcore body armor under his clothes, took this moment to grasp Troi by the arm, nearly forcing her off her stool.

"C'mon, baby," the human man slurred, who was barely able to stand straight due to being drunk, while gripping Deanna's arm. "Let's go."

Troi held her ground, as best she could, trying to pull away, only she didn't have much luck due to this man's much stronger hands. The guy might be liquored up, but he had survived on the frontier and therefore wasn't going to give up easily.

"Go where?" she demanded to know, obviously confused at this entire interaction. Admittedly, I had no idea either. Maybe he thought she was someone else?

I was an armed and dangerous badass Augment so I wouldn't let this waste of space truly hurt Troi, but I wasn't going to intervene yet either, as I really didn't know if this was part of her mission or her cover story/identity. I also found myself morbidly curious to see how she would handle this.

"Who cares?" the man sneered. "If you're worth the money it doesn't matter where we go."

A laugh, or was it better described as a guffaw, burst out of me once I realized what was going on, my eyes flashing between the two in pure mirth. When Troi glared at me and my continuous laughter, still obviously confused by what the man wanted, I explained why I was laughing so hard.

"I believe he's under the impression that you are a lady of ill repute, a streetwalker, a hooker," I explained with pure glee in my voice, each term seemingly going right over her head. Did these terms seriously not survive to the present day? "A prostitute?"

Well, that certainly got through to her! And, man oh man, was her reaction priceless! Guess being a prostitute was not part of her cover story! Her eyes nearly bugged out and she now struggled even harder against the man, who seemed content to carry her off if she remained uncooperative. The counselor stared at me as if this was somehow my fault. Somehow I think it had much more to do with the provocative dress she had on, and those rocking tits rather provocatively on display. On a frontier world, a desert world, maybe that was as clear a sign as any that you were a sex worker and open for business.

"Well, do something!" she urged emphatically.

With that request fun times were over and slowly I stood to my full height.

"Trust me, pal, you can't afford her," I said with a smirk, getting a kick out of my choice of words. Troi's mixed reaction was delicious. Maybe she took it as part compliment?

I could have just told him that she wasn't really a prostitute for hire, but it was so much funnier this way and who knows if the drunkard would even acknowledge the truth of my words.

"Stay outta it," the man replied drunkenly, "this is between me and the woman and her big beautiful tits!"

He was right on that score, glancing down for a moment at the tits in question, they were some really nice tits. I couldn't fault him for his taste there.

It was tempting to back off and see how the counselor handled things, maybe letting her get a brief taste for the less civilized parts of the human condition and the Federation as a whole in the process would be good for her, but Deanna had always been, if not nice, then at least civil towards me and I know she had played a big part in the restrictions being eased up on me back when the *Enterprise* crew were worried that I was a tyrannical augment despot from the 20th century.

Her mother was also an amazing lay, who I was eager to bang again, and had considerable influence in the Federation that could be useful to me in the future. I think she might be a little pissed if she heard that I hadn't helped her daughter. So, a mix of personal and professional reasons motivated me to nip this in the bud right now.

"She's with me," I said, firmly, no longer playing around and no longer smiling. "Find someone else for the night. Those big beautiful tits are mine."

I couldn't resist to poke at her a little even in this situation, so sue me.

Abruptly, the man pushed the counselor to the side so that there was nothing and no one between us.

"What are ya gonna do?" he asked, locking eyes with me, before making yet another mistake. Whatever threat identification instincts that humanity still had left in their DNA had obviously been silenced or dulled by the sheer amount of booze this man had imbibed or the drugs he had taken, and yes, narcotics still existed in this time.

The local man threw a fast sucker punch with his right hand, which may as well have been moving in slow motion for all the good it did him. Even while drunk, it was pretty clear to me that this man did know a thing or two about fighting as the sucker punch he attempted was thrown with a decent amount of power at a pretty good speed, relatively speaking. This move felt practiced, and had very likely worked quite well for him in the past. On someone else, the outcome may have been altogether different. But I wasn't 'someone else', I was an Augment

who had taken his genetic enhancements and honed them to a razor's edge with martial training so intense that it would have killed a Klingon.

Faster than anyone other than me, and perhaps some select species of aliens, could have followed, my left arm came up in a block, my hips already rotating clockwise, redirecting the punch to my right, while my right arm simultaneously hooked the extended forearm and wrist. In a fraction of a second I had redirected, then trapped the offending limb of my would-be attacker in an inescapable armbar, easily snapping the two forearm bones and tearing the bicep off the bone. The comical howl of pain and agony that resulted from this injury likely cleared whatever haze of alcohol and drugs that had been impairing his judgment previously.

Long honed survival skills from living on this dangerous world had finally kicked in and he had identified me as the far superior predator as the man's eyes took on the look of a prey animal and he scurried out of the bar, his right arm now dangling uselessly at his side, unwilling to make eye contact with me lest I decide to finish the job. The hearty laughs of the bar's patrons who had witnessed our confrontation followed him out.

I could have easily turned that arm bar into a throw, or snap kicked him in the knee to dislocate or break, but that would have escalated things pretty significantly from a drunken sucker punch and kept the man from being able to disengage like he had just done. If he had reached for a blade or an energy weapon, however, things would have ended quite differently, even with my Starfleet witnesses. Their presence meant I needed to attenuate my response to be a little gentler than I normally would be.

"Was that really necessary?" Deanna asked in a curious mixture of fear and admonition, with just a hint of arousal. 24th century women might think that they were oh so evolved, but a display of martial skill and power got their motors running just as well as it did in the 20th.

I shrugged and sat back down.

"You wanted to me to get involved," I replied with a smirk. "I think the patrons of the bar now know that those 'big beautiful tits' are mine for the night."

Troi blushed, before quickly glancing down at her own tits and then away from me in embarrassment. I noticed she hadn't corrected me on my claim on her boobs.

An instant later, Riker was standing beside her. He must have seen what I'd done and had rushed over with an honest to God standard Type-2 Starfleet issue phaser in hand. These guys might be fabulous Starfleet officers with incredible skills in operating a starship, but undercover operatives they most certainly were not. A very clean, well dressed human with a Starfleet issue phaser in hand. Sigh. He might as well have beamed right into the bar in uniform, shiny rank pips and comm badge on and announced proudly that he was the first officer of the *Enterprise*. Being armed on this world was pretty much a given, but seriously, use a Klingon or Romulan disrupter, or some other common weapon, anything but a Starfleet phaser.

After Deanna assured Riker that she was fine, just shook up, he requested some information.

"Any leads?" the Commander asked Troi.

She shook her head sadly.

"I don't like this place," Riker said as he sat down on the stool next to Deanna. "I don't see how anyone could possibly stand it."

Thankfully, he was keeping his voice low so as not to offend the locals. If he had been a new ensign I doubt he'd have had the intelligence to have even done that.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "It can grow on you after a while, much like some sort of persistent foot fungus."

I wasn't particularly worried about offending the natives, though, as I could take on everyone in this bar and win. I'd taken out entire squads of highly trained Cardassian soldiers with military grade weapons, a bunch of drunks was nothing compared to that. My display of intense violence had also clearly told everyone that I wasn't Starfleet. Might makes right.

"Gothic, will you help us find Captain Picard?" Troi requested, before hesitantly continuing. "I believe we may be somewhat out of our element in this situation."

I pondered the request for a moment. I had come here wanting a favor from Picard, so helping him out now seemed wise and would hopefully engender some goodwill. On the other hand, I wasn't in the habit of providing valuable services for free. I had a living to make and when it came to the Orb I did have some other options. Not great ones, but *options*, nonetheless. If I really got desperate I could just hide it on some lifeless moon in the middle of nowhere and hope for the best. Given all the shenanigans the *Enterprise* regularly got up to on the show it might even be safer that way in the end.

"Will you pay me?" I asked. "I do need latinum, nothing is free on the frontier, including my services, and I may need to buy information from people reluctant to give it."

Technically speaking, this was a mission-related expense so I already fully intended on drawing from the Section 31 funds set aside for mission expenses, but getting paid twice for the same job was only good business. On the way back to Bajor my cargo holds would be filled with weapons and other useful materials to further help the Resistance.

Riker nodded.

"I can arrange that with some discretionary funds I have access to for mission-related expenses," he said, "and we could do with some more help. Unfortunately, we're not having much luck with our investigation."

Paid work was good and color me not surprised that no one was eager to talk to these narc looking bastards.

"So," Troi broke in. "Does this mean you'll assist us?"

With the issue of payment now dealt with, I nodded my head with a smile.

"I'm assuming you believe Captain Picard was kidnapped?" I asked.

Before either of the Starfleet officers could answer my question. Kira returned and planted herself on my lap sideways. This was odd behavior for her, but I had no time to figure out her motivations.

"I was looking all over for you," the Bajoran woman said, a large smile on her face, before she pulled me close and shoved her tongue down my throat. Looks like someone was enjoying this mission, or had had some seriously alcoholic beverages with the money I'd given her. Or maybe seeing me talk to Troi and then announce to the entire bar that those 'big beautiful tits' were mine had aroused some jealousy.

Troi and Riker exchanged glances.

"I'm guessing you missed me then?" I teased my companion before addressing the Starfleet types. "May I introduce Kira Nerys. We met on Bajor. Kira this is Will Riker and Deanna Troi, I haven't seen them since I was last on Risa. I am trying to get in contact with their Captain."

Kira knew that I was looking for someone to protect the Orb from the Cardassians.

I changed the subject relatively quickly hoping that the two *Enterprise* crewmen wouldn't remember Kira all that well should they ever visit Deep Space Nine. If the timeline played out like in canon, the *Enterprise* would be there when the Federation began to administer DS9 after the Occupation ended. I doubted they would remember, though, as right now Kira didn't look like any kind of high-ranking future military officer. I'd replicated her new clothes, but she still had a wild appearance about her. It allowed her to blend in with this crowd well.

I also really didn't want Kira wondering too much about how I knew two Starfleet Officers, which was why I'd mentioned Risa. If she assumed that I'd met them by chance on a well-known resort planet that billions of Federation citizens and tens of thousands of Starfleet officers visited annually, then it wouldn't lead to her asking any unwanted questions. Some questions were inevitable, which is exactly why I'd insisted on Section 31 using so much of my real history as possible. The truth was far easier to maintain long-term than a lie.

Perhaps I should have left her behind on Bajor as planned, but she had wanted to come with me. Of course, that might have been on Shakaar's orders, to keep watch on me while away from the planet. His cell hadn't survived this long without learning how to be paranoid. It wasn't a great imposition, Kira was good company and was happy to spread her legs for me, even more so when were off planet.

"How long has the captain been missing?" I asked.

Deanna had told me already, I just wanted to get the conversation moving in the right direction and away from the subject of my travelling companion.

"He failed to make three scheduled check ins. We believe he has been missing for a week, possibly longer," Riker replied quietly.

Kira made a sound that may have been a derisive laugh.

"If he was dressed anything like you two, he was either mugged, kidnapped for ransom, or--" she started to say.

I finished for her.

"Killed and the body was dumped somewhere outside the colony, maybe even *vaporized*," I told Riker and Troi to their shock.

Had they seriously not considered that a possibility?? Undercover missions were the most dangerous of them all.

"This place isn't as bad as, say, Turkana IV, but it can get plenty rough," I elaborated.

Turkana IV, Tasha Yar's homeworld, was a failed Federation colony that made even this place look like a utopia. Sure, people got mugged here, and there had been a handful of murders, but there were no 'roving rape gangs' and if you got murdered here it was because you bothered the wrong kind of people, not just because you were vulnerable and alone. That place was a failed colony/state which had devolved into civil war and then had withdrawn from the Federation. It was essentially lawless now.

"Are you serious?!" Riker exclaimed.

Indeed, I was, though I was sure Picard's plot armor would protect him.

"It's a possibility, one you have to face when dealing with a place like this, Commander," I replied.

Riker frowned.

"I could always find out," I offered.

For a price, to be decided at a later time, but it would be decided. Hopefully the Federation's general disdain of money meant they wouldn't balk at the figure I'd name later on. Though a ship like the *Enterprise* would have an even larger industrial replicator onboard than I did, this could mean great upgrades for my ship with a skilled engineering team to install it for free.

"That would be helpful," he said.

I lifted a strip of gold pressed latinum into the air and that brought the Ferengi bartender over to me like it was some kind of greedy bastard summoning spell. Say what you want about the Ferengi, though, they could be a very useful bunch for the right price, you just needed to know how to deal with them, and motivate them, and constantly watch for treachery, but for all that, still damn useful. I had long considered establishing a business relationship with some Ferengi traders in the future when I had more latinum. Those wonderfully greedy bastards would sell you just about anything you could think of with little regard for anything but money. I had several upgrades to my ship in mind already.

"Listen, I need you to do a favor for me," I told the alien. "I need a list of everyone who has died on this planet over the last week."

This was a long-shot, but I had to at least try. Information dealers would have such a list available for purchase, but who knew if this planet was sophisticated enough for such a thing.

The bartender, who lacked Quark's social graces when working with different races, laughed shrilly at me.

"You're kidding, right?" he said.

I added another two strips to the one I had between my fingers, like magic.

"Does it look like I'm kidding?" I asked in a deadpan voice.

The alien shook his head, his eyes not leaving the latinum.

"Sorry, 'uman we don't keep lists like that, maybe if I had more specific information I could help you," he said eagerly.

I sighed. Well, so much for the easy way. I turned to Riker.

"Do you have a holo-image of him?" I asked, not even bothering to lower my voice. Ferengi had exceptional hearing and it was pointless to try now that his interest had been aroused. "I'm going to need to offer some...monetary incentives. It could get expensive, especially if we have to overcome some fear of retribution for providing this information to us."

When you had replicators that made pretty much anything that either wasn't alive or made of some material too exotic to replicate, information became one of the few things worth paying for, though I had a feeling that there were more replicators aboard the *Enterprise* in orbit, than there were on this entire world.

The commander pulled out a miniature holo-cube and passed it to me. I examined it a moment, before pulling another 7 strips of latinum out of my pockets (cargo pants for the win!), I placed the latinum on the table in two nice stacks of five. The famous chime when the strips made when they clinked together was proof that they were real. 20 strips equaled 1 bar of latinum, so the half

a bar that I was offering was probably too much for this place, but I wasn't really concerned. Starfleet would be ultimately paying for it.

"Bring me a bottle of your best Romulan Ale. If you try to cheat me, I will do a lot worse to you than I did to that 'ooo-man.' Do you understand me, Ferengi?" I ordered with a growl in my voice.

A bunch of fearful nodding was the waiter's answer before he practically ran off to get me the bottle of ale I'd ordered, but only after he'd scooped the latinum off the table. The man had his priorities straight.

"This isn't the time for drinking," Riker admonished.

I ignored him while continuing to scan the bar to see who was paying more than casual attention to us and waited for the waiter to return with the bottle of neon blue Romulan booze. It didn't take long. Many had heard me order a bottle of the bar's best Romulan Ale, which was a very popular drink amongst many species. I know I was certainly a fan.

I addressed the bar's patrons, after I had gently pushed Kira off my lap, giving her ass a nice squeeze in the process. A quiet moan and a lascivious smile was her response. Somebody was buzzed it seemed. I stood up with the bottle in my left hand, gripping the bottle by the neck.

"Who wants this?"

It was pretty good booze, so my question drew some attention. Even if they didn't want to actually drink it, it'd be a good trade good to barter or resell.

"If you want to win this prize then the only question you have to answer is this: have you seen this human?" I asked the bar, activating the holo-cube with my right hand and holding it aloft.

Everyone focused on the hologram of Captain Picard, who was dressed in his civilian clothes. There was a slight pause, then someone raised an appendage into the air.

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said with a smirk. Sometimes subtlety was overrated.

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"And what do I get if I tell you?" the Denobulan asked contemptuously, once we'd made our way over to a table in a dark corner of the bar and had taken a seat. This booth would give us a lot more privacy for private dealings. "The ale isn't worth my life if I annoy the wrong people."

Leaning forward I gave the man a chilling smile.

"You're wrong about the ale. It's yours already, my friend, that was the price for this conversation," I said, before pushing it across the table and into his hands. The ale was irrelevant, this little act established that we paid our debts and could be counted on to honor our

agreements. Psychology was an important part of every negotiation, especially between strangers.

This alien was a member of the same race as Doctor Phlox in Star Trek Enterprise; they existed in this version of Trek, and were, for the most part, a race who made friends easily. They were also important founding members of the Federation. Normally they liked to stay on their homeworld with their large complicated families, or on their colonies which were also like large families. This example of that species in front of me was alone and rather unfriendly, but there were oddballs in every race. I was a good example of this.

"I'll make sure you're justly rewarded," Riker said, while flashing his most charming smile.

This was not received well, as the Denobulan took this more as a threat on his life or a warning than a genuine offer of payment in exchange for information. I didn't even bother trying to resist rolling my eyes. I wasn't exactly an expert at this intelligence gathering shit either, having been a military officer in my previous life and only gone through some holo-training scenarios, but compared to Riker and Troi I may as well have been James freaking Bond.

The man looked like he was about to bolt, so rather than some bizarrely cryptic and potentially threatening words from Riker. I placed 5 bars of latinum on the table. There was nothing cryptic about that. It was a good thing my pockets were deep and my pants reinforced.

"What my partner means is that we are happy to pay for the information, five bars of latinum for good actionable information," I said, subtly shaking my head at Riker to remain quiet.

The alien mulled this over for a moment, eyes locked on the latinum, looking decidedly happier now that payment, and not potential threats, was on the table and a pretty generous amount at that.

"Then I will be happy to share what I know," the alien replied happily, giving that overly large Denobulan smile that human physiology couldn't reproduce. "Your companion, the balding human, was here about a week ago, asking many questions. A group of aliens, well-armed mercenaries from the look of them, took notice."

"Who were these aliens?" I asked.

"I don't know, but they looked dangerous. They sat at this very table. They had some sort of misunderstanding or argument and they attacked him. He managed to incapacitate three of them before he was knocked down. He was thrown against that wall and fell there."

The alien eyed the bars of latinum before continuing to speak, obviously unsure if this information was enough to earn him the money in front of him. The expectant look I was sending him clearly indicated that he had better give me more, even though I truthfully felt he had already earned the money.

Picard wasn't the type to hang out with mercenaries, nor was he a foolish man who went around picking fights. Which meant talking with them had likely been part of his mission or he had managed to attract the wrong sort of attention.

"Go on," Riker invited.

"He was thrown against that wall, and fell there. No, I was sitting over there at the time... so it must have been that wall. Yes, that's it," the alien said.

With this information, Riker called Beverly over and whispered in her ear. She looked visibly surprised to see me, but sent a small smile my way. It seemed the memory of me and our time together had weathered the test of time well.

I then watched as Beverly Crusher subtly used a Starfleet medical tricorder to examine both the wall and the area in which Picard had supposedly fallen.

"I picked up some Starfleet fiber traces and human cellular debris," Crusher reported.

Not exactly surprising news. Anyone could have brushed up against the wall and left bits of skin cells behind. There were plenty of humans on this world and they wore clothes, many of which had been provided by Starfleet when this colony had first been established.

"Can you establish a DNA reading?" Riker asked.

She shook her head no slowly in response after several long moments of button pushing.

"There's something strange here. The cell structures are badly distorted. It's as if they've been exposed to some kind of high-energy field," Beverly reported.

It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened, someone had fired an energy weapon or at someone in that vicinity.

"Could it be a weapon's discharge?" I asked. While it might have been obvious to me, it might not be to them.

"It could be. I'm picking up some faint traces of microcrystalline damage in the floor material, but I'm not familiar with the pattern I'm seeing," Beverly answered, looking alarmed.

There were many kinds of energy weapons in the galaxy, any sufficiently advanced race had their own versions. The only thing I could rule out was that a Federation phaser had been used, as the doctor would have immediately recognized that energy signature.

"What can you tell us about that, my friend?" I asked intently, turning to our paid informant. "We are not interested in placing blame, only learning what happened."

He looked decidedly shifty at this point, like he was wondering if the price was worth the risk, but didn't say anything further. I knew just the cure for that.

I placed another bar of latinum on top of the stack in front of the Denobulan, making sure the chime was heard as they clinked together.

"I'm sorry, but when the man was knocked down one of them took out a weapon and fired. He was vaporized instantly."

Crusher, Riker, and Troi all looked stricken. Great poker faces guys.

"He's telling the truth," Troi reported solemnly.

"These mercenaries," Riker asked firmly, obviously giving up on trying to sound nonchalant now that Picard's murder in this bar seemed likely. "Do you know if they were working for someone? Or anything else to help us identify them? Known associates?"

I wanted to sigh out loud at how much of a Starfleet officer or member of law enforcement he sounded like right now. There was not enough money in my pockets that was going to salvage this situation.

Just as I suspected, the Denobulan scratched at his face in response. A sign of nerves I guessed, and didn't say anything further. A moment later he quickly took the stack of latinum and left, obviously feeling like we were slipping into a dangerous topic that no amount of money was going to be able to overcome. I didn't blame him. He must have suddenly realized that he was giving information about a group of people who had casually vaporized a man in full view of a bar full of witnesses. Those were not the kind of people you wanted to get on the wrong side of.

"Commander, it will take me at least an hour to identify this DNA," Beverly reported in the silence that followed the man practically running out of the bar. For some reason I couldn't fully remember this episode, like something was preventing me from fully recalling it, but I had the distinct feeling my presence had upset the canon sequence of events.

Riker nodded.

"We need to find where those mercenaries are now," Troi said.

I figured that I could help with that.

"From the sound of it, these men may have killed Picard in a bar full of witnesses. There is a good chance someone here knows more. It's a good thing I have a few pockets full of latinum to loosen some tongues," I said, before heading over to the bar.

Now that I had more information to go on I could question the bartender more pointedly and find out exactly what they wanted to know. I had a feeling the Ferengi would be more amenable to sharing information than the Denobulan.

Bartenders had always been great sources of information, didn't matter how far in the future I was and money had always had a way of loosening lips.

XXXXXX

Sickbay. Onboard The *Enterprise*.

"Gothic, it is standard procedure for visitors to undergo a simple health screening when they come on board," Beverly explained to me as I tried to leave sickbay. "It's for your own good, but mostly for the good of the rest of us."

Sadly, being an Augment didn't make me universally immune to illness. I could still get sick, though it was exponentially harder and my immune system was so robust my recovery would be very quick. That was one of the benefits of having a super charged immune system.

"I'm not diseased," I protested, somewhat petulantly.

Thinking about it I realized that I actually could be and not even know it. I hadn't exactly visited a doctor in some time and I hadn't gone through the ship's transporters, which could detect that sort of thing. I'd landed my ship inside the *Enterprise's* main shuttle bay, rather than take the transporter, and I'd been on Bajor for a while now. It was possible that some sickness there had entered my body and I just didn't know it. I felt fine, but it could be dormant or be something that didn't even effect humans, yet might later spread to other species and make them ill. It was a sensible precaution and Beverly was my favorite Starfleet Medical Doctor.

"Okay, scan away," I offered to the doctor with a smile. "You are my favorite Starfleet Medical Doctor after all."

"Well, I feel honored," she responded with a laugh.

I sat down on one of the beds and fondly remembered when I had first woken up on this very bed before getting to beat up some Klingons. Good times.

"First you need to disrobe and put something else on," Crusher was now saying.

With 24th century medical tech there was no need to be naked for an exam so I was understandably confused as to why I needed to undress and put on a gown, or whatever it was she wanted me to wear. Was this a come on? If so, I'd be happy to bang her again. Our causal relationship had ended amicably.

"Doctor, if you wanted to see me naked, all you had to do was ask!" I whispered to her.

Her laugh was lovely, the mirth dancing in her eyes. She leaned close to me and spoke, "Gothic, if I wanted you naked for that reason, you'd know it."

“You saucy minx!” I joked right back, before realizing something. “Is my armor deflecting your scans?”

“Yes, but my tricorder is also picking up a lot of foreign DNA on the surface of your armor,” she reported. At my confused look she elaborated, “Your armor is stained with blood.”

What the... I looked down and saw nothing. Everything looked in order. My armor had gone through a recent significant upgrade after my trip to Minos. My gloves, bracers, cuirass and greaves, all black, were spotless as far as I could see. I didn't polish the material, as it wasn't metal, but I certainly kept it clean. And though I could wear it openly in lieu of clothes, it wasn't exactly a look that was inconspicuous, so I almost always wore clothes over the armor. Thankfully the materials technology was advanced enough to include some temperature regulation.

"On the microscopic level you're virtually covered in blood," the doctor explained. "I'm picking up Cardassian, Bajoran, human and some that are indeterminate. Whatever your armor is made of makes it difficult for me to get a clear scan, but the blood and DNA are there and scannable, even if you can't see it with the naked eye."

Well, fuck me. Guess I'd have to change up my maintenance procedures in the future to remove microscopic traces like this. The human blood was strange though. I had been in a few fights, although I didn't remember bleeding, so I had no idea where the human blood come had came from. The guy in the bar whose arm I'd broken hadn't actually bled either.

"Aren't you going to inquire about the blood?" I asked the doctor.

She shook her head.

"No, but if you'd like to talk about it doctor-patient confidentiality would apply, even if you aren't a member of the crew," she said.

Doctor-patient confidentiality was a medical and legal concept used in many cultures, including the Federation. It held that information regarding an individual's medical condition and any related communications are protected from being divulged by the doctor to any third party without the patient's consent. This applied to any third party, but especially to police agencies or other forms of authority, such as Starfleet.

"The only time I'm allowed to mention anything I discover during such a medical exam is if it's something that may affect the welfare of the people on this ship," the doctor explained. "I doubt you getting into a few bar fights will put the crew of the *Enterprise* in any danger."

Well, that wasn't how the blood had gotten onto my armor, but it was for the best that she thought it was because of something as mundane as that. She probably wouldn't be quite so sanguine about it if she knew the truth. Beheading Cardassians was a messy business, the blood spray when the head was suddenly separated from the body was not unlike that of a fountain,

though being soaked in Cardassian blood from head to toe did wonders in crafting a fearsome reputation in the Bajoran resistance.

"I can provide you with a change of clothes while your armor is being cleaned," Beverly offered. "No charge," she added jokingly.

I very maturely stuck my tongue out at her in response.

While the beautiful red-headed doctor had seen me naked many times before and I wasn't all that shy with my body these days, there were numerous others in sickbay at the moment, so I went behind the screen and changed into something that made me feel all 24th century civilized. I would have to get to a replicator and go through the ship's historical archives again in order to get myself something I could wear without feeling like some kind of commie hippy, but it was better than being naked. But only by a little. A Khan-era augment had nothing to be ashamed of body wise. Of course, I could replicate it back on my ship, but why use my ship's energy when I could get clothes and other items here for free. Petty? Maybe.

Once I was done getting dressed the exam began, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Kira getting the same treatment.

"That's odd, you have an extremely elevated level of toxicity in your bloodstream," I was told.

This was to be expected. Wasn't alcohol considered a toxin?

"I was drinking in a bar," I said.

Crusher looked worried, examining the blood work results.

"What on Earth were you drinking, Gothic?!" she asked. "This isn't alcohol, there's enough poison in your bloodstream to disable or kill an adult human male twice over."

What the fuck?? I just felt happy, maybe a little buzzed. Had someone tried to kill me in that bar? I had been asking a lot of questions about some rather dangerous people. Maybe someone wasn't happy I was investigating them?

"I'm not a normal man," I reminded the doctor with a grin that masked my true thoughts. "I'm super human."

Crusher still looked worried.

"Any addiction, even for you, can have serious ramifications to your health. Your body is capable of filtering toxins at a much higher level than a normal human, but even it has limits," I was informed.

That was when a nurse came over with a report, and he was the one whose wrist I'd broken when first waking up on the *Enterprise*. No surprise, the nurse didn't stick around for long.

"We've found the same substances, just in a much smaller dose, in your friend too," Beverly reported. "When drinking in a bar that serves many different species you have to be more careful about what you ingest. A bartender who doesn't care much for his customers' wellbeing might serve you something not fit for humans and species much like ours, such as Bajorans."

I'd have to go back to that planet and hit that fucking ugly Ferengi behind the bar right in the face. He'd poisoned me and Kira, and not in that the way I'd wanted him to. Booze was *supposed* to be bad for you, but the impression I was getting was that we'd been drugged with something humans and Bajorans shouldn't have in their systems.

What I found odd was that I'd drunk Klingon blood wine, Romulan ale and Bajoran spring wine without getting this buzzed feeling I had now. I guess that should have been my first clue that something wasn't right. However, upon thinking about it more, I figured that those drinks must have been more carefully brewed and intended for a larger humanoid audience than the swill I'd gotten from the lumpy headed alien back at that frontier colony. He might have even adulterated the drinks somehow, mixing drinks intended for different species that weren't compatible.

"Anyone else who'd drank what you did probably would have been deathly ill. Your robust physiology just dealt with it by giving you a pleasant intoxicating effect. If you have any withdrawal symptoms, I can give you a hypospray, then slowly wean you off the substances," she offered. "Some of the substances are like the narcotics of your time so you may become sick, or, it's possible you may not notice anything at all. With your enhanced biology I really can't predict what will happen, but I don't think you're in any real danger."

She quickly changed the subject, I assumed, so that I couldn't reject her offer of medication out of hand. I had had marijuana during my deployment in Afghanistan and I wasn't feeling anything like that.

"Other than that, and a similarly elevated blood alcohol level, you're remarkably healthy," I was told. "Your muscle mass and elasticity, bone density, and neural activity, all have increased beyond any realistic measure since the last time I examined you."

I was in far better shape now than I had been when I first arrived in this dimension, or awoke to find myself made anew as an Augment. The crazy amounts of sex and heart pumping combat was probably helping recently, but I had been just settling into what was essentially my new body the last time she'd examined me medically. I had broken down my body and rebuilt it through hours and hours of hard training over many months. Of course, Beverly saw a difference.

"Well, that's good," I remarked, before getting off the biobed.

"How's Kira?" I asked, this time more earnestly.

I was far more concerned about her. She'd grown up in a refugee camp and had experienced long-term malnutrition, like so many other Bajorans. Drinking stuff not meant for humans and Bajorans probably didn't help her health and she didn't have a genetically enhanced body to help

her deal with toxins. She was strong and mostly healthy, used to hard living, but she didn't have my advantages.

"She should be able to leave sickbay in a day or two," the doc answered. "I need to deal with her malnutrition, and some other minor problems. There's nothing life threatening, though, thankfully. I promise, though, she'll be far better when she leaves than when she arrived."

Beverly's smile was reassuring. Kira was strong, but she'd never had enough to eat while growing up and that may have affected her in ways that very few humans had to experience any more.

Before I could go over and check on... whatever it was Kira was to me these days. Riker came into sickbay. He was the acting Captain of the ship now so I decided to be a bit more respectful than normal on the off chance that Picard actually was dead, which was something I was starting to seriously doubt as this situation was reminding me of an episode when everyone thought Picard was dead only he was actually undercover. Still, I needed a favor from the commanding officer of this ship so there was no sense in being rude.

"We need to talk," Riker said.

I gave him a polite smile in response.

"How may I be of service?" I asked politely.

Riker immediately got down to business.

"I just went over the information you got about the mercenaries and it mentions something about the Debrune," Riker told me.

I nodded in recognition. I'd never heard that word before talking to the bartender, or if I had I'd failed to remember it. I'd put it in the report just in case it was important, and as it turned out it had been a smart thing to do.

"The closest Debrune outpost is on Barradas III," Riker continued.

Again, this meant nothing to me.

"It was abandoned nearly two thousand years ago," the Commander said. "The Debrune were an ancient offshoot of the Romulans, so the mercenaries are probably in the artifacts trade, the looting of ruins and so on. There can be a lot of money in that."

Now this was starting to make more sense. Picard did like his ancient relics, and while he'd humbly describe himself as an amateur archaeologist and historian at best, was extremely knowledgeable in the field. I remembered a two-parter in one of the later seasons involving an Vulcan psionic weapon known as the Stone of Gol, but it was far too early in the time line for that adventure.

Riker would know why the captain had gone off to that frontier colony, and he wasn't telling me even now that I had provided him actionable intelligence, so I assumed that it was classified. Also, he didn't seem overly worried, so I assumed that he was at least somewhat aware of the mission and that he didn't think Picard was really dead. Maybe he had scientific proof of that, or maybe he just had faith that Picard hadn't met his end in so ignominious a way as being vaporized on the floor of a dirty bar on a shitty frontier colony world. That'd be a terrible end for such a legendary man.

The information I'd provided Riker supported this faith/hope. While Picard had been shot, or at least looked like he'd been shot, the bartender didn't know if he was actually dead. He had said there was something not quite right about the energy beam that had hit the captain.

"Maybe the mercs are using it as a base," I suggested. "They might have chosen to take Picard for ransom or have some use for his skills with ancient artifacts."

Riker nodded in agreement.

"We'll know more when we arrive on Barradas III," he said.

That was when something struck me, just not in the physical sense.

"If these Debrune are connected to the ancient Romulans then won't their outposts be a long way from here?" I asked.

The Romulan border with the Federation stretched quite far, but not to this sector of the galaxy, and a mercenary ship wouldn't be able to easily make such a long trip like the *Enterprise* could, so perhaps it wasn't that far away really. These Debrune could have had many outposts far outside of Romulan space.

"We'll have to push the engines," Riker said, "but we'll be able to get there within a week."

I had a request to make.

"Commander, meeting in that bar was not an accident. I specifically sought out the *Enterprise* to make a request of the Captain. I'd like to stay onboard while the fate of the captain is still undetermined and until my companion is released from medical," I asked the Commander. "Doctor Crusher wants to keep her in sickbay for a while to treat her."

Riker nodded and I wasn't at all surprised that he would want me around a little longer. I'd already proven myself to be useful, so he had to be thinking that I could be useful again during this mission. He was right.

"I'll have someone show you to guest quarters," the Commander replied, before taking his leave.

Until then I'd talk to Kira and make sure that she didn't do anything to offend the ship's medical personnel who were just trying to make her healthy. Kira wasn't exactly a child, but she could be

overly aggressive at times and needed a firm hand to keep her in check and I wouldn't put it past her to refuse medical aid out of sheer stubbornness. She was rather like a guy in that way.

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Guest Quarters. Onboard the *Enterprise*.

"Computer," I called aloud in the quarters I'd be staying in for at least a week. "Play some music, any classic rock from Earth in the database, circa 1980s CE. Play it loud, say 70 decibels."

"Acknowledged."

Properly phrasing commands to a Federation computer had taken some time to learn, but I felt I was pretty proficient now, since I hadn't been asked a thousand follow-up questions like the last time I was onboard.

While I was here and had access to the Federation database, I figured I'd cross off an item on my to-do list that I'd had for a while.

"Interlink with my ship's database in the main shuttle bay, transfer a copy of all music, films, and books from Earth's cultural database, circa 20th and 21st century CE."

"Upload commenced, transfer will complete in 32 minutes," the computer responded.

Next I ordered a fully loaded sandwich on a wonderful 16 inch French baguette and promptly ate the majority of it in less than minute. I might as well have inhaled it. I had no doubt that the Bajorans had a unique cuisine that I would one day enjoy, but I hadn't exactly had the opportunity during my time there so far, when the planet's people could barely feed themselves. As I'd found out during multiple missions, that was no accident. The Cardassians did everything they could to keep the populace half-starved and weak, from poisoning farmland to indiscriminately killing wildlife so the Bajorans couldn't supplement their diet with hunting.

I had had to supplement my own diet with numerous Starfleet emergency rations to keep going. This body had amazing capabilities, but it required a large intake of energy that was very inconvenient at times. It was a weakness that I hoped to one day overcome or find a solution for.

When the door chime went off, my mouth was empty, but I was well on the way to placing another order at Chez Replicator. It was amazing how quickly I'd gotten used to and then begun to miss my ship's replicator on Bajor.

"Come in," I invited.

None other than Jadzia Dax herself walked into the room looking rather pleased about something, though she was visibly hunched over and struggling to carry something into my quarters. It was my armor. I wasn't surprised she was struggling. The materials technology

involved in its creation were advanced but they would be very heavy for most humans to routinely wear under their clothes. Luckily, I was made of stronger stuff.

"Computer, music off," I ordered.

I went over and easily took my armor off the Trill woman. I noted that it looked and almost felt brand new, like that feeling you got after your car had just been detailed inside and out. It even smelled rather good now. The *Enterprise* crew did some good work. 24th century dry cleaning was amazing! There were very few creature comforts like a shower on Bajor. The best I could hope for was a bone chilling bath in a river or a pond on Bajor once every few weeks or so, so my armor could get rather ripe.

"Oh, you got the ambassador quarters," she said, smiling, skipping any pleasantries that would be normal for two people who hadn't seen each other in a long while. "Somebody's moved up in the world."

They were much nicer quarters than the ones I'd stayed in last time. Riker had to be expressing his thanks for my aid down on the planet.

"Not quite as good as my suite on Risa, but it'll work," I replied with a grin, happy to see Jadzia again. "My recent accommodations have been rather...rustic."

"Sounds like a pretty frugal life without much fun," Jadzia mused as she looked around, swishing her hips in a way that I knew was entirely on purpose. "I don't think that would be for me. I intend to have plenty of fun."

She was a party girl.

"I don't need to be telepathic to read your intent, lieutenant," I said with a smile.

Clearly this was a booty call of some sort. She had a twinkle in her eye that suggested mischief. I was more than happy to oblige.

"I hope getting you to stop calling me 'lieutenant' while you're onboard won't be a monumental task," she remarked, smiling back at me.

I'd never seen her in a Starfleet uniform before now; swimsuits and sheer dresses had been the order of the day on Risa. I had to admit, she made it look sexy. Still, it made me think of her more as Lieutenant Dax, rather than simply Jadzia.

"So, what did you come by for?" I wondered, playing coy.

As if I didn't know.

"I was thinking that perhaps we could go to the holodeck and run through an exercise program of mine," she answered. "I've been meaning to use it to get a long, hard, sweaty work out."

As had I. Reaching this area of space had taken a good while, and I'd spent too long cramped up onboard my small ship, despite my pleasant company. A good work out would get the blood flowing before Jadzia lost her patience and demanded Augment-level sex.

"Sounds like fun," I said. "I'll change into something I don't mind getting sweaty in."

Jadzia smiled at me wickedly, and I didn't know in that moment if I should be really aroused or really worried.

"I'll go get my bathing suit," she said, "met meet me in holodeck 3 in about fifteen minutes."

Oh yes, aroused it was.

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Holodeck 3. Onboard the *Enterprise*.

"This? This is why I put on my smallest bikini?!" Dax declared in exasperation as she took in what the holodeck had to offer.

She was indeed wearing a *very* small bikini, having taken off the robe she'd had on over it. It was a shiny gold in coloration, the top of which barely contained her ample and very perky breasts. For that matter it did little to conceal her perfect behind, a small string going between her cheeks and similarly leaving almost nothing to the imagination in the front either.

The image was somewhat ruined by the circumstances she found herself in now, a dead and blasted landscape with a burning sky, surrounded by barren razor-sharp rocks, all of which was glared upon by an unrelenting blood-red sun. There was not a drop of water to be found in this desolate place and provided a rather harsh juxtaposition with her very sexy bikini.

To complete the setting, I was currently wearing my full blackened armor, currently dripping with the colorful blood of several different alien races, and was carrying a holographic copy of my sword in one hand and my combat knife in the other. I'd gotten to the holodeck well before Jadzia, and since she'd been running late I'd started running one of Worf's most advanced combat programs, not just for fun though, but to keep my fighting skills sharp and test how far I'd come in my training. I was pretty sure I'd destroyed his 'high score.' Was it wrong to hope he'd be pissed? Augment for the win!

"I was expecting something a little less...*apocalyptic*...and perhaps a little more to the relaxing, fun and sexy," Jadzia grumbled good naturedly. "How silly of me. I wonder what I was thinking."

My guess was something involving swimming and powder white beaches and beach-side cabanas with frozen tropical drinks with fancy little umbrellas in them?

"It's a very nice outfit," I said in a conciliatory tone.

She was not happy.

"I will have you know I picked this up on Risa for a special occasion or special someone," the semi-pissed Starfleet Officer explained. "Just before I left to board the *Enterprise*. I've never even worn it until now."

Since she couldn't possibly have known we'd ever meet again I assumed she hadn't gotten it with me in mind. Still, it was a privilege to look at her while she wore it. She was a very sexy woman who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to act on that desire.

"Computer, please load Dax Risa Program One and run," Dax ordered.

The landscape around us immediately shifted and disappeared before being replaced by a beautiful beach, one that was skirting a calm ocean that was an exquisite shade of bright turquoise. The water was crystal clear. The sand was fine and white. The clouds overhead were fluffy. Dax smiled from ear to ear in delight. Now the tables were turned and my armor was providing the harsh juxtaposition.

I was greatly reminded of several beaches on Risa. From the name of Dax's program, she'd obviously been inspired by the planet. This might even be a real setting for all I knew.

"Now, Gothic, I need to ask you something," she said in a mock serious tone. "Do you really want to swim or is there something else you'd rather want to do?"

Despite my many enhancements I still didn't get women. Jadzia could just be teasing and actually want to go swimming, or could possibly be more interested in the sex rather than the swimming, or this could be a test to determine if I was only interested in sex with her and nothing else. If so, saying I wanted sex over swimming meant that I had failed and thus I would get no sex.

This was getting fucking confusing. Women could be such cruel creatures and sex might not even be on offer. It made me thankful for Kira. Most of the time she just kept at least some of her clothes off to let me know that sex was available. Perhaps Bajoran women didn't understand the idea of being a tease? Or maybe the Prophets didn't support that kind of thing? In which case, thank you Prophets!

"I want to... copulate?" I answered, though it came off more as a question.

It was the bikini that was causing me to be silly. I didn't think there was currently enough blood for both my huge erection (if I did say so) and my brain.

"Not the word I would have chosen, but yes." Dax replied happily, "and now that we've established that..."

She slowly undid the knot at the back of her bikini top and let the tiny item fall away from her body.

"What do you have to say about this?" she asked.

The bikini, even while half of it was on the floor, had a strange power over me. It was tricky to form a sentence, but with effort I took control of myself.

"Take off the rest," I ordered.

I was rather used to having my way during sex these days so it was a surprise when Jadzia started to obey and then inexplicably stopped.

"You can't take it off yourself," she said. "If you can catch me!"

With that she ran off into the water, which was real water judging by all the splashing, and I was left to strip off my body armor as quickly as possible before finally diving into the sea, like I was an ancient God of antiquity seeking to bed a sea nymph.

XXXXX

The Flighty Temptress. Enroute to Barradas III.

As it turned out, the mercenaries, who had either kidnapped or killed Captain Picard, possibly both by now, did have a base on Barradas III. That base had good long-range sensors, though not as good as the *Enterprise's*, of course, which was why the galaxy-class ship was able to detect the range of those sensors and had come to a full stop just outside their range. The plan was to take my ship to the planet, which didn't show up on long range scans. I'd play chauffeur to the away team tasked with rescuing Picard, to the planet.

We were heading to the planet at low warp speed, in order to reduce the chances of being spotted by any ships the mercenaries had, and it was dragging the journey out over an entire day. I didn't think this level of caution was truly warranted, but Riker had insisted.

I'd left Kira behind on the *Enterprise*, so instead of having her diverting company to while the time away I was stuck with Riker, who was flying my ship rather well, Data, who I was eager to deepen my relationship with, Worf, who wasn't doing much talking to me these days, and a red-shirted ensign who was most likely going to die on this mission so I hadn't bothered to even learn his name. I felt kind of bad for the dude, but the universe seemingly demanded his sacrifice to let the viewers at home know how serious this all was. Sorry Ensign No Name, your death was decreed by the universe.

It was a small team considering we were going up against a gang of ruthless mercenaries, but that was standard procedure for Starfleet and again, Riker wouldn't hear otherwise! My ship could support a team that was 10x larger for this relatively short journey, yet he couldn't be convinced to take a larger team. He didn't even have this small team outfitted with heavier weapons, like Type-3 phaser rifles, despite my strong suggestion. They were not Augments like me who were as deadly with a phaser pistol as they were with a phaser rifle.

Riker's plan was to sneak in and rescue Picard, not make a full-on assault I was told. This kind of ridiculous thinking was why Ensign No Name was going to freaking die within the first 5 minutes on the planet, mark my words. They weren't even wearing any kind of body armor. Even in 21st century Iraq and Afghanistan you wouldn't find me without my body armor and helmet and full kit of weapons while away from base. It was like these fools thought they were taking a casual stroll through the forest, rather than potentially entering a firefight. Whatever. It was their lives on the line.

Data and I were currently fiddling with the small two-pad transporter that had been recently installed on my ship, near the back of the main cargo bay, which sat directly under the cockpit. As it was a two-pad Starfleet transporter, it was officially rated for only two people to be transported at any one time, but the two pads could also be used to transport cargo. I had considered installing it in the cockpit itself, as there was room, similar to how a Runabout-class ship did it, but it seemed like a bad idea. Yes, it'd be quite convenient, but it also felt like a security risk. Having the transporter in the cargo bay also meant that it could be used for the transport of cargo, which I still had plans to do in the future to make more money.

The transporter required a significant amount of energy to operate, even at minimum capabilities, so the android and I were forced to reroute power, which had involved temporarily taking the shields and weapons entirely offline, so hopefully we wouldn't be attacked until after we were done because those systems would be unavailable entirely till after we finished.

I was feeling mighty smug about all this. When Riker had asked for the use of my ship, I had initially declined, saying how sorry I was, that I would love to help *but* that my ship's lack of transporter capability would put the mission, the away team, and Picard at heightened risk. Just like I had hoped, Riker offered to add a transporter to my ship for free, one that I could keep after the mission was over. Hells yes!

An entire engineering team of highly skilled folks had worked overtime installing the transporter but hadn't had the time to hook up the technology to my ship's power grid. All of this was for free. I was still going to insist on mission pay, but truth was, I would have happily done this and a whole slew more in exchange for the transporter alone.

"What is the purpose of this device?" Data asked me, gesturing to an object in my tool box.

"It's something I came up with; I call it a 'holotool,'" I answered the android. "It uses a small holo-emitter and a force field generator to mimic a number of different tools, mostly engineering related tools. It can mimic simple tools, like a hammer or a wrench, to more complex tools like a hyperspanner or a phase modulator, whatever you need really that has already been scanned into its memory."

I picked up the device and made it create assume a number of different tools.

"The power requirements for such a device would likely be quite high," Data commented, looking interested, turning it over in his hand and examining it from multiple angles, "but I can certainly see its utility. A single tool that can mimic the functionality of so many other tools

would be useful not only in the field, but onboard a starship as well. My friend, Geordi, would be quite excited at the idea. Many times in the past, he and I have been on away missions where we could have benefitted from such a versatile device.”

Having watched multiple Star Trek shows, I knew the truth of that statement. I had seen away teams come up with overly complex and elaborate solutions to problems that wouldn't have even been problems if the right tool had been available at the right time. Sure, in a television show that was okay, as it gave the characters a chance to show off how clever they were, to up the drama and urgency of the episode, however, in real life, you couldn't always rely on someone having some brilliant plan that could save the day at the last moment.

I decided to give Data the holotool. He'd been a great help to me when I had initially arrived on the *Enterprise* and had helped me with a number of early design challenges when I had been tinkering around. Some of my early armor designs had been inspired by conversations with the man who had given generously of his time. It was only fair that I gave him something in return, plus it would preserve my ability to ask him for assistance in the future, should I need it.

"You can have that one, Data," I told the android. "It's the prototype design. I'm already working on a better model with a few more features. I would be honored if you and Geordi used it in the field, onboard the *Enterprise*, and provided me with some feedback for improvements. Just don't share the design with anyone else as I haven't patented it yet. Down the line I may license the replicator pattern to Starfleet operations for use onboard their ships and facilities.”

“Geordi and I would be honored to test it in the field and provide feedback,” Data responded eagerly. “We will not share the design with anyone else, or allow anyone to scan or examine its workings without your permission.

If this was anyone else, I wouldn't have let my prototype out of my sight, especially before it had patent protection. It was too easy in the modern day to take detailed engineering scans and replicate a copy by the millions. That's why you often licensed the replicator pattern itself and would get paid each time it was replicated. The Federation and most of the major powers would honor the licensing fees meticulously, though that didn't stop black market copies from inevitably showing up that didn't. That was the cost of doing business in the modern day, but it did mean an inventor could do what he did best and just release the replicator pattern, assuming everything beyond the power cell was replicable in the design. No longer did you need to build the thing yourself, or hire factories, etc. Some things, though, were too complex or used non-replicable components and then you needed to manufacture and distribute the old-fashioned way.

Data was a scrupulously honest being, so I'm sure he'd ensure that the design was kept safe. It would be an incredible boon to me to have the holotool design tested on the flagship, by people as well-known and well-respected as Geordi LaForge and Data. They would likely have some great ideas for improvements I could implement and their endorsement would be worth a lot when I submitted the proposal to Starfleet Operations.

“I already have plans to add an alternative source of power, like a small solar cell, or some kind of kinetic motion based regenerative power source,” I shared. I was always excited to build

things, which was what had attracted me to the combat engineer role in the first place. "On a frontier colony power generation could be an issue, or if you're stranded on an alien planet, simply set it out to charge in the sun for a few hours and the holotool can be used again."

I imagined that the holotool could do quite well on far flung Federation colonies where they didn't have all the fancy Starfleet tech or unlimited power for replication of new tools.

"What is this device?" Data asked, while picking up a stun grenade I had stashed in my tool box. Man, I really needed to clean up my stuff. That should have been in the armory, not in my tool box.

I gently took the weapon off him.

"It's a combination flesh/bang and stun grenade," I answered. "You press the activator button, throw it into a room and it will render everyone in its blast radius unconscious or severely disoriented should they prove resistant to the stun effect."

Data spent a moment thinking before saying anything else.

"Why not simply use a phaser set on wide beam?" he enquired.

I had an answer ready, I had an answer ready even when I was back in my old life watching the shows and shaking my head at this wild west shootout bullshit.

"Because you can throw a stun grenade into a room full of heavily armed people without ever exposing yourself to weapon's fire," I informed the android. "Plus no one seems to use grenades anymore so they never expect them to be used against them. I have an advanced multi-mode plasma grenade that I also use for more...*permanent* solutions."

Humans had forgotten so much about advanced warfare that they once knew; I could only be thankful that most everyone else was bad at it as well.

"We'll be at Barradas III in half an hour!" Riker shouted down from the cockpit into the cargo bay. "Is the transporter ready?"

The plan was actually to land the ship, rather than have anyone beam down onto the surface, the transporter would only be used to quickly recover Picard should he be unable to walk or if the opportunity presented itself to grab him without conflict, or if a quick escape for the team was required.

"It will be, Commander," Data assured. "We are completing our final power system diagnostics."

I'd be happy when the Starfleet personnel were off my ship. Data was actually pretty good company, but the *Flighty Temptress* should only be piloted by me and it shouldn't have anyone else onboard who wasn't a hot chick willing to blow me at the drop of a hat. It just seemed wrong any other way.

Thankfully, they hadn't noticed the shielded compartments that were used to hide the weapons I had smuggled to Bajor. Those compartments were currently empty right now, but their mere existence would raise uncomfortable questions that I really didn't want to answer.

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Ancient Ruins. Barradas III.

The only energy signature on the whole planet was coming from this area, yet we hadn't found any signs of civilization aside from some stone ruins that looked more like something SG1 would investigate after stepping through the Stargate, which coincidentally always looked like the verdant green forests of Vancouver where the show was filmed, go figure.

As I looked around I saw Riker point to part of the forest while talking to his fellow Starfleet officers.

"Commander Data, Ensign Dadrian, you go in that direction," he ordered. "Gothic and I will search this area; if you find anything contact us immediately."

He then noticed my modified 23rd century Type- 2 phaser in hand, which was legal for me to own and for which I had a license on file, and stepped back a pace or two. I think he also took notice of the sword strapped to my back and my combat knife strapped to my hip.

"A sword, Gothic?" Riker asked, a curious mix of alarmed and amused.

"The Klingons don't have the monopoly on bladed weapons, Commander," I responded, scanning the area continuously. "Even in an age of energy weapons they still have utility."

"I see," Riker said, looking incredulous. "If you're going to keep that phaser un-holstered while we walk, I want you to walk in front of me," he requested.

I feigned offense.

"Commander, I have a Class-1 weapons license on file. I'm allowed to purchase, own, and carry up to Type-3 phaser rifles throughout the Federation," I replied.

He smiled.

"That's impressive, but I've never seen you shoot myself," he said. "Just because you are genetically enhanced doesn't mean that you're a good shot or have good weapon discipline in a highly charged and emotional situation like an away mission."

I turned fully now to look at Riker.

"First, I am an *amazing* shot and had a perfect marksmanship score in the licensing exam. You don't get a Class-1 weapons license without being a great shot," I pointed out. "Given the

prejudices Augments face, I don't like pointing this out so blatantly, but I have enhanced hand-eye coordination and spatial acuity. Like I told someone once before, I could vaporize a Terran house fly at 30 feet, mid-flight, narrow beam. Second, I was in my country's military for several years and was deployed in two countries with active combat zones; you are the inexperienced one in this equation by comparison. I'm actually far more worried that you might accidentally shoot me by accident."

A stormy look appeared on his face for a second or two at the reminder of my abilities and what he probably viewed as an Augment's superiority complex or arrogance.

"I meant no offense, if you are worried about your safety, all the more reason to walk beside me then," he compromised.

"Picking up anything?" I questioned, as we walked.

Riker had started scanning the area with his trusty tricorder.

"It's tough to get accurate sensor readings here," he told me. "There's an awful lot of interference in the area."

There were any number of things that could mess up a tricorder's readings. Some were natural, others were decidedly not.

"Any idea of the cause?" I asked while scanning my surroundings with my eyes. I'd let him do all the scanning. It was safer for me that way if I needed to jump out of the way.

Riker soon replied.

"I'm not sure. It's very unlocalized, so it could be atmospheric," he said.

Riker then pointed to a series of holes in the ground.

"What do you make of these?" he enquired.

We approached the holes and knelt down. Riker picked up a rock and examined it both visually and with his tricorder. I bent down to take a closer look too.

"At first glance these appear to be blast points, but the shape is too perfect, too uniform," I mused.

The holes were bone dry, which suggested that they had been dug after the last time it had rained.

"These indentations were made fairly recently, and they're too small for holes dug up by treasure hunters," the commander said. "Could be the site of some battlefield."

I wasn't so sure about that.

"This doesn't look like anything made by an explosives and energy weapons don't typically make holes in the ground," I commented. "At least not ones this deep and this uniform."

Perhaps a land mine of some sort had been buried here? Finding and disarming unexploded landmines, then deploying them elsewhere or just taking out the explosives in them, had been a very serious and common problem in my time in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many allied troops had been killed or maimed by such things. Perhaps some aliens had long ago mined these ruins and someone had recently decided to repurpose these ancient weapons.

"Commander Riker, we've found something," Data said over the comm badges we all wore. I had been provided one for the mission so that I could communicate with the rest of the team.

We got to Data just in time to see multiple blue white energy bolts blast hit the Ensign assigned to the team square in the chest, killing him instantly, and I was not at all surprised to see him die. Throwaway minor characters did not often survive away missions in the Star Trek universe. The remaining Starfleet officers and I threw ourselves behind some cover.

I idly wondered if I could cause the universe to hiccup by saving one of these no names fated to die ignobly on yet another away mission. It had always been bizarre to me that no one seemed to care all that much about these dudes dying all the time, like it was business as usual.

"They know we're here now," Riker said. "I'll call in the *Enterprise*."

Normally the standard issue comm devices badges wouldn't be able to reach the starship at this range, however my ship was acting as a communications relay. It had always been part of the plan to call the galaxy-class starship in if things went south and the element of surprise was lost.

"*Enterprise*! We are under attack down here. Repeat! We are under attack!" the Commander shouted.

The starship wouldn't take long to get here at maximum warp, but nor would it arrive right away, so we had to fight.

"I'm going to head for those trees over there. If I can get there we might be able to set up a crossfire," Riker told us. "Give me some covering fire."

You have got to be kidding me. Seeing this on a television screen versus seeing it play out in real life was a surreal experience. This seemed foolish as I could deal with the mercenaries so much quicker and in far safer a fashion.

"Let me handle this," I said.

Riker called out my name, while perhaps thinking I was about to do something foolish like charge the mercenaries, something which wouldn't have been all that hard really for me

considering the number of trees I could duck behind for cover, but my plan was much more sane than that.

Taking a quick glance out of cover to identify our attackers' current positions, I outstretched my left guide hand like I had once been taught, what felt like a lifetime ago back in basic training, and threw a stun grenade with my right, with all the precision and strength my genetic enhancements offered. Then I waited. I'm not above admitting that I showed off a little by bouncing the grenade off three trees before it landed directly in the middle of the group of mercenaries who could only stare dumbly at the unknown object that had landed at their feet. I had considered using a plasma grenade to kill them all, but this wasn't Bajor and that level of force would probably see me in the brig or something knowing how righteous these people were.

A thunderous boom, which told me I had used the flash bang/stun grenade variant I had designed, the forest was quiet and no one was firing anymore.

"Okay, now we wake one of them up and ask where Picard is," I explained to Riker, who was stunned speechless.

He looked so confused, as if I had said 'up was down and black was white' and he couldn't quite figure out what I'd just done and didn't I hear that he was going to 'head for the trees' and circle around all heroically?

"That was a stun grenade," I explained. "It's like a small bomb you can throw, only it doesn't explode, it just stuns everyone within the blast radius."

These Starfleet types seriously needed to invest in more weaponry than phasers. Sure, they were explorers and peacemakers and all that, and while that meant they wouldn't stock up on the lethal stuff, there were a lot of options for knocking people out at a distance without some long and ridiculous firefight like they were trading shots in the old West.

I had the distinct feeling, though, that even with this display showing how effective it could be, nothing would actually change and plenty more red-shirted Ensign No Names in the future would die on away teams.

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Conference Room. Onboard the *Enterprise*.

Not long after recovering Picard, who the mercenaries had kidnapped and put to work after Picard had asked one too many suspicious questions about their operations, I got the chance to finally meet with the Captain so that I could request the favor that had brought me out here in the first place.

"This Orb, as you say the Bajoran people call it, is what made you seek out the *Enterprise*?" Picard asked.

I gently placed the orb, which was inside its jeweled and ornate box, on the big conference table, which took up most of the space within this room. Then I turned to face the captain of this fine vessel.

"The vedek I met requested that I take the Orb off Bajor, to keep it safe from the Cardassians. It will be returned to Bajor once the danger to it has passed," I explained. "It's very important to the Bajoran people and needs to be kept safe."

Picard examined the box with the eye of someone used to inspecting ancient artifacts.

"You are asking that I keep it aboard the *Enterprise*? You believe it will be safe here with me?" he asked.

That was the plan.

"I am and I do," I answered the Starfleet officer. "I have a great deal of respect for both you and the *Enterprise* and feel the Orb will be safest with you."

Picard appeared to accept my compliment, but still looked unsure.

"I must admit, my knowledge of Bajoran religion and the specific significance of this object is extremely limited," Picard admitted.

"The Orbs of the Prophets or Tears of the Prophets are considered the gifts of the Prophets to their chosen people. The Prophets being the Gods of the Bajorans. The Orbs are central to their religion, offering tangible communication with their Gods," I explained. "Do you appreciate what I'm saying, Captain? Imagine having such faith and being able to communicate with your Gods. The orbs are akin to the Holy Grail on Earth, but far more real."

The look of incredulity on Picard's face was understandable.

"Tangible?? Real? I do not understand," Picard said.

"They possess real power, Captain. They can offer some form of personal insight or divination into the future, they can grant visions of other places and times, the past, the present, the future. Whether you believe any of this or not, is *irrelevant*, they are important to the Bajoran people and the Cardassians have raped and pillaged Bajor for far less. It needs to be kept somewhere safe and protected, until it can be returned to the Bajoran people, which will be in a year or so according to the vedek I spoke with. I doubt the Occupation of Bajor will go on for much longer than that, honestly."

I truly believed that. And that wasn't even based on my knowledge of the future, in fact it had more to do with the news programs. The Federation and the Cardassian Union were getting close to the point where a new peace treaty would be signed. This treaty would open up whole new worlds for the spoon heads to colonize or strip mine, ones that didn't have irate Bajorans living

on them willing to do anything and everything, including dying for their cause, or killing them and/or blowing up everything even remotely of value, to drive them off the planet.

Picard's eyes were locked onto the ornate and jeweled box. I had no doubt that he would try to scientifically examine the Orb and find himself stymied by it entirely.

"Is it safe to have onboard my ship, Gothic?" Picard asked. That was a fair question.

"Perfectly safe as long as no one opens the box, but that doesn't mean anyone should mess with it or even know that it is here," I answered and warned simultaneously.

"I imagine that having such a holy relic returned at the right time would have a profound effect on the Bajoran people," Picard said after a long pause. "A sign of better things to come, perhaps?"

That could very well be the Prophets' plan.

"What I know is that I'm supposed to return it at the proper time," I told the Captain. "And I promised that I would, but it needs to be kept somewhere safe in the meantime, and I can't imagine you'd let such an important artifact fall into the wrong hands."

Picard stood up straight and adjusted his uniform.

"You're quite right," he agreed, looking almost wistful. This was a passion of his. "It's just a shame that I can't study it myself. I wouldn't do anything that risked damaging this...orb...or do anything to violate or disrespect the Bajorans' beliefs. I must admit, though, it is rather tempting to try to learn as much as I can about it."

Hmmm, it seems I was mistaken, and he wasn't going to scientifically examine it. The man was just as honorable as he appeared on television.

I decided then and there that perhaps Picard *should* take a look. If the Prophets truly didn't want him to see a bit of the future, or get some guidance in this case, if that wasn't a part of their grand cosmic plan, then all he would see was a glowing alien object, shaped like a rotating hourglass. I'd do as the Bajorans do and simply trust in the Prophets' judgment. If they wanted to share something with Picard, then they would, if they didn't, it'd just be a fancy lightshow.

"Look if you wish," I said, deciding to speak more freely now. "Just don't show it to anyone else. It's a priceless relic with power both wonderful and terrible and not everyone in the galaxy respects other cultures as much as you do or has as much honor."

I had been tempted to open it again. More than mere curiosity had motivated me before, perhaps it was the will of the Prophets, and if Picard was feeling it too then it made sense that he was supposed to open it.

Looking uncertainly at me for a short time, he eventually did. For a moment there was a burst of green light that reached out and enveloped Picard, and before more than 5 seconds or so had passed, Picard was closing the box. I knew that he'd seen something that had affected him greatly, he had that look in his eyes that I'd seen both in the Bajoran vedek and later in my own mirror.

"That was..." he started to say, sounding almost breathless, before shaking his head in awe, slowly regaining his composure and turning to me. "Yes, you're right, this artifact *must* be protected at all costs and returned to the Bajoran people when you think that time has come. There will be no tests and I will ensure that no one else even realizes that it is more than a mere curiosity I have picked up during my many travels."

I didn't know what the Captain had seen, but I knew very well the profound effect an orb vision could have.

"Thank you, Captain," I said sincerely.

My gamble had paid off; the Prophets had wanted Picard to *see* so I knew the orb was in the right place. I was about to leave when Picard softly called out my name.

"Gothic, you've had a similar experience, haven't you?" he asked.

I just nodded my head silently, and then left the room. There was no need to say anymore because we both knew that what we'd been shown was too personal to share and meant only for us. My vision had been an affirmation of the future, and where I should be. It had also given me ideas to pursue. His, like her personality, probably had weighty, momentous, substance. I hope the experience served him well.

It was time to go, Kira would be out of sickbay by now and I didn't want her running into Dax.

That could cause me a whole new set of problems, so it was best to leave the *Enterprise* quickly and get back to Bajor as soon as possible, after picking up some more weapons to smuggle to the rebels. Unfortunately, the pretense of coming to Bajor to sell farming equipment wasn't possible anymore after my run in with Dukat, but it should still be possible to get to the planet undetected.

It'd probably be a good idea to make shameless use of the replicator in my quarters before I left as well, to stock up on some goodies. Oh, and before I left, I was going to make sure that Riker got me paid.

I did so love to get paid.