

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

**“In any story, the villain is the catalyst. The hero’s not a person who will bend the rules or show the cracks in his armor. He’s one-dimensional intentionally, but the villain is the person who owns up to what he is and stands by it.” – Marilyn Manson**

**“A good villain exudes charisma and power. He has principles, though; that just gives him a level of dimension. It makes him seem to be a bit unpredictable because he’s usually deemed as some type of evil, ruthless person, and then he shows you his principles, and you don’t know what to think of it.” – Pusha T**

## **The Adventures of Augment Gothic**

### **Chapter 37**

#### **Medical Aid Camp 3. Capital City. Kessik IV.**

Beaming near one of the many medical aid camps in the capital, I found what could best be described as controlled chaos. The tent, and that’s what it really was no matter how nice it was, was one of those prefab, easy to install, Federation models, that could be put up in a short time and withstand some pretty extreme environmental conditions. It even came with power distribution conduits built in. Underneath its roof were hundreds of people in need of varying levels of medical attention in the capital, portable fusion generators feeding the various sections with the power needed to keep all the computers and modern medical equipment running.

According to our sensor scans this aid camp was one of half a dozen that had sprung up after the Collectors had attacked the planet from orbit. Their attack from orbit had caused the vast majority of the death and destruction that this world had suffered, but it had been only been worsened by the damage and violence their ground teams had then done.

I bent a little to step into the tent opening and came to a stop, taking the sight in, my eyes and ears sweeping over the entire covered area. The aid camp was organized quite well, with those with less serious injuries or medical conditions segregated to one area, with correspondingly fewer medical personnel bustling about. The next area was for those with more acute injuries, with more medical folks buzzing about like bees rendering aid. Another area was segregated entirely, which was likely a place where operations or other more involved life-saving medical procedures were being performed. One area, though, I could tell from the body shaped tray-style stasis units that went from the floor to the high ceiling, was a makeshift morgue, for those who *hadn’t* survived for whatever reason. A depressing number of these ‘slots’ were already reading as occupied.

All around were the citizens of Kessik IV, with varying looks of disbelief that their normally happy and joyous lives as Federation citizens had taken a truly terrible and quite unexpected turn. It must have been quite a shock to them that the suffering that they had only seen and read about on the various Federation news services had visited their quiet little world and small population. It was an unfortunately common aspect of humanity that no one expected those kinds

of horrors to befall them. No, no, that kind of thing happened to ‘other’ people, in ‘other’ places, not to them.

Family members surrounded various beds, clutching each other tightly, offering comfort and love, and companionship. My sensitive ears could also hear the terrible cries of despair and disbelief when a lost family member was found to be in critical condition or worse, already in the morgue. There were an equal number of cries of joy, though, at being reunited with family or learning that their loved ones had survived the attack. It was a cacophony of high emotion, a mix of the ultimate lows of life coupled with the ultimate highs, extremes that were common to those effected by the horrors of war.

“Can I help you, sir?” a young man in the garb of the planet’s internal security forces asked me, rather apprehensively. I somehow doubted that he had even had an opportunity to fire the type 2 phaser holstered to his side, despite the attack on his world. Those who had seen and survived combat had a little more mettle visible in their eyes.

He looked quite nervous at the sight of me, which really didn’t surprise me. I towered over him by a good 8 inches, my armor in its fluidic silver mode, two large and deadly looking sidearms on my hip and a sword handle peeking over my shoulder for a quick draw if needed. I had decided to keep my more powerful rifles and other weaponry in my inventory, considering the danger had mostly passed, but I would never be entirely unarmed unless it was an absolutely necessity.

“Yes, I’m looking for President Moss,” I answered gently, so as not to spook the young man. “I was told to meet her here. She’s expecting me.”

“Of course,” he said, taking out a padd, looking less nervous as this was a much more familiar situation for him. “Your name?”

“Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Force, Captain of the *Flighty Temptress*, a privately owned starship in orbit,” I replied.

His wide, shocked eyes told me that my reputation had preceded me.

“Admiral Gothic!” he exclaimed coming to rigid military attention, quickly thrusting out a hand to shake. I took it graciously as he vigorously shook my hand, his words coming out in a gush. “It’s an honor, sir! A real honor! Thank you, thank you, sir, for coming to our rescue. You saved this world and we will always be grateful to you!”

“You’re welcome, son,” I said in response, automatically falling into old habits when addressing junior officers, not knowing the young man’s name.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the young man’s exclamation had not gone unnoticed as dozens of nearby people began approaching us, reaching out a hand for me to shake, or even just to touch me.

“Thank you, sir. You saved my family!” said one older woman clutching her arms around what was probably her granddaughter, tears running down her face.

Dozens of people of all ages offered their own thanks, shaking hands, offering hugs and kisses. I graciously accepted them all, acknowledging their gratitude with a smile of my own and many a kind word in return. The children were the ones I paid the most attention to as I'd always felt more open and connected with them. They too, had not escaped the attack unscathed. Orbital bombardment didn't discriminate, and neither had the Collector ground teams when they attacked to gather people and technology.

Seeing small children with grievous injuries or missing limbs just hit harder, especially as it brought back a recent rather traumatizing memory. Thankfully, I was able to help create new biosynthetic limbs with my ship's advanced medical facilities to assuage some of my guilt and had given many to the planet's medical personnel, per their specific urgent needs and requests. It was irrelevant that Section 31 would be paying for them per the expense reimbursement clause in our agreement. Since the Federation didn't assign monetary value to such things, my pricing model was at my discretion, so I had chosen the prices assigned for such things on Ferenginar.

"That's enough, people, the Admiral needs to meet with President Moss," the young security officer called out, which settled most people, but I could still catch many sending me looks filled with heartfelt gratitude. It was a powerful feeling to be the recipient of all that gratitude, instead of fear and suspicion. "This way, Admiral."

With that the young man led me through a veritable maze of beds and different areas before I was directed to another recovery area. We stopped near a row of beds, all eyes already turned towards one area in particular with a woman sitting on a chair next to a bed where a human man laid, recovering from what looked like an antiproton weapon discharge. A large chunk of his flesh was just *missing*, but it appeared to be a glancing shot, which explained how he had survived what was normally an almost certain death. He would likely have a long recovery ahead of him, unfortunately, assuming he didn't succumb to an infection.

The man, who didn't seem capable of sitting up on his own, had his hand up. The young-looking woman was clasping it gently and warmly in both of her own, leaning close to him, obviously offering him what quiet comfort she could. She listened intently as the man quietly shared his ordeal with her, weeping softly at the loss of his wife and two young children who had been killed when the apartment building they lived in had exploded after being struck from orbit. He had survived only because he had been away at work, but his whispered words were wishes that he had died with them instead. I had no doubt that there were thousands of similarly heart wrenching stories just like this all over the planet today.

"That's President Moss," the security officer quietly revealed. "She's been visiting with many who were injured during the attack, or the surviving families of the dead, listening to their stories."

From the many grateful and adoring looks the President was being sent, her presence had granted many some small comfort in this most trying time in their lives. It was the sign of a great leader that she was here, listening and giving comfort where she could. T'Maz and my holographic doctors had worked closely with her staff and various parts of her government to assist in the recovery efforts in the last 12 hours or so. We had provided a great deal of technology and

medical supplies to assist with their recovery. Every report from my crew was that Kessik IV had an efficient and well-run government that was tirelessly working to help their citizens recover from this ordeal.

Our presence must have been felt as the blonde president turned slightly to glance in our direction briefly. I was shocked at the familiar face she wore. As the president was not yet done with her visit, I mentally requested a brief biographical information packet on the President of Kessik IV. Turning my inner wrist towards me, I received a brief biography on President Donna Moss. I had to stop myself from reacting. She even looked like the actress Janel Maloney from one of my favorite dramas, *The West Wing*, a woman I had always thought was hot. My Patron or Q was obviously fucking with me.

President Moss was in the second year of her second four-year term as President of Kessik IV and was 63 years old, but looked in her early 30s to my 20<sup>th</sup> century eyes. The medical technology of Star Trek really was freaking amazing. She had been elected to office in a landslide and every indication was that she was an effective leader whose policies had seen her world's population double during her time in office. That was quite an achievement.

Glancing back up, I saw that she was finishing her chat with her injured citizen and had gotten up and turned to face me.

"Admiral Gothic," she greeted politely, but warmly, after shaking my hand. "Let's step outside so as to not disturb the people recovering here."

"Of course," I said, nodding respectfully in affirmation and then following her out into the daylight, more security personnel forming up around us in a protective phalanx. I must have been in everyone's good books as no one tried to disarm me, even while around their President. As we stepped out, she turned back to the medical aid tent and sighed loudly, her eyes clouded with grief. She took a deep breath as if to fortify herself before she turned to me and met my eyes with a laser-like focus.

"Admiral Gothic, on behalf of the people of Kessik IV, I thank you for the great service you have done for this world. The Collector attack brought us the darkest day in our world's short history. Your heroism and that of your crew saved so many lives from a terrible fate. It is a debt that we can never repay," she said with the utmost sincerity.

"You are welcome, Madame President," I said in return, smiling at her. "It was providence that my new ship and crew were in range and were capable of providing aid, when we received your distress call."

"I can't imagine what horrors would have befallen us if you had not stopped the Collectors in orbit and on the ground," she said, looking stricken at the very thought, likely stunned at how horrible things currently were and struggling to imagine them even worse, though she obviously knew they would be. "We are not a violent people and have little with which to defend ourselves. While our world is rich in dilithium, we are not in a very strategic location and deep enough within Federation space that we have never faced such a danger before. I admit, we placed our

world's defense entirely in the hands of Starfleet, something I and my people have now come to regret.”

“Many worlds have had that realization recently, Madame President,” I offered softly in consolation. “I have strong opinions and feelings on this topic, but they have not been well received in the past so I will stop here.”

“No, please Admiral, speak your thoughts freely with no fear of censure,” President Moss encouraged. “The foundations of my worldview have been shaken. I would welcome an outside perspective from a warrior of your obvious skill and caliber, someone from another time and dimension.”

My eyes twinkled in mirth, “Someone has read my *classified* file, I see.”

“I did. It's one of the perks of being the planetary leader of a Federation member world,” she answered with a small laugh, before turning serious again. “Please continue.”

Normally I would be very hesitant to share these thoughts, most Federation worlds and people were blind to the larger dangers in the galaxy and would be very hostile to my way of thinking, but the horrors these people had just experienced had likely opened their eyes and would make them *more* receptive to the truth, not less. If I could do them the same favor that I had done Betazed, then I would be happy.

“The Federation has enjoyed near a century of relative peace since the Federation Klingon war. Many Federation member worlds have seemingly forgotten the fact that they're independent, sovereign worlds and while they benefit from membership and the collective defense Federation membership offers, they have their own duty and responsibility to protect and defend themselves. Kessik IV and many, many other Federation worlds have forgotten that they need to work and sacrifice to protect themselves too.”

“What about Starfleet?” she asked curiously, though not angrily.

“Starfleet's protections should be viewed as supplemental to your world's defense, at best. Yes, there have been small wars with minor opponents, like the Cardassians, but after a century of peace, with no peer opponent to pose an existential threat to the whole, Starfleet is not what it once was. They've forgotten that their primary purpose is the defense of the Federation rather than exploration and scientific discovery alone. Couple that way of thinking with the losses that they've suffered in the Cardassian war and those suffered during this invasion and Starfleet is objectively the weakest it's been in a long, long time. Luckily for the Federation, the Hur'q attack everyone indiscriminately, rather than focusing on one enemy, which would likely be its downfall.”

President Moss looked argumentative for a moment before she deflated in seeming defeat.

“It's hard to argue with your words when there was only a single Starfleet ship within a day's travel at high warp away available to assist us. Even now the ship still hasn't reached us and won't for some time,” she admitted, glancing unconsciously at the sky. “Assuming the Hur'q would not have already gotten what they wanted and moved on, my advisors have expressed

incredulity that a single Excelsior-class ship could survive against three Hur'q carrier ships, much less defeat them. The *Cairo* is a far cry from a state-of-the-art, heavily armed starship such as yours, Admiral, which is an anomaly at best, you'd agree."

I merely nodded in response, agreeing with her words, while letting her work through her own thoughts.

"What would you do if you were in my position, Admiral?" she asked, sounding curious. "Again, please speak freely."

I paused for a time, thinking on what I should say in answer.

"At a minimum, I would create a larger defense force to combat space-based threats," I answered. "In my role as Admiral for Bajor, I purchased 12 well-armed, but small fighter craft to patrol Bajor's orbit and near space. They operate in groups of 3 to provide 26 hour a day coverage. It's not much, but it's better than nothing and has already proved useful against smugglers and the like. Kessik IV would likely be able to afford and staff a much greater force than that."

"Interesting," she replied, looking thoughtful at my answer. "Do you think such a force would have been enough to repel the Hur'q forces that just attacked the planet?"

"No, likely not, but it would have been a start. At best they'd have been able to repel the Hur'q dropships that they sent down to the surface or delayed them, at least for a time, to allow for Starfleet to arrive," I answered honestly. "Ideally, you'd commission, deploy, and maintain a planetary defense net as well."

"I'm not familiar with that term, Admiral, though I suspect I think I know," she admitted.

"A planetary defense net is a network of space-based and/or ground-based defenses intended to protect a planet from attack," I explained. "Ideally, weaponized satellites surrounding the planet would be able to generate a shield around the entire world to prevent orbital bombardment as well as repel starships with beam weapons and/or torpedoes."

"Is this defense net rare or uncommon?" she asked.

"In the modern-day Federation, I would say yes," I replied. "It was far more common for the more prosperous Federation member worlds to have one in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, when the hostilities with the Klingons was such a persistent and serious threat to various worlds."

"When the Federation had a 'peer opponent,' I believe you called it," she speculated aloud. "You also said the more prosperous Federation member worlds had one, I imagine that means acquiring one of these defenses would be extremely costly in both material and long-term maintenance."

I was impressed at how clever and wise this woman was, taking a few words I'd spoken and immediately seeing the implications.

“Exactly right, Madame President,” I said with a smile. “The initial purchase cost would be extremely high. The costs to maintain it would also be high, but you can’t put a price on peace of mind and the safety of your people. Prior to recent events, I imagine your citizens would not have truly understood that sentiment, but I believe it has taken on a new meaning for them.”

The president eyed me with a focused shrewd gaze, but I continued.

“I recently had an interesting conversation with Ambassador Troi of Betazed. Her world built a defense net in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, but now a century later it is antiquated, undermanned, and poorly maintained,” I relayed. “I strongly advised her to speak to her leaders and either upgrade or bring that defense net back into full operational readiness. The Hur’q are but one threat facing the alpha quadrant, an enemy from the distant past and long forgotten. But the galaxy also just discovered the first known stable wormhole in existence leading to the unexplored gamma quadrant. Prophets only know what dangers lie on the other side, hostile to us all.”

“You speak like both a prophet and a salesman, Admiral. From my security briefing on you, I know you’ve recently started selling a new wearable device that is supposed to combine all the utility of a tricorder, a communicator, and a personal computer into one device,” she said, lifting up her sleeve to show her previously hidden omnitool on her forearm. “I’ve only used and tested this device for a few hours now and already I see how useful it could be in my work every day.”

“I’m always happy to learn of a new happy and satisfied customer,” I said with an over-the-top salesman smile.

“Quite,” she deadpanned, though I could tell that she was amused with me. “Your ship has capabilities previously unknown to me, which suggests both an incredibly high-tech level and manufacturing capability, or access to such, which is surprising to me on many levels as Bajor does not possess technology that advanced. Are *you* capable of also selling us a planetary defense net?”

My smile turned devious, before I continued in a tone that suggested that I was sharing a secret.

“Perhaps, in time. If that should one day be within my capabilities, would Kessik IV be interested?” I asked.

“We would,” she answered. “Though I may need to reallocate large amounts of our budget to cover the expense.”

“I will keep that in mind,” I said, grinning all the more. President Moss thankfully looked amused. “I may even be willing to take payment in your world’s dilithium.”

“That would be convenient,” she returned, honestly. “I apologize, but I must cut this short, Admiral. I have a world in crisis that needs to heal and my people say that you wish to depart before the *Cairo* arrives. So, I would like to reward you for the actions you’ve taken on our behalf. As I said, it’s a debt that we can never repay, but this is a small token of our appreciation. Once we’re past the current crisis, I will be ordering the large-scale replication of your omnitools to outfit every member of the planetary government and will make replication of your omnitools a priority subsidized item for this world’s community replicators. Knowing my people as I do,

I'm sure many will wish to purchase one in order to offer their small thanks to you for defending us in our time of need."

"That's very generous of you and them, Madame President," I said, thinking of all the replication license fees that I would be receiving from this world alone. In some ways, the widescale adoption and use of the device by a Federation member world's government was even more valuable in the long-term as Kessik IV's population was relatively low. Member worlds interacted with each other routinely and freely, and Kessik IV would essentially be giving me free advertising and testimonials to their fellow member worlds. Hopefully other Federation worlds would see the same utility and adopt them as well.

"That's not all," she said, before gesturing to a nearby security officer who handed her a lacquered wooden box that practically shined in the light. "For your heroic defense of this world, as President of Kessik IV, I award you the Karagite Order of Heroism. It is awarded to individuals who show conspicuous heroism in the defense of Federation worlds and its people during times of conflict. I cannot think of a more worthy recipient than you. Congratulations Admiral."

She then handed me the open box containing the medal. The medal appeared as a stylized humanoid female with outstretched arms which were grasping an upraised sword that was attached to scarlet and white horizontal stripes. The medal was actually made even more interesting by what it was made of, a form of dilithium that looked like optical crystal, with a bluish pink hue. Kessik IV was rich in dilithium, so it felt rather fitting and looked quite eye catching, in my opinion.

"I am honored by this award, Madame President," I said, bowing my head in thanks, my right hand placed over my heart. "Thank you."

"You're welcome Admiral," she said with a smile. "Know that you will *always* have a home on this world, should you ever wish it."

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**Main Bridge. USS *Cairo*. On route to Kessik IV.**

"We will be dropping out of warp in 90 seconds, Captain," the Benzite helmsman of the USS *Cairo* reported.

"All crew to duty stations, prepare for combat operations," the human first officer named Leslie Wong ordered.

"Shields at full, all weapons, ready," the tactical officer reported.

Captain Edward Jellico's gaze was locked on the viewscreen, taking in the constant chatter and information sharing his well-oiled crew were engaging in prior to battling the Hur'q. He was both determined and excited to protect a Federation world from the depredations of the alien race that had wreaked havoc across so much of the alpha quadrant.



The sector the *Cairo* had been ordered to patrol was relatively out of the way and of little strategic importance in normal terms, so the ship and crew had had no contact or reason to engage the Hur'q since their invasion of this galaxy and universe had begun. That, of course, hadn't stopped the ship and her crew from hearing about the many horrors the Hur'q had perpetrated on the many worlds that they attacked, with little to no regard for what race called the world home. To the Hur'q, they were all enemies, all food and they didn't seem to care how many enemies they made in the process. This alien way of thinking and waging war was frightening on a very visceral level.

The insectoid race was a mystery and how they ultimately chose their targets was still unknown to them all. What was known was that they gave no quarter and made no distinction between military personnel and civilians. They even killed and ate *children*, and not always in that order. It disgusted him. He had come to *hate* the Cardassians during the Federation's war with them, for their casual brutality and the way they devalued their enemies, in fact he had made a name for himself during that war and had given as good as he got in many engagements with the wily race. Compared to the Hur'q, though, the Cardassians seemed almost like gentlemen.

It was a travesty that his ship had been so far away at maximum warp, God only knew what horrors the people of Kessik IV had been forced to endure while they warped here as fast as they could. With little knowledge on the sensor capabilities of the Hur'q, he had ordered a communications blackout to prevent them from being more easily detected by any active communications with the world. As a result, information was sparse at the moment, the distress call from the planet having ended hours ago for no apparent or discernible reason. Many nightmare scenarios could explain the cessation of the distress call, but without any information to inform them one way or the other, he was hesitant to give voice or credence to any of them.

"Tactical, I want to fire on the enemy the moment we come out of warp," Jellico ordered calmly, unwilling to wait to engage the invaders or engage in any discourse that by all accounts had never been returned. "The second we have a target lock, fire all weapons. We give no quarter or warning or calls for surrender. Is that understood?"

"Aye, sir, I understand," his chief tactical officer offered solemnly and aggressively.

"Coming out of warp in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, normalizing now!" his helmsman's yelled aloud.

The planet loomed large in the viewscreen as the ship came out of warp, obscured by what almost looked like an expanding fog in space.

"Detecting numerous impacts with the shields!" the *Cairo's* tactical officer reported, numerous vibrations and impacts shaking the ship. "Shields down to 92%."

"Evasive maneuvers!" he yelled, jumping out of his seat to approach the viewscreen. "Tactical, get me a target!!"

"No targets in range, sir!" tactical responded loudly, sounding confused, his fingers flying across his console.

"Sir! Priority hail from the planet," the Chief science officer reported.

Jellico felt extremely confused at these unexpected circumstances.

“On screen,” he ordered tersely, wary of any tricks.

A beautiful blonde woman appeared on his screen. The video was moving organically, as if the visual receiver was attached to a person, rather than a fixed camera, which was very strange. What could be seen in the foreground of the visual image suggested that this person was outdoors and leaving a large covered structure.

“Captain Jellico of the USS *Cairo*, I presume? This is President Donna Moss of Kessik IV,” the woman offered in greeting. “Your evasive maneuvers are unneeded; the danger to our world has passed. We are safe for now.”

A brief glance to the side conveyed a silent question to his first and tactical officer, eliciting a small nod from both officers. This woman’s identity was apparently confirmed and sensors similarly confirmed that they could detect no enemy ships in range.

“Stand down from evasive maneuvers, helm, but keep shields up and weapons ready,” he ordered. “Madame President, our shields suffered damage from multiple impacts when we came out of warp in system. The danger may *not* yet be past.”

“You came out of warp in the middle of a debris field, Captain,” President Moss explained with a bloodthirsty grin which rather took him aback. During the course of his career in Starfleet, he had had the opportunity to deal with the leaders of several Federation member worlds and never before had he seen a world leader effect a face of such...sadistic glee. “That debris field is all that is left of the 3 Hur’q carrier ships that attacked our world. May they suffer in whatever hell will take those *monsters*,” she practically spat.

There was metaphorical collective intake of breath at that unexpected statement, for multiple reasons.

“We- we were unaware you possessed forces capable of withstanding such an assault, my congratulations to you and your people, Madame President,” he offered sincerely. “You have achieved a great victory today.”

President Moss looked downright pained at this.

“It was not we that defeated the Hur’q today, Captain. We tried our best, but to my great shame and regret, we did not possess the means to repel them. The Hur’q had over 90 minutes to bombard our world from orbit before they landed troops to steal technology and people, kidnapping and killing many,” she admitted with an intense sadness in her haunted eyes, the eyes of someone who’d seen too much suffering in too short a time and felt acute guilt over it. Whether that guilt was deserved or not was a question for the counselors. “No, Admiral Gothic saved us. He destroyed the ships in orbit and then engaged the Hur’q ground forces in combat, killing them all and rescuing our people in the process.”

*Admiral Gothic??*

He glanced at his first officer with a slightly raised eyebrow, in clear inquiry; she shook her head slightly in response, effecting a look of ignorance. She, too, had obviously never heard of this Admiral either.

“I’m not familiar with a Starfleet admiral by that name, Madame President, nor is my first officer,” he said. “Is this Admiral with the Klingon or the Romulan military, perhaps?”

Either of the two races being this deep inside Federation territory was highly unlikely, but these were very strange times.

“Neither, Captain,” she replied with a look of humor in her eyes. “He is an Admiral with the Bajoran Defense Force, captain of the *Flighty Temptress*, his personal starship.”

“The Bajoran?” he asked in shock. “I was unaware the Bajoran people possessed warp technology advanced enough to travel this far from their home star system, much less destroy three Hur’q carrier ships. How many ships did this Bajoran Admiral have in their fleet?”

“Just one.”

Jellico’s mouth fell open a little, a little dry.

“Forgive me, Madame President, but that is quite hard to believe,” he responded slowly and honestly, trying to sound respectful, but doubting the absurd report.

“Whether you believe it or not is irrelevant, Captain. It happened; I’ll have our sensor records forwarded to you,” President Moss said in return. “I can meet you in one hour in my office. My staff will provide the transporter coordinates. Moss out.”

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Jellico faced the viewscreen for several long moments after the President was gone, with a thoughtful look on his face, standing ramrod straight as was normal for him.

“Number 1, what do you think?” Jellico asked softly, not turning, still facing the viewscreen showing the planet below them.

“I’m as taken aback as you, Captain,” Wong replied. “It seems almost impossible that one ship could take on three Hur’q carrier vessels. I’d call it a toss-up even against a galaxy-class.”

“Agreed,” Jellico reluctantly returned. “Mr. Thomson, have you analyzed the debris field?”

“Aye, Captain,” the man answered, knowing his very particular captain would want not him to give the report until instructed to.

“Report,” Jellico immediately ordered.

“The size of the debris field and its rate of expansion are consistent with the President’s report of 3 Hur’q carrier ships and the purported time of the battle. Metallurgical scans and analysis of some of the larger fragments are also consistent with Hur’q hull materials that have been recovered by the Federation or allies from previous battles.”

“Weapon signatures?” Jellico asked.

“Sensor analysis and particle decay rates are also consistent with the primitive, but highly overpowered phasers used by the Hur’q in other engagements with allied forces. There is another energy signature unknown to us that is present, but energized explosions of great power and the likely destruction of the Hur’q ships have made any more detailed analysis impossible,” Thomson reported.

“Keep on it; do the best you can. I want to learn as much as we can about all this,” Jellico ordered. “Number one, you’re with me.”

With that Jellico practically marched into his ready room and sat down behind his desk’s computer monitor. His young son’s hand drawn artwork decorated the walls. Usually, the sight of it brought a deal of peace and joy to his workday, but his thoughts were on many other troubling topics. His first officer took the opportunity to sit in the guest chair in front of the desk, waiting patiently.

Jellico rotated the computer monitor so that his first officer could also see the screen.

“Computer, access biographical profile and all information available on Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Force,” Jellico ordered.

“Level 9 security clearance required to access the requested information,” the computer dutifully demanded, instead of instantly displaying the requested information as he thought it would.

Jellico’s eyebrows rose into his gray hair, locking surprised eyes with his first officer.

“Level 9?” Jellico asked aloud in disbelief. Why would this information require such a high clearance level? Bajor’s importance had risen greatly after the wormhole had been discovered, but they were still a planet of virtually no other strategic importance. At the moment, it was more a scientific curiosity, at best. “Very well. Authorization, Jellico alpha three one.”

With that, Jellico’s code was accepted and a biographical profile on Admiral Gothic was displayed.

Both captain and first officer silently read the profile with increasing amounts of surprise and disbelief. It read like the plot of an overdramatic holonovel, which was ironic in a way because the man was a highly successful holonovel author in his own right, it seemed. His Call of Duty holonovel was actually stored in the *Cairo*’s database and was a favorite of many of his younger junior officers, played in their off hours.

“An Augment and a dimensional traveler from a different 20<sup>th</sup> century Earth?” Jellico whispered in disbelief. “The closest human examples with similar levels of genetic engineering are the Augments from Khan’s time.”

“Found by the *Enterprise*, of course,” Wong scoffed.

“Of course,” Jellico acknowledged sending her a conspiratorial smirk. They had often talked about the insanity that was the *Enterprise*’s service record and how galactic affairs seemed to

revolve around that one ship. “He fought with the Bajoran Resistance before becoming an Admiral in their so-called military. It says here that his brutality was legendary and the Cardassians declared him a war criminal and placed a large bounty on his head. He’s a criminal!”

“Not necessarily, captain. He helped the Bajoran resistance while the Federation was formally at war with the Cardassians. He’s also a Federation citizen only by virtue of being a human born on Earth in a different dimension, so it’s arguable whether or not he’s even bound by Federation law in this instance, especially since all this happened on Bajor,” Wong logically argued. “As the Bajorans don’t consider him a criminal, I’m not sure how we could possibly legitimately label him that way.”

“Hmm. He shouldn’t be allowed to occupy such a position as an Augment; it’s illegal and prohibited for their kind. Humanity learned a long time ago not to mess with the genome,” Jellico argued back.

“I’m not saying that I agree with it, captain, but the Bajorans have no such laws or prohibitions,” Wong argued back. “If Bajor ever becomes a Federation member in the future, the diplomats and Judge Advocate General’s office will have quite an issue to unravel there during the integration period.”

They continued reading in silence, but to their surprise, they noted that entire sections of the man’s profile were present but entirely inaccessible to them, even after having used Jellico’s high-level clearance afforded to him as a long-serving captain of a Starfleet ship.

“Computer, why are these sections of the profile inaccessible?” Jellico asked aloud.

“Reason, insufficient clearance provided,” the computer dutifully answered.

“That can’t be. Computer, access these sections, Jellico, Captain USS *Cairo*, authorization Jellico, omega alpha theta six two six,” Jellico growled out in annoyance.

“Access denied, insufficient clearance,” the computer quickly reported, to Jellico’s shock.

Seeing her captain’s increasing fury, she decided to take over and take a different tact.

“Computer, what clearance level is required to access this classified data in the biographical profile of Admiral Gothic?” she calmly asked.

“That information is classified,” the computer replied.

They were both surprised once again, but Jellico had just about had enough at being denied here.

“Computer, override required clearance authorization, exigent circumstances emergency, Hur’q Invasion,” Jellico attempted in a last-ditch effort.

His first officer looked at her captain in shock, surprised that he would go to such lengths when the consequences could be so extreme. An exigent circumstances emergency override was only used in the most dire of circumstances, circumstances in which the ship and her crew were in danger of imminent destruction or some other extreme danger to Federation interests was present

and could only be avoided with the requested classified information. If the request was made while within communications range of Starfleet Command, priority was given to the computer interlink with Command's systems over everything else. Data on the ship's current circumstances would be shared and evaluated to determine if the override should be granted. If they were out of communications range, the *Cairo's* computer would use all available data to make that determination itself.

"Exigent circumstances emergency override request has been logged. Denial of override request may result in disciplinary action. Do you still wish to proceed?"

"Yes," Jellico growled out.

"Acknowledged," the computer said. "Request has been relayed."

Twenty-one seconds passed before the computer spoke again. When galactic communications were routinely sent at hyper luminal velocities, that was nearly a lifetime.

"Exigent circumstances override request has been *denied*. Captain Edward Jellico's clearance level has been downgraded, pending disciplinary review board. Access to current biographical information has been rescinded."

With that proclamation of doom, the computer monitor in front of them turned off and went black. They sat in shocked silence for a few more seconds at the unexpected bad turn that this had all taken.

When it looked like Jellico would not speak for some time, his first officer took pity on the man and decided to snap him out of it any way she could.

"Computer, do we still have access to the sensor readings and recordings of the arrival of the Hur'q forces and the battle above Kessik IV that occurred within the last 24 hours?" Wong inquired with the computer.

"Affirmative," the computer responded.

"Begin playback."

With that command, they watched together as three Hur'q carrier ships engaged with three Federation patrol craft. The ships put up a valiant defense, but they were old and obsolete vessels that Federation members worlds often purchased when Starfleet was done with them, and were quickly overwhelmed and destroyed. She sent a silent prayer to whatever deities those lost on the Federation ships had worshipped to guide them to the next life.

Once the planet's resistance was set aside, the three Hur'q carrier ships took positions in orbit and began raining down fire on the defenseless world. Several small transport and cargo ships could be seen fleeing the planet, even while it was in the midst of being attacked. She couldn't exactly blame them, though she wished that they had been capable of doing more, knowing how many people were dying each time the Hur'q fired down on the planet. Ship and crew losses during the Cardassian war, coupled with losses sustained during the Hur'q invasion had put Starfleet in a very precarious position. While the Federation held a vast territory within its

boundaries, Starfleet had never fielded as many ships as was truly needed or the Federation were capable of building with its vast infrastructure.

The side panel to these recordings and sensor readings contained information on what was being struck from orbit and how many casualties they believed had resulted. What was even worse was that those numbers were constantly rising as more and more corpses were being dug out of the rubble at this very moment.

“They’re not firing entirely at random, Captain,” Wong reported to her still silent captain.

“They’re first destroying military targets and critical pieces of infrastructure, including the planet’s power generation capabilities. They’re systematically destroying the planet’s ability to fight back or resist.”

She glanced away from the screen to look at her captain, but no response seemed forthcoming.

“This is an evolution in their battle tactics,” she speculated. “There have been reports of several Federation ships going missing recently in the sector block. They could have acquired the required target data from any of them.”

The bombardment stopped and perhaps 15 minutes later each ship released a dropship containing their soldiers.

“Computer, forward playback to the arrival of the *Flighty Temptress*,” she ordered.

The computer dutifully complied and roughly 90 minutes later, according to the time index, the action started. She watched in awe as bright neon blue beams of energy and what had to be torpedoes of some kind lanced out of an area of space that had no ship visible inside it.

“A cloak. He has a cloak capable starship,” she whispered.

“Pause playback! That’s a violation of the Treaty of Algeron,” Jellico growled out, somewhat righteously. “We should report this violation to Command and arrange for his arrest.”

“After he just saved a Federation world from attack by the Hur’q? That would be a hard sell,” Wong replied dubiously, unsure why her normally aggressive captain was acting this way, though she supposed the discipline he would be facing in the future for his failed request was playing a big part. “Captain, I’m no lawyer, but I’m not sure it even is a treaty violation. His profile indicated that he is a Bajoran citizen and that his starship is of Bajoran registry. Bajor is *not* yet part of the Federation and thus not bound by that treaty, therefore he likely isn’t. He’s human, and a pseudo-Federation citizen, but I’d have to check the actual language of the treaty to see if it even envisions a Federation *civilian* possessing a cloak-capable ship. The Romulans might not have envisioned anything like that when the treaty was originally drafted; it could be a loophole.”

“Semantics. A cloak capable ship is illegal under the treaty and he is human. End of story.”

Wong offered no retort, choosing not to aggravate her captain any further. Under normal circumstances she imagined that her captain would have rather liked someone like Admiral Gothic.

“Computer, resume playback,” she ordered and the battle in space resumed.

It was strange watching the playback of a battle in which one of the ship’s was visible only insofar as they could see the weapons’ fire departing a cloaking envelope. Their faces were lit up brightly from the light of the monitor as one of the Hur’q carrier ships went up in a bright orange red ball of fire.

“Computer, pause,” she ordered. “The pilot of the *Temptress* is incredible. I’ve never seen a starship execute maneuvers like that. The ship’s captain is a brilliant tactician as well. He used the Hur’q’s extreme aggression and lack of concern for friendly fire to destroy that first ship with their own weapons’ fire. Computer, resume.”

She watched as over a hundred fighters chased the *Temptress* and she wondered how he could possibly survive such an attack, but knowing that he obviously had. Modern starships just weren’t designed with these kinds of tactics in mind. Her eyes gleamed as she watched the ship release thousands of bolts of smaller energy pulses targeting the fighters chasing the ship, destroying many of them.

“He has a dedicated anti-fighter secondary weapon system!” she loudly said in awe. “It’s like the ship was designed with the Hur’q in mind. Has he encountered them before?” she asked aloud in puzzlement.

“Could he be in league with them?” Jellico suddenly asked, a malicious gleam in his eyes.

“No, captain, that wasn’t what I was suggesting, only that his ship is uniquely suited to deal with an unusual enemy like the Hur’q, an enemy that uses so many fighters in their battle doctrine,” she cautiously responded.

Her attention was caught by the video playback of the battle as the large group of Hur’q fighters were caught in the grip of a powerful tractor beam.

“Amazing, to catch so many ships in a tractor beam,” she said in awe. “The power required to contain that many ships for any length of time would be massive, much less the torsional stress on the ship’s spaceframe holding them. Why is he dragging them along with him, though? The tractor beam is probably negating much of their weapon’s fire, but not all of it.”

Admiral Gothic’s true plan quickly became clear to her as the vector changed and the trapped fighters were *thrown* right into the two Hur’q carrier ships at incredible sublight speeds, causing catastrophic damage to both ships. Secondary explosions lit up the two ships before they both exploded.

“Yes! Take that you fucking insect bastards!” she shouted, raising her fist in triumph, as if it were her own personal victory. And in a way, it was, she was a member of the Federation and the destruction of these ships protected Kessik IV, a Federation member world.

Jellico sent her a dirty look which quickly settled her down and dimmed her enthusiasm, making her turn quickly back to the screen. There were still 30 or 40 fighter craft still remaining in the



space above the planet, desperately trying to destroy the ship that had taken out their carrier ships. How would the Admiral deal with these ships?

For the first time since the battle had begun, she got a glimpse of the *Temptress* as her cloak started to fluctuate before failing entirely. Had the ship taken more serious damage than she'd realized? Had a lucky shot hit just the right spot?

Unconsciously, once the ship was fully visible, she leaned in further, her sharp eyes noting the sexy lines of her hull. It looked...fast...and *dangerous*...and sexy. That hull geometry was unique, yet felt familiar.

"The Admiral might be a Bajoran citizen, but the humanity in him is shining through," she joked, forgetting for a moment the mood of her captain. "That ship has a very Federation design aesthetic to it, though it's entirely unique. That arrowhead design, maybe it gives them a few more decimal points of maximum warp?"

The remaining 30ish ships continued to fire upon the *Temptress* and by the way they were flying you could just tell they were trying to ram the ship if they could. The *Temptress* though, continued to fire on the fighter swarm whittling down their numbers, yet leading them away from the planet. In the heat of the moment it likely wasn't as easy to discern, but by virtue of viewing it this way she could spot the pattern and see hints of a plan.

"He's leading them away from the planet," she said. "Maybe to prevent them from turning around and ramming the surface? His top sublight speed is fluctuating too, which is bunching up the fighters more. Was the ship's sublight engines damaged or is this part of some strat?"

She was cut off midsentence as the *Temptress* released a bright yellow omnidirectional plasma wave that vaporized the remaining fighters chasing the ship caught up in the wave.

"Wow," she whispered.

Jellico grunted, but she could tell even her captain was reluctantly impressed.

"Fleet intelligence reports during the war reported that the Cardassians were in the process of developing or already have a weapon system like that," Jellico added. "It's less useful against a traditional shielded starship, but perfect for less shielded fighters or to destroy incoming torpedo volleys."

"I suppose that makes sense if he fought the Cardassians for a few years while on Bajor. Maybe he learned of it somehow and decided he liked the idea of it when facing numerous fighters," Wong speculated.

"Perhaps," Jellico replied, with a sour look on his face and maybe one of begrudging respect.

"That Admiral Gothic is one dangerous man, especially with a ship like that," she complimented. "You may not like it, captain, but you can't deny that the man has *style*."

The dirty look her captain sent her almost made her laugh. *Almost*.

**XXXXX**

## **Office of President Moss. Kessik IV.**

Beaming directly into the office of President Moss, the two highest ranked officers on the USS *Cairo* were impressed. It was a large open space, decorated well, but not so over the top as to be off-putting. Behind the desk was the President of Kessik IV, reviewing data on a holographic projection coming out of an unknown device strapped to her forearm. She glanced up moments later and met the eyes of her two new guests.

“Captain Jellico and guest, welcome,” Moss greeted before stepping out from behind her desk to shake hands.

“Thank you, Madame President, for meeting with us,” Jellico responded with a small smile. “May I introduce Commander Leslie Wong, my first officer.”

“Commander Wong, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Moss greeted with a tired smile.

“On behalf of my ship and crew, we grieve with you for the many losses and hardships you’ve endured,” Jellico offered. “All the resources of my ship and crew stand ready to assist you in any way we can. Ask and we will provide as best we can.”

President Moss’ smile in response to these words appeared relieved and far more genuine than before.

“Thank you, Captain. Admiral Gothic provided us with most of our most critical immediate supply needs, but your engineering and medical staff would be greatly appreciated helping to repair and heal the damage the Hur’q did to our world,” Moss replied.

Jellico grimaced slightly in response to further mention of ‘Admiral Gothic’ and it was only her many years of serving with the man that she had noticed it.

“Please, take a seat,” President Moss advised before we all sat down. “Can I offer you any refreshment?”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” they both said.

“Have you had a chance to review the sensor data we sent on the battle in orbit with the Hur’q forces? Were you as impressed as I was?” Moss asked eagerly.

Noticing that her Captain was hesitating or struggling to form a response, she decided to answer for the both of them.

“We did, ma’am. Admiral Gothic, his crew, and his ship were indeed, very impressive,” she answered honestly, glancing subtly at her Captain from the corner of her eyes. “We would have been hard pressed to achieve the same results.”

Her captain glanced sharply at her at these words, though it was the truth and he probably knew it.

“Yes, my security advisors said much the same thing. The Excelsior-class has withstood the test of time and it is a tried-and-true design, but it is a very old ship design, no matter how many refits it’s undergone to stay current over the decades,” President Moss answered.

“We were quite surprised to learn that Admiral Gothic’s ship, the *Flighty Temptress*, possessed a cloaking device,” Jellico chimed in. “I have submitted a request to the sector JAG officer to initiate an investigation as to whether this violates the Treaty of Algeron.”

With those words and in an instant, President Moss’ expression went from warm and welcoming, to closed off and cold as an Andorian winter. She was now sitting up straighter, fingers interlaced on her desk, her eyes locked on the captain with intense focus.

“It is my understanding, *Captain*, that while Admiral Gothic is a Federation citizen by virtue of having been born human and on Earth of an alternate dimension, that he is a Bajoran citizen, a flag officer in their military, and captains a Bajoran registered starship,” Moss stated in a voice devoid of any of its previous warmth or good feeling. “How could he be bound by that treaty? In fact, Bajor and the Romulan Empire have no diplomatic ties whatsoever, I checked.”

The way that she had emphasized ‘Captain’ was probably intended to remind everyone present that while Jellico was the Captain of an old and relatively unimportant ship in Starfleet, *she* was the president of an entire Federation member world and that he better tread lightly lest he be stepped on.

“That is not for us to decide,” Jellico responded, unhelpfully in her opinion.

“Even beyond that, and may I just speak candidly for a moment, I don’t give a *damn* even if he did violate the treaty. I’d give him a pardon in a heartbeat,” Moss nearly spat. “He saved the lives of my people, both by his actions in orbit and on the ground. He is a hero to me and my people and I will not tolerate anyone besmirching his name while in my presence. Is that understood, Captain?”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand,” Jellico reluctantly said.

“Now, is there anything else you need, Captain,” Moss asked. “I have a world to rebuild.”

“Yes, Madame. You mentioned he did battle with the Hur’q on the ground. I’m assuming you’re referring to the 3 dropships the Hur’q carrier ships released before they were destroyed in battle,” Jellico asked.

“Yes,” the President responded shortly.

“We were not sent any sensor records with regard to that battle,” Jellico inquired.

“There were none, Captain,” Moss answered coolly. “Much of the city’s sensor network was destroyed or disrupted by the bombardment from orbit. What I can tell you is that Admiral Gothic fought and killed the approximately 75 Hur’q warriors that arrived on the surface in the 3 dropships. He rescued and saved the lives of many men, women, and children that had been taken hostage and imprisoned aboard their ships.”

Now that...was unexpected.

“75 Hur’q warriors, ma’am? Did he have a team of Bajoran security with him from his ship?” she asked.

“It is my understanding, corroborated by every person that he rescued, that Admiral Gothic was alone when he engaged the Hur’q,” Moss answered.

“One man, killed 75 Hur’q warriors? And then rescued your captured people?” Jellico asked incredulously. “Was he injured?”

“We don’t know, the people he rescued never actually *saw* him during the rescue,” President Moss answered, and appeared to be taking a perverse delight in flummoxing the captain.

“I- I don’t understand, Madame President,” Jellico admitted reluctantly.

“No, no you don’t appear to,” Moss replied mockingly. “Apparently, the Hur’q warriors in the ship that were killed in front of my captured citizens just started dropping dead in front of them, from some kind of projectile weapon.”

“Are you suggesting that this Gothic has a personal cloaking field?” Jellico asked.

“*Admiral Gothic, Captain. He is a hero and you will show him the respect he deserves in my presence or you will not be welcome on my world,*” Moss demanded. “And I am not suggesting anything, only relaying what eyewitnesses have reported,” Moss impatiently responded.

“Captain, there have been reports of Hur’q snipers with some kind of camouflage abilities built into their armor, perhaps Admiral Gothic recovered some of this technology and adapted it for his own use?” Wong speculated.

A thoughtful silence descended on the group for a bit, before Jellico stood up signaling that he wanted this meeting to come to an end.

“Madame President, if you could direct us to the Hur’q dropships, we’d like to take our own scans of the area and begin salvage of any technology left behind. Hur’q technology is extremely powerful and dangerous and we do not want it falling into the wrong hands.”

“I’m afraid that that is not possible in the way that you envision it, Captain,” Moss replied with a smirk, no longer trying to hide her amused mocking.

“And just why is that?” Jellico asked with a visible scowl, his voice verging on a growl.

“Because there is practically nothing left beyond the skeleton of the three dropships’ spaceframes. Admiral Gothic transported all the bodies up to his ship and his engineering crew recovered all their weapons, dismantled and recovered all of the dropships’ technology, and apparently any valuable materials.”

“He had no right to do that!” Jellico yelled. “That technology is the property of Federation! I will have an arrest order immediately issued upon my return to the ship!”

President Moss stood up from her seat abruptly.

“He *did* have the right and you will do no such thing, Captain. I’m far more inclined to *arrest you* for making unlawful threats against a hero of this world.”

Wong reached out and took her captain’s arm.

“Sir, please calm down,” she advised in a whisper. “Madame President, may I please ask why you believe that Admiral Gothic had the salvage rights to the Hur’q ships and their technology?”

“Much better, Commander,” Moss said, eyes still locked on her fuming Captain. “The Hur’q Mutual Defense Treaty grants salvage rights to any Hur’q technology to the party rendering the defensive assistance and by whose actions resulted in the Hur’q’s defeat. There is no question in my mind that Admiral Gothic defeated those forces. As Bajor is a signatory of the treaty, the salvage rights are his. In fact...”

At this President Moss selected one of the pads on her desk after a moment or two of searching and handed it to Wong.

“I received this from Starfleet Command confirming Admiral Gothic’s right to salvage the Hur’q technology. If you have any issue with that, take it up with your superiors.”

Jellico practically ripped the padd out of his first officer’s hands and growled at what he read and then promptly smacked his comm badge and beamed away from the room without a word said in goodbye, which was quite a breach of decorum when meeting with a planetary leader.

Wong sighed quietly in exasperation. The failed exigent circumstances request was obviously causing havoc in her captain’s mind. The man was very career oriented and the failed request would likely set his career goals back several years, at least. Hopefully, Admiral Gothic and Captain Jellico wouldn’t have any reason to meet in the future.

“My apologies, Madame President,” she offered sincerely. “This invasion has been hard on us all.”

“I understand, commander, better than most,” President Moss offered in a conciliatory tone. “I would request that *you* serve as the primary point of contact between the *Cairo*’s crew and my government while you are rendering aid to the planet.”

Wong cringed at the request, but nodded all the same, having no choice but to agree, despite how her Captain might feel about it.

“As you like, ma’am. If that is all, I have to return my duties as well.”

With that this disastrous meeting came to an end and she tapped her comm badge to signal that she’d like to return back to the ship.

**XXXXX**

**A few hours earlier. Bridge. Onboard the *Flighty Temptress*.**

“B’Elanna, what is the status of the salvage operation?” I asked from the comfort of my captain’s chair on the bridge.

“Neela and I finished a half hour ago, Captain,” B’Elanna replied from her duty station in engineering, sounding pleased with herself. “We’ve retrieved all the Collector weapons and stripped the dropships down to the hull plating, as you ordered. Anything useful or valuable was salvaged and stored. We have plenty of spare Collector power cells in inventory now for pretty much any situation.”

“Very good,” I said, happy that I now had even more power cells to experiment with. “T’Maz, is there anything keeping us from departing? I want to be clear of the planet long before the *Cairo* arrives.”

“No, Captain, we can leave the planet at any time, though I do recommend you communicate with President Moss before we depart,” T’Maz answered and advised.

“Of course,” I said, agreeing with the good advice. “Open a channel.”

Moments later, President Moss was visible on the large screen.

“President Moss, my ship and I are preparing to depart from the planet. We transported the last of the supplies you requested to the coordinates provided a half hour ago,” I said, after having stood up from my chair to show my respect to the planetary leader.

“Thank you again, Admiral,” she offered in returned. “Your actions on behalf of our world will never be forgotten; you go with our most heartfelt thanks. Please keep a dialog open between us as you continue your journey.”

“I will,” I replied with a smile.

“Good journey,” she ended, before the viewscreen went dark.

“T’Maz, select a course and warp speed at random, I want to throw off any observers by making at least three random warp jumps, different vectors, speeds, and durations,” I ordered.

“Understood, captain. Course and speed selected.”

“Engage!”

With that command the ship lurched forward and disappeared in a distant flash of bright white light as the ship jumped to warp.

**XXXXX**

“Come in, come in!” I happily called to my motley crew as they made their way into my ship’s conference room, gesturing to various seats with dishes of food already placed before them.

“Take a seat and dig in.”

“What’s the occasion?” B’Elanna asked, looking appreciatively at her dish of banana pancakes stacked high, plenty of fresh fruit and maple syrup available. She took a healthy forkful of the

fluffy, buttery pancakes with a delicate slice of banana on top and let out a moan of delight that was almost pornographic, her eyes closing. “Why is this so good?!”

“I’m glad you asked,” I answered, feeling proud of myself. “The pancakes are replicated, but the bananas, fruit, and maple syrup are 100% real, the genuine article, straight from Earth.”

“Straight from Earth? That must have cost a lot to get it all the way out here,” she speculated, looking impressed.

“It was most definitely *not* cheap, but that’s what stasis field enabled cargo containers are for,” I replied. “I had intended all this to both thank and reward my steadfast crew for the successful end of the shakedown cruise, but given recent events, I felt it was the perfect time for a reward.”

I turned my eyes to Neela and T’Maz, who were tucking into a plomeek soup and genuine hasperat.

“T’Maz, that soup was made with non-replicated ingredients from your hometown on Vulcan. And Neela, that hasperat was made by one of your family members on Bajor who used your mother’s recipe,” I explained. “It was put in stasis moments after being made.”

“Thank you, Gothic. That was very thoughtful of you,” Neela said with a nostalgic look on her face, between bites of her spicy dish. “It feels a bit like home.”

“Such extravagance is unneeded and perhaps illogical, but I too thank you for this...memory of home, in the spirit it was intended, Captain,” T’Maz said in thanks, bowing her head slightly, between spoonful of the broth.

Her response was just as I expected. I cut up a few bites of my large prime rib and dipped the delicious medium rare meat in the warm juice. The grass-fed beef that I was eating was not from a replicator, but was also not from Earth. It was near impossible to get beef from Earth from slaughtered cattle; it just wasn’t done anymore and was borderline illegal on the world. I actually had to buy this beef from a retro agricultural colony that lived a more primitive lifestyle. It was delicious, even better than what I remembered from home since none of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hormones, artificial feed substitutes, or chemicals was used in their raising.

“I want to thank all of you for your hard work during this shakedown cruise. When we set out, it was always meant to be a semi-low risk journey testing the ship’s systems and refining them as needed while under real use. Diagnostics and simulations can only tell you so much, after all,” I explained, glancing at each of them, B’Elanna nodding sagely. “It was never my intention to take this untried ship into battle with 3 Collector carrier ships, or for me to engage in ground combat against such a large enemy force. But circumstances demanded it.”

The smile and look of humor on B’Elanna and Neela’s face made me happy. I had been worried, B’Elanna, at least, was going to regret signing up for this shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have been considering she had joined the Maquis in another timeline.

“Yes, we heard from a few of the injured people that you took on 200 Collector warriors-”  
B’Elanna said.

“And that you cut them down with your sword, beheading them like monsters straight out of your ancient folklore and legend,” Neela interrupted, with a laugh. “I think many of Kessik IV’s women would have been eager to experience your personal *sword*, or sheath it at the very least somewhere safe...and warm!”

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly, B’Elanna and Neela laughing loudly at the lewd joke. I wouldn’t have minded *sheathing* my sword with President Moss, but we hadn’t been given the required time and the circumstances had been rather grim for her people, which was a hard mood to overcome.

“Hyperbole is live and well even in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, I see,” I said with a laugh. “There were 75 Collector warriors, at most, and none of them were killed by my sword. My rifle got all the kills.”

“No close quarter combat, Captain?” B’Elanna teased, a sparkle in her eyes. “The Klingon in me is practically ashamed of you.”

My eyes, too, sparkled with humor.

“The thought crossed my mind, believe me, but it just wasn’t necessary to take a risk like that when I had other options available,” I admitted.

“A sound strategy, Captain,” T’Maz chimed in. “Taking unnecessary risks in combat could lead to severe injury or death. You are much too important to us to lose.”

Whether she was talking about herself personally or to Section 31 and the Federation was unknown.

B’Elanna looked contrite at these words, “She’s right, Gothic. You absolutely did the right thing. The Klingon way is rarely the best way, believe me.”

“Thank you, ladies, I appreciate it,” I said, leaning back in my chair.

“Congratulations on being awarded the Karagite Order of Heroism, Gothic,” B’Elanna said, smiling proudly at me. “That’s a very hard get. I imagine many people are going to be put out that an Augment, a monster from Earth’s past, was awarded such a prestigious medal.”

“Yes, I imagine many will,” I said thoughtfully. “That was part of the reason why I wanted to leave the planet before the *Cairo* arrived. Being arrested for war crimes was not something I wanted to risk.”

“There is no way they’d do that, would they?” B’Elanna asked, sounding furious, but also unsure, having experienced prejudice herself on the very world we had just saved. Irony was alive and well in this universe.

T’Maz helpfully chimed in again at that, “Starfleet personnel can be quite unpredictable in the ways they express their righteousness and sense of superiority. I would not discount the possibility.”



“It doesn’t matter, at this point,” I said, waving it off as inconsequential. “President Moss seemed firmly in my corner. I’m sure she’ll support me should it come to that. But we do have the most dangerous part of our journey ahead of us. Speaking of; B’Elanna, are we ready for this?”

B’Elanna’s expression turned deadly serious in a heartbeat, as she wiped her mouth clean with a linen napkin.

“The secondary computer cores have been installed, networked, and thoroughly tested, Captain,” she reported. “The processing power we can throw at making the needed the phase variance calculations in real time, while in the quantum tunnel, has risen by over 300%. Every simulation says it will work, but there is only one way to know for sure.”

I nodded at that, fully agreeing with her.

“We’ve minimized the risk of catastrophe as best we can, but we need a successful test and all the data it will generate to refine the phase variance calculation process,” B’Elanna passionately argued. “We’re all in agreement, right now we’re brute forcing these phase variance calculations. No finesse whatsoever. It’s both inefficient and wasteful. There is undoubtedly a better, more efficient way to go about this, but without the real data to work with, we’re stuck with what we’ve got. If we survive, *when* we survive, I intend to work closely with T’Maz, Scarlett, and Hermione on analyzing the data and coming up with a new approach or method to make these calculations.”

I’m glad she felt this way. Without directly sharing my knowledge about Arcturus and his people, I had subtly led her to this conclusion. Hopefully with T’Maz and my VIs’ help, they’d come up with something.

“I agree, B’Elanna,” I said. “Let’s finish up our meal and hopefully we survive the attempt.”

**XXXXX**

“Are we ready, people?” I calmly asked aloud from my captain’s chair, knowing my question would be heard by my entire crew.

“All systems are optimal, Captain,” T’Maz reported from behind me.

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be, Captain,” B’Elanna confidently answered from her station in engineering.

“I’ll be piloting the ship, prepare for slipstream test,” I ordered, before putting my recliner up and back and slipping fully into the neural connection I had with my ship, my eyes closing as my chair’s safety harness auto-deployed and secured me safely in place, no matter how much the ship was jostled around. “The plan, as always, is to travel for one hour at the slipstream drive’s lowest speed, which is 50 lightyears per hour of travel. Once an hour has elapsed, assuming we survive, we’ll shutdown the drive and travel the rest of the way at warp to reach our destination. Does everyone understand the plan?”

“Understood, Captain,” and other variations came in response from my entire crew, which was all of three people.

“Stand by then.”

My first step was to plot a course to Minos, that planet I had become a citizen of then leader of what felt like a lifetime ago, but had in fact been only a few years, a time before I’d even joined the Resistance on Bajor to fight the Cardassians. My thoughts had often strayed to the planet over the past few years. The data and technology I had taken from that world had been instrumental in the success of many of my endeavors. That’s planet’s technology, in fact, had been the inspiration behind many facets of the design details in my personal armor and weapons, the upgrades to the original *Flighty Temptress*, and the most recent iteration of my ship. It wasn’t hyperbolic to say that without Minos he wouldn’t have been able to accomplish half of what he had.

Even the creation of his VIs, one of his greatest achievements to date, was only possible due to what he had learned from the brilliant programming that made the Echo Papa weapon system possible. Of course, that had terrified him in the beginning, especially since that weapon system had wiped out that planet’s entire population, but it had given him a head start, maybe even a decade head start, in achieving his ultimate success. It had also given him ideas on what not to do and how to better protect himself from his own creations going rogue.

Of course, it was not long after I had claimed and left the planet behind that I realized that there was no way to safely reestablish contact with the planet, or to ever again make the months’ long journey back to the planet at warp, with my current position on Bajor. Minos was my ace in the hole, my trump card to use. It could be a source of incredible profit, a way to increase my influence in galactic affairs in the war-torn years to come, and a way to significantly improve my chances of survival. At the very least, it could be my secret fortress and bolt hole if I ever needed to escape from my enemies.

Unfortunately, what hadn’t occurred to me then, was that while the planet was out of the way, in a relatively isolated and distant sector of the galaxy, which made it perfect for many things, as it was so distant from any of the major alpha quadrant powers, attempting any contact with it would practically send a signal flare up to gain the attention of the Federation and Section 31 and the rest of the galaxy’s big players who routinely monitored the galactic subspace communications network. It would be a giant neon sign blinking in the darkness on a moonless night, attracting all the wrong kinds of attention and practically demanding all to investigate.

That was the crux of my problem, *I didn’t own or control those systems*, which made using them inherently dangerous. Getting lost in a sea of routine communications would have been easy, but a single one, going out into the desolate void to a planet as isolated as Minos, would instantly draw attention and scrutiny. A trump card that was known was no trump card at all. The consequences of powerful people and organizations realizing that I had taken control of an advanced world like Minos were unknowable. Even Section 31, my longtime partner, might even decide that I was too big a threat to allow unrestrained with those kinds of resources to call upon.

At best, they might ask to use them for their own purposes, at worst, they'd kill me and take it for themselves. The Prophets only knew what the other powers might do to me.

*I couldn't take that risk.*

I couldn't even make the months long journey to Minos again. Becoming a General on Bajor had brought me a lot of prestige and opportunities as it thrust me firmly into the events of canon DS9, but it had also attracted a lot of high-level attention to me. It was as much a boon as it was a yoke around my neck. I couldn't realistically disappear for months on end, while traveling at warp to reach Minos, and not have many parties interested in trying to figure out where I was going and why. I also couldn't realistically be away from the station for that long a stretch, especially while canon episode events were taking place.

My circumstances were different now, though. With my burgeoning quantum entangled communications network being slowly deployed, I had new options to securely communicate with the planet. And if I could survive a trip by my ship's quantum slipstream drive, I would now have the ability to travel there quickly enough without arousing interest by parties with too much power and far too much paranoia.

Submerging myself in the ship's systems, the path to Minos lit up like a bright white path through the void of space, ending at the verdant green planet. Drawing more and more power from the ship's powerful core, I directed the power to the many systems that were needed to ensure we survived, like shields, structural integrity, sublight engines, and the deflector dish.

Routing energy through the ship's main deflector, I created and focused a quantum field like a knife, cutting an opening into the fabric of real space, penetrating the quantum barrier to open a portal into the quantum realm which would allow the ship to reach speeds many, many times the top speed of the most advanced warp drive available to the vast majority of the alpha quadrant races. I gunned the sublight engines and entered a new quantum realm, continuing to cut a path through that realm like a plow through rich soil, careful of hitting rocks in my way.

Reaching into that quantum realm, however, were the gravitational effects of stars, and planets, and blackholes. Keeping the tunnel I was traveling in stable, by constantly adjusting the phase variance of the quantum field, allowing me to traverse this realm, was both the path forward and the only path to survival. Failure to adjust the variance meant the quantum tunnel or slipstream would collapse, violently throwing the ship back into normal space in the gravity well of a star, or a black hole, or seconds away from impacting a planet.

Upon entering the slipstream tunnel, the battle for our survival began. It was not a traditional battle, filled with grand actions or glorious fighting, this was a battle of ethereal, high-level mathematics. The ship's sensors were constantly providing real time data to the ship's computers on the changing circumstances in the quantum realm, providing the so-called phase variance problem to be solved. The problem with the problem was that it was ever changing each nanosecond, and the computer needed to solve the problem and use that answer or solution to adjust accordingly the quantum field the ship was projecting out and carving a path through the quantum realm.

While the traditional excitement was missing, what was at stake was still our very lives.

Even with all the additional processing power B'Elanna's plan had given the ship, I could tell that we were on the edge of failing at any moment. Ten minutes went by like this, fifteen, twenty, before I felt a hiccup, if you will, in the ship's systems. Some minor malfunction in the ship's gravity plating had diverted just a tiny bit of processing power away that a phase variance solution came a picosecond too late and now we were behind the proverbial 8 ball. This resulted in a phase variance adjustment coming a touch too late, not enough to harm the ship, but enough to cause a momentary loss of stability in the quantum tunnel which shook the ship slightly. Each infinitesimal delay resulted in the instability continuing to shake the ship, getting worse as the problem became cumulative. If this was a Starfleet ship, we would have all likely been tossed to the floor or thrown into the ceiling snapping our necks, but my ship's design included a stupid number of inertial dampers and safety harnesses for all crew.

"We're not keeping up with the phase variance adjustments!" B'Elanna shouted. "We are nanoseconds late and it's getting worse!"

"Stand by," I said calmly, trying to project a source of serenity and calm in a tense situation, like a good captain would.

Reaching out in desperation as a plan began to form in my mind, I pulled on my connection to Hermione and my island's systems, testing its strength. While the quantum entangled connection to my island's systems was still there, the quantum realm we were traveling in was limiting the data throughput in a way that I didn't understand the reason for. That was irrelevant, though.

'Hermione, Scarlett,' I called mentally, at the speed of thought. 'I need you two to link together to share the burden here.'

Without any more traditional words shared, even in this mental space, I outlined my plan, to use the processing power of both my ship and my island to work together to share the computational burden the phase variance calculations were placing on us.

The trick was to carefully divide the mathematical labor between them, with the data throughput limitation Hermione was limited by firmly in mind. It would be like two professional pianists sitting at the same piano, on the same bench, one on the left side of the keys, the other on the right, both playing specific parts of the same complex piece, but not tripping over each other or ruining the coherence of the single song.

In this case, the Island's untaxed computer systems would be taking over perhaps 25% of the song, aka the computational burden. That was a huge weight off the ship's proverbial shoulders. It would also provide us the needed breathing room should another unexpected divergence in the ship's processing power happen again, since the ship's processing power was not being maxed out anymore.

When the 'duet' between Scarlett and the Hermione began and harmonized, the ship slowly stopped shaking.

“The quantum tunnel has stabilized, Captain,” B’Elanna unnecessarily reported. “I’m not entirely sure what you did, but it seems to have worked.”

The rest of the hour passed with no further incident and we came out of the slipstream *approximately* fifty light years away from where we started. Figuring out how to travel exactly the distance we wanted and come out at the coordinates we desired would obviously be a work in progress, but an important one.

With a mental command, my recliner lowered and the harness securing me in place retracted automatically to release me.

“Good work, people, we survived,” I congratulated my folks, a smile on my face at this successful test. In my mind’s eye, I saw B’Elanna and Neela sharing a hug and engaging in back slapping. T’Maz maintained her stoic and calm demeanor. I was tempted to demand a blowjob from her.

“We’ll be traveling the rest of the way to our destination by warp drive. In the meantime, I want all the data from our voyage collected and an analysis of everything that happened begun. Work with Scarlett and Hermione.”

**XXXXX**

### **In Orbit of Planet Minos.**

We’d finally arrived at our destination and my ship was now approaching the planet, a world with alternating horizontal bands of white and a verdant green. It was just as beautiful and alien as I remembered. I had kept my destination secret from the entire crew and had even sent T’Maz off the bridge to assist B’Elanna. I had also ordered Scarlett to prevent any ship systems from providing information to the crew on our current location. The ship’s armor was also still deployed to prevent anyone from looking out a window. Handheld tricorders or other sensory devices not connected to the ship itself would also be blocked.

I suspected T’Maz realized that I was keeping this information from her and the others, but as a longtime Section 31 operative, she easily accepted that some information would not be shared with her. B’Elanna and Neela were unlikely to be as accepting as her, but I was keeping them sufficiently distracted and busy with the data from our slipstream journey.

As expected, I received a one-way hail from the planet below. Accepting the one-way communication, the Peddler, who I had renamed ‘Carl’ in a fit of whimsy, based on a used car salesman I had once dealt with in my old life, appeared on the screen. He still rocked his signature look with white puffs of hair on either side of his head, but instead of the vapid, welcoming smile seen on the show, he bore a serious expression this time.

“Incoming starship, you have entered the restricted space of Minos, the ‘Arsenal of Freedom.’ By order of the Arcon of Minos, Minos and its star system is closed, until further notice, to all travelers and visitors. You are ordered to please depart the system immediately. I repeat, you are ordered to please depart the system immediately. Failure to acknowledge this warning may result

in your ship being destroyed, or impounded and crew killed. Have a wonderful day and journey back to where you came from.”

I stood up and opened a two-way communications channel.

“Hello Carl,” I greeted, an evil looking smile on my face. “I’m back.”

His evil smile in return, of anticipation and happiness, would have made a lesser man tremble.