

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

## The Adventures of Augment Gothic

### Chapter 25

#### **Infirmary. Deep Space Nine.**

‘I am firmly stuck on the canon path, aren’t I?’ I thought with a sigh, as I reclined on the Cardassian designed biobed in the station’s infirmary while casually glancing around at all of the frenetic activity going on.

If a butterfly flapping its wings could cause a hurricane on the other side of the world, what had my many actions brought about? There were differences, sure, but for someone who hadn’t been working very hard to preserve his future knowledge, I was surprised at how closely events had followed the show. The only possible way to explain it was that the Prophets had been subtly guiding things back to the path that they wanted, which wasn’t a bad thing for Bajor...or for me, if I was really honest about it. It did rankle a bit though. I had a feeling I would have to pick my spots going forward.

Looking around, trying to take my mind off these thoughts, I was struck by how different the station’s infirmary looked from the television show. Of course, it had to be different. Just like the *Enterprise’s* main shuttlebay was a truly cavernous space that looked gigantic in person compared to the space in the show, the infirmary set depicted on the show was nowhere near the size it’d need to be to realistically provide medical care and services to the station’s entire population.

Like most of the station these days, under Federation administration, it was a mix of Cardassian and Federation technology. The biobed I was on was Cardassian in design and manufacture, which was easy to tell from just how uncomfortable the fucking thing was, not suprising considering it came from a society that focused on the collective’s needs rather than the individual’s. Unfortunately, it was a piece of technology that needed to be integrated into the station’s Cardassian designed power systems so it had to be Cardassian technology, anything else was incompatible. Anything that didn’t require that integration, though, could be the far more advanced, user friendly, and *comfortable* Federation technology, thank goodness.

At full capacity, the station could easily sustain a permanent population of up to 7,000 people. It had a minimum crew capacity of 300, but at full staffing the crew count could reach up to 2,000. Of course, the station had nowhere near those kinds of numbers at the moment. The crew complement, made up of both Starfleet and Bajoran Militia personnel, only totaled 500 at the moment (split about half and half), with a permanent civilian population of only about 250, which were mostly the merchants and their families who called this station their home and the families of the crew.

As the station’s traffic increased, and thus more consistent revenue came in, I was sure the crew complement would go up to support the increased demand. At the moment, the Bajoran

government had a hard enough time just paying the salaries of the personnel here and repairing the station, while simultaneously maintaining the rebuilding and recovery efforts on the planet itself, so things would likely stay the same for a while. Thankfully, the Federation was doing most of the heavy lifting when it came to the ongoing repairs of the station. It was a nice side benefit of inviting them in.

The infirmary was jam packed at the moment, with every available biobed occupied with someone speaking gibberish. It was actually kind of funny, at least now that it appeared unlikely everyone on the station would die because of it.

In many ways this pandemic had followed the canon episode, but the timing of it was entirely off. This episode was out of order, with at least two other episodes before it that hadn't yet happened. Was this a result of this being an alternate universe from the shows? Or had my actions butterflyed a change into the timeline far earlier than it was supposed to?

The source of this aphasia virus, as it was being called, had already been discovered. Chief O'Brien had opened a panel in the replicator pattern generator control systems which had accidentally activated a long forgotten Resistance trap-

*'Fuck me,'* I thought as I came to a sudden realization. This trap was set off earlier than in canon DS9, but the timing was coincidentally immediately *after* I had told Sisko that the Cardassians had set my replicator to explode during our last chat. What were the chances that Sisko had heard that and then ordered a system-wide inspection and diagnostic of the replicator system?? The chances were pretty fucking high; I definitely wouldn't take that bet.

So O'Brien goes to inspect the system on Sisko's order and unleashes the virus earlier than in canon. Fucking butterflies! I'm not even sure it could even be called a butterfly since I was pretty sure it was a direct and, arguably, somewhat predictable result of my conversation with Sisko.

If I had to carefully watch and second guess what I said and did at all times for potential consequences like this, the joy would be sucked out of this life pretty quick. I wasn't going to live like that.

Dr. Bashir had already identified the virus as Bajoran in origin. Plot twist, it was actually the Bajoran Resistance that had created this engineered virus and placed it on the station over 18 years ago, when the station was first constructed! The distribution method was actually pretty ingenious. The Cardassians' replicators themselves were creating the virus, at the molecular level, within the very food it was producing. If you ate the compromised food, you were infected with the virus. There was a certain delicious irony in that.

Why this attack had never been activated was a question we'd probably never learn the answer to as both the virus' mad scientist creator was long dead, along with his entire Resistance cell. It was possible the cell or cells that had been behind the attack were all killed before it could be unleashed. Or the cell leadership might have changed their mind; it killed Bajorans the same as everyone else after all. Or maybe they wanted to wait for the perfect time or circumstances to come about and enough time had passed that no one who knew of the attack was still alive to implement it.

Every one of these possibilities was just as likely as the other. It wouldn't even make the top 10 craziest plans I'd heard gone awry in the Resistance whose vision was often greater than their ability to execute. This was one of the few 'crazy' plans that I felt would have likely worked, had it been activated. Of course, it also would have represented a major escalation in the fight with the Cardassians that could have led to the Bajoran people being exterminated wholesale, but who knows. Maybe that's why that cell had hesitated in executing their plan? Maybe it was a 'last resort' kind of thing.

In canon, Bashir had made little progress working on a cure for the virus before being infected himself; once that happened the station would have been screwed. Facing the death of nearly everyone on the station, in desperation, Kira had had to find and kidnap off Bajor the still living research assistant of the virus' original creator before they found a cure.

With me here, though, well, they'd found an alternate solution.

"This won't hurt a bit, General," Bashir reassured me with a well practiced 'doctor smile' as he put a hypospray to my neck and activated the blood collection function of the device. He just stood there, staring at me pretty awkwardly, as he took a shit ton of my blood. This was actually the third or fourth time he had, as the first few times was to prove a theory. "Your unique physiology is the key to defeating this virus!" he said, probably as a way to reassure me that all of this was well worth the trouble.

"I know, Doctor, and I'm happy to help," I returned with a small smile of my own, staring intently into his eyes. "It's rather ironic, isn't it, that the unique physiology and aggressive immune system of an Augment like myself, a product of illegal and banned genetic engineering for humans in the Federation, is the key to saving the lives of everyone onboard this station. If we were on a Federation world, well, I wouldn't have been allowed to join Starfleet, much less be such a high-level officer in it."

"Y-yes, I suppose it is ironic, in some ways," Bashir said in response, looking abashed and uncomfortable, before positively running off.

If I didn't know his unique backstory I might have assumed that he was uncomfortable because of the Federation's prejudice towards the genetically enhanced. I knew better.

"I want any unused blood samples destroyed, Doctor!" I called out to his retreating back.

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It was actually Dax who'd first noted that although I had eaten and drunk from the same infected replicators on the command deck, that I was showing no evidence of the virus. I was still human, thus susceptible, as they already had evidence of (unlike the Ferengi who couldn't contract it at all for some reason), so I *should* have been infected. Once this was noticed, I willingly offered myself up for study.

After an examination, Bashir had quickly discovered that I actually *had been* infected, but that my genetically enhanced and very aggressive immune system had detected the virus and quickly developed unique antibodies tailormade to seek it out and destroy it. I hadn't even noticed, or

spoken a word of gibberish, that was how quickly my immune system had made short work of this nasty little bioweapon.

Fascinated by how well my body had fought it off, Bashir had identified then harvested these unique antibodies from my blood and found that they were the perfect little killing machines in the human body for this virus. Of course, the station's population was made up of many more races than human, so he'd had to harvest a great many antibodies to run tests to learn the way it went about neutralizing the virus in order to develop a synthetic antibody that could be given to most of the humanoid races on the station. The non-humanoid races onboard, few as there were, weren't affected in the first place, so they didn't need it.

Once he'd done that it had just been a matter of spreading the cure to everyone onboard, and then waiting for the virus to die out once it lacked anyone new to infect. Compared to the episode on TV it had actually been a rather sedate affair, relatively speaking, and hadn't involved kidnapping then intentionally infecting someone to get them to cooperate like in canon. And since it was resolved quicker than in canon, no one was quite yet on the doorstep of death.

Luckily, or not so luckily, as I had purposely nudged things in that direction, I was a hero once again and was being given quite a bit of the credit for saving the lives of everybody onboard the station, further proving the value of an Augment. First Minister Nalas had even given me a commendation medal, the first the new government had awarded.

My differences were now being seen as a source of strength by not just the Bajoran crew, but the Federation crew as well, rather than something to be met with fear and prejudice like was normal. As I knew from my service in Iraq and Afghanistan, changing hearts and minds took time and effort, but this was a great start.

The downside to all this was that now Bashir wanted to do an ongoing study of my Augment physiology, and this was a bit of a pain as I had quite a lot of work to do, but he kept calling me down to the infirmary so that he could take more samples.

I had a genuine and not unsubstantiated fear that Section 31 would quickly have all his research on my physiology in short order. They could easily use this information to develop ways to counteract my immune system in order to kill me. However, the more I thought about it, the more unlikely I thought it. They attacked the Founders in that manner because the Founder race was inaccessible, their location unknown in the gamma quadrant. They needed one Founder, Odo, to meld with the others and thus pass on the disease to the whole. I was a singular entity. There was no race of Augments that they needed to kill. There were far more direct ways to kill a single person, especially one who wasn't exactly hiding. I could think of five different ways off the top of my head they could kill me with that my current defenses wouldn't prevent at the present time.

Had it been anyone else, I would have declined, but the doctor was a fellow genetically enhanced (even if he didn't know I knew that) and therefore the closest thing I had to kin outside of the four lovable nutjobs still living on Earth. Maybe he thought of it that way too. It certainly wouldn't hurt to build a friendship with the man considering how many episodes he played a

vital role in. I couldn't wait for the first time he invited me to lunch with Garek, which I'm sure he'd do. As an operative of the Obsidian Order during the Occupation the man probably knew exactly who I was and what I had done to his fellow Cardassians.

I was actually looking forward to it!

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### **Holosuite 1. Quark's Bar. Deep Space Nine.**

One of the biggest problems living in a TV show dimension is that the show you're getting all of your future knowledge from never showed the boring bits or the fiddly little details happening in the background of a fully fledged universe, but not directly relevant to the plot of that one particular episode. As someone whose life had been in jeopardy more times than he could count during the Occupation, the details mattered. They mattered a lot. The details could kill you.

An episode of television was the tiniest glimpse into a particular set of events, usually broken up into an A and B storyline, and even then they were only as detailed as a 42 minute episode could realistically allow. The vast majority of time wasn't covered by an episode of television. So the viewers were never shown the days upon days when fuck all happens and you end up sitting in your office filling out seemingly endless paperwork. On a television show, those days didn't matter much to the overall storyline, in real life, *of course it did*.

I had often complained about writing reports when I was a low-level officer in the Army in charge of a small unit, I was woefully unprepared for just how exponentially worse it'd be as a general with a rather broad purview of responsibility.

Thankfully, as an Augment, I had advantages and capabilities most in my position didn't. I could get by on little to no sleep for up to a week at a time, could do the work of three accomplished men, and had a smoking hot and competent adjutant in Major Ro Laren who didn't mind it at all if I randomly bent her over my desk, pulled down her pants and panties, and thrust myself inside her for a little 'afternoon delight' when the stress got to be all too much to bear and I felt like killing someone. I took my frustration out on her ass by taking her to pound town, to her vocal delight.

So, while most men in my new position would drown in the amount of work it required, especially at the beginning when they were just settling into such a new role, with my advantages and good staffing, I found some free time to work on my holo-novels.

Writing felt like a wonderful escape from the daily grind of life as a flag officer, and it made me a lot of money too, which justified the time expenditure in my own mind and thus I rarely felt guilty about it. Making money from my writing was even more important than it might seem as I really did need the visible income from a legal source that I didn't have to hide from everyone. Strong sales meant continuous payments received from my publishers as people continued to buy my works, both old and new.

I was finding out that 'There is no kill quite like overkill' was all fine and great as a life philosophy right up until you have to pay for all your cool toys like phaser cannons, torpedoes,

and shields. It took quite a lot of money to build a palace-like home and then turn your island getaway into a fortress, I had found out; thank the Prophets that the land itself had been free! Even though I had made a shit ton by both selling that Collector data to Section 31 and for my successful long-term mission on Bajor helping the Resistance, that was all 'Dark Money,' using the parlance from my own time, though it wasn't perfectly applicable. The Ferengi didn't give two shits where my money came from so I happily paid them from my dark money pool of funds, but most parties weren't like that and I really didn't need the questions or increased scrutiny it would bring onto me if they thought my money was from a criminal enterprise.

Building my island palace fortress had been a *major* drain on my various bank accounts' balance of 'light money', meaning legal funds from a recognizable source, and that total was still going down as I had several things still awaiting delivery and installation. Sonic showers, hot tubs, training rooms, a brig, and even state of the art gym equipment to keep in top form were all on order. Thankfully, most of these things were one-off expenses, but I would eventually need to hire a permanent staff to maintain the house and grounds while I was off-world, if I didn't want the place to fall apart while I was gone for any appreciable length of time.

Another significant drain on my finances was the money I was pumping into Bajor's military budget. The military budget for off-world defense was a joke, even for the Militia's relatively small size, so I wasn't personally getting paid a lot as a general or given a lot to work with to adequately do the job I was given, and oftentimes had to pay for things directly out of my own pocket. Knowing of my smuggler background, Li Nalas (and thus the Provisional government) was more than happy to look the other way when it came to using my dark money cache for this funding and had thanked me many times for contributing in their time of great need.

Of course, this had the benefit of not only increasing the goodwill the Bajorans had for me, by passing these dark funds through a planetary government's accounts and spending, it had the side benefit of laundering this dark money in a way that was virtually unassailable by external parties, so it wasn't all out of generosity and the goodness of my heart. I wasn't a chump. They had assured me that they'd reimburse me in full once they had the funds available and would give me some tax breaks in the meantime as a form of interest payment. Unlike other governments whose promises were worth less than nothing, I had no doubt that they meant what they said and would do it when they could. They had not batted an eye at following through on their promise of citizenship and land, after all, even with the huge amount of it I was owed and the headache making me a citizen had caused them with the Federation.

In terms of off world defense, *we were semi-fucked* at the moment, which was another reason why I felt compelled to pump my own money into the military budget. The show never showed or talked about just how defenseless Bajor was after the Cardassian withdrawal. Terok Nor, or as it was known now, Deep Space 9, had *always* been intended to provide some level of vital protection to the planet once Bajor repaired the station a bit. Now, though, it wasn't even in orbit of Bajor anymore and its runabouts were hours away at full impulse! It made perfect sense to move the station to the mouth of the newly discovered wormhole, the only known stable wormhole in the galaxy, but there was next to nothing now to stop a hostile power from simply bombing the planet from orbit or even just landing and kidnapping people into slavery again.

In fact, it was only a paper thin illusion of security and the Federation's reputation that kept Bajor itself safe. A handful of relatively far away warp capable runabouts on the station, and the Federation defending Bajor, *on paper*, was pretty much the planet's only defense at the moment. The nearest Federation starship with any real firepower was several days at maximum warp away from Bajor, *on a good day*, so not exactly capable of being there on a moment's notice if the planet called for help. Nausican raiders or Orion slavers or whatever trash species of the galaxy who wanted to try their luck wouldn't much care about the vague threat of the Federation arriving in a few days once they were long gone. Did I mention Bajor's off-world defense was semi-fucked???

The nightmarish idea that one day I could very well be forced to fly *The Flighty Temptress* out of the station at full sublight speed, or engage in a very risky in-system micro-warp jump, to combat some ships over Bajor, had prompted me to shell out my own funds to purchase six impulse-only Federation attack fighters from the Federation on behalf of Bajor. Of course, it wasn't that easy, the Federation had always been reluctant to sell ships and weaponry to non-Federation members, but I had pulled some strings and gotten them to agree to it, though they would only sell defensive weaponry, hence why the attack fighters were impulse only. Without warp capability, in their minds, Bajor would not be able to use these ships to actually reach and attack Cardassian ships, for example, only to defend their own planet and space. Each ship was armed with type 8 phasers and four photon torpedoes, which was a decent armament if they fought in groups.

Of course, I hadn't told them that I had also purchased six older and lightly used low-warp capable Klingon attack fighters from Gaila. These fighters were on the cusp of being obsolete and did not have a cloaking device, unfortunately, but I was glad he had been able to source even those. Some Klingon house had probably needed the funds after the civil war ended and the Collector threat had reared up and they wanted to clear out their inventory of older ships in favor of purchasing state of the art fighters. They were still capable of doling out serious damage and the purchase of these ships had propelled me into 'VIP Customer' status with Gaila, or so he said. I was told that meant I got the best pricing available and first dibs on any new inventory he acquired. I was skeptical of all that, but ok. I was just happy he'd come through with some good ships.

So, that was the extent of Bajor's off-world ship defenses near the planet, 12 attack fighters, 6 of Federation design, 6 of Klingon design, operating in small wolf pack groups of 3. Per my standing orders, at any one time 3 wolf packs, or 9 ships, were to be patrolling the orbital space around Bajor, with the 3 remaining ships available in backup as a rapid response unit. Of course, the reality was that those 3 supposedly on-call fast response fighters were more often than not just those ships undergoing repairs or maintenance, but what could you do when you had such a small group of ships operating virtually 26 hours a day, everyday? That kind of constant operation required similarly constant maintenance.

Those 12 ships had cost me a lot of money. To keep costs down, I'd expanded the Jerrado moon base, the Gothic cell's former home, to serve as the staging base for all these fighters, with the old sub-impulse ships the Resistance had once used given to the Bajoran militia forces working on the planet itself. With Kira's help, I had convinced Lupaza, our former Shakaar cell

teammate, to command this squadron of fighters while I maintained offices on the station. Her longtime paramour/unofficial husband, Furel, was made her second in command.

For a planet of Bajor's size, with the fame, attention, and traffic the wormhole was bringing to the system, these 12 attack fighters were woefully insufficient for the task, should anyone really make a go at Bajor. An orbital weapons' system and shielding would have been far more appropriate for the job, but that was a cost I wasn't willing to bear, assuming I could even acquire something like that. Working together, with luck on their side, those fighters could probably take on and disable/destroy a single modern capital ship or harass several to hopefully drive them off. If the Prophets were really smiling down on us, the attacking ships would be in the limited range of my Island's orbital defenses and I could remotely order my weapons' installations to destroy the vessel.

I was still waiting for the time when I could sell the cargoes of the freighters I'd captured, but the question was what to do with those ships afterwards. While I had promised the Provisional Government a 20% cut of the loot, the ships themselves were mine to do with as I pleased. At the moment, I was strongly considering offering them something that would hopefully benefit Bajor and myself.

My plan was to offer to lease, at a discounted rate, the four Cardassian freighters to the Provisional Government to use as a defense force or to use as a shipping concern. This would give the Bajorans much needed capital to aid their recovery. If they weren't interested, I could start up a shipping concern of my own to make a profit. A business like that would give me the perfect excuse to leave the system as I wanted. There was a glut of skilled Bajoran labor at the moment who I could hire to crew the ships and I had a feeling Starfleet Intelligence and Section 31 would have some work for my ships if they knew that I was the one running them and could be trusted to get the job done.

"Computer, interface with *The Flighty Temptress*' in-process holo-program database," I ordered aloud.

"Interface has been established," the Cardassian computer's voice responded.

"Load Mass Effect program; begin chapter one," I ordered aloud. "Observation mode with the female Shepard character template."

The Mass Effect holo-novel/program was mostly complete already, with most of the heavy lifting having already been completed with the efficiency and speed only my neural control helmet could offer. Right now, though, I was doing some last minute tweaking, revisions, and integrity checks the old fashioned way.

With my command, the empty space around me transformed into the bridge of the SSV Normandy that I remembered from the games, at least in a general sense. The bridge layout was most definitely not Federation standard, but the workstations themselves could be set to look and function like any of the major powers' standard starship control interfaces, at least those I had programmed in. Right now it was set to Federation standard control interfaces. This was intended to make it easier for the player to use. In other words, the bridge layout was locked, but a



Federation citizen could select a standard Federation starship control interface, a Klingon could use his, etc., or they could use the one I had custom designed based on my experience with the game if the player wanted a real challenge. If I had any Breen fans, well, we really didn't know what their bridges looked like or how their controls were set up, so they would have to tweak it themselves or they were shit out of luck.

Standing in the middle of the bridge I did a slow turn while the program played out. Looking around with a very critical eye, everything looked good. Nothing appeared half-assed or thrown together too quickly, there were no visible derezzed elements or holographic instabilities that I could detect even with my genetically enhanced eyes. Those showed up when an author made some kind of impossible or conflicting design choice that couldn't exist in the same space or be properly rendered three-dimensionally. Even the very sexy Jane Shepard that I'd written, who could be replaced by whoever played the holo-novel, looked real and rather badass in her armor. Her physical parameters were a mix of several famous Hollywood celebrities from my time.

The player had several choices and could engage with the program with any of the main Mass Effect characters, including the villains, assuming they wanted to try taking over the galaxy, and could also change the gender of anyone at will. I had a feeling that Wrex, the consummate badass warrior, would become a favorite choice for the Klingons. They might even find him to be a rather handsome alien, who knew what those guys thought was sexy.

I'd selected the observation mode so that I could see how the holo-novel progressed without being distracted by being directly involved in the events going on around me. Observation mode was actually a player option as well, but why anyone would choose that for too long was beyond me, but whatever.

The observation mode was useful, though, for the players who didn't actually want to do any fighting. During the combat scenes they could just stand back and watch rather than do the shooting and killing. I had long ago learned my lesson in dealing with my Federation customers in particular and had offered many upfront options for the player to choose before starting, including whether they wanted to engage in any combat, either ship-to-ship or hand-to-hand, and the level of bloody reality they'd like to see depicted, the level of sexuality/nudity, among a host of other choices. I'd even put in parental controls! This led to far more customer satisfaction and much less banning as a whole now that the player could better choose the parameters of their experience. The Federation was all about choice, after all. I'd learned my lesson.

Just like in my time, where the US was the richest country with a citizenry that could afford to purchase luxury goods, the Federation was the 'richest' market for my products in the alpha quadrant and the ones who could most easily and consistently afford modern luxuries like a new original holo-program. It was consistently where the majority of my customers came from. As such, while it chafed me at times to make accommodations for them and their delicate sensibilities, they were my biggest customer and for the sake of my bottom line I couldn't just ignore them.

"Okay, witty banter between Joker and Shepard is good. Plenty of witty responses available for the character personality matrices to create a custom response to the player," I said to myself. "Now the captain summons the commander to his ready room."

Which fit in more with life onboard a Starfleet ship; the captain there always had a ready room.

"Crew members interact just fine, even with no player input," I muttered.

I wanted everyone of the characters on the Normandy itself to have a fully defined and fleshed out backstory in order for them to seem as much like a real person as possible, which required a complex personality matrix. Creating a complex personality matrix for a holo-character, much less multiple ones, would normally be a very, very time consuming process, probably the biggest task a holo-author engaged in besides maybe the storyline itself. It was also the task that separated the shit authors from the great ones.

Of course, I cheated like a motherfucker when I used the neural control helmet. When an author built a character in their minds, like an iceberg, only a small portion was visible from interactions with the player. The helmet, though, took what was hidden underneath the waterline of my imagination, what I had in my unconscious mind for that character, and efficiently built that complex character in the digital space. The really good holo-authors out there had a rare ability to translate those thoughts into the holographic space of the program through complex narrative and personality programming. I essentially cut that step from the process.

So, while the player might not realize that so much was going on under the surface to generate their unique interaction with the characters of the program, a more organic and complex character would almost always lead to a better connection forming between player and character, which led to more emotional buy-in with the entire narrative. Which would, in turn, make those character deaths at the start of the sequel much more meaningful.

Of course, the original game never created any such depth for its NPC population, but I was an Augment with an enhanced mind, a memory perfect for such a level of detail, and in possession of a piece of technology that made the writing process far quicker, more comprehensive, and more accurate. My ability to create such a complex world was one of the big reasons why my holo-novels/programs had become so popular and so in demand. I took the good 'bones' and general storyline from what I remembered from my time and turned it into a fully interactive and fleshed out world, so quite a lot of my own creativity was in each of my works as much of that detail had never existed in the original games I was using as inspiration and guide.

As for the Mass Effect sequel, I'd have to change the Collectors quite a bit because they were a lot like the modified Hur'q everyone was rightfully worried about these days. I had even called them Collectors in my reports to Section 31 and *somehow* that name that I had given them had gotten out and been put into common use. How *the fuck* that had happened, who knew?

Still, the sequel could wait and any thoughts about it were rather premature at this point, the sexy Commander Shepard first needed to deal with the Geth and rogue Spectre agent Saren before I spent any time worrying about ME2. Even if ME1 was a huge success, which was a huge IF, for maximum profitability I had to wait anyway. The first installment had to have time to build up a

critical mass and get popular and only after a sufficient amount of time could the sequel be released for purchase. Player feedback on ME1 would also be a great help in making any sequel.

The briefing scene also looked good. I'd made sure that the Earth Alliance Defense Force had proper uniforms and I was also making it clear that this wasn't Starfleet or a Starfleet ship, even if the building blocks of what could one day be the Federation were not all that hard to spot.

Currently Jane Shepard, the stand-in for the player if they played that character as a woman, was talking to Nihlus about her being considered for a place as a Spectre agent of the Council.

That was when a door chime beeped at me.

"Computer, pause program," I ordered, *but nothing happened*, which caused me to feel an acute moment of intense panic as all those crazy holodeck episodes from the show where the program went off the rails flashed through my mind. "Computer, *end* program!" I called out quickly, Since the program was still in development mode, many of the standard holosuite command phrases wouldn't work yet.

I then turned to the door.

"Come in!" I said aloud, knowing the computer would carry my voice to the doorway.

Jadzia Dax entered with her characteristic mischievous smile and swagger. Her arrival was no surprise as I'd told her I'd be in the holosuite working on my program and had asked her to come here when she found some free time off duty.

"General Gothic, you wanted to see me," she said with a smile, taking an interested glance around the bridge of the Normandy. "Interesting bridge design; I'm not sure I've ever seen anything like it before."

"It's straight from my imagination!" I teased back.

Jadzia had recently been transferred off the *Enterprise* and had been promoted to Lt. Commander after accepting the Chief Science Officer posting on DS9. It was a good career move for her, assuming Dukat, while possessed by a Pah'Wraith, didn't murder her this time around. I wonder if my presence on the station had factored into her decision to accept the posting.

"It's always Gothic for you when we're not on official business, Jadzia. Such formality seems a little ridiculous considering I've been inside you so many times," I joked with an over the top wink sent in her direction. She just rolled her eyes good naturedly. Jadzia could take a bawdy joke better than anyone.

"Genetically enhanced human you might be, Gothic, but you're still just a man, always thinking with their penis and where they've put it in the past," she joked right back.

"I'm always looking for a warm, wet, safe place to put my penis, my dear. And yours is fabulous!" I replied.

"From what I hear, you've got plenty of warm, wet places to store your...*sword*," she snarked with a wicked smile. "I've heard tales that the Gothic Resistance Cell had an alias during the

Occupation as the ‘Gothic Harem of Hotties’ and guess what, they’re all on the station and frequently seen coming out of your quarters with a *limp*. How scandalous!”

If I didn’t have such excellent control of my body, I may have blushed at that and the juvenile nickname I had once used. Who had told her that?! If it was Kira I may have to dust off the pantsless sniper story in retaliation.

“Checking up on me, Dax?” I jibed. “You’re always welcome in my bed and my ‘harem of hotties’ would have no issue with that.”

“We’ll see,” she said flirtatiously. “Now what did you need my help with?”

“I wanted you to take a look at something for me,” I told her seriously, while handing over one of my data pads. “I need the science for this story to make some sort of sense. It doesn’t need to actually work, of course, but I don’t want it to seem ‘ridiculous stupid’ if you understand my meaning. Absurdity is my enemy; plausible to semi-plausible is the ideal.”

She took a seat at one of the empty bridge stations and began looking over my data.

Federation citizens were better educated as a norm than the people in my time, especially in the sciences, and while only the most elite got into Starfleet, most adults still had a firm grasp on the principles upon which Federation technology worked, even if they couldn’t produce it themselves. As such the science behind the Mass Effect tech used in my holo-novel had to make some *slight* sense, otherwise my human audience was going to laugh at it and that would take them out of the story altogether. If your audience felt something was absurd enough, that would remind them that it was all just a work of fiction. Suspension of disbelief could be overcome with enough absurdity and that wasn’t good. I was planning three holo-novels set in this mythology, with great detail and plenty of interaction, so the folks down in the engine room should be able to talk physics with the player when it came to explaining the unique propulsion systems of the Normandy and the advanced races of the Mass Effect galaxy.

“So, this element zero releases dark matter when subjected to an electrical field, which can then be manipulated to lower the mass of any object. These people use that effect for both propulsion and weaponry, interesting. Going down this technological path probably stifled the development of energy weapons, which is the traditional route most races take,” she spoke aloud while chuckling at the pseudo science at various times, like she was thinking it through. She’d also accidentally stumbled on a key plot point. “I see what your intent was here and how this non-existent ‘element zero’ makes it all possible, which actually helps sell the possibility of it all since we obviously can’t manipulate dark matter in this manner, but there are only bits and pieces here,” Jadzia commented after a few minutes of close review of the fake science behind mass effect technology that I had worked up. “Might take me a while to add some theoretical substance where it’s needed.”

Not for the first time I wondered if maybe I had chosen too ambitious a project for my current level of experience. Writing the Mass Effect series felt like a good way to get that experience, though, especially if one of my long-term goals was to recreate the entire Star Wars movies on the holodeck. Those holo-novels were going to be my magnum opus, but I knew I didn’t yet

have the experience required to write those tales with the quality that they so truly deserved. That universe was wide and deep and would require all the skill I could muster. Eventually I would have the experience I needed to do it justice and I had a feeling that when that time came it'd be a huge hit across the galaxy and make me a shit ton of money.

Introducing the story of Star Wars in the Star Trek universe, suddenly I felt like a multiverse full of fanboys was crying out 'Blasphemy!!'

"It doesn't need to be perfect," I reassured Jadzia with a smile, hoping to convey that I didn't need the technology to actually work. "It needs to make only just enough sense for the average Federation citizen to not consider it absurd and ridiculous. I want them to believe all of this could work, *maybe*, at least in an alternate universe, with vastly different technology and with some miracle substance that doesn't exist in this universe, etc."

The Trill smiled at me.

"And what do I get out of this?" she asked in a sly voice.

I thought about that for a moment.

"Well, I'll owe you a favor," I replied. "And a favor from me can be worth quite a lot, as you probably know."

As long as I didn't countermand Sisko's direct orders I could get any member of the Bajoran militia stationed off-world to do whatever I wanted, within reason. It would be easy for me to get Jadzia additional support for her work if she needed it. With my ship and its now very advanced sensors, she could even leave the station to conduct research for any of her pet projects or do other things, even if the station's Runabouts were needed elsewhere. I could even take her through the wormhole if that's what she wanted.

I had a feeling that she had something sexy in mind, and that might involve a skimpy Risian bikini and a different locale, like the palace fortress I built on a beautiful semi-tropical island on Bajor. My girls were discreet, but even they couldn't help bragging about what a wonderful getaway it was and how great a time they'd had there.

"I'll take the favor," the Trill decided, with her customary smirk. "And you owe me dinner. I hate working on an empty stomach."

Since I knew what dinner would lead to I didn't really mind this at all. Since she had been stationed on DS9 we had had no opportunity to renew our sexual relationship and I was eager to begin it again. I had a feeling that once we both started again, we wouldn't be able to stop, which suited me just fine as Jadzia was one hell of a woman who would probably fit in very well with my lifestyle.

"It's a deal," I agreed. "We can even have dinner on my private island. It might not be Risa, but it's pretty damn close."

**XXXXXX**

## Quark's Bar. Deep Space Nine.

The sounds of a spinning dabo wheel filled the air in Quark's bar. It was a pleasant sound for most humanoids and I found myself wondering if the Ferengi had chosen it in the same way the sounds commonly associated with slot machines had been chosen in Vegas on my world.

Dabo, itself, was a roulette-style game of chance developed by the Ferengi in the 23th century and was the gambling game of choice in Quark's Bar on Deep Space Nine. When one won, it was customary to shout "Dabo!" thereby creating a communal sense of victory and driving up interest in the game by giving the impression that they too could win big. The odds, of course, favored the house, but not as heavily as you might expect for a game developed by the Ferengi.

I certainly wasn't yelling *that* every time, however other people were every time I won. Which wasn't to say that I won every round, even as an Augment. I certainly did better than most, at least over the full course of all my gambling; knowing when to bet high and when to bet low, how to maximize potential gains and minimize potential losses, playing in a strategic and disciplined fashion without letting emotion lead to stupid moves, all of that definitely helped. However, no matter how skilled you were, no matter how disciplined, at the end of the day random chance reigned supreme. My enhanced physiology had little effect on the *objective* laws of probability.

Given the near ubiquitous, and short-sighted, 'profit at any price' philosophy held by most Ferengi--though I had found and developed good working relationships with the few who were the exceptions--the laws of probability were often artificially tilted in the house's favor and it was not uncommon to find that a dabo table had been rigged to deal out bad luck, *on command*. Random chance could just as easily lead to a string of player wins, after all, which meant that the house was often unwilling to pay if they had an alternative. I knew that this table was rigged to go the other way on command, but I already knew where the control was, and I was making damn sure that no one's hand got anywhere near it while I was playing.

Not that I felt Quark was likely to try that particular trick on *me*. Not only was I a general in the Bajoran militia, a power center on the station that he lived on and where his bar was located, I was also a celebrated holo-novel author, a big spender, and a frequent customer in Quark's bar, and someone Quark had already pegged as the richest man on the station. I suppose it wasn't that hard to work out, I did own my own advanced starship and had just built what was practically a palace on my own private island. Quark had also undoubtedly heard of my successes as a pirate and had put 1 and 1 together to get 2. The man always did know more than he should.

While direct rigging of the game wasn't beyond him, Odo kept a *very* close eye on Quark, so he rarely chose that option, using that only as a last resort. Far more often he used a softer approach when he needed to turn a too successful player's luck around. Win too much and soon enough exceedingly beautiful and highly trained to distract dabo girls would swarm you, tasked by their Ferengi employer to distract a player into making bad decisions and losing as much as they could back to the house. A common bit of wisdom in dabo was, 'Watch the wheel, not the girl' as they were always on the prowl.

You didn't even have to be a big winner to get their attention, their normal job was to get you to the table in the first place and then bet heavily, letting random chance do its work while the house profited. Thankfully, I was someone who could temper my own desires while focusing on their goals. I'd like to think being an Augment wasn't the sole reason I could do that, but it probably played a small part. Who knew the 'switch' I often flipped in combat would actually be good for gambling too? This meant I could both watch the wheel, play and bet strategically, all the while checking out all that delicious flesh on display. Getting handsy with the dabo girls was similarly part of the experience, though this wasn't Risa. The Bajorans were definitely not prude, but there would be no enthusiastic blowjobs under the table at Quark's while I played, much to my chagrin. Now that was a great way to enhance the gambling experience. How I missed Risa.

Even with all the external obstacles to winning and *keeping* those winnings, which was the real trick, Dabo was not a simple game, even when you could prevent the house from outright cheating. There was more than just the wheel, there was a pot that built up over time. That was the real prize, and unfortunately it didn't look as if I was going to win that big pot this time.

After a while I came to realize that all I was really doing was exchanging Federation Credits for gold-pressed latinum without making enough in profit to make it worthwhile, certainly not enough to risk so much money on a bad spin coming up through simple bad luck. I soon left the table a bit ahead by five bars, taking my minor winnings with me, much to the disappointment of the growing crowd who were hoping I'd keep trying my luck for that big pot. The communal aspect of dabo made it more exciting for all, even if you weren't directly playing, like craps on Earth. I felt the lure of the big win as much as the next guy, but sometimes being an Augment with an enhanced mind really sucked the fun out of things.

Instead, I booked a holosuite so that I could continue working on my latest holonovel. Quark had given me a significant permanent discount to rent his facilities in exchange for allowing him access to some of my works. We both came out ahead on that deal, I think. O'Brien was a huge fan of both my Tron and Call of Duty programs, saying they were almost as good as his famous white river rafting program, which was extremely high praise.

It would have been infinitely preferable to use my own much more sophisticated holodeck and hololab on the island, but it took hours to travel from the station to the island. When on the station my options were limited to Quarks, who had the only holosuites on the station. I was rich enough that I could easily install my own, but rocking the boat like that had consequences and keeping Quark favorably disposed towards me was worth more than the convenience.

If a future ship of mine had its own internal holodeck, well, he wouldn't be able to legitimately complain about that.

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### **Holosuite 1. Deep Space Nine.**

"So, who am I again?" Jadzia asked again, but I was getting the impression that she was messing with me.

I may have made a bit of a mistake when I'd requested her aid in this project. She had done a fantastic job finetuning how I talked about, explained, and sold the plausibility of the Mass Effect pseudoscience and technology base, but now she wanted to know all about the storyline itself. Hence why we were here, running through the Eden Prime mission at the start of the holonovel to test for bugs in the story or the holomatrix.

Part of me was happy she was so invested in the project, the other part of me, the one that didn't like to show my works prior to them being fully finished, cringed at the potential criticism coming my way. Just like some expecting parents didn't like to share their unborn child's name till they were actually born, I had never liked sharing my work in progress with anyone besides my publisher, but here I was sharing it with two people!

The computer had been set to note any irregularities that popped up for later review and correction. Of course, the computer had extensive checks that it performed internally and autonomously, but there was no substitute for testing with a live player interacting with the program itself. It introduced an element of chaos and randomness that the computer always had a hard time accounting for.

"You are Ashley Williams," Doctor Bashir answered patiently for me. "A marine in the Earth Defense Force."

Julian had pretty much invited himself along once Jazzia had opened her big mouth and told everyone in Ops what she would be doing after her shift. I just went along with it when Bashir asked if he could come too. One more person wasn't a huge imposition and his presence should prove helpful in running this integrity check. He was a huge fan of complex holonovels, as fans saw frequently in the show, and thus a rather discerning consumer. In fact, he was pretty much my ideal customer and had a more open mind than most, though I suspected he was not running Dead Space in his spare time.

The Mass Effect mythology was right up his alley since he specifically liked holodeck programs that had a bit of action in them, though he preferred more archaic settings on Earth. In fact, I found out that he was already quite a fan of several of my previous works and had played all of the ones in Quark's stock. He was also here because he had correctly pointed out that my hand eye coordination was vastly superior to that of a baseline human's, as such what might be an easy 'tactical simulation' for me may be too taxing for others. Of course, he was genetically enhanced himself with enhanced hand eye coordination, so I privately thought that his participation didn't particularly help in that regard either, but he didn't know that I knew that.

His point was valid, though, and I hadn't actually considered the practical implications of that before. It hadn't been an issue for my other holonovels because those had all been 'single player,' so to speak, and like all my programs that involved active combat, the difficulty level could be player adjusted at any time. In a multiplayer setting, however, this was something to consider because if the difficulty level was lowered too much for the entire group, it would be no challenge for humans with the right training, or for species that had superior baseline physical capabilities.



Thankfully, this was sorted out by allowing the difficulty level to be personalized for each individual player. You'd think that'd be an easy change, but it had required a significant increase in the complexity of the novel's holomatrix. This resulted, for example, in most of the Geth focusing their fire on me and their aim and tactics being better, at least when it came to attacking *me alone*, since I had set the difficulty to the highest level of all three of us.

Unfortunately, it could get a bit ridiculous if one person in the party had their gameplay set to an easy level 1 difficulty, where all of their enemies had the marksmanship of a drunken Star Wars stormtrooper, while someone else set it at the maximum level 10, and it was like you were facing a team of world class snipers a moment away from headshotting you, but there really was no way to easily work around that. Hopefully such huge disparities in the chosen difficulty, at least within the same party, wouldn't happen often. If there was only a few levels difference it wasn't quite as noticeable, thankfully.

"Ashley Williams is Shepard's romantic option," I explained to Jadzia, "if the main character, who I will play today, is set to be a man or is played a man. *You're welcome*. The doctor is playing the female Shepard's romantic option, Kaiden, he's what is called a biotic in the Mass Effect mythology."

Bashir had actually been a great help to me when perfecting the biotics in the game, not only coming up with semi-reasonable medical and biological explanations for the abilities, but also coming up with an intuitive way for the player to use their biotic abilities in a holo setting. While playing the game in my time, you just pressed buttons on the controller. In the holonovel, in a fully interactive and immersive sensory environment, the player had to use specific hand gestures that we'd come up with, that the program was designed to recognize, in order to use specific biotic powers. Do the gesture for a biotic pull and the program made it happen 'for real.' It was brilliant and yet so simple. Having another genetically enhanced human to work with was a pleasure at times.

"Now, our objective during this 'tactical simulation' is to fight our way past the robots known as the Geth," I told the two Starfleet officers. "There are people to save, bombs that need disarming, lest we all die, and then we need to find the 'beacon.'"

The visions the Prothean beacon would give the player who touched it had been easy to include for a single player situation; I just had the holodeck program show the oh so mysterious images I created to the player, making it seem as if the apocalyptic vision was all around them and being projected directly into their mind. In a multiplayer setting, this would make absolutely no sense since the beacon's vision was meant to be received only by the one specific person who touched it. The solution was to have the holodeck visually isolate the main player from the others, and then display the images around them in a smaller area, the other players not being privy to the images. This was much like how holomaze programs worked. It was very tricky to program actually, but it was worth the effort given how important the visions were to the game's overall plot long-term.

"No girl-on-girl action?" Jadzia teased with a lascivious smile.

The Trill woman most certainly preferred men, but she liked women too. People in this century didn't care much about labels such as gay, straight or bi. However, this didn't lead to things like orgies as often as you might think, though luckily, I had had quite a bit of luck on that front. I was still working on making an orgy with my Bajoran babes, Jadzia, and myself a reality. It was only a matter of time.

"There's a homosexual romance option for both genders, which the player can select or change at any time," I informed the two officers, while chuckling. "There's a sexy blue alien who shows up later on in the story, and for guys I made sure Kaiden swings both ways."

Which might be an issue in multiplayer mode. Maybe I'd make Joker gay? Or Garrus?

"Sexy blue aliens?" the doctor asked with a smile of his own, sounding intrigued. "Tell me more!"

I'd rented the holosuite for a few hours so there really was no rush to get started running the program. I took the time to explain as much about the characters as I could.

"Hold on, they're a single gender species that reproduces using a mind meld equivalent?" Julian asked when I'd gotten to the bit about the asari and how they made babies. "That doesn't make any sense from a medical perspective."

Of course it didn't. That was just a way to justify the existence of an entire race of sexy and promiscuous female aliens and I think the game worked around this by suggesting the child doesn't actually get any genetic material from the 'father.' They served as a catalyst only. But I think they even tried to muddy the waters on that too later on. Whatever, it really didn't matter.

"Well, can you suggest something to make it seem more plausible?" I wondered.

"I'll give it some thought and get back to you," Bashir responded, looking thoughtful.

"Okay, let's move on to the Citadel," I decided.

I ordered the computer to skip a couple of chapters ahead and the scene changed accordingly. Unfortunately, in my opinion, I hadn't been able to do justice to the Citadel in Mass Effect, even while trying to take it wholesale from my memory via the neural interface helmet. It just didn't...feel right...when rendered 3 dimensionally, but I kept it in as a placeholder for now. While my genetic enhancements had given me an incredible range of abilities, I had never really tried my hand at making traditional art, which would have been very helpful in this instance. Perhaps it was something that I could learn with time? I much preferred stories over pictures, which I suppose was ironic given that I was a somewhat successful holonovel author now. Maybe Commander Data would like to take a crack mocking something up based on what I remembered from the game as a starting point? He'd probably give me a hundred options in a few hours.

"I've limited the places you can go on the Citadel so that the players don't get too distracted," I explained to my fellow adventurers. "The Citadel is the place where people wanting to bring in more friends into the story get their chance. There will be a member of a warrior race who is after a bounty and an engineer character from a race of space nomads, who incidentally created the Geth and were driven off their planet after a long war with them that they pretty much lost. Plus another alien, who is a space cop of sorts, and also a romantic option for women playing Shepard, or will be when I finally get around to writing that part. Figured some more interspecies loving would spice things up nicely."

This would have been discussed in even more detail, however that was when Sisko called for his underlings, AKA, his senior staff, which left me all alone. I would spend the rest of my reservation in the holosuite trying to make the Citadel look a bit more impressive, maybe by borrowing liberally from the various space station designs of the 24th century. Which wasn't going to be easy. Commander Data was looking better and better as an option. Or maybe I could just hire an artist; the thing didn't need to be real or functional. There were plenty of artists on Bajor who would be happy to take a paid commission. Decisions, decisions.

Whatever, I'd figure it out. It was time for some fun!

"Computer, give me an Elkoss Combine Avenger assault rifle, and an Armax Arsenal Brawler pistol."

It was time to let my murder hobo tendencies run wild...for testing purposes, of course.

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### **Island Fortress. Unnamed Island. Bajor.**

"Oh, wow, it actually fires antiprotons," I quietly mused to myself after looking over my latest scan results from a few test fires on a sensor laden target specifically designed to analyze directed energy weapon output.

The scanning device I was shooting at was the exact one that La Forge and Data had used in an episode of TNG in which they'd discovered that the supposed Federation Phaser Rifles showing up on a Klingon planet in active rebellion against the Empire, had actually been produced by the Romulans to cause unrest between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. It had been an *extremely* expensive, extremely advanced, and extremely hard to come by piece of specialized diagnostic equipment, but these scans would be worth every credit it cost me, especially if it helped me to reverse engineer this bad boy.

Ro walked into the lab with a tray of food, just in time to hear me say that. I knew it was her without even turning around to look. It was the way she walked. Her footsteps, her breathing, her heartbeat, all together it comprised the unique signature of a person, especially to someone with senses like mine. If I listened closely I could hear them all and recognize individuals I knew well by them.

“Thank you, Laren! I completely forgot to eat,” I admitted sheepishly.

"I know...and you're welcome. Now what does what?" she asked, clearly interested in what I found so interesting.

From her angle she couldn't see me leaning over the badass Collector rifle I was studying, looking so alien and deadly in design and aesthetic. It was part of the cache of weapons we'd looted from the Collector ship, but had held back from Section 31. I'd been meaning to take one of these bad boys apart to study for a *very* long time, but until now I'd lacked the time, the proper equipment, and the requisite scientific understanding to do the job properly. Times had changed, thankfully.

Now, though, my super-secret 'man cave' was pimped the fuck out and I had a full research, design, and fabrication holo-lab and workshop with full sensor suite, which allowed me to study, design and make all sorts of fun things. Imagine creating a fully 3-dimensional, high resolution holo image of the weapon and then being able to manipulate it tactilely and virtually disassemble it in mid-air. Imagine Tony Stark in various Iron Man movies to get the picture. And let me tell you, I was learning all kinds of things about the weaponry and tech used by the modified Hur'q. As we'd seen a few times already, their tech base was extremely advanced in some areas, well beyond the technology currently available to the Federation and most others in the alpha quadrant.

"This is one of the rifles I took off the Collectors," I explained to Ro, who had taken a seat in my lap while looking at the hologram. "Though this is still, fundamentally, a directed energy weapon, it's not a phaser or a disruptor and does not correspond to those scientific principles. As you may know, a phaser releases a controlled stream of nadiion particles, which are subatomic particles that cause instantaneous disruption of the bonds and strong nuclear forces holding any material structure together. These particles convert the matter into neutrinos, thus making sure the matter is not broken down into photons, which would cause it to release nuclear level energy in the form of gamma rays and heat."

Ro leaned closer to the rifle image, examining its internals. I took a moment to notice how her militia uniform, which was black like mine, hugged her curves more than other Bajoran uniforms I'd seen did. Clearly, she'd taken the time and spent the money to get it tailored, rather than use the mass produced versions that were provided for everyone. I heartily approved!

"The stun effect is a setting of the phaser in which all the living target's neurons are directly overcome, causing a non-lethal shutdown of consciousness," I continued to explain. "Disruptors are considered less 'elegant' than phaser-based weapons; their effects are described as thermal shock and blunt force, as opposed to the 'rapid nadiion effect.' As a result, disruptors inflict more damage to matter, but less damage to shields, than phasers do."

I then gestured excitedly to the Collector weapon.

"This rifle, I'm learning, fires a very focused, direct and coherent beam of antiprotons," I explained to Ro. "Antiprotons are stable, but they are typically short-lived in the natural

universe, since any collision with a proton will cause both particles to be annihilated in a burst of energy. That is why Collector weapons were able to cut through their advanced armor so easily, while our phasers had so much trouble, requiring multiple very high energy shots to accomplish the same result. Though I haven't confirmed it yet, I figure disruptors will have a bit easier time of it too, but the Federation doesn't use those."

Ro soon saw the problem.

"Nor does the Militia," she realized.

Yes, that was a problem. During the Resistance, for obvious reasons, we had no standard weapons. Frankly, we used any weapon, of any design, from any source, that we could get our hands on that could kill Cardassians. Even when I was supplying weapons to the Resistance from Section 31, we supplied them a wide range of weapons from different races to better hide the fact that they were coming from a single source.

After the Occupation had ended, though, the military of Bajor had switched to phasers that were designed and manufactured by Bajorans. They were more civilized weapons for a more peaceful time, the thinking went. I understood the reasoning, of course, phasers could still stun and kill like most other weapons, just like a disrupter, but they were also versatile enough to be used in many other ways, which is why they appealed to the Federation and so many other advanced races.

"We're going to have to issue disruptor style rifles to all off-world militia members to be used in case of a Hur'q attack," I said to Ro. "I doubt I'll be able to get the militia stationed on Bajor to do the same, but it's certainly worth trying."

"That assumes we will ever encounter the Collectors out here," Ro pointed out.

"That's true, but I'd rather be safe than sorry," I answered.

"I've got some of your paperwork to do, so I'll let you get back to your playtime," she snarked, before giving me a deep kiss.

"Thanks!" I yelled, as she left the room. "And this isn't playtime!"

If her laughs were any indication, I don't think I convinced her, so I turned my eyes back on the Collector weapon.

It was a very impressive and advanced piece of technology that somehow combined the versatility of a phaser with the deadliness of a disrupter. The race they had initially stolen this design from must have been extremely advanced, as I sincerely doubted they came up with it themselves. The amount of power required to create and keep the antiprotons stable long enough to do damage to a target was similarly impressive, and currently impossible with Federation science and technology, especially in the context of a portable man-carried weapon. The Federation had only ever been able to create ship or installation mounted antiproton weapons,

with huge dedicated reactors, and they didn't use them much because current designs weren't effective against standard shields. However, the Hur'q were a very old race who could travel to many different realities. They'd had the opportunity and time to encounter, steal this tech that had already overcome these limitations. They'd been out pillaging the galaxy in this dimension with warp powered ships as far back as the 14th Century and Prophets know how long in other dimensions.

They'd even conquered the Klingon homeworld, and the Klingons themselves had acquired warp technology from the Hur'q by capturing and reverse-engineering some of their ships when they resisted their incursions. This explained how the Klingons, despite not being at all focused on technological research and development, had managed to make the huge jump to interstellar travel.

A big part of what made all this possible, among other technologies, especially in a portable man-carried weapon system, was the weapon's revolutionary power cell, something the Federation was a long, long way from being able to naturally develop on their own. It seems the Collectors had gone with a theme, since the same power source that allowed them to move planet-sized objects at FTL speeds, also powered their hand-held weapons. Of course, the scale was vastly different in application.

What made their power cells revolutionary was that it actually contained an artificial micro-singularity within. To create a singularity this small, this precise, then contain and harness it safely enough to be used in a man portable weapon like a rifle or pistol was beyond our current abilities. While the singularity was microscopic, and obviously nowhere near powerful enough to move a ship, it still produced a ton of power constantly, more than enough for a hand weapon, and would likely produce power for centuries more before entropy naturally set in and the singularity closed. Since the micro-singularity was just that, microscopic, the bulk of the power cell's systems was dedicated to harnessing the singularity's incredible power and directing it towards containing the effects of the singularity.

It was actually a pretty ingenious design. It harnessed the singularity's own released power to power the containment system which leashed it and kept the gravitational effects from spilling out into our universe. The excess power left over after containment was fed into a series of advanced capacitors for storage and eventual usage, the power stored in these capacitors is what is actually used to power the item, or fire the weapon in this case.

In the case of this rifle, the power cell supplied the incredible power demands of the weapon's antiproton generator and the magnetic containment system used to collimate the antiprotons to be used as a controlled discharge of deadly energy. It was a supremely lethal weapon. I'd even go so far as to call it a one-hit, one-kill weapon on unshielded personnel, which was pretty much everyone these days besides myself, who is a proudly paranoid fucker. A hit on the humanoid body would probably cause something akin to an explosion, as the antiprotons and matter of the target annihilated each other until the energy was expended. It was probably a very messy way to die.

Thankfully there were safeties built in to prevent the failure of the containment system and allowing a naked singularity from being exposed to our universe and sucking in everything with the power of a black hole until it was overloaded and collapsed naturally. In fact, I determined that if the power draw from firing the weapon depleted the amount of excess power stored in the capacitors and its recharge rate, thus putting the singularity's containment system in danger of failure, then the power cell was designed to stop working temporarily to enter a 'recharge cycle' to refill the capacitors.

The user *could* override to get an extra shot or two, but once the containment system was in imminent danger of failure the cell was designed to collapse the singularity permanently and simply stop working. Probably for all time. So while a power cell like this didn't exactly mean *infinite ammo*, with judicious use so as not to overtax the power cell's capacitors and recharge rate in a single session, it'd be more like 'shit-ton' ammo that could last for centuries. Well, the power would last, in vacuum, on paper, the components that made up the rifle would probably fail long before that, especially under the rigors of combat.

Needless to say, I wanted these small Collector power cells to supply the power needs for my own power-hog designs. Thankfully I had several already in hand from my looting and could easily replace the cell's housing and capacitors without risking a containment breach, since it was designed for that kind of swapping. That would work for now since it was impossible for me to make my own.

Though I had examined these cells closely and understood how to recreate the support systems, artificially creating the singularity itself was the real trick and well beyond Federation science, though I knew that the Romulans themselves had a closely guarded secret method to produce the singularities that powered their ship's engine cores.

Section 31 had almost certainly already done what I was doing now, trying to reverse engineer these weapons, but even they wouldn't have the scientific knowledge to artificially create the micro-singularity at the heart of these power cells.

Well...assuming they hadn't already stolen that information from the Romulans in some past intelligence coup. Even if they did have that knowledge they'd have to carefully hide the fact that they knew to prevent a war.

After a good deal of thought I realized that I had already seen how such a singularity could be artificially created. In the Star Trek reboot, Ambassador Spock, who had knowledge from more than a hundred years in the future, possible knowledge even obtained from the Romulans themselves, now that I thought of it, used red matter to create a singularity. I even knew how red matter was created, as in my previous life I had gone onto the Memory Alpha page and read that it was manufactured from a substance called decalithium, a rare isotope that could be mined.

That alone obviously wasn't enough to create it, but with that key bit of information to help focus my search in the stolen Collector database, it was only a matter of time before I found some reference to the process, perhaps even the location of where I could mine the isotope found in other similar realities which may be the same here. Considering how long the Collectors seemed

to have been using this technology, information on the process may even be in their historical records.

With that out of the way, my attention turned back to the Collector rifle design. The funny/ironic thing about this weapon and even its incredibly advanced power cell, was how simultaneously impressive yet *shitty* it was. The underlying science and technology that allowed it to function was extremely impressive, and beyond Federation science, but the materials used and the build quality were just so very...*shitty*.

The materials used in its construction and its build quality could be charitably called sub-standard, at best. The engineering tolerances and overall quality were also just atrocious. I had a few examples of this rifle and there were obvious differences between them, suggesting some very lax construction standards. Most races that had reached this level of technology had precision replication technology or some kind of automated machine manufacturing. Did they not have that?

Sure, it fired pretty impressively powerful blasts, and had a power cell that would last for centuries, assuming it was properly made, but this rifle felt slapped together quickly without much care and was obviously never intended for hard prolonged use over that span of time. Was this a cultural thing? If so, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. The Collectors viewed all their people, even their queens, as important as they were, as disposable and replaceable assets, why would their weapons be any different? This thing had *not* been designed with long-term durability and repair in mind, more like quantity and ultra quick manufacture, with just enough quality control to ensure the thing fired when needed to, and didn't blow up unexpectedly...mostly.

Again, I was struck by just how alien this race was. If they could quickly grow disposable forces by the millions, then they'd need to be quickly armed too. Perhaps that was how to rationalize it and thus understand these choices?

The good thing was that this left a lot for me to improve and room to personalize the design. I could take the base tech here and holographically design a much more robust and functional weapon system, including using what I learned from the rifle to design a pistol version. Thankfully, with a complete holo design in place, everything besides the power cell itself could then be carefully replicated with exacting precision.

A list of potential improvements was already forming in my mind. First, I'd start with using much better materials. That was a great place to start.

Second, it could be much more user friendly if I added an advanced scope for a longer range shot, with a holographic targeting scope and backup mechanical sights. Kira had waxed often enough on which she preferred during our downtime.

Third, a visual indicator on the cell's current power levels would be prudent, its recharge rate, and how close it was to going into a forced recharge cycle.



Fourth, could the neural link technology found in my helmet be used here? Weapons I was linked to would certainly be a game changer. In fact, why shouldn't I do the same with my armor? Games like Halo had their weapons interface with their armor's heads up display system.

Fifth, a selective fire switch for semi-automatic or full-auto, beam or pulse fire mode, and to otherwise adjust the power levels were a must have too. Believe it or not, the Collector designed weapon didn't even allow an adjustment in the power output of the discharge. Why was I not surprised that the Collectors had their weapons permanently set to maximum discharge with no ability to change it?

Sixth, a biometric and DNA reader and lock in the grip of the weapon would be another great addition to prevent it from being used by anyone but me. Maybe I should have it render unconscious (or kill) anyone unauthorized who gripped the rifle? Perhaps a discharge through the grip?

The grip, incidentally, would also house the standardized power cell casing itself, which was removable, like a clip in a gun from my time, so that it could be swapped between the rifle and pistol easily.

A self-destruct by command, or if the casing was scanned too thoroughly or opened up would be smart too. Well, the list was long, but it would be an amazing weapon when I was through with it.

I spent the next few days in my lab borrowing outrageously from the weapon designs of many different races to come up with one that worked here. While tinkering with the design, I continuously ran simulations as I added in my wish list of design improvements. Thankfully pretty much everything I wanted had already been designed by someone else, or had been used in some other non-weapon item, so I wasn't reinventing the wheel here. In fact, all the functionality and components I had long wanted to add to a weapon, I already had the designs and replicator patterns for. An extensive database of restricted replicator patterns, from multiple races, had been part of my requested compensation for the Collector tech and database I had gotten from Section 31 and I had stolen wholesale from it at times. The value of that database couldn't be understated in this process, as the restricted patterns also included the schematics of the restricted item.

That was a huge deal considering I had purchased a large-scale industrial replicator and could produce all of this stuff now at will. In fact, that replicator had been the most expensive purchase I'd made while building my island home, *by far*. Section 31 wouldn't care, but Starfleet would flip their shit if they knew I could replicate tons of weapons and other restricted stuff now. Unfortunately, larger weapon systems had many non-replicable components so I couldn't just replicate a phaser canon, for instance. That kind of thing, or at least the non-replicable components, still needed to be made the old-fashioned way or purchased normally.

After several days of non-stop hard work, for which I'd foregone sleep entirely, I leant back in my chair, looking up and admiring the holographic image of the rifle and pistol I'd designed languidly rotating in mid-air. I'd taken and used what I'd learned from the Collector technology

as a base, as it was a very effective weapon, and radically improved upon it by borrowing from many different sources.

These were supremely deadly and versatile weapons, but it was still using the same Wild West point and shoot philosophy, where you exchange fire with a visible enemy. How could I do it better? How could I surprise my enemy? How could I kill them without them even seeing me? I'd been doing that all along where possible, when I'd used my grenade variants, but was there a way to do that with this type of weapon?

Then I remembered one of the most innovative and creative episodes from DS9's run, where someone had already figured that out. That episode had involved a mentally disturbed Vulcan Starfleet officer who had replicated an experimental weapon called a TR-116 rifle and used it to murder the happiness he saw in people onboard the station. Crazy might be a better way to describe that Vulcan. That weapon had been developed by Starfleet Security for use in dampening fields or radiogenic environments where conventional energy weapons would be useless.

It was designed to fire a specially designed, chemically propelled, tritanium bullet. That crazy Vulcan, though, had taken that weapon and made it infinitely more dangerous by adding a micro-transporter to the barrel. By using an exographic targeting sensor he could look through walls and kill people anywhere on the station by *transporting* the fired bullet to hit and kill a target. It was displaced targeting with a 24th century flare. You could essentially kill your enemy from a great distance without them ever seeing you. I wanted that ability!!

"Computer, access the restricted replicator pattern database and load design schematics for the TR-116 rifle designed by Starfleet Security and display holographically next to the Gothic-type antiproton rifle," I commanded the computer excitedly, while reaching up and flinging the pistol image off the side of the room.

Moments later the TR-116 was displayed, floating next to the other rifle. I gave it a gentle nudge to start it spinning slowly in mid-air, parallel to the ground.

The TR-116 rifle was a handsome weapon, in my opinion; it was surprising that Starfleet designed something so handsome considering how ugly the Type 2 and Type-3 phasers were. I didn't quite realize from the show that the rifle was actually pretty large. But did I really need it to be that big for my purposes? No, all that I needed was a rifled barrel for gyroscopic stabilization, a bullet, and a means of firing it; the rest of the needed components were already on the other rifle. The barrel didn't even need to be that long since I was never planning on shooting a bullet from point A to target B by traveling the distance conventionally through the air. With a shortened barrel, if I was forced to fire it that way, the effective distance would be more akin to a pistol shot, but my Augment hand-eye coordination should help there.

"Computer, mount the TR-116 barrel underneath the discharge aperture for the Gothic type antiproton rifle. Reduce barrel length to match. Extrapolate needed material and design to tie into the larger weapon system," I ordered.

The requested changes were made moments later by the computer, though it wasn't exactly pretty.

"Explode the additions I touch for modification of internal components," I ordered, touching the new rifle barrel I'd added to my weapon before making a few tweaks and changes to the exploded diagram of the new components with quick swipes of my hands. That was a more efficient way to do it.

It was still rough as hell at the moment, but I could tweak it later to make it pretty and functional.

If I added an internal micro-replicator I also wouldn't need to add in an external ammo clip. The micro replicator would only need to produce one Tritanium bullet with propellant at a time and it was a pretty simple pattern to produce so it wouldn't take long. The question was, with the addition of a micro-transporter and replicator, would the power and space demands be too high? I didn't think so, the antiproton generator was the power hog, not the other components, relatively speaking, and the micro transporter and replicator were both quite small pieces of technology from a spatial perspective.

Opening the casing holographically with my hands, I integrated the transporter to the end of the barrel and added the replicator to the beginning. There was just enough room for 3 bullets, which the micro-replicator would keep full. The computer handled the details, like adding in the appropriate circuitry for these new components to draw power from the cell appropriately. Imagine the Iron Man movies and how Stark designed his fun toys.

After a few minutes of tweaking and connecting the barrel components to the rest of the rifle, it *looked* like it'd fire properly. Thankfully I remembered to enlarge the exhaust ports to the rifled barrel in order to vent the gasses the bullet would expel. It was a chemically propelled bullet, after all. With all the power I had to work with I could have tried to mock up a magnetically accelerated firing mechanism, but that would require way more time and patience to figure out. That could be a future modification if I determined it would be better, assuming I had the power to spare. It'd definitely lower the amount of noise it produced.

Right now, I was working with an already established and proofed design and smashing it together with my antiproton rifle. Making a change that significant would essentially mean I was designing yet another new rifle from scratch.

I added a rail system to the underside of the weapon with a power port if I wanted to add something down the line, but not otherwise change the overall design. I had often used the rail system on my rifle in Afghanistan for a tactical light, laser, or a small grenade launcher.

"Computer, run simulations with current design parameters, multiple firing scenarios and speeds. Determine viability. Determine power demands for this weapon given standard power output of the power cell," I commanded the computer.

The simulation failed immediately.

Whoops! Looks like I had forgotten to connect the TR-116 components to the trigger! Yeah, that was embarrassing... A simple tweak fixed that and I began the simulations again.

"Simulations complete. Current design viable. Power demands of current design well within expected standard output levels," the computer concluded several minutes later.

There it was, I thought with a smile. I had just designed a hybrid weapon. It looked like an *ugly piece of shit* at the moment, but it worked, which was all I cared about right now; I could pretty it up later during the optimization process. The TR-116 design would let me reach out and touch my enemy even when they weren't directly in front of me and the power demands of the micro transporter and replicator were tiny, in comparison to the power required to create, collocate, and fire a beam of pure antiprotons. Some more tweaking was required to pretty it up and make it more efficient, less prone to break down or malfunction due to the vigours of combat, but I was incredibly proud of what I'd accomplished.

"A hybrid antiproton weapon like this could beat any kind of armor given enough time," I mused to myself.

Dense materials, like armor, would probably minimize or mitigate the explosive effect when the matter was annihilated by the antiproton beam. Density was just a matter of having more tightly packed atoms, and all atoms had protons, which meant the energy of the beam would be expended faster on denser materials, but even the toughest metals would only resist a Collector weapon for a certain amount of time. And there it was, that was the key to a power sword and knife, since I couldn't yet build a lightsaber and probably never would, an antiproton edge would let me cut through near anything. But how to make it work? That was the question.

That was when I looked over to my current armor sitting nearby and the rifle and hand pistol still floating holographically in the air and remembered the vision the Orb had given me. It all made sense now. Back when I received that vision I had no idea how I was going to make all that tech I saw actually work. The miniature, but incredibly powerful Collector power cell, was the key to it all, otherwise it was impossible.

Which begged the question, why did it take so long for me to make these weapons? In the vision I was returning the Orb and the weapons and technology had been already created. I had already returned the orb and I certainly didn't have tech at that time. It was possible the Prophets had shown me a possible future and my own actions had derailed the timing of that vision. Was being of extra dimensional origin the answer? Was I a free agent in their visions capable of changing the future in a way they couldn't immediately predict? Or was my patron the cause of that ability?

My head hurt just thinking about it, so I turned my attention to something I did actually understand, something I could accomplish if I put the required time and effort in.

The armor and its systems, the rifle, the power sword, power knife, and all the goodies attached to the armor itself. I had long had great ideas on what to include in the design, but no way to ever

meet the incredibly high power demands of the thing in a way that didn't require me to carry a huge suitcase sized power source all the time.

Now, though, I'd have all the power I would need. The Collector scout sniper armor I'd stolen was also likely the key to an adaptive camouflage system. The combination of my personal shield and advanced materials in the armor meant that very soon, energy from weapons, be they kinetic or plasma energy, would be either stopped by the shield or spread out over the armor's protective surface.

"Computer, end display of the Gothic-type hybrid antiproton rifle and pistol. Load design for the Gothic-type Personal Armor System."

Moments later the computer holographically displayed an empty set of armor in midair. It was a hodge podge of ideas that I had mostly designed during my first few weeks in this dimension and hadn't really changed much since. I didn't have the ability before to either design something better and then replicate it.

This armor, as janky as it was, had still served me well and had saved my ass and the asses of my Resistance cell several times over when I'd taken a hit meant for them, but it was time to make some much needed improvements with all that I had learned in the time since. I was actually pretty excited now to get to work. With all of the resources and equipment this island possessed and the spare Collector power cells I now had in my possession, suddenly all of those long-shot ideas were now in the realm of possible.

The Iron Man armor from the movies and comics was actually a source of inspiration for most of those long-shot ideas. That fictional armor had so much functionality I wanted to replicate and was a great source of ideas. Sustained flight, in atmosphere at least, might be a pipe dream at the moment, unless I could find a miniaturized thruster design that wouldn't tear my legs off if I activated them, but jump assist thrusters in the boots were doable right now, like I'd seen in that vision. After that a built-in sensor suite, a holo-tricorder built into the back of my hand, a retractable helmet with air recycler to protect against being gassed or spaced, a transport inhibitor coupled with a personal site-to-site transporter in something like a utility belt, and a heads-up display connected to the built-in sensors, all were doable now too... now that I had the power to spare!

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It had taken an additional week, but I now had a working prototype armor system rotating languidly in midair. This armor system was far more complex than even the rifle, especially in the integration of all this technology together, though many of the systems I had wanted to add to the armor, like my holo-tricorder (or omnitool, as I jokingly called it in my thoughts), I had long ago designed. It had taken a while to finish, and I had definitely abused Ro Laren as she'd handled all my duties on the station that I could delegate, but the end product was worth it I felt.

Analyzing the Collector armors I'd recovered as well as the data from Minos they'd gathered on their customers' enemies over the years, had given me the breakthroughs I'd needed in materials

technology, like the under armor kinetic gel barrier to reduce impact and energy damage, the artificial muscle fibers to increase speed and physical power, and the neural linkups based on my ship's neural interface helmet. The armor's outer layer also used the same fluidic alloy materials the Collector scout snipers used to blend in with their environment. Whether passive energy from sensor scans, or directed energy discharges from weapons, the fluidic alloy had the ability to refract and dissipate energy that hit its surface. And that was assuming my personal shield had been overcome in the case of directed energy weapons' fire.

Just like with the Collector rifles, though, I had found numerous ways to improve upon the base armor technology and it now had an adaptive camouflage system, with the ability to mimic clothing, like a uniform. An overly elaborate outfit composed of numerous separate parts, though, would be beyond the mimicking function. I got a kick out of the idea of wearing my full armor all the time yet appearing to be dressed in my normal Bajoran Militia uniform. As the armor was skintight and only added a little extra thickness to my body, it could be worn under clothes as well.

Unfortunately, two systems were still a work in progress, those being the heads-up display integrated into the headpiece, providing an augmented reality view of my environment, and my idea for built in miniature stealth sensor drones, which relied on the heads-up display working. These two tiny 3-inch discs would be mounted on each shoulder and could detach and fly silently according to my will, using anti-grav tech that was so common now, reaching a maximum range of 100 miles via a subtle subspace link. The US Army of my time had used aerial drones to great effect scouting enemy locations using advanced sensors to get a full picture of the battlefield. It had made no sense to me that with 24th century tech I couldn't do far, far better than that. In time I hoped to weaponize them like the Minosians had.

Some of the sensor technology in these drones was based on the Section 31 stealth drones, but significantly reduced because of size limitations. Unfortunately, I had a feeling I would need some outside help for the programming of a heads-up display. The programming wasn't beyond me, I just didn't have the time to do it justice. Data had been an amazing help with the palace design on my island so I was hoping he'd be willing to help again.

Besides those two systems which still required work, my armor was ready for use, or live testing in a combat simulation on my holodeck. Like the Iron Man armor, for quick entry and exit I had designed it to stand upright on its own and be stepped into and out of. Once inside, the armor would constrict to form a near skin tight bond with my body. Around my waist was a Batman-style utility belt with multiple compartments, which was covered by the same material as the rest of the armor.

In the compartment directly in the middle, where a belt buckle would be (and also where the shield strength was the highest), was the Collector power cell which powered the entire thing and made all this possible. The power cell powered all the armor systems, but also transferred energy along the utility belt to each compartment which had its own power port and currently contained my redesigned personal shield generator, the transport inhibitor which could be turned off in an emergency situation, and a small, hand-held site-to-site transporter device I remembered Tom Paris once using in an episode of Voyager.

This was an incredibly expensive and hard to come by piece of technology, given how complex it was and how easily it could be misused. It would allow me to transport from one site to another without a transporter pad on either end. Of course, power limitations meant it had nowhere near the range or longevity of a traditional transporter, despite having a dedicated Federation power cell of its own.

Its lack of full sensors also limited the locations a person could be beamed to. I had reduced those limitations by supplying it with additional power from the Collector power cell, so its range was increased significantly. It would first use power from its dedicated Federation power cell, then from the armor's power cell, if needed. My armor's dedicated sensors could similarly be tied into the site-to-site transporter, but my armor systems could also link up with my ship's computers and sensors or DS9's systems, since I had the required access codes.

There was still a lot of work to do to finish it, but it was usable now. With the full design schematics in my computers, I should be able to soon conduct a combat simulation to test the armor and work out any kinks that would inevitably pop up. Once the testing phase was over, I'd carefully replicate what I could.

Now I needed a well-deserved break. First, though, I had some groveling to do with my girls. These past few weeks of rampant design had been exhilarating and wonderful, but it had meant I'd practically abandoned my duties to Ro Laren, who was probably none too happy with me. It'd also kept me away from my girls for entirely too long and I found I really missed them.

They thought I was being ridiculous spending this much time and energy designing weapons and armor, especially since the Occupation was over and we weren't going into combat all the time like before.

Of course they didn't know about the war to come and I couldn't tell them. Nonetheless, they supported me anyway, having made frequent visits to bring me food and remind me to eat, and to ensure that I was taking care of myself. There had been a few days in the beginning of this design binge where I'd just forgotten to eat for 2 straight days. They'd even forced me into a sonic shower a time or two after letting myself get so carried away that I started to smell rather rank.

In the end it showed me just how lucky I was to have them in my life.

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### ***The Flighty Temptress. Bajoran System.***

After spending literally weeks on my private island designing weapons and armor in an orgiastic design binge that I couldn't help but find exciting and wonderful and fulfilling, it was time to get back to reality and return to the station.

It felt almost like I had been away at summer vacation for several months and now I was returning to the drudgery of school full-time. So, I found myself dragging my proverbial heels. I

could already be docked with the station by now, but instead I came to a full stop a few hundred thousand kilometers away and just tried to enjoy these last few moments before returning to the job and participating in the events of all these canon episodes where I had to constantly balance my desire to flip the script and upend the game board, or just go with the flow and try to find my opportunities to exploit and moments to profit by.

So, I took a few minutes to get a really good look at the station before committing to my return and docking. Sure, I'd *seen* the station before, many times even, but I wasn't really looking at its physical structure now, rather I was seeing the station and its place in history, both now and in the future to come. I was seeing what it offered, all the adventures that would take place there, the wonders it would support, and the incredible dangers it would both guard against and inflame.

The visible traffic in the area was higher than the Provisional Government and Federation had expected at this point, even with the recent discovery of a stable wormhole, the only one of its kind in the known galaxy. By the looks of things an entire convoy of exploratory ships was passing through the system on the way to exploring the gamma quadrant. That was good, Bajor desperately needed those funds.

As I sat in the cockpit I looked over the data my sensors were reporting and as I did I suddenly felt the incredible temptation to just say 'fuck it!' and fly my ship through the wormhole and leave all this responsibility behind. The Gamma Quadrant was only moments away, and on the other side of the galaxy lay the kind of freedom an Augment such as myself would never know in the Federation. Bajor had never treated me differently than anyone else, never caring about my genetic enhancements, but how long would that last when they became a member of the Federation, even with my rank and hero status? Was there a ticking clock for my life on Bajor?

If I went through the wormhole right now, though, I could spend my days charting systems, making contact with new races, going on adventures, and then when I wished to I could return to DS9 to sell the information I had gathered to interested parties. But I knew that such a life wouldn't last long due to the threat of the Dominion.

Sooner or later I'd run into some of their warships and get myself killed, or worse, captured, so it was best to stay in the Alpha Quadrant for the foreseeable future. Besides, if I stayed at Deep Space Nine then the Gamma Quadrant would eventually come to me. The future of the quadrant would be decided here.

No, as much as I sometimes craved a wandering lifestyle free of limits, restrictions, and responsibility, I really did like the life and relationships I had built here. The future might be dark and filled with death and violence, but it would end eventually and these were all silly thoughts that I would never truly act on anyway.

It was time to return to the station and to reality.

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## Replimat. Deep Space Nine.

Food replicators were really a wonder, I thought, as I sat in the corner of the replimat and slowly ate spoonfuls of this delightful Vulcan broth. Even though it was probably a bit bland by human standards, my enhanced sense of taste gave me a bit more appreciation for the complex dish and its subtle intermarrying of flavors on my tongue. With so many alien dishes I'd yet to try, I could go years without ever eating the same dish twice. In addition to savoring this Vulcan dish I'd never tried before, I was also keeping my eyes and ears open while observing the many people around me. One duo, though, was garnering a lot of my interest.

"And how are you this evening, Mister Garak?" greeted the ever jovial Doctor Bashir, my fellow augment, as he passed by the table the station's enigmatic tailor was sitting at.

Of course, Garak was *only* a tailor in the same sense that I was *only* a holonovel author. He was a spy, and a pretty damn good one given that everyone essentially knew that he was a spy, a possible operative of the Obsidian Order, and yet no one felt threatened enough to do anything about it. He projected an aura of harmlessness, that people were somehow fooled by, while I tried to project an aura that told people that I was really dangerous. Which I absolutely was.

"Excuse me. Just plain, simple Garak, you said," the doctor corrected himself.

"Plain and simple," agreed the pleasantly smiling spy before he made a request. "Join me, Doctor. Enhance my evening."

The doctor did just that.

"Keeping an eye on the ebb and flow of things, are you?" Bashir asked.

Like me, he'd noticed that Garak was keeping a close eye on things. He was waiting for something to happen. As was I. I wasn't sure what *he* expected to happen, specifically, but I was waiting for an event that I recognized.

"As a clothier, I do have a keen interest in what the station's population is wearing from day-to-day," the alien explained. "Klingons have an odd sense of style, don't you agree?"

For a warrior culture, the crinkle heads seemed to embrace uniformity. They carried the same weapons and dressed the same for the most part. A trained eye could pick out the subtle differences, different badges, medals, and iconography and such, especially ones that told you which House they belonged to, but to the casual observer there didn't seem to be all that much variation. It was there, though, if you had the sharp eyes to see it and put it in context.

"Oh, yes, they do I suppose," commented Bashir idly, glazing around.

The Federation had a policy of viewing other cultures in the best possible light, and when people couldn't, in good conscience, they tended to try and say as little as possible. Plus, it was wise not to insult a Klingon as they were three times stronger than baseline humans and didn't have much

problem killing anyone they wanted to as long as they could find some way to justify it with their rather flexible code of honor.

"But intriguing, nonetheless," Garak then remarked. "I would say that those two outfits, in particular, are worth studying closely."

The outfits in question belonged to Lursa and Be'tor, otherwise known as the infamous Duras sisters. They were *highly* sought after renegades from the Klingon Empire at the moment and if my memories about this episode proved correct they were going to meet up with a Bajoran terrorist to make a deal, and that interested me greatly. This was one of those moments where I was content to let canon play out mostly the same because there was a huge potential profit to be made if I played my cards right.

However, this wasn't the time nor the place to make my move. I had a very rich bounty to collect, but I had no authority to make an arrest here on the station, as they weren't actually wanted by the Bajorans yet and Bajoran law controlled on this station. Bajor also did not have an extradition treaty with the Klingons either. If the law allowed I was sure that Odo would have already beaten me to it. Unfortunately, even my rank and technical command of this space station wouldn't allow me to just take them into custody. Well, I probably could, but Sisko would be in the right to protest it and only my reputation and relationships with the Ministers of the Provisional Government would make the outcome uncertain.

No, rather than try to navigate that murky legal quandary, I would bide my time for the moment and strike at the right opportunity. In unclaimed space, I'd be free to do what I wanted as a private citizen on his private ship; my status as a General in the Bajoran Militia wouldn't be relevant at all. In unclaimed space, there were no specific laws to stop me from playing the role of bounty hunter and collecting on a very rich and legal prize offered by a sovereign government on a couple of their most wanted citizens.

The delay was all right, I would at least be able to finish this rather nice Vulcan broth I was having for dinner. For such a joyless people, the Vulcans didn't have such bad taste in food.

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### **Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. Just Outside the Bajoran System. Unclaimed Space.**

After thoroughly enjoying my meal, I'd gone back to my ship and departed from the station, heading out into free space in order to wait for the opportunity my memory said was coming. I don't remember exactly what happened in this episode, for some reason, but seeing many of the main players and drama playing out had jogged my memory a bit.

Which meant that this part should be rather simple. A Bajoran terrorist, who had quite the bounty on his head thanks to the Cardassians, was going to hijack a Starfleet Runabout and then meet with a Klingon Bird of Prey? To buy something? When that Klingon ship decloaked for the rendezvous I would strike.

My ship was running in what I called 'stealth mode,' which made it near impossible to detect my ship on long-range scans and more difficult to detect normally on short-range scans. This was, again, not to be confused with a cloaking device, although that would soon change if everything went to plan. If I'd been tracking a state-of-the-art starship then there would be no way for me to be this sneaky as I would have been *immediately* detected on short-range sensors, but a small Runabout and an obsolete Klingon Bird of Prey didn't have the means to detect me as long I was clever and exercised a modicum of caution. Caution, in this situation, meant operating at low power, locking down all ambient emissions, and keeping the main propulsion system completely offline. For the most part, I was dead in space. Reaction control thrusters were ok, but anything else and I significantly increased the chances of my detection.

I was making sure to use all the tricks I'd learned from my pirate days to hide my presence as well as taking advantage of the fact that this area was full of space/time oddities that only the locals, like myself, really knew about. Even the distant wormhole was giving off all sorts of crazy emissions which would further confuse sensors. If you knew the right spots to hide in, *and I did*, a warship that wasn't specifically looking for you could fly right past you and they'd never even know you were there.

The stealth systems were just one of the features of this amazing vessel that had mysteriously arrived one day. It was totally unlike anything Starfleet had, and were it not for me being allied with Section 31 I was pretty sure that some overreaching admiral would have already found some excuse to take it from me even though that was against the law. Even my affiliation with Section 31 didn't seem enough to protect me, in my opinion. I'd long decided that there was something intangible and mysterious going on, since nothing else made any sense to explain it. Even intrepid explorers from the *Enterprise*, whose unending curiosity was legendary, *who had even been onboard my ship*, never asked a single question about it, its origins, or expressed incredulity that I somehow had such a ship of my own with such advanced capabilities. Capabilities that I had increased greatly during my time in this galaxy.

The ship had pretty decent defenses for its size, which were two independently targetable disruptor cannons and two micro-torpedo launchers I had added to the 'wings.' Sadly, even now, I only had the standard photon torpedoes, rather than the more advanced quantum torpedoes. Unfortunately, Starfleet didn't even give their allies quantum torpedoes; believe me, I tried. They might be liberals in some respects, but they weren't stupid. I had it on good authority, though, that a comparable copy might soon be available for purchase from the Ferengis so I might just have to splurge in the near future, at least for my ship.

Photon torpedoes themselves, as opposed to their quantum cousins, were much easier to come by and relatively cheap. My island fortress had numerous photon torpedo launchers and could fire off a lot of them to destroy targets that the cannons had already softened up. It certainly worked well in that episode when DS9 was attacked by the Klingons. Fire enough photon torpedoes at even a state-of-the-art target and you were going to destroy them. In this case, though, I wasn't really going to need that much firepower, the disruptors, a hefty dose of surprise, and a dash of foreknowledge would be quite enough.S

"Showtime," I whispered, as the Runabout I had been expecting finally left the station. I was still pretty far from the station, in order to stay in free space, but my Section 31 stealth sensor probe was sending me back all the information I needed. It was time to put on the neural control helmet.

Like always, the feeling of the universe opening itself up to me was euphoric.

The Runabout wasn't heading for Bajor or the wormhole at the moment, but as expected there were two non-human life signs onboard so I knew that it was Kira and the terrorist on that ship. The freedom fighter, a member of the extremist Kohn-Ma splinter group, was planning to collapse the wormhole, but that didn't matter as my weapons could disable that ship. The idea that maybe I should help him succeed occurred to me, but I decided again that it was too risky.

Using the runabout's projected course, and knowing the Bird of Prey was out here, I was able to determine the most likely rendezvous coordinates.

"I have you now," I muttered as the Bird of Prey decloaked several minutes later, just as expected, right outside Bajoran claimed space.

With the speed of thought, my ship powered up fully, shields, weapons, and propulsion coming online far quicker than would normally be possible. I had a very limited window of opportunity here. A Klingon Bird of Prey, even an obsolete one, was fighting above my weight class. Luckily, I knew what was coming next and you couldn't beam off a ship with the shields up.

As soon as my sensors detected two new lifeforms had transported onto the Runabout, I brought my ship out of stealth mode and beamed the Klingon sisters into the prison cell I had pre-prepared on board my vessel. Then I fired three double shots using my twin disrupter cannons on the Bird of Prey, crippling both their weapons and engines. Then I lowered the output of my weapons and carefully disabled the engines of the Runabout to prevent escape. I had spent a lot of time prior to my stint as a pirate upgrading my ship's targeting software, coupled with the neural interface, I could hit a ship exactly where I wanted to, like a space-based sniper!

Still, my attack on either vessel wouldn't have worked anywhere near as well, or gone as easily, if either of the other crafts had their shields up. Thankfully, they had not, and now I had two very high-value prizes locked screaming in rage in my cargo hold. It was music to my ears. The value of foreknowledge was never clearer than in this very moment.

My ship's sensors informed me that another Runabout, which no doubt was under the command of Commander Sisko, was heading right for me so I raised my shields and set a course away from the area at maximum warp.

I wasn't really concerned about him following me, since he had to rescue Kira and deal with the Bird of Prey. Even in the unlikely event that he did try to follow me, I could easily escape from a craft like a Runabout, especially since its top speed was Warp 5 while mine was Warp 8. So I set a course for the agreed upon rendezvous, where a Klingon warship would be waiting, and then I engaged the engines.

It was tempting to grab the terrorist as well, but it wouldn't look good for me, even with what he had tried to do, and besides, I knew what Cardassians did to their prisoners. That was of course also ignoring what they'd do to me if I tried to collect, since I likely had a much, much larger bounty on my head from them given my actions during the Occupation. The Klingons would just imprison and execute the Duras sisters, so the terrorist, whose name I'd already forgotten, could go to the Federation or Bajor for his crimes. It made no difference to me and would be safer in the long run. Given how rich and slippery the Duras were in the shows, I would place a large bet on the Duras somehow escaping their fate anyway, probably through some judicious bribes, but that was not my problem.

"Incoming hail," the female voice of my ship's computer informed me.

I'd never given it much thought before, but that voice had never sounded familiar to me. Whoever had sent the ship to me had somehow known that I would respond much better to a woman speaking, and certainly better than Starfleet's standard computer voice, Majel Barret. I had a rather funny thought to change the computer's voice to Scarlett Johansson, and even use 'Scarlett' as an alternate way to call for the computer's attention. That chick had a *crazy sexy* voice that I wouldn't mind hearing more often.

She had been an actress even in this dimension, though her career hadn't been anywhere near as successful as it had been in mine, possibly due to the changed circumstances of the time, so there should be some historical recordings of her voice I could use to build a pattern. When I got back to the station I'd interface with Earth's cultural archives and see if I got lucky. With a decent sized sample of her voice I could create a voice pattern for all communications with the computer. I had done similar things many times before for various characters in my holonovels so it wouldn't even be that hard.

"Ignore it," I ordered. "I have a big reward coming my way."

The huge sum of latinum the Klingons were offering would certainly be put to good use given all my many ongoing projects to pay for, but the *real* prize was the military-grade cloaking device the Klingons' were offering, along with a license to both possess and use it in the future. It was a hell of a nice bonus for bringing them both in alive. The Klingons were mighty pissed off at the idea of those two working with the Romulans, of all people, to incite a civil war, and they had pulled out all the stops to entice the who's who of bounty hunters in the galaxy to bring them in. What bounty hunter worth their salt wouldn't want a genuine cloaking device for their ship??

I was positively gleeful at the idea of my ship soon possessing its own cloaking device, especially one that I could use openly. With my research capabilities expanded, it hadn't taken long to figure out how the phasing cloak worked and how I would need to integrate it into a ship's systems. Unfortunately, the *Temptress* would require a major and fundamental redesign of its power systems to make use of it. It was one of those situations where it would make more sense to just start from scratch rather than try to retrofit it. The *Pegasus* had been chosen specifically because that class of ship actually had a more compatible power system design that worked well with the technology. I'd always had plans to upgrade the FT someday, so it'd have to wait to make use of that tech.

"Best bounty hunter ever," I praised myself in the silence of my ship's cockpit, Sisko's Runabout still on my scanners.

It wasn't even bothering to chase me. The Bird of Prey was still dead in the water after my precision shooting.

**XXXXX**

### **Gothic's Private Island. Bajor.**

On this part of the planet the evening weather was very kind, a refreshingly cooling breeze washed over us, coming from the open sea, the salty air leaving a pleasant tingle on the skin. With this view and the feeling of contentment it brought, it was well worth being outside to take it all in.

The night sky of Bajor was so much more impressive than that of Earth. This world had a sky full of moons and stars, so it was easy to understand why the Bajoran people believed the Prophets always watched over them. Their ancestors would have seen the many moons as signs of those higher powers. The beautiful shimmering of the moonlight on the water from this certainly helped give it more ambiance.

It was so peaceful here and once again I felt very happy and excited that this was all mine. Having a beautiful palace-like home on my own private island was an impossibility for someone like me, a low level officer in the army, on my old world and time. Now, though, it was my reality. This life was such a gift.

Kira, my companion this evening, had drifted off to sleep after the delicious meal we shared and the sensual naked massage I'd given her as she laid on her stomach on the extremely comfortable, cushioned lounge chair which faced the open sea. A couple of empty bottles of a very rare vintage of Bajoran spring wine, that I knew Kira loved, sat on a nearby table.

I had pulled out all the stops and it had proven to be a much appreciated apology for shooting at the runabout she'd been flying and not transporting her to my ship. As I didn't have room for another prisoner and leaving a ship and an extremely powerful armed explosive device unattended seemed like a supremely bad idea, it made little sense to bring her along to the rendezvous with the Klingon authorities. And I knew she'd overpower that fool in short order. My unexpected intervention had given her the perfect opportunity and prevented them from flying anywhere near the wormhole, like they had in the episode itself.

Kira could be extremely pragmatic at times and when she heard that a huge sum of latinum AND a cloaking device was the bounty on the Duras sisters, well, she said she'd probably have done the same thing. Of course, she didn't forgive me until *after* I had wined and dined her all evening and turned her into a puddle of pleasurable goo from the sensual massage I'd given her. Unfortunately, I'd been a little too successful with my massage and instead of vigorous sex, she'd fallen asleep on me!

Yet as happy as we were now and no matter how idyllic our surroundings, I knew that the rest of this world wasn't so lucky. The spoon heads had really done a number on this planet over the past 50 years, going as far as to make whole provinces, that had once been this planet's breadbaskets, into places where no crops would ever again grow. Keeping the population half-starved was another method of control, after all. It was a very old tactic, even on Earth.

That meant famine, and with that came sickness and despair, then there would come fighting as Bajorans fought amongst themselves over what little resources they had left. I had to do something about that. I had a large industrial replicator in my home that could make even other small replicators, much less the food, building supplies, and other materials needed all over the planet to help rebuild. The fusion reactor which powered my home, and my industrial replicator, though, required fuel. I was happy to donate what I could to the cause but my power reserves at the moment were finite and getting more fuel out here was difficult. What would be ideal was a power cell like the Collectors had. Harnessing a singularity did not require an infusion of fuel. It was essentially free power that would last as long as the singularity did.

All of the Collector power cells I had were meant for discreet hand held weapons, so none of them were suitable. The incredible energy draw from my replicator, for even a single sufficiently large or complex item, would probably trigger the failsafe that would collapse the singularity. No, I'd need a Collector power cell intended for something much larger, like powering a starship. Those were probably going to be rather hard to come by.

As silly as it sounded, I may need to build my own singularity in the future, but I would need a source of decalithium, a rare isotope that could be mined, to make my own red matter. After searching fruitlessly for a while through the Collector database for any mention or reference to decalithium, or its chemical makeup, or the process by which red matter was created, I had broken down and asked Ro Laren to help me in my search. Even as an Augment I knew I wasn't perfect or infallible; I knew a second set of eyes with a different perspective and way of doing things could be the answer I needed.

After some time, she actually found a reference to it, tucked away deep in a database the Collectors had stolen centuries ago from an extremely advanced race in another dimension and had included it in their historical archives. In fact, I strongly suspected that it had been misfiled centuries ago and no one had ever caught the mistake, since they typically left that kind of specialized technical information only with the caste that actually needed it. It wasn't their assimilated and applied data, meant for their own operations, so they must not have recognized it as caste specific. That was about the extent of their data security, but when you had so many soldiers onboard a ship maybe you didn't need much of it. The circumstances in which we'd stolen it were probably a once in a million situation.

Without knowledge of red matter and decalithium and how it was connected to the creation of artificial singularities, which was at the heart of all Collector power generation, Section 31 would have little to no chance to find this stolen alien database, hidden away inside the larger Collector alien database I'd sold them. I was certainly not going to help them either, even with the danger the Collectors represented to the galaxy, well, not unless things got really, really bad. In fact, I was going to go to great lengths to hide my desire for the isotope and would likely choose to

mine it myself if I ever found any, in order to better hide my interest and activities. Luckily for me, the very rare decalithium was only found near very rich dilithium deposits, so my interest would seem to be about the dilithium to anyone who learned about it.

Unfortunately, though I now had in my possession alien technical data describing how to create the red matter and thus artificial singularities to generate power, the knowledge was worthless without the isotope itself! Even just a few microliters of red matter would be enough to create a large number of hand weapon-style power cells, but I had bigger plans than creating a half dozen backup power cells, which I also wanted, to be clear.

With a relatively larger amount, in fact just a teardrop of red matter, I could increase the size of the singularity and thus produce more power. I had even found several ingenious designs meant for a large power core in that same stolen alien database, which I had already somewhat improved upon and adapted to equivalent materials I actually had access to.

Since the designs weren't Collector inspired and thus stupidly inefficient and substandard, there wasn't as much need to improve upon them. One of those large power cores was enough to supply the power needs of my entire island for centuries, even with the shields at full power and the phaser canons constantly firing. In fact the emitters would burn out from overuse long before the power ran out.

If I found the isotope and thus could create the red matter, my plan was to create two large power cores, and place one of the large power cores in my hidden underground levels to supply the power needs of the lower levels, including the industrial replicator and holodeck which were the true power hogs, and serve as an emergency power source for the entire island if needed.

I could resell or repurpose the Federation reactor I currently had down there since there was really no comparison in terms of power output and since the Federation reactor required fuel and ongoing pesky maintenance.

The second power core could be placed on *The Flighty Temptress* to supply all the power needs of the ship's secondary systems, like sensors, transporters, weapons, shields, etc. Whatever 'notice-me-not' or 'uninteresting' field effect that was protecting my ship should similarly protect me from people suddenly wondering and asking how my ship's power levels were so high. The warp core would continue to power the ship's propulsion systems, though, as I wasn't even sure the ship's warp drive was compatible with another power system.

With the warp core now only powering the propulsion system, I might even be able to increase the ship's top warp speed, though I'd need to do some simulations to determine if that was viable. The warp field, hull geometry and nacelle configuration might need to be adjusted to handle a higher top speed and increased power.

Regardless of that, the secondary systems having their own dedicated power source would be a huge advantage for me. If I could further hide the power signature, and not fully rely on whatever effect was protecting my ship, it could be quite a surprise. No one would expect my little ship to have such sharp teeth!



Sighing at my grand plans, *that I couldn't actually do shit about at the moment*, I put the data pad away and picked Kira up bridal style to carry her back to the chateau. The night might be pleasant and warm right now, the sound of the waves incredibly soothing, but it would quickly get chilly here as the night deepened. Best to get that finely sculpted bare ass inside my bed for cuddles before she caught something.

I'm pretty sure I was firmly out of the doghouse now.