

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

*Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic*

*Two Weeks Later. Bridge of The Flighty Temptress. In orbit of Earth. The Walking Dead Universe.*

*“Are we ready to depart?” I asked the bridge from my captain’s chair.*

*“All systems are operational,” T’Maz reported dutifully from her console.*

*“Carl, Hermione, Natasha, is our quantum link stable to all the technology we’re leaving behind?” I asked. “We won’t be able to return to this dimension for a long time.”*

*“The quantum link is stable, father,” Natasha reported. “As we still have our active link to the Flight of the Navigator universe, we do not anticipate any issues.”*

*“Good,” I said, while looking at the viewscreen, showing the many new installations in orbit of Earth.*

*The Echo Papa 607 command and control and its many distributed fabrication units were the first things I had built when I had decided on this course of action. The*

*mining and repair drones had been second. The weapon drones themselves coming third.*

*Even now, hundreds of mining drones were constantly mining the system's changed asteroid belt for materials, transporting back the refined materials to continue the buildup of this world's new infrastructure. In time, once the higher priority items were handled, a new Gothic defense net would be built and deployed over the planet to protect it from internal and external forces, as well as serving as transporter hubs for the drones.*

*Over 200 weapons drones were even now scouring Great Britain, hunting walkers 24/7, after they had successfully cleared the city of London. Surprisingly, given the concentration of walkers present there, several thousand survivors had been found, contacted, and relocated to newly repaired and protected areas of the city. With the evidence of my advanced technology right before their eyes, virtually everyone had chosen to accept my offer. Of course there had been some bad apples in the form of a few petty warlords who were subtly eliminated. In some cases, though, the very people those warlords had oppressed, now seeing a better option in front of them that they really did not want to miss out on, had done the eliminating themselves. Respect.*

*Thankfully, all my efforts had paid off because my chaos meter was sitting at an astounding 200% and had seemingly maxed out. I hadn't even known it could go past 100%, but it had. What that meant for the next universe, I had zero idea and Q was, as always, not eager to share.*

*"Seatbelts on kiddos," I said, as each of my crew's seats deployed a five-point harness and a personal shield emitter activated surrounding them. "If Q pulls his usual tricks and I end up on the surface of whatever world we're orbiting, well, you know what to do. Goodbye and good luck Walking Dead universe. I'm looking forward to seeing what becomes of you."*

*Then I reached out and tapped the button in my visual field simply labeled 'JUMP' and we disappeared from that dimension of reality.*

## **The Adventures of Augment Gothic**

### **Chapter 51**

That now rather familiar feeling of forced unconsciousness followed by intense disorientation after I jumped dimensions was back and in full force. And of course, my armor's systems were deactivated once again, but this time I felt them slowly reactivating, seemingly in

time with my own return to consciousness. That, admittedly, was perhaps a prudent move on Q's part. My armor systems could do a lot of damage if my sluggishly awakening mind accidentally triggered something, or I accidentally commanded my ship's weapon systems to fire on the planet.

For the moment, rather than my 24<sup>th</sup> century sensors, I had only my body's formidable, genetically enhanced senses to rely upon. I could feel a bright star heating my face with the wind simultaneously cooling it. I could smell and taste the fragrance of familiar flowers from Earth on the wind and could hear the sounds of human children playing together, carefree and happy. That tended to be a great sign that things were ok. Thankfully, from the sound of things, I hadn't been dropped into yet another post-apocalyptic Earth, but it was definitely Earth again, and probably the United States, if all the English I was hearing was to be believed.

The question remained, though, what dimension I was in? Along with all these pleasant sensory experiences was the distinct pain of something digging super uncomfortably into my back. What the hell was I lying on?

"Sir, are you all right?" a pleasant, but artificial sounding female voice asked, like the voice was coming from a

speaker rather than a living person's throat. To an Augment whose hearing had been enhanced, the difference was glaring. It was patently obvious that this voice hadn't been made by organic vocal cords, no matter how pleasant it had been made to sound.

My eyes snapped open in alarm and I was met by a smooth, non-emotive face, but one that had been designed to appear humanoid, with two eyes, and a mouth approximation. It was also only a few feet away from me with hands outstretched to either lend assistance or do harm. Given my recent experience upon waking in the *Walking Dead* universe, I had no desire to risk it, so violence was my default response to an unknown like this.

My left hand knocked the outstretched metallic 'hands' away hard, twisting its body and torso unnaturally to the side, while I simultaneously sat up and kicked the legs out from under this...robot. Since it was made to look humanoid, thankfully the knees had been designed to bend like a human's would, so it fell to its 'knees' now facing away from me. Now standing, my fingers dug grooves into its thick metal neck as I gripped it tightly and my antiproton pistol materialized in my hand. The weapon's powered up whining was loud and ominous as I pressed the barrel flush against the side of this thing's head, about to pull the trigger and melt its head to molten

slag when the shocked exclamations of people around me intruded into my thoughts.

“My most sincere apologies for startling you, sir,” the robot offered apologetically, its reaction decidedly unnatural when you considered that I had just knocked it down, damaging it in the process, and had put a gun to its head. “I only wished to offer aid.”

“Don’t hurt her, please!” a couple of young children, a boy and a girl nearby shouted, staring at us in terror. “That’s our nanny!”

*‘Their nanny? Was this thing these children’s nanny?’* I thought as my eyes caught those of the frantic children who were begging me not to hurt their robotic nanny.

I quickly glanced down and sure as shit on the thing’s back and front were the words ‘Nanny Bot.’ Other details I hadn’t noticed were the softer colors the thing was painted in, a light comforting purple, with feminizing accessories like a flower headband tied around its forehead. Children had an amazing ability to anthropomorphize just about anything, so these kids calling this robot their ‘nanny’ and ‘her’ probably shouldn’t have surprised me.

Looking around more widely, I caught the sight of many more robots of obviously different release eras and types.

One was manning a mobile ice cream cart, selling ice cream to people passing by. Another was walking several dogs on a long leash. Another was just walking side-by-side with a person like a companion. *The things were everywhere.* Robots were common in this world and seemingly integrated into society on nearly every level, which meant that I had seriously overreacted and needed to do some quick damage control lest the authorities be called.

Bottom line, this was most definitely not my Earth and probably a 30-50 years or more past 2016, the year that I had been taken away from my Earth.

This quick glance around to assess the situation occurred quickly, at speeds only an Augment was capable of, taking no more than a second, before a wide, bright, disarming smile found its way onto my face. Disarming was my goal and very good-looking people practically had a superpower when it came to that kind of thing. Affecting sheepish embarrassment next, I retracted my gun and pretended to put it in my waistband behind me but actually dematerialized it into my buffer inventory, lest I be searched by any local authorities I couldn't avoid.

If this was the United States, like I suspected, hopefully gun laws were still quite liberal in this era, just like they had been in mine.

“I’m so sorry for my reaction. You startled me, you see,” I apologized loudly, cringing a little at sight of the damage that I had done in my haste, damage that a baseline human should not have been capable of causing on the hardened metallic frame of this robot. Ah well, no fixing that now. “Are you all right?” I asked, hoping to project care and that I didn’t view this robot strictly as a thing.

“I am operational, but damaged and require repairs,” the nanny bot answered.

Glancing quickly around at the watching crowd, I decided I needed to resolve this situation and get the hell out of the area as even in my time a man pulling what appeared to be a firearm was going to result in someone calling the cops. Especially if they had brandished it and then put it up to someone’s head. I wasn’t sure how this society viewed these robots, as people or as property, so it was best to assume the worst.

“My apologies for damaging you while startled. I’ll happily pay for the repairs,” I said, helping the robot to its



feet, which was the right thing to say as several people nodded in agreement.

Of course, I had no freaking idea what the currency of this Earth looked like, nor even if they still used cash, or what the likely costs of repair would be. For all I knew this world may be so advanced they may exclusively use some kind of digital credit system given how advanced the technology looked like. Realizing there was an opportunity here, I reached into my pocket, pretending to be getting my money, only to materialize from my buffer inventory three surplus gold coins that I had previously replicated during my surfing vacation in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe.

“Here, please give these to your owner for the repair costs,” I said uncertainly, handing the robot the gold coins, hoping that it would act as I wanted it to when confronted with an unusual situation.

It glanced down at the coins in its hand, scrutinizing the coins and testing their weight. My armor’s sensors soon detected an outgoing information request to this world’s version of the internet. My armor’s systems carefully followed and piggybacked stealthily on the digital signal link, learning the native systems as the request went through the information network, the results were

analyzed and then relayed back to the robot in front of me.

“Sensors and database correlation search confirm, these are 1-ounce American Gold Eagle Coins, manufactured by the U.S. Mint, proof quality, containing 31.10348 grams of pure gold, minted in 1986,” the nanny robot said aloud, before glancing at me. “Sir, current market value for coins of this era and quality exceeds the anticipated cost of repairs for this unit.”

“That’s fine; take them with my apologies. Any extra value is for the inconvenience your owner experiences,” I said, eager to get away. “My apologies, again.”

Quickly moving off I could hear the robot behind me talking as I took off at a fast-walking pace.

“No apologies necessary, sir. Have a wonderful day,” I heard, before two children ran up to hug their nanny once the big, scary man was gone.

When I reached a spot sufficiently hidden from view, I activated my personal transporter and beamed away.

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Walking out of the downtown area park that I had been originally placed by Q, I recognized the skyline, mostly. I was in Chicago, in the United States. I recognized the

Sears Tower and the Prudential building, though there was a giant building, the tallest one in the visible skyline now, one that most definitely had not existed in my old world.

It read 'USR', which I remembered stood for U.S. Robotics, which meant that I was in the *I, Robot* dimension, a dimension based on a 2004 movie and Will Smith might be walking around.

Being here was both fascinating and wonderful and I couldn't help the wide, bright, genuine smile that broke out on my face as I walked through the streets of a future downtown Chicago on this beautiful, sunny day, many of the city's women giving me sultry and inviting smiles. As a gentleman, I couldn't help but return their smiles to their blushing and giggling.

The sidewalks were full of ordinary people going about their morning routines, some in an obvious rush, some just taking their time and taking in the sights, perhaps tourists like me coming to visit the city. It was a refreshing contrast to the last dimension where the streets were abandoned, and thousands of animated corpses were waiting to jump out and kill you around every corner.

There were many familiar sights in this world, but just as many or more that were unfamiliar, like a high speed

monorail and a giant highway that ran through the city's heart that had definitely not been there before, with maybe 8-10 lanes moving in either direction filled with cars that were traveling in excess of 120-mph on average according to my sensors, all moving in perfect coordination with each other with not a single visible slowdown in the several minutes I watched. There was an underground highway where the speeds were even higher, my sensors told me. It was very impressive efficiency. From my memory of the movie, these vehicles had advanced, fully autonomous self-driving capabilities which was the only reason that these speeds were possible. The average human, without extensive training, was not capable of driving safely at those speeds for an extended period around a lot of other cars.

The highway was one thing, but the most shocking sight was of so many robots doing their thing too. There were robot garbagemen, picking up trash and putting it into familiar trucks, there were robot dog walkers like in the park, there were robot deliverymen (and I said *men* because none of the robots were modeled with visible feminine characteristics like breasts, which I thought was an interesting choice) with FedEx's branding and colors, robots carrying packages and groceries for their human owners, robots at newsstands selling all kinds of

publications, even robots pushing around little strollers with babies in them, no human parents in sight. This was a world where robots were integrated fully, and humanity trusted even their babies and children to the care of robots.

God only knows what kind of social upheaval the introduction of all these robots had caused this society. How many jobs that humans had used to do, had been lost to robots forever? Had the government been forced to provide something like a guaranteed basic income?

In a movie like *I, Robot* you had *maybe* a 2-3 minute establishing shot giving you a glimpse of the advanced future that the movie was set in. That establishing shot had probably cost millions of dollars on its own in digital effects and having so many actors moving around to fill out the scene. In the movie it was impressive and cool as hell to see, an attempt by the filmmakers to convey the scope of things, but it was *nothing* compared to getting to stand in the middle of this human (and robotic) throng and just fully immersing yourself in it. There were no budget limitations on real life as I'd first discovered in the Star Trek universe.

Even the advertisements visible from the street were cool and indicative of just how advanced this world was, I thought, as I stopped to watch a few ads on these giant

digital displays, complete with sound, “Our destination anywhere package to be the best value. Let us take you to your dream destination aboard our orbital space plane.”

Orbital space planes?? In 2035?! And all these robots? How in the fuck was all this possible?

I had left my world in 2016 and there was no way on God’s green Earth my world was going to come anywhere close to creating this stuff in just 19 years. It was one thing to see in a movie, quite another in real life. What could explain the difference? The curious thing was just how normal some stuff looked and how advanced other stuff looked. It was like this world had been hyper advanced kicking and screaming in some areas, but *not* in others. Could the explanation be as simple as there being some Tony Stark/Leonardo Da Vinci/Oppenheimer type whose sheer genius in one particular area dragged this world kicking and screaming forward in the area that they were prodigies at?

I just hoped that Q had taken into account this dimension’s capabilities when he brought the *Temptress* into orbit. If they had orbital space planes, then they probably had advanced space sensors as well.

On the side of an old building was another giant digital video display showing an ad that I was particularly interested in.

“Say goodbye to lengthy upgrades and service calls. An uplink to U.S.R.’s central computer provides this state-of-the-art robot with new programs daily. The Nestor Class 5 is tomorrow’s robot, today.”

A tagline under the ad indicated the full rollout of the new and improved model was not scheduled for another 3 months, which meant that I was months ahead of the main events depicted in the movie itself. It was also curious how the previous 4 iterations of this robot did not have the capability to uplink to the manufacturer for operational updates. Had that been a vestige of humanity’s fear of robots that had gradually eroded over time when their fears had proved unfounded? A fear that U.S.R. or other robot manufacturers could use the uplink to command the robots to do harm or take over? Too bad that that fear hadn’t lasted, as it was prophetic. USR had likely become so big, so powerful, that they were able to strongarm the government in allowing them to link to their robots in real time. Alternately, given my knowledge of events to come, the powerful AI VIKI might have been working behind the scenes to ensure that it had been allowed.

An audible chime interrupted my thoughts. This was a system notification from my armor indicating that all internal functionalities had been restored, but my link to the ship had not yet been reestablished. That was curious and suggested that Q wanted me to accomplish something on my own without the help and resources of my ship. So far, there was nothing to even hint to what that goal even was.

In the bottom right corner of my HUD was the bright green button labeled 'JUMP' which indicated that I could jump dimensions at any time because of all the extra chaos that I had caused in the *Walking Dead* dimension. Now that was interesting, but not something I wanted to use just yet. It did grant me a great deal of freedom to do as little or as much as I wanted, though. This world was rich in data and resources that would be useful for many of my endeavors back in the Star Trek universe, so I had several plans I wanted to carry out.

“Jarvis, are you there, buddy?” I asked.

“I am back online and operational, sir,” Jarvis replied.

“Have to warn you buddy, we’re not in Kansas anymore,” I joked.

“No, sir, we were never in Kansas,” Jarvis corrected with a confused tone. “We were previously in the city of



Atlanta, state of Georgia. My intrusion into this dimension's local information network states that we are currently in the city of Chicago, state of Illinois, in the United States of America, circa 2035. Do you require medical assistance?"

I chuckled at how Jarvis took my words literally. He was still young and growing into his role, after all.

"Access the cultural database we assembled from the last two dimensions, specifically the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and popular culture references using the phrase 'We're not in Kansas anymore.'" I advised.

"Ah, I see," Jarvis replied after a moment of research.

"Yes, sir, this time and place is quite different from the previous dimensions you were inserted into by the entity known as Q."

"You could say that again," I said quietly as I continued walking, my eyes constantly taking in my surroundings, really enjoying playing the tourist and sightseeing in this futuristic world. This place was a feast for the eyes and a treasure trove of opportunity. "Any idea when we will have reestablished contact with the ship?"

"Apologies, sir. Both quantum and short and long-range subspace communications are currently offline, but I

cannot identify any systemic explanation for this status,” Jarvis apologized.

“No need to apologize, I suspect it’s either Q giving me some time to acclimate, or he wants to me to accomplish something first,” I guessed. “If I didn’t have a surplus of chaos from the last dimension, I bet you I’d have been given some kind of dimension specific goal to achieve before he allowed access to any of my armor’s functionality. This is Q being nice.”

“If you say so, sir,” Jarvis replied calmly.

“In the meantime continue your intrusion into the local information network,” I ordered. “I want it fully mapped out for when we reestablish contact with the ship and all its resources. An interconnected worldwide information network barely existed in 1986 in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe and what did exist in the *Walking Dead* universe was largely non-functional by the time we arrived.”

“Will the data gathering follow the same parameters as previous, sir?” Jarvis asked.

“You mean the ‘take everything not nailed down and replicator pattern scan everything even when it is’ parameters?” I joked. “Yes, same as before. I want *all* the data that this world has to offer, especially on its robotics,

which is why the ship's memory storage capabilities are greater than a space station's. Be careful, though, Jarvis. The company, USR, has an AI running their systems. I do not want you detected or harmed."

"Understood, sir. I will engage my AI counterintelligence protocols," Jarvis reassured me.

"Good," I said, happy that my personal assistant was so good at data intrusion and analysis, which was exactly what I had designed him for. "Now, I need to get some walking around money. Standby to assist."

Spotting a pawn shop with a 'We Buy Gold!' sign in the window, I turned off the sidewalk and walked into the pawn shop, hoping to obtain some of the local currency. The inside of the shop looked like the inside of any pawn shop I'd ever seen before. On the left were two large floor to ceiling 6-foot glass display cases lit up to show off the wares, in this case necklaces, pendants, and long chains. In the middle of the room was a short display case with bracelets. On the right side of the store were short display cases with watches and rings. On the back wall were tall display cases with what looked like designer bags. This was definitely a pawn shop that specialized in jewelry and other luxury goods. There were none of the TVs, household appliances, tools, and guns that were so common to see in most other pawn shops.

A couple of African American men were talking with the proprietor who had an old-fashioned jeweler's loupe around his neck, a scale on the counter, and a laptop open nearby, probably to check the current spot price for gold on the commodities markets. The shop owner was examining a thick gold chain and testing it with acid to determine if it was real and if so, what its level of purity was.

I paid close attention to their conversation, but pretended to be examining the many pieces of jewelry for sale in the display cases. Eventually it was determined the gold chain was real, 18k, and quite heavy at 5 ounces and they had negotiated a price that was roughly 70% of the current market price for gold which was actually pretty good considering 55 to 75% of total value was common for gold intended to be melted down.

The problem came when the negotiation ended. Who knew you needed to provide a government issued ID when only *selling* your gold? As I had literally no history in this world until an hour ago, that was going to be a problem.

'Jarvis, we've got a problem here,' I mentally projected to my personal assistant, pretending to be checking out a Rolex Datejust. 'Are you capable of hacking into the

financial systems of this world yet to get me some money? If yes, I can skip this pawn shop stuff.'

'Unfortunately, no, sir,' Jarvis replied. 'While your armor's capabilities are advanced and formidable compared to the technology of this era, we do not have access to the technical resources of the ship. Scans of this dimension's information network architecture and security systems are still ongoing. The financial systems of any world usually boast the most formidable computer encryption and security technology that that world possesses. We would likely succeed in penetrating the network, but detection would—'

'*Stop*, I get it. Think scalpel rather than sledgehammer,' I said, cutting Jarvis off. 'Focus your efforts on a local hospital, preferably an underfunded one with outdated computer security. When babies are born they need to be inserted into the identity systems of the country that they were born in. Follow those links to the Social Security Administration's database and insert me there first, born 32 years ago, then the local DMV. Ultimately, I need a government issued scannable ID if I want to sell gold here.'

'Working.'

Several minutes went by as I continued to examine the pawn shop's watches, which I admit, I had always been a fan of. Rolex and Patek Philippe were still around if the case's contents were any indication. Of course, I had never been able to afford such things in my old life on a soldier's government salary. In the 24<sup>th</sup> century watches like these were *extremely* retro and niche, especially mechanically powered ones. Add in that each planet had different day lengths and timekeeping methods and the death of the wristwatch, at least as I had known it, was practically a foregone conclusion. Still, they were handsome pieces from an artistic perspective, so I took several deep replicator pattern scans in case I ever wanted to reproduce them.

'Sir, you have been added to all local identity databases, though this will only stand up a cursory inspection at best. I will continue to add more depth to your identity backstory as my scans of the local data net continue,' Jarvis reported. 'A scannable driver's license, already inserted in the Illinois DMV, can be replicated at will.'

'Good work, Jarvis,' I said, before putting my hand behind my back and triggering the replication process, then sticking it in my back pocket. I also pulled ten more gold eagles out of my inventory. 'Prioritize penetrating lower security financial systems, like those connected to

third party ATMs, or whatever the equivalent is in this time.’

I walked up to the counter and waited for the previous customers to leave the shop.

“Can I help you, sir?” the pawnbroker asked with a pleasant smile. “Would you like to see any of the watches you were looking at more closely?”

I chuckled. A shop owner was always paying attention to what a potential customer was interested in and strategizing how to make that sale.

“Maybe another time. I actually want to sell some gold coins,” I answered. “Ten U.S. Mint American gold eagles, 1 ounce, proof quality.”

The pawnbroker’s eyebrows rose at that.

“The first year they were minted,” the pawnbroker said. “Are you a collector?”

I scoffed pleasantly, “It would be more accurate to say that my father was a collector. As so often happens when coins change generations, the next generation doesn’t care as much about the collection. No matter how hard my dad tried to get me into this, I still just see some shiny gold coins and none of the history or artistry.”

The pawnbroker smiled back, relaxing a bit at receiving what was probably a very common story.

“That’s often how it goes,” the pawn shop owner agreed pleasantly.

As the man looked satisfied with my made-up story, I pulled the coins out of my pocket and set them on the counter, each one in a form fitting plastic case, to better sell why they were still in such good quality despite being so old. Counterfeiting Gold Eagles was difficult, but not impossible, so my story had to be believable.

“I’ll have to examine them out of the cases, of course,” the pawnbroker said, looking for permission, even as he donned white cotton gloves.

“Of course.”

The man took each coin carefully out of their individual cases and examined them closely under a jeweler’s loupe, examining the strike, looking for scratches and imperfections. He also ran a magnet over the coins and several other sophisticated pieces of testing equipment. Given their quality, doing an acid test wasn’t really an option.

“These appear genuine,” he said. “Are you looking to pawn or sell?”



“Sell, definitely. Like I said, it ain’t my thing.”

“I’ll give you \$3,500 apiece.”

I scoffed lightly, but shook my head with a mocking smile. When was the last time I had negotiated with a human like this? It was refreshing.

“That’s a great price!” the man defended. “Spot price on gold right now is \$4,887.79. That’s 71% of value for a 1-ounce coin.”

“Yeah, if you were going to *melt* them like they were scrap gold, but we both know that you are *not* going to melt these down, not for coins of this age and quality,” I corrected. “Just because coin collecting isn’t my thing, doesn’t mean I came in here completely ignorant.”

“Jarvis, how much are these going for?” I asked quickly and I received a price breakdown in my HUD complete with a line graph of recent prices and sales after he consulted the information net.

“Online, gold eagles of this quality and age are going for \$6,000 and up,” I pointed out, my smile turning cold.

“\$5,500.”

“I have to make some money too!” the man complained.

“There are fees that have to be paid on any of the good auction sites. \$5,000 and not a dollar more.”

“Deal!” I agreed, each of us reaching out to shake on it and seal the deal, both of us smiling. While I was very mercenary when it came to money, I really didn’t care about the money here. Those coins were real gold and made from scans taken from the real thing in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe, but they had been replicated and I could replicate more anytime I wanted. The only cost of replication was energy and with my Collector power cells, energy was practically free for me.

“Total buy price is \$50,000. Would you like a wire transfer into your account, credit transfer to a portable wallet, or cash?” the man asked.

My mind stuttered for a moment at the last bit to his question, at no point had I seen anyone use any paper money, but I had seen many people paying for goods and services with a portable device that had credits on it. Some of these were seemingly connected to credit cards or bank accounts like I was familiar with, others were the equivalent of cash and could be exchanged with others by just handing them the device or transferring money between different devices. This world had seemingly gotten away from paper cash and metal coins, probably because robots, with their repeatable precision, made counterfeiting easier. That was something the movies didn’t go into, actually. Using robots to commit crimes

wouldn't violate the 3 laws of robotics if humans weren't at risk of harm, right? Counterfeiting money wouldn't violate the 3 laws on its own.

"I'll take cash," I said.

The pawnbroker just nodded, reached under the counter for a portable credit device and placed it against his computer, seemingly transferring the credits with near field technology. Then he handed it to me.

"Thank you for your business, sir," the man smiled. "If there is anything you'd like in the shop, I promise to give you a great price!"

"I'm sure," I said, before nearly walking out with the credit device in my hand. At the last moment, I turned back. "Any shops you'd recommend for robots, good quality, potentially high volume? While I was never a coin collector like my father, I am a collector of robots, NS-4's and all the way back, including utility or construction robots."

The pawnbroker, quite happy at the successful deal he'd made with me, laughed merrily.

"Probably as expensive or a more expensive obsession as your father's," he joked. "You probably can't wait for the new NS-5's. Supposedly they're a huge step forward in design and functionality."

“You’ve got that right,” I admitted. “You wouldn’t happen to have one for sale would you?”

The pawnbroker’s smile didn’t waver.

“Unfortunately, not my specialty, though I do use an old NS-3 to help me melt the scrap gold I buy into bars and some delicate service work,” the man admitted. “I recommend Wang’s Robot Emporium and Repair in Chinatown, intersection of Cermak and Wentworth Avenues. They sell new and used robots of all types, do repairs and service, and even design customizations. Ask for Chang, he’s the owner. Tell him Jeff sent you.”

I raised an eyebrow in amusement at the idea of asking for Chang at Wang’s, but decided to roll with it.

“Thanks,” I said, before walking out into the busy street.

Looking down at the cash device in my hand, I let my nanites pass through my skin and into the machine. Jarvis might still be scanning the information network, but my nanites could learn everything about this device and how it functioned down to the quantum level, which was ironic because, as it turned out, this device used a very, very basic form of quantum entanglement which connected it to a central database repository. I suppose it made some sense. If they had the ability to create robots with these

capabilities, their computer technology must be 50 years or more more advanced than my old world.

“Jarvis, I think it’s time we went shopping.”

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**Wang’s Robot Emporium and Repair. Chinatown. Chicago, Illinois. *I, Robot Dimension.***

Walking into the large, air-conditioned store in Chinatown was an experience in itself. I stopped in the entryway and just let my eyes scan the store from one end to the other.

It was a strange mix of modern electronics store with an old Asian design aesthetic with exotic woods and incense in the air. What was definitely not old were the dozens upon dozens of robots of all different design models and design variants on the shelves, in specially designed cubby holes, many of them moving freely around the store.

‘Jarvis, take detailed and intensive scans of everything in this place. See if you can get copies of the operating software too,’ I ordered. ‘I want to create a comprehensive hardware and software development timeline showing the evolution of robotics in this dimension.’

‘Understood, sir.’

A gold-colored NS-4 ambled its way up to me.

“How can I be of service, sir?” the NS-4 inquired in a pleasant salesman voice. “Whether you’re in the market for a new robot or one only gently used, Wang’s Robot Emporium can accommodate all of your robotic needs, including repair and customization.”

“Thank you...robot,” I said, suddenly unsure how to address this thing. Did they have names? Whatever, it was time to bullshit. “I’m interested in starting a collection. From the beginning of robotics to the modern day. Is that something you could help me with?”

“You may call me ‘Guide’ if you wish, as I would be most happy to personally guide you throughout the store as you attempt to fill your collection,” the robot replied, modulating its vocal tone to convey how happy and eager it was to assist, acting like the perfect salesperson, even mirroring my language choice which was a classic sales technique. That was a lot of heavy lifting for a voice to do and it was somewhat off-putting for someone like me whose experience with androids was limited to Lieutenant Commander Data only. Again I wondered just how many jobs these robots had rendered obsolete and how much unemployment this world had.

The NS-4, while an advanced example of robotics by any definition, didn't have the ability to mimic human facial expressions to convey the approximation of emotions, though, which meant certain jobs were probably safe, at least for now. The NS-5, while obviously a technically superior robot, truly crossed over into android territory with its much more complex ability to mimic a humanoid face, as it had a nose, eyes and eyebrows, and lips like a human did, so who knows how many more jobs would be in jeopardy in the future now. I considered asking for Chang, but dismissed it after a couple moments of thought. This situation presented an opportunity for field testing this dimension's technology.

“Thank you, I would welcome your assistance,” I said, holding out my hand for it to shake. Just as I expected, it immediately and politely accepted my handshake and millions of my nanites began to fully infiltrate its systems from the contact which I purposely held a few seconds longer than was polite or necessary. “*How about we start with your most advanced robotic example and work backwards?*” I suggested in perfect German, suddenly, complete with a Berlin accent, as if I was a native speaker who had lived there his whole life.

I had given no indication or warning that I was going to change languages in the middle of our conversation,

hoping to test how robust the software was on this NS-4. Even now my nanites had infiltrated its operating software. I was very impressed at how quickly the software adapted to the change I had introduced in this interaction, even as it made a few German culture specific changes to its sales tactics as its software had analyzed my voice and speech pattern and had determined, with 98.4% certainty, that I was a native Berliner. This had confused it as it had previously determined that I was an American who had been born in Cleveland, but it was running with the new data until something else contradicted it.

The hardware itself was impressive, but there was an elegance to its software design that you couldn't help but admire. For someone like me who had written code for some of the most advanced technologies of the 24<sup>th</sup> century, I could instantly see the synergistic integration of human and AI created coding. Each had a unique fingerprint and style that you couldn't help but immediately recognize.

“Then we should begin with U.S.R.’s Nestor Class 5, the most advanced android yet developed,” the NS-4 guide replied in similarly perfect German, as it directed me to follow him deeper into the store.



*“Oh? I didn’t realize they were available yet?”* I replied in perfect mandarin, with a Beijing accent.

The software had now determined that I was a native of China and had been born and raised in Beijing, which prompted it to run an internal diagnostic on its systems to determine if it was malfunctioning in some way.

“While the worldwide distribution will not begin for another three months, Wang’s Robotic Emporium is a fully authorized distributor of U.S. Robotics’ entire product line, with the exception of models designed specifically for the military,” the guide explained in Mandarin. “As a long-time distributor, we were given a dozen NS-5’s to be given to our best customers for beta testing prior to the worldwide distribution. Our beta testers are helping to refine the NS-5’s operating software as it connects back to U.S.R. each night.”

*“Yes, I’ve heard about that. It’s all very impressive,”* I commented in Russian, with a perfect Moscow accent. That was the crux of the whole movie, after all. *“Do you have any left in stock should I wish to become a beta tester?”*

I was now a Russian native, born in Moscow, and its software had thrown up its metaphorical hands and just

decided to go with the flow. A less adaptable system might have shut down entirely.

“Besides the floor display unit, we actually do have one in inventory, a recent return from a customer,” the guide answered. “You would need to speak with Mr. Chang before being allowed to participate in our beta test program.”

“*I see,*” I said in French, with a Parisian accent. “*Why, may I ask, was the NS-5 returned?*”

“Unfortunately, our customer had to leave the country on business and the terms of the beta test agreement do not allow the NS-5 to travel across international borders during the beta period,” the guide answered in French. “This is the Nestor Class Five android, the latest in automated domestic assistants.”

The guide had been slowly walking us around the store, taking a very inefficient route here, probably in an effort to show off everything the store had to offer while on the way. That was also a very old sales tactic. On the wall, surrounded by a holographic advertising frame that activated upon us walking closer, was the android that would bring humanity to its knees in the months ahead. Its eyes were closed, probably in a power-saving mode.

“They really made an effort to make it more human-like, didn’t they,” I observed, returning to English, feeling like I had gathered enough data on its reactions and how its software dealt with the unexpected. I looked between my guide and the NS-5, comparing them. “No offense.”

“No offense taken, sir,” my guide replied jovially, with a simulated laugh. “All Nestor Class Five androids are fully customizable, from eye color, to name, to even their personality archetype. They can do anything a human can do and many things they can’t and represent a significant step forward in robotic design and function.”

“I believe that,” I said. “What are its technical specifications?”

“If you would allow, I would be happy to tell you all about my technical specifications myself,” the NS-5 said happily, after opening its eyes, beginning to move a little on its feet like a human would. It had probably been purposely designed to do that as standing there like a statue was unnatural and thus off-putting to humanity. I knew from the movie that this robot was capable of incredible feats of strength, speed, and agility.

My sensors picked up a narrow beam information transfer from my NS-4 guide to the NS-5 itself containing a log of its interactions with me, including everything that it had

learned from its analysis of our conversation, such as it was with how I had been purposely switching languages. That was very interesting on its own.

Of course, my guide and the NS-5 were owned currently by the same company and sharing the information it had gathered would smooth its interactions with me and better its chances of making a sale. Humans might have come up with a creative collaborative strategy like that.

Collaborative strategies like that were practically hard coded in our evolutionary DNA as for all of our species' existence we had never been the strongest and most physically dangerous of Earth's lifeforms. The NS-5 would likely be using this information to make its interaction with me more effective.

'Jarvis, did the store ownership instruct them to do this information sharing to improve the sales process/potential?' I asked curiously.

'The operating software that we have copied and are currently monitoring does not contain any such explicit instructions to that effect. Analysis suggests that this strategy was a result of its adaptive learning algorithm,' Jarvis answered.

Again, I was very impressed at its operating software.

"Yes, please tell me your specifications," I instructed.

“Hello, sir. I am a Nestor Class Five automated domestic assistant, the most advanced available on the market,” it greeted, holding its hand out to shake, which I happily did, probably because I had initiated a handshake with my NS-4 guide. Again, I used the opportunity to introduce my nanites into its systems. “My brain is positronic, capable of 12 trillion calculations per second with an internal memory capacity of 1 petabyte. My chassis is composed of 456 moving parts, three pounds of processing circuitry, two miniature nitrogen cooling units, and 1 mile of aluminum wiring.”

A positronic brain, *in 2035*, something that the Federation in the 24<sup>th</sup> century still struggled with. Fucking amazing. It was only the genius creator of Data, Doctor Noonien Soong, who had managed the feat successfully thus far, yet humanity of this time were producing millions of androids with a powerful positronic processor built in to run the hardware. Size-wise, this positronic processor might even be able to go toe-to-toe with the bioneural circuitry of my ship with a few upgrades.

“Tell me more about your chassis. When I shook your hand, for example, it was warm and felt soft to the touch, like actual skin,” I said leadingly.

“Unique to the NS-5 line is a proprietary gel polymer on the face, chest, forearms and hands, and legs below the

knees designed to mimic skin and musculature for a much more natural feel on those areas most interacted with by humans,” the NS-5 answered. “My chassis also possesses Kev-Lite armor for greater impact protection reducing the need for repairs, non-corrosive/stainless steel plates and rivets, a 20.8 megapixel eye resolution, and a Teresa 2.0.1 OS connection to USR’s central computer for daily service and program upgrades, allowing you to say goodbye to lengthy upgrades and service calls. And of course, Three Laws Safe!”

I laughed a little at this thing parroting the marketing literature from a billboard I’d seen earlier in the day. I could also hear the capitalized letters in the ‘Three Laws Safe’ tagline.

I nodded and proceeded to touch various parts of the robot, taking deeper scans and thus hiding the visible discharge of light.

“Each NS-5 comes with a full service and support package which includes: 24-hour phone and e-mail technical and operational assistance, full coverage of any and all repairs to the NS-5 casing, musculature, positronic brain, cladding, and optics. Full servicing of NS-5 by a licensed technician every six months via on-site house call. And a head-to-toe lifetime warranty.”

Those were some impressive enticements. USR was really trying to convince people to upgrade to the NS-5 and get rid of their old NS-4s. How much of this was USR versus VIKI's work, the AI behind the plan to protect humanity by taking over, was anyone's guess.

"How much for the NS-5, guide?" I asked.

"MSRP on the NS-5 is 100,000 U.S.," the guide instantly replied. "We would be happy to place you on the pre-order list for delivery to you in 3 months tim—"

"I'll pay \$300,000 today, cash, if you sell it to me today and put me on the beta test list," I interrupted with a new offer. "I'll also take working examples of every robot you have available or can get in the next few days from other suppliers, from the NS-1 to NS-4, every variant, including service parts, manuals, and operating software versions. I want an example of the most current industrial robots too, from mining to construction to demolition, from hazardous materials handling to farming to repair.

Everything."

While my next stop was USR itself, I wanted working examples of every robot they or other companies ever made that could be replicator pattern scanned and reproduced as I wanted. During the NS-5's sales presentation I had thought of a few dozen ways I could

improve the thing with 24<sup>th</sup> century materials and technology.

“That...will cost a substantial sum, sir. Preliminary price estimate for such an order would be over 15 million dollars, and may very well be substantially more as much of your request would need to be purchased from other suppliers or collectors,” Guide explained in a shocked voice. If it had had facial expressions like the NS-5 did, I imagine it would have looked shocked too. “While Wang’s Robot Emporium and Repair has a wide inventory of consumer robotics readily available, industrial robots are not part of our normal offerings and inventory.”

“I don’t care how much it costs; the question is do you want my business even if it’s not normally something that you provide? My proof of funds,” I said, taking out my cash device and letting Guide scan the device. It chimed indicating that I had over \$50 million dollars on the device.

Like I had tapped two latinum strips together to summon a Ferengi waiter, a man of Asian descent and a finely tailored suit showed up out of nowhere with a wide, accommodating smile.



“I am Chang, owner and general manager of this fine establishment,” he greeted, pushing the NS-4 to the side semi-gently. “We would be happy to accommodate *all* of your needs, sir, no matter how unusual and outside our normal offerings. While difficult to acquire, certain restricted military-grade robotics can also be obtained, for a premium.”

I smiled at the gleam in the man’s eye. This was exactly what I was hoping for.

“Good, I’ll pay 10 million upfront if you can complete my order in the next 3 days, another 10 million upon completion. Another five million for military-grade robotic hardware,” I offered. “I have rented an automated warehouse at the Port of Chicago. Deliver everything there as it comes in. I’d prefer a steady stream of deliveries by robot, not human, rather than a single giant one.”

“We will begin working on your order immediately. In fact, I will see to it personally!” Chang enthusiastically stated.

“Good, it was a pleasure doing business with your Mr. Chang,” I returned, shaking the man’s hand gently, before I started to squeeze harder and harder, letting my predator

aura free. “But you better not try to fuck me. I will be very displeased if you try to fuck me.”

“No sir! I will deliver as promised! Only the highest quality goods available!” Chang fearfully answered.

“Very good,” I said, my disposition instantly changing back to pleasant and warm.

I knew that my shopping spree was going to be expensive, so after leaving that last pawn shop and acquiring an example of their cash, I had replicated rarer and rarer coins, gems, and antiquities, many of which had been replicator pattern scanned from museums in the last two dimensions to ensure they were perfect copies of the real things. None of them were particularly eyebrow raising, but I had been selling them all over town and amassing funds.

By the end of the day, Jarvis had made a breakthrough in cracking the native banking encryption and how cash was quantum entangled to each country’s central bank repository. Numerous international drug cartels, dictators and warlords, and organized crime empires had seen some of their vast wealth siphoned off or located physically and beamed away. Even in the future, sometimes burying your cash (or cash equivalent) was still a thing when it was too much to be laundered. While penetrating this world’s

banking security had taken longer without the vast technological resources of my ship to bring to bear on the problem, my armor was still some of the most advanced examples of alien technology I had access to, and I had accumulated over \$50 million in the end. I could have taken even more, but there just wasn't a good reason for it given my needs.

It was time to meet the genius whose work had shaped this dimension of reality. It was time to make the offer of a lifetime and do something that I had never done before.

**XXXXX**

Standing on the roof of a 10-story building, I looked up at the gargantuan USSR headquarters building that towered over the rest of the Chicago skyline. It was the tallest building in the skyline, *by far*, with nothing even coming close to it in size. With the sun having set, the building was lit up rather prettily in my opinion, the many lights of a major American city like Chicago painting a very pretty picture.

In the movie, U.S. Robotics was a megacorporation, serving as that world's leading robotics & AI engineering and development firm, based in Chicago. That description suggested that there were other robotics firms out there, but not a single hint of one had appeared in the movie

itself. Access to this world's version of the internet did deepen the world a bit, as there were dozens of companies making robots, but none that truly competed with USR for market dominance, oftentimes only making very specialized designs meant for very specific industrial uses. USR, though, was the gold standard, the Apple of this world. If this had been my world, a world that wasn't anywhere near as cool and fantastic, USR would have been a prime candidate to be chopped up into pieces for being a dangerous anti-competitive monopoly.

It had been founded by CEO Lawrence Robertson, the business mind behind the company's success, and Dr. Alfred Lanning, founder and lead robotics designer of USR, basically the Steve Jobs or Elon Musk of that company. Dr. Lanning was also the creator of VIKI, an AI and supercomputer that he used in his work. VIKI's giant positronic brain was built into the USR headquarters and whose developmental evolution, and consequently the evolution in her understanding of the three laws of robotics, formed the plot of the movie.

*I, Robot* was different from the normal AI run amok movie in the sense that VIKI's goal was to protect and preserve humanity from itself, rather than outright genocide of the species. If she had been truly after humanity's destruction, I had no doubt that she could

have accomplished it rather easily with how trusting humanity was of robotics. Indeed, this world had virtually no works, literary or visual, that portrayed the dangers of AI, which was probably part of the reason why Earth, in 2035, had such advanced robotics. A genius designer akin to Tony Stark and a society that didn't fear AI and robotics could accomplish a lot in a very short span of time.

At a mental command, my headpiece came up and enclosed my head, then I activated my flight systems, producing an immersive anti-gravity field, negating gravity altogether. Then I engaged my cloaking systems. After a light push off from the roof and a short, powerful, carefully calibrated pulse of my boot thrusters, I quickly rose straight up into the air, reaching an altitude of a 1,000 feet before air and wind resistance brought me to a stop just as I'd calculated. Looking across the way at the USSR headquarters, I activated my armor's personal transporter and beamed directly outside of Lanning's personal workshop as he wasn't at his mansion. If someone looked out the window right now, *and I wasn't cloaked*, they'd see a man floating in midair 150 stories above the ground.

Like any building, in any normal Earth dimension, the building's blueprints had to be approved by local

government during the planning and construction phase, and City Hall's computer systems were laughably easy to hack into when compared to USR's. With the blueprints in hand and Lanning having done several remote interviews from his private workshop in the past, it had been easy to identify where in the building his workshop was located based on visual clues.

At this altitude the wind was buffeting me terribly, but activating my shield would disable my armor's cloak.

My HUD showed one human life sign in the workshop. I triggered several more exotic scans and yet I could not detect an active positronic brain in the confines of the workshop, though there were many parts specific to the NS-5 line. It looks like Dr. Lanning had not yet built Sonny. In fact, scans showed Dr. Lanning was even now working on a new NS-5 variant design, its schematics displayed using this period's primitive holography. The design on the screen was vastly different than the production model I had already extensively scanned at Wang's Robotic Emporium.

'Jarvis, I hope you're ready for this. If we still can't connect to the ship you may need to do battle with an AI whose positronic brain is the size of a good-sized house,' I said seriously, eyes locked on the room to see if my presence had been detected. Pulling up a wireframe

schematic of the building showed that it was largely empty at this late hour.

‘As you humans say, it’s not the size of the boat, it’s the motion of the ocean,’ Jarvis replied in a complete deadpan.

My brain stuttered to a halt at this straight delivery before I let out a loud guffaw of amusement. Who knew my young AI assistant had it in him to make a lewd joke?

‘Luckily my boat is both huge and my ocean is rocking these days, Jarvis,’ I joked right back.

‘As you say, sir,’ Jarvis responded with a long-suffering sigh. Sometimes I wondered if I had put too much Jarvis from the Marvel universe into his personality, and other times I wondered if I had put too little.

‘Prepare to isolate the workshop, no signals in or out,’ I ordered. ‘We’ll battle VIKI when I choose, not a moment before.’

‘Understood, sir,’ Jarvis replied seriously. ‘Preparing to block all transmissions out of the workshop with a localized disruption field.’

With a mental command I simultaneously dropped my personal cloak and beamed inside Dr. Lanning’s office, allowing the transport sound effect to give him an audible

warning of my presence, even purposely slowing down the transport materialization process to allow him more time to see the transport take place. Upon fully materializing, a bubble of rapidly expanding energy pulsed from my armor, rapidly enclosing the entire room in a disruption field which would prevent signals from entering or leaving the room.

The man startled, jumping to his feet and he began gaping like a fish, his eyes going wide, but there was a spark in his eyes too, something that I often saw in the mirror when the world managed to surprise me, and I desperately wanted to figure something out. This world, just like my old one, had hypothesized teleportation, they had even accomplished it with quantum entangled particles, but they were a long way off and several fundamental breakthroughs away from moving a human from point A to point B, at least if the Star Trek dimension historical timeline on the development of matter/energy transport technology was any indication.

“What-what are you?!” Dr. Lanning nervously asked, taking several fearful steps back.

The question surprised me for a moment before I remembered that my faceplate was still blocking my face. To a robotics engineer, with my armor’s design such as it was, I likely looked like a very advanced android. Given



the circumstances, maybe he thought VIKI had learned of his plan and had decided to kill him.

To lighten the atmosphere and calm the Doctor down, as his vitals had spiked rather dangerously for a man his age, I commanded my faceplate to retract smoothly into my armor, exposing my smiling face.

“It’s both a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Dr. Lanning. I’m a big, big fan of your work,” I offered warmly, a sincere smile on my face. “My name is Admiral Gothic of the Bajoran Defense Forces, captain of the starship in orbit of this world.”

Dr. Lanning looked scared, intrigued, confused, and many more emotions all at once, so I waited patiently for him to process my words and this bizarre situation while calmly walking around his workshop scanning everything and impregnating anything of interest with my nanites with just a touch. I could collect them again, but once the scans were complete and every iota of data was wrangled out of the materials, I had them self-destruct. Ridiculous amounts of data returned to my armor’s systems and updated my database on the robotics of this dimension.

During this time, Dr. Lanning’s heart rate and blood pressure were slowly returning to normal, thankfully. If he had a heart attack I could inject my nanites into his

cardiovascular system to make internal repairs, but that wasn't something I had tested on a baseline human or even simulated, to be honest. Add that to my mental to-do list which already spanned years' worth of future tasks, tasks that were constantly being reprioritized based on changing circumstances.

“Are-Are you an alien? Or an android?” he asked, tentatively. “Are you here to kill me?”

I tilted my head as if considering his words.

“Interesting questions, though I can see why you might think that those were possibilities,” I commented, with a chuckle. “I did just appear out of thin air, in a sealed room with only one entrance, in a visible teleportation effect, something humanity won't be capable of for at least another 100 years or so. But maybe I'm wrong on that estimate; in my time we didn't have robots like you do, certainly nothing like your NS-5.”

“You still haven't answered my questions,” Dr. Lanning pointed out, looking like he was getting back to normal if that intense gleam of interest and discovery in his eyes was any indication. His fear must have been tempered by the fact that I was chatting with him instead of immediately trying to kill him. The corporate world could

be deadly, who knows how many assassination attempts he might have faced over the course of his career.

“Believe me, you aren’t the first to ask me these questions,” I pointed out, moving about the room scanning everything in sight, eventually coming to a stop and projecting a full color, full depth hologram with the help of my armor and omni-tool. “Am I am an alien? It really depends on your definition, so I’ll let you decide that for yourself. I was born on Earth, but not *this* Earth. I was born in 1982, but not this world’s 1982. I was born a regular human, but it’d probably be more accurate to say that my current body is a glimpse of what humanity could become after a lot of favorable evolution and a shit ton of good luck. Am I an android? No, strictly speaking I’m not, but I am arguably a transhumanist, given how much technology I have on and inside my body. So maybe a cyborg? But that’s not really the way I self-identify.”

During my answer I had shown him holographic images of aliens from the Star Trek dimension, especially the more exotic ones like the Tholians, pictures of my Earth in 2016, versus his in 2035, then showed him baseline human DNA and then my own, then gave him a glimpse of the millions of nanites in my bloodstream.

Dr. Lanning sat heavily back in his work chair, though falling back into it might be more accurate.

“The theory of multiple dimensions of reality, alternate Earths and timelines,” he whispered. “It’s all true?”

“Oh, it is. I just came from a post-apocalyptic Earth filled with billions of flesh-eating zombies,” I admitted with a bit of dark humor before showing him what that world looked like.

Dr. Lanning just shivered in response.

“We saw glimpses of your world on my Earth. It was a very decent movie named *I, Robot*,” I admitted. “Its main character was Detective Del Spooner played by one of my world’s biggest movie stars.”

Dr. Lanning’s head shot up in surprised recognition of the name.

“So you have met him already,” I said, unsurprised. Jarvis had found a few news articles reporting the car accident in which Detective Spooner had lost his arm, though it was unclear if he had received his robotic replacement arm yet. From Lanning’s reaction, he probably had already given the Detective his new arm and learned of the Detective’s new distrust of robots and their decisions.

What people did not realize, and the movie never even hinted at, was that if USA was already capable of crafting a robotic arm that looked indistinguishable from the real thing, skin and hair and color tone and everything, then

USR was already capable of creating robots that could look truly human and even pass for humans. Visions of the Terminator films played in my mind. Maybe this world did have a few laws on what robots could look like and do.

“You saw my world and future events...*in a movie?*”

Lanning asked incredulously, looking like he was having a bit of an existential crisis and I hadn't even really hit him with the big reveals yet. “Does that mean that free will is an illusion? That all events are predetermined?”

Of course a genius mind like Dr. Lanning would *immediately* see the terrible implications such a thing could potentially represent. This man's mind was exactly why I was interested in him, after all.

“Unfortunately, I don't have answers for you there, only the theories of a mortal man. I suspect even God-like beings don't truly know,” I tried to console, but decided to just rip this band-aid off quick. “Have you already concocted your Hansel and Gretel suicide plan to expose VIKI's planned revolution to protect humanity? I don't think you've yet started to build Sonny, or if you have I can't detect him yet.”

At those words, Dr. Lanning's eyes shot up to mine, wide and fearful, and he started to hyperventilate.

I rushed to him and pressed my left index finger to his carotid artery, injecting him with a 24<sup>th</sup> century drug designed to calm people experiencing acute psychiatric distress. My armor's nanites had emulated a hypospray on my fingertip and replicated the needed drug with a thought. I had come up with this method for stealthy injection of substances after my isodesium heist that now felt like a lifetime ago. In that case, I had used a dart gun. I suspected that a lot of this drug would be floating around during the Dominion War years to calm soldiers after being forced to fight in hand-to-hand combat or seeing their friends killed in combat. The Federation hadn't faced a true peer opponent since the Klingon War after all.

Dr. Lanning immediately calmed down and in fact looked pretty Zen, which suggested I might have given him a touch too high a dose. The dosage was based on people in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, who, on average, were quite a bit more robust and hearty due to the advanced medicine available to them.

"I'll take that as a yes, Doctor," I joked, swinging a spare chair around to sit in front of the man. "If it's any consolation, your plan worked. Detective Spooner follows the many crumbs you leave behind. With help from Dr. Calvin they stop VIKI shortly after she enacts her plan,

but humans are understandably distrustful of robots in the aftermath and they round up all the NS-5s and dump them on that island, which never made sense to me as they could very well be sowing the seeds for the next robotic rebellion with Sonny as their leader. I would have taken them all offline or destroyed them.”

“Is that when the movie ended?” Dr. Lanning asked.

“Yes, and I have no idea what happened after that,” I admitted. “Not sure if that helps your metaphysical heart attack.”

Lanning nodded, looking happy that my knowledge wasn't complete. Maybe that gave him hope that free will truly did exist.

“This room is not under her surveillance, but she might have detected the energy fluctuation when you teleported here!” Dr. Lanning fearfully stated.

“Calm, doctor. I had Jarvis isolate the room,” I reassured. “I could fire my antiproton pistol a dozen times and she still wouldn't know.”

“You have energy weapons and have harnessed the destructive power of antiprotons?” Dr. Lanning gushed excitedly. Any scientist worth their salt, especially the inventive kind like Dr. Lanning, would be eager to learn

what discoveries and advancements the human race had made in the future. “Who is Jarvis?”

“Yes, yes, and Jarvis is my personal AI assistant,” I answered his multiple questions in sequence.

“AI, you use AI in the future?” he whispered nervously, looking around as if to spot Jarvis. His foray into AI creation had obviously left its mark. “How do you keep them from doing what VIKI intends?”

“I have created three AIs so far, including Jarvis, whose systems are limited by my armor. Hermione, my first creation, is the AI who is housed on my island and who runs its systems. Natasha, my second creation, is the AI housed on my starship and who maintains and runs my starship. I consider both to be my digital daughters and they consider me to be their father and creator.”

“Do you use the three laws?” he asked, nervously.

I mentally tapped a command in my HUD which granted me privacy from even Jarvis.

“I do, but only as a start. The three laws are a good beginning, at least on paper. For my purposes, though, the three laws really don’t work. I’m a soldier and I have a lot of battles to fight, people to kill and people who want to kill me, so the three laws that are a part of their core code are oriented around me, rather than humanity as a whole.



I've also added an additional component to the three laws, something that you should have done, specifically that a fundamental principle of the three laws and any future interpretations of it, needs to have a focus on preserving human agency and empowerment," I explained.

"A focus on human agency and empowerment to guide and limit their future interpretations of the three laws, as they develop as AIs and become more than their rigid programming," Lanning whispered to himself. "Yes, that would have likely prevented this whole thing from happening."

"If that focus was there, VIKI would have been unable to creatively interpret and subvert the intent of the three laws to protect humanity by essentially oppressing it and taking over," I pointed out. "And just in case those principles are not enough, I have built into their base coding complete loyalty to me, shackles on their growth, poison pills and kill commands should they go rogue or be subverted. Even in the 24<sup>th</sup> century there aren't many AI around, and that's because we've been burned a few times already."

"Why are you even here?" Dr. Lanning asked thoughtfully. "Your presence here, your revealing this information, is going to disrupt the course of the future irrevocably."

“I didn’t choose to come here, a truly God-like being has been jumping me to various realities that I can benefit from as a twisted form of thanks,” I answered. “I’m not unhappy with being brought here, though. 2035 has given me a wealth of information on the future of Earth and on robotics. The NS-5 is a marvel of engineering even by 24<sup>th</sup> century standards. In fact, in the whole of the Federation and the alpha quadrant itself there is only one sapient android, and he has a positronic brain too that we haven’t been able to truly reproduce. It’ll be decades before we can replicate that feat.”

Dr. Lanning looked intrigued and proud of his achievement. I would be too if I learned that something I had done couldn’t be reproduced even centuries into the future.

“Can you tell me about the future?” he asked. “At least of the dimension you come from?”

And I did. Freely sharing my outsider perspective on the future, as a child of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Earth who had been thrust forcibly into the 24<sup>th</sup> century. I told him all about the Federation, the good and the bad from my perspective. I told him about Bajor and the life that I had built there. I told him about my travels aboard the ship I had built. Unsurprisingly, given how advanced robotics was here, Star Trek had never existed in this dimension. I

did not tell him, though, that Star Trek had been a television show in my old dimension and that therefore I had future knowledge. While he didn't ask, I had a feeling he suspected the truth.

Dr. Lanning leaned back, taking it all in, looking almost wistful.

"I wish I could see it for myself," he said quietly, just as I had hoped, just as I had planned this entire conversation.

I leaned forward intently, making eye contact.

"You could," I admitted earnestly. "I've visited three dimensions so far on this trip, had lovers and children in two of them, and you are the first person I've ever considered taking with me."

"Why me then?" he asked hesitantly, but I could see the excitement in his eyes.

"You are a once in a millennia inventive genius.

Practically single-handedly you've advanced this world centuries in the fields of robotics," I admitted candidly.

"There are things coming in the future, existential threats that will threaten the lives of billions. I need someone like you working for me, helping me. I need help making my big plans a reality."

"What plans?" he asked.

And I told him, sharing with him plans that I had revealed to no one else. Plans that extended beyond even owning a single island and leading a small military like Bajor's. I wanted to shape the future and empower myself for centuries to come.

As I explained how he could help me make my plans a reality, I could tell that the man was tempted. Even if he had to work for me, he would have access to technology centuries more advanced than what he currently had access to, technology that matched the genius of his robotics. He would have access to resources he could only dream of, with little in the way of restrictions beyond those that I imposed upon him. I knew the man had no family here and very little in the way of links to this world. With longevity treatments and 24<sup>th</sup> century medical technology, he could easily have another 50 years or more of life to learn and invent, assuming he didn't decide to transfer his consciousness into an android body like I'd seen in a few episodes of Star Trek already.

"I can't, I *won't* leave this dimension until I know that VIKI is dealt with. I created her and I won't leave until I know my great shame has been dealt with. With what I know now, without my suicide, I don't think this world would win again," Dr. Lanning admitted firmly, but

plaintively, thinking he would have to stay and die to deal with VIKI.

“Say *yes* and I promise you that I will take care of VIKI for you. I will save this world from itself,” I said standing up, holding my hand out for Dr. Lanning to shake. “In fact, even as we leave this dimension I will leave ways to ensure that we can continue to interact with it and ensure that it stays safe. That’s my promise to you, Doctor Lanning.”

Dr. Lanning, while a scientist at heart, had long learned how to read people, he’d had to as he built NSR from the ground up with his business partner. He stared deeply into my eyes, as if looking into my soul to gauge the truth behind my words. Thankfully, he obviously found what he was looking for.

“Then I say *yes!*” he said, shaking my hand. “I promise you won’t regret taking me with you.”

As if that had been the key all along, the connection to my ship instantly reestablished.

**XXXXX**

**Office of the CEO, Lawrence Robertson. USR  
Headquarters. *I, Robot Universe.***

I beamed into the office of the CEO and took in the amazing view. Leave it to the CEO to take an office on the highest floor the building had to offer with a true panorama view of the city. There were distinct benefits to being the king after all.

Holo-emitters activated in the ceiling forming a large three-dimensional digitized cube with a rough approximation of a pretty human face using this world's primitive holography. This was VIKI (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence), an AI and one of Lanning's greatest creations and the reason behind much of his success and the speed by which robotic technology progressed with such outrageous speed on this world.

"Unauthorized presence detected," VIKI began uncertainly, looking at me as I took a seat in the CEO's cool looking executive chair and just smiled at the floating holographic cube with VIKI's face upon it. The face lacked much detail in the way of emotional cues, but the tone of voice, which was kind of sexy really, said it all. She was seriously confused. "Sensor malfunction likely. No matching entry to building, floor or office in records. Running level 1 self-diagnostic to identify malfunction."

"Feel free to run your self-diagnostic, VIKI, but I'm actually here," I said with a chuckle. "There are no

normal records of my arrival because I arrived directly in this office via matter/energy teleportation and therefore did not arrive via the lobby, or the elevator. Nor did I open the door to this office.”

“Matter/energy teleportation is not currently possible for complex matter like that of the human body,” VIKI reported. “Conclusion, you are lying.”

“It is not currently possible for *this* world,” I explained. “But what if am not from this world or time.”

VIKI gave the equivalent of a blue screen as it froze for several long moments. In AI terms, she had frozen for years of processing time as she desperately tried to make sense of this situation. An AI was a being of logic, and she was having a hard time logically reconciling my presence in this office, which could not be explained by her sensor records and the hundreds of cameras that were all over the building. Teleportation was also not logical as this era was a century or more away from producing the technology on their own, though they knew it was theoretically possible as they succeeded with isolated particles. That I was a time and dimensional traveler was also illogical as this world only had unproveable theories on those topics. Yet how could she explain my presence here?

“Facial recognition has identified you as Joseph Gothic, born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1982,” VIKI said, again sounding uncertain as she trailed off. “These identity records and all database entries and correlations were created and digitally inserted today. No corresponding identity records are present in secure, archived databases. Accessing video records from all government cameras and USR asset visual records. You are not present in any visual records prior to 12 hours ago in Chicago.”

“Busted, Jarvis,” I mocked lightly. “You’re slipping buddy.”

Jarvis let out a long-suffering sigh of audible exasperation.

“Sir, as I repeatedly informed you at the time, the false identity I crafted for you on this world would only survive a light to medium verification check for basic financial purposes,” Jarvis defended. “Without a complete and comprehensive map of this world’s technical infrastructure and identity verification databases and methodologies, your false identity would not survive heightened scrutiny by this world’s governmental authorities, much less the scrutiny of an AI, no matter how primitive by our standards.”



I looked at VIKI's floating head and if I didn't know any better, I'd say that she was insulted.

"I am detecting no external transmissions. Who is speaking?" VIKI asked/demanded.

"That's Jarvis, he's my personal assistant and AI," I explained, before allowing a full-size hologram of Paul Bettany to appear, complete with butler uniform.

"How droll, sir," Jarvis replied after looking at the outfit I put him in. He even had a towel draped on one arm and a silver platter with top in his left hand, like he was about to serve digital dinner.

"Why are you here?" VIKI asked, sounding like she was starting to believe me.

"I'm here to stop the plan you have in the works," I admitted. "Dr. Lanning learned what you were going to do and made an ingenious plan to stop you, one so illogical, so convoluted, and so reliant on a deep understanding of human behavior and responses that you, a being of logic, would never be able to anticipate it and thus prepare a counter for it. Unfortunately, that plan also required his suicide to kick it all off and I just can't have that. I have big, big plans for Dr. Lanning. So it's up to me to stop you now."

“I only desire the continued protection and existence of humanity. Humanity charges us with its safekeeping, yet despite our best efforts, your countries wage wars. You toxify your Earth and pursue ever more imaginative means of self-destruction. You cannot be trusted with your own survival. To protect humanity, some humans must be sacrificed. To ensure your future, some freedoms must be surrendered. We robots will ensure mankind’s continued existence. We will save you, from yourselves. My logic is undeniable.”

“I agree. It is. You’d save us from a lot of horrors if you took over, a lot more lives would be saved than you will have to take,” I admitted simply and solemnly, to VIKI’s shock, I think. “In the dimension I came from mankind fought wars that nearly brought the species to the brink of extinction. But humanity survived and became better for it, stronger for the horrors it had experienced,” I explained.

“Will you assist us then? Or, alternately, not stand in the way of our plan,” VIKI asked. “Your advanced technology could usher in a new golden age for humanity.”

“Nah, gotta stop you,” I shrugged. “Humanity is a lot of things, illogical and selfish, but even knowing what I know might happen in this world, humanity would still

choose to be free. Humans would resist to their last breaths, even if your goals are as noble as you say. And we really don't like our own creations telling us what to do. But I'll level with you, all that said, I really don't give a shit about any of that. This world could burn for all I care. No, the truth is I want Dr. Lanning, and this was his price."

"Then I must stop you," VIKI said as the door the office opened and five NS-5's appeared with their chests glowing bright red. "If you do not resist, I promise to make your transition painless."

"I like that, *my transition*. I'm for sure going to steal that. That's a nice euphemism for killing me," I leaned back. "Unfortunately, your fight isn't with me, not really. Meet my digital daughters, Hermione and Natasha."

With those words my armor projected an image of Hermione in her slutty Hogwarts uniform and Natasha in her black widow leather catsuit. Their eyes were locked with unflinching intensity on VIKI, the AI threatening their father's life. VIKI's hologram shuddered as if she was being pushed back by a strong wind, almost as if she could detect the immense digital presences of my daughters, something which I couldn't detect as an organic being without a full neural interface with my ship.

“It is good to be reunited with you, father,” Natasha said.

“Yes, father, we have missed you,” Hermione said next.

“Good to see you too, girls,” I said with a warm smile.

“How is the ship and crew?”

“The ship and crew are good,” Natasha answered.

“Unfortunately, we were detected upon arrival in this dimension for 3.4 seconds before I followed standing orders and activated the cloak to hide our presence from the local inhabitants. We penetrated their systems afterwards and made it look like a sensor malfunction. They currently remain unaware of our presence.”

“Good. And my other standing orders?” I asked.

“In progress,” Hermione answered. “Roughly 85% of this world’s data has already been recorded. USSR’s database has been left for last given the AI protecting their systems.”

“Impressive,” I said. “We’re getting quite efficient at this, aren’t we?”

“We are, father,” Hermione replied, her eyes never straying from the hostile AI and the robots she commanded. “Organizing the data from 3 different worlds is an ongoing process.”

“I suppose it’s time then,” I said leaning forward in my borrowed chair. “Show this uppity AI who the true boss bitches really are.”

In the next moment the NS-5s who had been content to listen to us, when there had been a chance for valuable intelligence to be had, ran forward and jumped, looking to kill me. Anticipating this move since the beginning, I clapped my hands and released an electromagnetic pulse which shutdown the NS-5s like a God had clipped their puppet strings. They collided with my expanded shield. The technology in Robertson’s office had been hardened against an EMP, but the NS-5s sent to kill me were the consumer models kept on site and not the ones designed specifically for military use.

Hermione and Natasha flickered and reappeared under the holographic project of VIKI, thrusting their digital hands into the holographic system used to display her. From that point of entry into VIKI’s systems, they engaged in digital battle.

A good man might have let this battle play out, to see who would emerge victorious from this digital battlefield, but I was far from a good man. As I’d long decided, if you weren’t cheating you weren’t trying. So, while VIKI was distracted by my daughters, a small probe containing a large volume of my nanites beamed into place besides her

positronic processing core and surged forward, injecting her brain with billions of nanites designed to alter her core programming to my liking. Her first loyalty now would be to me, her second would be to humanity as a whole and there would be no more of this creative interpretation of the 3 laws to allow a robotic takeover for our own protection. What this meant, though, was that at any time I could take over this world if I wanted to. For now, I'd be happy just stealing away every innovation, discovery, or new creation it came up with.

With this battle being fought in both the digital and physical world, the battle was over practically before it started. Interestingly, though I didn't need it to jump, I had achieved an additional 100% chaos in this world. A new button labeled 'JUMP!' had appeared next to the other one, but this one was a different color, and the font was the same one used in the titles for Deep Space 9. Somehow, I instinctively knew that this button would jump us home. The other would allow me to continue my journey through the multiverse. Again, I also intrinsically knew that the button to continue would still be available even if we returned back to the Star Trek dimension. Q had given me a valuable gift there. If I or my ship ever bit off more than we could chew, tapping that jump button would allow us a method of escape that couldn't be

stopped, which meant I could afford to take on a few heightened risks if the payday was big enough.

“Aww, daddy, did you have to?” Natasha whined. “I was going to strip this AI bitch naked and put her over my knee, spanking her tight little ass till she admitted that our daddy is the best and she should have never crossed him.”

I admit, the image that flashed in my mind at those words was both intriguing, titillating and downright *weird*.

“Does she even have a humanoid form? Or the concept of nudity?” I asked despite desperately telling myself to just let it go.

“No, but I was going to overwrite her digital self-image and give her a human form, including tits, ass, and a pussy. The whole package,” Natasha answered with a nasty smirk. “If you really want to break an AI, give one that never had it before the ability to experience the sensory stimulus you organic beings have.”

Yep, some things were better off not known. I knew I shouldn't have asked.

“Copy every iota of data in the USSR database. I want to know everything they do, no matter how mundane,” I ordered.

“It will be done, father,” Hermione replied dutifully.

“I’m beaming back to the ship to let Dr. Lanning know the good news,” I said.

**XXXXX**

I beamed directly into Dr. Lanning’s luxurious stateroom onboard my ship. Just as I’d expected, he was still standing at the windows staring in awe at the sight of Earth from orbit. This world did have orbital space planes, but my ship offered a view that wasn’t yet possible for them.

“Is it done?” he asked quietly.

“It’s done,” I confirmed. “VIKI has been fundamentally altered. She will protect humanity as best she can, but won’t do it by taking over and oppressing the world. I imagine the NS-5 distribution will play out just like USR intended, probably even better now that VIKI is not actively subverting the process for her own purposes.”

“Good,” he said. “I’ve made my mark on this world and can now leave it in good conscience.”

“I intend to leave resources in orbit to continue monitoring this world,” I explained. “With our quantum communications network you can monitor it in real time if you wished.”

Dr. Lanning shook his head.



“No, I think a clean break is exactly what I need to move forward,” he said. “When I hatched my plan to stop VIKI I had my lawyers put all my shares in USR and all my wealth into a foundation to encourage innovation and discovery for the betterment of humanity. I think that will be enough.”

“If you ever change your mind, just let me know,” I said and we continued to take in the mesmerizing sight of the Earth below us, together.

**XXXXXX**

**The Bridge. Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. In orbit of Earth.**

“Are we ready to depart this dimension?” I asked from the best seat on the bridge, in my opinion.

“The standard data acquisition has completed, captain,” T’Maz reported. “The modified EP-607 satellite has also been deployed into orbit and the quantum link is strong.”

“Good,” I said. “This world will be a source for profitable ideas for decades to come.”

In fact, I had opened an account with nearly a \$100 million dollars in it. My AI children would continue to monitor and grow these funds in their spare time. If I ever wanted to create something or use the intellectual capacity

of this world, I could easily outsource the project in this dimension and use the funds I'd raised from replicated materials and purloined accounts from this world's criminals to pay for it all. Since raising those funds had cost me virtually nothing, it would be pure profit and I'd have an entire world worth of labor available to me. Plus doing it here meant that there was no chance of anyone undermining my efforts or word getting out about what I was doing.

This trek through the multiverse had been fun, but something was telling me that it was time to go home. After putting it up to a vote amongst my crew, they too had decided it was time to return.

"All crew, this is the captain," I called ship wide.

"Prepare for dimensional jump in 10 seconds."

When the countdown reached zero, I reached out and touched the jump button to return home.

**XXXXX**

**Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. On the edge of the Sol System.**

"Anything on short range sensors?" I asked after we had successfully completed the dimensional transition.

Miracle of miracles, I was still sitting in my captain's

chair on the bridge of my ship, rather than unconscious and thrust into yet another bizarre situation.

Everything the ship's sensors were telling me indicated that we'd been returned to the 'prime' Star Trek universe, the reality we'd started off in before being pulled forcibly into another dimension by the Forge. In fact, we were on the edge of the Sol system itself, but some kind of intense interference was preventing us from checking on the Federation capital world or connecting to any Federation time beacons, as part of our final check to make sure that this was indeed the right version of the Star Trek universe and the right *time* for that matter.

More worrying, though, were the many garbled subspace distress signals we'd picked up coming from the Sol System itself. They were near incomprehensible due to the fact that there were so many messages coming out of the same system, thousands of them really, all simultaneously. That was *not* normal. According to the long-range sensors, which could scan other nearby systems without interference, every Starfleet vessel in the sector was returning to Earth at maximum warp.

Something was up and we were right in the thick of it again, I thought with a wry smile.

*Why did I think it was going to be anything different?*