

Strength from the Shadows

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Strength from the Shadows

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Summary

Stardate 4007.14: After a board of inquiry clears Commander Lilith Montgomery of wrongdoing, she is promoted to captain and assigned to the pre-commissioning crew of the USS *Musashi* as an intelligence liaison. Tasked with leading covert operations and managing sensitive intel, Montgomery must navigate a delicate power dynamic with the ship's commanding officer, Captain Leo Verde. Both skilled in the art of strategy, they begin to test the boundaries of trust and control. In the shadowy world of intelligence, the greatest challenge may be learning to work together.

Notes

Historian's Note: This story takes place the week after the events portrayed in "[The Razor's Edge](#)."

Sol III (Earth)

Starfleet Headquarters, Fort Baker, Sausalito

November 15, 2322 (Stardate 4007.14)

The Office of the Chief of Starfleet Intelligence

Commander Lilith Montgomery, OSI, inhaled deeply, steadying her nerves as she sat in the ante-office of Admiral Stulot, the Chief of Starfleet Intelligence. Her orders instructed her to report at 0810, but she had arrived a full twenty minutes early—better to be safe than risk even the smallest infraction of punctuality. Stories circulated about officers who dared maintain a casual relationship with time under Stulot's command, a Vulcan who measured every moment with precision and demanded the same from those serving beneath him.

Across the room, Lieutenant Commander T'Reth, another Vulcan officer, sat at the flag assistant's desk. Though Montgomery hadn't moved a muscle, T'Reth's occasional glances her way felt like a reminder that she was under close watch. It was an intentional, silent pressure, but Montgomery wasn't easily rattled.

If this was meant to unsettle her, she wasn't having it. Her hands came together in a deliberate gesture, fingers interlaced as she closed her eyes, centering herself in quiet meditation. Calm was her ally, and in this room, she would hold onto it.

"Commander," intoned T'Rath, her tone precise. Montgomery opened her eyes and looked up. "The admiral will see you now."

Montgomery rose with a quiet nod of acknowledgment, brushing invisible wrinkles from her uniform before stepping toward the large, imposing wooden doors. They slid open as she approached, and she crossed the threshold with steady purpose. The room was as austere as the man she was about to face.

Admiral Stulot, sitting behind an expansive desk, barely glanced up from the display in his hands. His focus remained on the device as if to remind her that time—even the seconds she waited—was never wasted in his presence.

"Commander Lilith Montgomery, reporting as ordered, sir." Her crisp Edinburgh accent lent formality to her words. Behind her, she sensed another presence, the faint rustle of movement from someone else in the room, but Montgomery stood at rigid attention. She wouldn't turn her head until dismissed from her stance—protocol was everything here.

Stulot's eyes remained fixed on the display in his hands, completely disregarding her presence. Instead, his gaze lifted toward someone seated

across from him. "The objectives are sound," he declared, his voice a low rumble. "Inform Rear Admiral Ciza that she may proceed with the operation."

Montgomery's mind briefly flickered to Ciza, the Saurian admiral she had worked with before. Starbase 10, the Rihannsu Neutral Zone—familiar territory. She entertained the thought of returning to that post, where her collaboration with Ciza had been both efficient and mutually beneficial.

"Commander, you may sit," Stulot said at last, placing the device face-down on the desk with measured precision. His tone, as usual, gave no room for interpretation.

Relieved of her rigid stance, Montgomery turned and acknowledged the two officers she hadn't yet seen—Vice Admiral Ch'zelles and Commodore Shi-Hadley. Both were familiar to her, though their presence now promised something weighty.

"Admiral, Commodore, it's good to see you again," she greeted them, professionalism etched in her tone.

The tall, wiry Andorian, Vice Admiral Ch'zelles, smirked. "Likewise, Commander," he replied, leaning back. "But let's see if you feel the same at the end of this meeting."

Montgomery's heart sank, a familiar weight settling in her chest. The atmosphere shifted, the pleasantries over. She redirected her focus to Stulot, feeling the room's temperature drop with the admiral's piercing glare.

"Indeed," Stulot began, his voice a calculated force. "I am gratified to learn that the board of inquiry has cleared you of any wrongdoing." Rising from his seat, he reached across the wide expanse of his desk, handing her a PADD with deliberate precision.

Montgomery accepted it, her right hand steady despite the growing tension in her gut. She flipped it over, quickly accessing the display. The first file in the directory loomed on the screen—an exhaustive report from the Starfleet Judge Advocate General's office. The weight of its contents sat heavy in her mind as she prepared to revisit the inquiry's findings.

Stulot's gaze didn't soften as he continued, "I believe you will appreciate our reluctance to assign you to further duties until this matter was officially resolved."

"Of course, sir," Montgomery responded, meeting his eyes as he resumed his seat. She kept her tone measured, the tension still simmering beneath her composed exterior. "I've been making myself useful here at headquarters in the meantime."

"Shuffling papers," Shi-Hadley interjected, her lightly accented Standard cutting through the air. The commodore's voice carried a hint of wry amusement. "Dreary work, but you handled it with aplomb, Commander."

Montgomery offered a slight nod in acknowledgment, resisting the urge to let the compliment feel like anything more than a temporary reprieve.

"Agreed," Stulot said, his tone unwavering. "Though, I caution you to remember the gravity of your decisions in the future. While the board cleared you, were it not for your talented legal counsel, the outcome could have been quite different."

Montgomery made a mental note to properly thank her JAG attorney, Lieutenant Michiko Isley, for guiding her through the inquiry. "Yes, sir," she replied, keeping her voice steady.

Stulot leaned forward slightly. "Your next assignment will test those lessons." He gestured to the PADD. "Access file Mike-Sierra-Three-Three-Four-Seven for your briefing."

Montgomery pressed her thumb to the biometric scanner, unlocking the file. As the text illuminated the screen, she skimmed through it, her brow furrowing. This was not what she had anticipated.

"Admiral," she said, her respectful tone barely concealing her surprise, "I expected to return to DS-Five, where I could continue managing operations."

Admiral Ch'zelles cut in before anyone else could respond. "Your role at DS-Five has already been taken by another officer. Someone who might be... less confrontational with the Kzin. Returning you there now would create political complications the Federation Diplomatic Corps would rather avoid."

The weight of his words lingered in the air before Stulot spoke again, his tone measured. "You've already proven yourself in that role. I have no doubt you will excel in this new assignment, Captain Montgomery."

Montgomery's attention snapped back to the PADD, but as soon as she heard the word "Captain," she paused, her eyes widening in surprise. "Captain?" she echoed, her tone a mix of shock and disbelief.

Stulot remained unfazed. "This billet requires a ranked captain. Once you finish your briefing, you will report to PCU *Musashi* with your promotion."

Montgomery cleared her throat, carefully choosing her words. "Erm, Admiral... I understand that these Matsumoto-class command cruisers have captains as OSI officers, but won't that pose a conflict with the ship's commanding officer? Will I be subordinate to Captain Verde's orders?"

Commodore Shi-Hadley stepped forward, taking a seat opposite Montgomery. "Yes and no," she replied evenly. "You'll serve as an intelligence liaison, strategic advisor, threat analyst, and more. Technically, you operate outside Captain Verde's direct chain of command, giving you the latitude to act on your own discretion when necessary."

Montgomery nodded, absorbing the information. "Understood, sir. And the 'no' side of that answer?"

Shi-Hadley met her gaze. "As with naval tradition, the ship's captain retains ultimate authority over all shipboard operations. In those situations, you may find yourself subject to his command."

Montgomery held her expression neutral, mentally preparing for the balancing act ahead.

"During your assignment, you may encounter missions that require shipboard personnel for execution," Stulot continued. "In those cases, you are authorized to marshal joint operations with *Musashi*'s crew if your staff lacks sufficient resources."

Ch'zelles leaned in slightly, adding, "Also, as an unrestricted line officer, you may be called upon to augment the crew in hazardous situations. We've had agents, like the one aboard the *Yukikaze*, step into departmental roles during crises."

Montgomery blinked, processing the scope of her duties. "So, in catastrophic circumstances, could I be required to assume command of the ship?"

Stulot's response was firm but measured. "In such an unlikely scenario, Captain, you will follow Starfleet regulations regarding seniority. Under normal operations, your role remains as an OSI field office, functioning in an advisory capacity to the ship's command team."

Montgomery absorbed the weight of the responsibility—balancing between autonomy and the ship's hierarchy was a fine line she'd have to navigate. She frowned, her thoughts racing. "Sirs, I have to admit this is a fascinating role. That said, I've always thrived in covert operations. Is there any possibility of a return to that field or an open position in that capacity?"

Shi-Hadley sighed, her expression softening slightly. "As we mentioned earlier, your recent... actions... have placed your covert career on hiatus, at least for the time being."

Montgomery's frown deepened, her past decisions casting a long shadow. "Commodore, if I may... I understand the political fallout regarding our border with the Kzin. But if there's another opportunity—perhaps at a different outpost or base? I wouldn't mind working under Admiral Ciza again."

Ch'zelles let out a quiet chuckle. "You'd like to return to Ciza's region?"

Montgomery nodded firmly. "Yes, sir. Admiral Ciza and I worked well together. I believe our professional relationship could lead to continued success."

Stulot, ever the pragmatist, cut in. "While Admiral Ciza did offer to create a billet for you at Starbase Ten, the current needs and my confidence in your abilities have made *Musashi* your next assignment."

The deflation in Montgomery's posture was subtle but unmistakable. "I understand, sir." She hesitated for a moment, then spoke up. "If I complete this assignment successfully... might there be an opportunity to return to covert operations?"

It was a faint hope, but one she wasn't willing to let go of just yet.

"Are you trying to broker some sort of *deal*, Captain?" Shi-Hadley asked, her tone sharp with icy disapproval. "This office isn't in the business of quid pro quo."

Ch'zelles raised a hand, his expression amused. "Hold on, Commodore. It's not the first time we've made accommodations."

Stulot remained silent, observing the exchange, his gaze fixed on Montgomery.

Shi-Hadley's lips thinned as she shot a glance at the Andorian admiral. "With respect, Admiral, I don't believe Captain Montgomery has the leverage to negotiate here."

"Leverage?" Ch'zelles countered, an eyebrow arched. "Her record speaks for itself. Shouldn't we be weighing her accomplishments rather than any perceived leverage?"

As Shi-Hadley prepared to respond, Stulot's deep voice cut through. "Regardless of that point of discussion," he said, turning to Montgomery. "You will have the opportunity for a favorable assignment—provided this one is completed to the satisfaction of all three flag officers in this office. Do we have an agreement?"

Montgomery straightened, her voice firm. "Yes, sir. I agree."

Ch'zelles smirked, the hint of satisfaction playing across his face. "Sounds like a deal to me, Commodore."

Shi-Hadley exhaled, her frustration barely masked. "So it would seem."

Stulot stood, signaling the end of the meeting. The others quickly followed suit out of respect for the admiral's authority. "Captain," Stulot began, "read through the briefing carefully. You are ordered to be ready for transport within seventy-two hours. Upon arrival at Utopia Planitia, report to PCU *Musashi* and make yourself known to Captain Verde—with my compliments."

"Aye, sir," Montgomery replied, her voice steady.

"Then you are dismissed."

Montgomery offered a respectful nod to each of the high-ranking officers before turning to leave the room, her mind already racing with the implications of her new assignment. The door slid shut behind her as she stepped into the corridor, the weight of the future pressing against her.

shoulders.

Shi-Hadley, watching her exit, glanced back at Stulot. "By your leave, Admiral?"

Stulot gave a silent nod, granting permission for the meeting between the three officers to conclude.



"Hold up, Captain!" Commodore Shi-Hadley called, quickening her pace to catch up with Montgomery. "Let me walk you out."

"Certainly, sir," Montgomery replied, falling into step beside her.

They approached the turbolift in silence, descending to the ground floor with the quiet weight of unsaid words between them. Once outside, under the warmth of the Californian sun, Shi-Hadley gently touched Montgomery's arm, guiding her towards a nearby bench shaded by tall trees.

Montgomery sat, glancing at the commodore with polite curiosity. "How may I help you, sir?" she asked, her tone pleasant, though she sensed there was more to this impromptu conversation.

Commodore Melissa Jian Shi-Hadley, OSI, reached into the inside pocket of her uniform and produced a small rank insignia. "First things first," she said, her tone softening. "I'm sorry we couldn't give you a full ceremony, but it's tradition to receive your rank from a fellow officer." She gestured to Montgomery's uniform, showing her intent to affix the new insignia.

Montgomery turned slightly, presenting her rank strap to Shi-Hadley. She felt the commodore's steady fingers remove the commander's device and replace it with the longer, more prestigious captain's insignia. Afterward, she glanced down at the new rank adorning her command white strap, a mixture of pride and gravity settling in.

"Thank you, sir," she said sincerely. "I'm honored."

Shi-Hadley gave a small, knowing smile. "I'm sure Admiral Ciza would've liked to pin these on you, but the needs of the service come first."

Montgomery grinned, her eyes glinting with confidence. "I'll make sure she gets the chance to pin the commodore's device on me."

"Ambitious," Shi-Hadley remarked softly, though not without a trace of approval. "And that's exactly what I wanted to discuss before you ship out." She gestured toward the bench, and they both took a seat.

Montgomery raised an eyebrow, her expression curious. Shi-Hadley met her gaze. "This assignment is more than just what you've read in the brief."

"With all due respect, sir," Montgomery replied, "I've been in intelligence my entire career. That much goes without saying."

Shi-Hadley smirked, conceding the point. "Fair enough. But even for you, this one has... complexities."

"Is it *this* captain I should be concerned with?" Montgomery asked, leaning forward slightly. "I noticed he was with JAG just before receiving this command. It's unusual to jump from a staff role to a line billet."

Shi-Hadley gave a slight nod. "You're not wrong. I'd recommend you familiarize yourself with Captain Verde's dossier and background. His career is... unique, and understanding it will help you navigate this assignment." She paused, then added, "But what's most important right now isn't Verde's history."

Montgomery's brow furrowed. "What do you mean, sir?"

Shi-Hadley's eyes narrowed slightly. "Earlier, you mentioned feeling more at home in covert operations."

"Yes, sir," Montgomery replied with a nod. "That's correct. If there's a chance I could—"

Shi-Hadley raised a hand, cutting her off. "Not going to happen. Sorry."

Montgomery sighed, the weight of reality settling in. "Worth a shot."

The commodore sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose as if to relieve an invisible weight. Dropping her hand, she met Montgomery's gaze. "Stulot meant what he said. You do this for us, and he'll move mountains to get you any role in OSI. He's Vulcan, so his lack of emotion might make it hard to see, but he's genuinely enthusiastic about talented officers."

Montgomery smirked slightly. "That's common with all the devotees of Surak."

"Quite," Shi-Hadley agreed. "But he genuinely believes your abilities are up to the challenge. He sees your time on *Musashi* as a stepping stone—one that could give you the rare opportunity to choose your own path in intelligence. Hell, by then, you might even eye my office."

Montgomery raised an eyebrow, sensing the weight of expectation behind the words. Then, she shook her head as the thought of working with admirals at Defense Intelligence holding no appeal. "I'm not interested with the internal political of OSI, sir. No offense."

"None taken," Shi-Hadley replied with a slight smile.

"And babysitting a JAG lawyer playing line officer for a few years? Not exactly my idea of a good time."

Shi-Hadley chuckled softly. "Read the brief when we're done. This isn't a babysitting job. Trust me."

Montgomery remained unconvinced, her tone skeptical. "Okay, sir." But she knew there was more to the assignment than the commodore was letting on.

"Look, your role on *Musashi* won't take you away from covert ops," Shi-Hadley explained, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. "In fact, you'll essentially be running a floating OSI station, just like the admiral said. You'll function in the same capacity as one of our sector or starbase offices. That means handling a wide range of intel missions—an incredible opportunity to use every skill you've honed."

Montgomery blinked, processing the scope of the assignment. "Well..." she started, drawing out the word thoughtfully. "Sounds like I'm being groomed."

Shi-Hadley nodded. "You are. And even though the board of inquiry cleared you, you know how things work in Starfleet. A whiff of impropriety, and you're radioactive to any command. Even Ciza's generosity would have cost her some political capital."

She reached out, briefly touching Montgomery's arm. "This is the perfect opportunity for you. It'll rehabilitate your career, give you the experience you need, and set you on a path to flag rank."

The weight of the words settled over Montgomery, the path ahead both promising and fraught with responsibility.

"Flag rank?" Montgomery echoed, her gaze drifting away from the commodore. "I was joking earlier. After the board of inquiry, I thought I'd be stuck as a permanent commander."

"I can understand that," Shi-Hadley replied, her smile understanding, almost serene. "But you've always had a knack for seeing the bigger picture, especially at DS-Five. Now, I need you to channel those skills toward the future of OSI."

Montgomery's attention returned to Shi-Hadley as she continued. "At some point, Stulot will move into Command. Maybe start as Vice Chief of Starfleet Operations, but it's inevitable."

The implication hung in the air, shifting Montgomery's perspective.

"I see." Montgomery mulled over the possibilities, her mind swiftly piecing together a hypothetical future. "That would move Ch'zelles to OSI Chief, and you'd likely become a section chief as a rear admiral." She continued thinking aloud, her voice gaining momentum as her options unfolded. "So, I could reach commodore in three or four years, depending. That might put me in position to lead spec—"

Shi-Hadley cut her off, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. "Yes. That's what being groomed means, Captain Montgomery."

The realization settled in, and Montgomery understood the path ahead was far more intricate—and ambitious—than she'd first imagined.



"Ah, *te voilà, ma chérie*," Maureen Montgomery's familiar Gascon accent greeted her daughter as Lilith stepped through the door to their home in Edinburgh.

Lilith smiled warmly, slipping off her uniform jacket and hanging it neatly in the foyer closet. "*Merci, Maman*," she replied. Down to her white turtleneck, she moved further into the house, following the scent of lavender to the family room, where her mother sat reading.

Maureen glanced up from her book, her eyes lighting up. "How was the weather in San Francisco?"

"Beautiful," Lilith said, settling into the overstuffed armchair her father usually occupied. "Warm, sunny... You'd have loved it. I'm surprised you're in here—I thought you'd be in your greenhouse." Since retiring, Maureen had fully embraced her passion for gardening, with an ever-growing collection of plants. Lately, she'd been utterly captivated by different varieties of lavender, always experimenting with new cultivars and scents.

Her mother gave a light wave. "Oh, I've already had my fill of sunshine in the greenhouse this morning. Needed a break to finish reading my new novel." She leaned forward, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. "But enough about me—what did the admiral have to say?"

Lilith recounted the day's events, detailing the meeting and her conversation with Shi-Hadley afterward. "So, I'm shipping out for Mars the day after tomorrow," she finished.

Maureen's face lit up with a wide grin. "*Félicitations, ma chérie*! This calls for a celebration, *non*?" She rose from the couch, setting her book aside, and pulled Lilith into a tight embrace. "I can't wait for your *père* to get home—he'll want to parade you around the city, showing you off to everyone!"

Lilith's cheeks flushed under her mother's affectionate gaze, already imagining her father's pride when he heard the news. She could practically predict their celebratory dinner at *The Witchery*, his favorite spot in Edinburgh for such occasions. Holding her mother close, she whispered, "I wouldn't have made it this far without you both."

"*Non*," Maureen said firmly, pulling back just enough to meet her daughter's eyes. "This is *your* hard work. Don't diminish that. We are proud—*so* proud of you. Understand?"

Lilith nodded silently, sinking back into her mother's embrace. The love of her parents enveloped her, a constant she cherished more than words could express. In the warmth of their home, Lilith felt an unparalleled sense of safety unlike anywhere else in the galaxy. She didn't have to pretend or wear a mask.

It was the only place she could fully let down her guard and simply be herself.



Captain Lilith Montgomery settled into her seat aboard the transport shuttle, her eyes quickly scanning the growing crowd of passengers still boarding. The steady hum of activity filled the cabin as crew and civilians alike filed in, finding their places for the routine flight between Spacedock and Mars. She adjusted her restraints methodically, the familiar snap of the buckles bringing her mind into focus. Soon, the last passenger would settle in, and the pilot team would announce readiness for launch.

Everything felt poised on the edge of departure, but there was a different weight to this journey.

Two full days at home had done wonders to replenish her spirit, wrapped in the warmth of her family's love, as her father, Chief Petty Officer Douglas "Wee Dougie" Montgomery (ret), often said. "Carry their love with you to the stars, lass," he'd remind her, just as he used to say before his own deployments. As a child, Lilith had never quite understood what he meant, not until she became a young reserve ensign herself, heading out on her first assignment.

Now, as a captain, she felt the ache more acutely, wishing she'd had two full months to bask in the serenity of her parents' retired life. Her mother's greenhouse filled the air with the scent of herbs and flowers, and her father's studio housed four towering display cases of model ships he'd painstakingly built (a few of them with Lilith's help). The thought of those quiet moments filled her heart even as the shuttle prepared to carry her away from that peaceful life, back into the vast unknown.

The shuttle ride, cruising at full impulse power, took about ninety minutes with Earth and Mars in their current orbital alignment. Captain Montgomery used the time efficiently, skimming through the latest updates from her staff. Her yeoman, Chief Soli, had already reported aboard the *Musashi* the day after she'd received her orders from Admiral Stulot. Commodore Shi-Hadley, it seemed, had known about the assignment well in advance and made sure Soli was briefed to evaluate the ship and oversee the necessary modifications under OSI protocols.

Soli's report detailed how the engineering teams from the local OSI detachment had arrived later that same evening, immediately setting to work. The intelligence compartment was being set up on deck six, directly across from the combat and information center. Out of respect for her rank, the ship's commanding officer had arranged for her stateroom in the VIP area. Soli mentioned that the intelligence-level security systems were being installed and expected full completion within two days. In the meantime, he was keeping a close watch on progress, stepping in when necessary to ensure everything met OSI standards.

Montgomery felt a sense of relief as she replied to Soli with her thanks. His reputation within OSI had long preceded him, and the fact that Shi-Hadley had personally ensured his transfer to her command indicated she had backing at the highest levels. A quick note of gratitude to the commodore followed, thanking her for the foresight in securing such talented staff for what would undoubtedly be a demanding, long-term assignment.

In addition to Chief Soli, Montgomery's deputy had already reported aboard: Lieutenant Commander Shov Th'chilliq, a former colleague from her time on the Constitution-refit starship *USS Lexington*. Shov, an Andorian, had started his career under her supervision as an ensign fresh out of the Academy. Their partnership had proven to be highly effective, and she looked forward to picking up where they had left off. Another key member of her team was Lieutenant (jg) Sophia Levasseur, a sharp-minded Quebecois intelligence analyst with two letters of commendation from her time on Deep Space 3, near Breen territory. Hisoma's intuition and analytical prowess made her invaluable in their upcoming missions.

Her senior enlisted team included another trusted figure: Chief Petty Officer Karav, a seasoned Tellarite intelligence specialist. Like Soli, Karav had arrived early to begin setting up the office, ensuring all the necessary groundwork was laid. Karav's team of junior non-commissioned officers rounded out her unit, with acknowledged experts in signals intelligence, data systems, logistics, and cryptography all working to establish operational readiness.

Altogether, the Office of Starfleet Intelligence had assigned Montgomery a team of eight. This capable staff would help her manage the complex web of intelligence matters she was expected to handle aboard *Musashi*, keeping her ahead of the curve in any mission they would undertake.

By the time the shuttle reached the primary spaceport in Mars orbit, Montgomery had caught up on all her correspondence and sent a quick note to Soli, informing him of her imminent arrival. The process of transferring to the Starfleet side for transport to Utopia Planitia was a familiar one but still involved several layers of security. She flashed her OSI badge five times just to gain access, navigating checkpoints and corridors with practiced ease. Twice more, she presented her credentials upon reaching the main facility, before stepping aboard shuttle *Sassen*, bound for Construction Yard Eleven.

As the shuttle cruised towards the pre-commissioned *Musashi*, Montgomery felt the anticipation building. This was no routine transfer; this was the start of a new chapter, and the sight of the massive ship's flight deck coming into view filled her with a sense of purpose.



Lieutenant Commander Th'chilliq and Chief Soli stood at attention the moment the shuttle *Sassen* touched down on the flight deck. As the

starboard-side hatch hissed open, Captain Montgomery descended with her usual composed stride.

Without breaking step, Montgomery approached both officers, her sharp gaze taking in their professional stances. "Lieutenant Commander. Chief," she greeted, acknowledging the familiar faces of her staff with a subtle nod.

Th'chilliq, his violet eyes focused and assessing, gave her a respectful nod. "Welcome aboard, Captain," he said, his smooth tone carrying a familiar weight. There was no need for formalities between them—they had long established a mutual respect, and the unspoken understanding between them felt as steady as ever.

"Thank you, Shov," she replied, a genuine warmth in her voice. "Good to see you again."

"And you, sir." Th'chilliq allowed the faintest hint of a smile to touch his lips. "I'm pleased you accepted my request to join your staff on this assignment."

Montgomery met his gaze, her tone appreciative yet discreet. "I would've brought you with me to DS-Five, but they told me you were unavailable." She kept the words deliberately vague, mindful of the highly-classified nature of his work during those years. "I'm glad it worked out this time," she added, the weight of her sincerity clear between them.

"As am I," Th'chilliq agreed before gesturing to the impeccably composed Bolian beside him. "May I introduce Chief Soli, your yeoman?"

Soli, standing tall with the calm precision expected of his reputation, wore the circular insignia of a Chief Petty Officer. His dark eyes, sharp and assessing, met Montgomery's as she stepped forward.

"Chief, thank you very much for your detailed updates this week," she said in greeting, her tone warm but professional.

Soli nodded crisply. "Of course, Captain. It's all part of the service."

Montgomery extended her hand. "Well, your service to OSI is renowned and highly regarded," she added, her voice carrying genuine respect. "I'm in your care, from here on out."

Soli grasped her hand firmly, his expression unflinching. "You'll have nothing less than the best, Captain."

She grinned. "I have no doubt." Gesturing toward the luggage offloaded from the shuttle, she asked, "Are my quarters ready by chance?"

Without missing a beat, Soli snapped his fingers, and two crewman apprentices rushed forward to collect the bags, each efficiently carrying half. "We've arranged temporary quarters on deck three, sir. I've been assured your stateroom will be ready by tomorrow morning," Soli promised, his tone precise. "If you'll follow me, Captain, I'll take you there now."

As the group of five made their way toward the exit, Th'chilliq interjected with a knowing glance. "Captain Verde requested to see you at your convenience."

Montgomery raised an eyebrow. "He said 'convenience'?"

The Andorian gave a lopsided smile. "He's... an *interesting* officer."

"Hmm." She returned the grin, the familiarity between them clear. "Sounds like a conversation we should have somewhere a bit more private."

"Yes, sir," Th'chilliq replied smoothly.

Montgomery shifted her attention. "Where are the rest of you staying?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I've placed the commander in the senior officers' section on deck five," Soli responded promptly, his baritone voice steady and measured. "Chief Karav and I are in the senior NCO quarters on deck ten, along with our junior NCOs."

Montgomery thought for a moment, recalling the deck diagrams she'd studied of the *Musashi*. "Not to question your judgment, Chief, but are you satisfied with their distance from our office in case of emergencies?"

Soli shook his head without hesitation. "I am not," he confirmed with a hint of frustration in his otherwise controlled tone. "However, for now, it's a temporary solution. I'm working on securing a more suitable compartment closer to deck six."

Montgomery gave a thoughtful nod, reassured by his attention to detail. "I leave it in your hands, Chief," she said as they stepped into the lift. Then a thought crossed her mind. "Actually, would you mind taking my luggage? I think I'll go introduce myself to Captain Verde now."

"Absolutely, Captain," Soli replied without missing a beat. "Computer, add a stop for deck one."

As the ship's computer replied with its acknowledgment, Th'chilliq glanced at her. "Shall I join you, sir?" he asked, his tone offering support.

Montgomery smiled, a quiet confidence behind her words. "Not necessary," she assured him as the lift slowed to stop on deck three, allowing the others to exit. "I'll go up, kiss the ring, and we'll compare notes when I get back."

Th'chilliq returned her smile with a nod, the easy camaraderie between them evident. "Good luck, sir."

Montgomery gave a small wave as the lift doors closed, feeling ready for whatever awaited her on deck one.



The lift doors parted with a soft hiss, revealing the main bridge of the *Musashi*. Montgomery stepped out, her boots making a measured rhythm against the polished floor. Under normal circumstances, a captain's arrival would warrant an acknowledgment, but with the ship still in the final stages of construction, the pre-commissioning crew—yard birds and Starfleet engineers alike—remained focused on their work. No one looked up from their tasks as *Musashi* edged toward her completion date of December 30th.

The bridge was a mix of near-finished elegance and scattered functionality. Open panels marred what would soon be the sleek lines of the ship's command center, wires hanging loose and consoles flickering erratically as final systems came online. Montgomery made her way forward, stepping around the railing that separated the outer stations from the heart of the bridge.

The bridge module here was unique—a layout designed for command cruisers like *Musashi*, with five central seats instead of the usual three. The captain's chair, larger and more imposing, sat at the center, flanked by two smaller stations for key bridge officers. Forward of them, helm and operations stations commanded a view of the ship's expansive viewscreen.

Montgomery's role wouldn't place her here during combat; six decks below in the Combat Information Center (CIC) would be her domain. Still, she couldn't help but appreciate the bridge's design. They had placed a spare station off to the side—perhaps, if circumstances allowed, they could grant her the privilege of working from here when necessary.

For now, meeting the ship's commander was her priority.

Montgomery came to a stop before the door to the captain's ready room, on the starboard forward side of the bridge, just past the environmental status display. She took a steadying breath, her fingers hesitating before she pressed the chime with purpose. The quiet hum of the ship's unfinished systems filled the pause until a deep baritone voice from inside broke the silence.

"Enter."

Without hesitation, she straightened her posture and stepped forward, ready to make her introduction to Captain Leo Verde.

She passed through the hatch and stepped into a well-appointed office, fitting for the captain of a ship like *Musashi*. Though the vessel had yet to be fully commissioned, the personal touches were already evident—particularly along the far bulkhead, where an impressive "love me" wall showcased Captain Leo Verde's many accolades. Commendations, awards, and certificates adorned the space, a testament to his decorated career.

Montgomery's curiosity flickered, drawn to the display for a moment. But discipline won out, and she kept her focus on the man seated behind the desk. With a professional yet warm smile, she spoke, "Captain Lilith Montgomery, sir. A pleasure to meet you."

Captain Verde set down a steaming mug and rose to his feet, his own smile easily meeting hers. As he extended his hand in greeting, Montgomery couldn't help but notice the intensity of his heterochromatic eyes—one green, one brown—giving his gaze an unsettling, almost penetrating quality that seemed to reach beyond surface pleasantries.

The dichotomy of his commanding presence and unassuming nature took her slightly aback, though she masked her visceral reaction behind a practiced, professional smile.

"Ah, my very own spook," Verde quipped, his tone light but carrying a sharp edge of humor. "Forgive me, but I was only just informed of your arrival. I trust you've had time to settle in before coming up here to genuflect?"

Montgomery chuckled, matching his tone as she accepted his handshake, firm and assured. "Not quite. My deputy informed me you made a request, not an order. And since my quarters aren't ready yet, I thought there was no more convenient time than now to pay my respects, Captain."

Verde's grin widened, his eyes glinting with approval. "Efficient. I like that. And, please, call me Leo," he replied, waving off formality with a casual flick of his hand. He gestured toward the open seat nearest him and settled back into his own chair. "And my apologies for the delay with your stateroom. SupShip assured me we'd arranged for you to stay on deck three tonight. I hope you don't mind roughing it for one more evening."

Montgomery blinked, taken aback by how naturally his disarming nature contrasted with the commanding presence she'd expected. She had read his biography and psychological profile, but meeting the man in person was proving to be a different experience altogether. "Erm... it's actually my fault, Leo. OSI has certain protocols when it comes to offices and quarters. I'm fairly certain my yeoman's demands have caused the delay."

Leo's eyes twinkled with understanding as he leaned forward slightly. "Yeomen are known to have that effect. But we're more than happy to accommodate you and your team."

Montgomery relaxed slightly, appreciating his easy demeanor. "Thank you. Chief Soli's high standards raise the bar for even the most efficient yeoman."

Leo chuckled. "I don't know. I've known some JAG yeomen who might give Chief Soli a run for his money."

"Yes, of course," she replied, picking up on his mention of JAG. "I read you transferred from the JAG Corps. Must be quite the change for you."

Leo smirked, leaning back in his chair. "Ah, I see we've moved subtly into the interrogation portion of our meeting." He held up a hand, forestalling any protest. "But before we dive into that, I need to play the good host. May I offer you something to drink or snack on? My chief steward recently came aboard, and he's every bit the consummate professional."

"I prefer a blend of Earl Grey and lavender," Montgomery admitted, her voice calm but deliberate.

"Coming right up," Leo promised. He tapped open a comm channel and relayed the order to a man named Brodd before quickly closing it. Turning his attention back to her, he leaned forward with a knowing smile. "So, you were asking about my decision to leave JAG?"

Montgomery pressed her lips together briefly, exhaling with a soft sigh. "You read people well, Leo."

"Occupational hazard. Leading questions are second nature to any attorney," Leo said casually, his tone warm, letting her know he took no offense. "I'm happy to answer whatever you need to know. The only way this works is if we build trust. Even though..."

As he trailed off, curiosity got the better of her. "Even though what?"

"Well... OSI has a well-earned reputation in Starfleet," he admitted with a slight smirk.

Montgomery mirrored his expression, finding herself unexpectedly liking the man. "Fair point. I'll admit, this is my first time leading an office afloat. However—"

"You're exceptionally good at what you do, and you come highly recommended by multiple flag officers who are basically family," Leo cut in with a knowing smile. "And between you, me, and this bulkhead... if I'd been on that board of inquiry, I would've voted to clear you, too."

Surprised, she let her amazement show for just a moment before her smile returned. "You're remarkably well-informed."

He shrugged lightly. "Just as you've studied me, I've studied you as well." Raising his mug in a casual salute, he took another sip before continuing. "And having another captain aboard, especially one with the full power and authority of OSI... well, I thought it only prudent to know exactly who I'd be working with."

As Leo wrapped up his words, the door swished open to reveal a Bolian master chief in the crisp uniform of a steward, his sky-blue tabs marking his expertise. Without a word, he approached with smooth efficiency, setting down a tray laden with a pot of dark tea, two mugs, and a selection of carefully chosen snacks.

Montgomery's attention was immediately drawn to the assortment. Each item spoke of her homeland, a thoughtful touch that deepened her appreciation for the precision of Starfleet's stewards. "Thank you, Master Chief," she said, her tone warm and genuine.

The steward's smile was polite but sincere. "Please, Captain, it's just Brodd. This assortment was prepared to welcome you aboard, sir." His gaze flicked to Leo, a silent query for any further needs.

Leo gave a slight nod and raised his hand in a casual gesture. "We're all good, Brodd, thank you."

Brodd inclined his head with measured grace, his eyes closing briefly in acknowledgment before he exited as efficiently as he had arrived.

As Leo poured her a mug of tea, Montgomery's carefully maintained composure slipped for a moment, her eyes widening in surprise. "Are those Dundee cakes?" she asked, a note of astonishment in her voice.

"Help yourself," Leo replied easily, his tone light. "I'm sure Brodd chose them to complement your tea blend."

She exhaled softly, a mix of gratitude and unexpected emotion filling her chest. "It's an exceptionally thoughtful gesture," she murmured, her fingers brushing the edge of the tray as though savoring the care put into its preparation.

"We aim to please here on the cruise ship *Musashi*," Leo quipped, his tone light, yet teasing. "How's the tea?"

Momentarily distracted by the cakes, Montgomery lifted her mug and took a tentative sip. The warmth of the Earl Grey melded with the delicate floral notes of lavender, gently awakening her senses. A genuine smile crossed her face as she judged, "This is perfect."

She followed the sip with a bite of the Dundee cake, closing her eyes as a low moan of satisfaction escaped her lips. "Absolutely divine," she added, savoring the blend of flavors that transported her, just for a moment, back home.

"I'll make sure Brodd shares his recipe," Leo promised with a grin. "That way, you can call it up on your personal replicator or have the stewards whip it up for you in the wardroom."

Montgomery nodded appreciatively. "I might just take you up on that. It's a taste of home I wasn't expecting out here." She noticed Leo's grin widen, and to her mild annoyance, she realized he was pleased with her slip in composure.

She quickly corrected her expression, returning to her professional mask as she cleared her throat to cover the brief discomfort. "You were telling me about JAG?" she prompted, steering the conversation back to safer ground.

Leo chuckled softly. "How much did you read about my last JAG field assignment aboard *Reykjavik*, *Gol*, and *Repulse*?"

During her time at home, she did recall skimming through the abridged reports. Montgomery recited nearly from memory, though with an air of flippancy, "You and your team diverted to Commodore Trujillo's task force regarding Repulse's unsanctioned activities beyond the Gorn territorial border. You led the investigation into Captain Keller's actions, arrested him, and somehow ended up in command of the ship when the computer went crazy on you?"

Leo's initial smirk told her he recognized the playful jab in her tone, but as she continued, his expression shifted. She could see the amusement drain from his face, his eyes narrowing as if weighing her words more seriously than before. The change was subtle but unmistakable—his posture stiffened slightly, and his jaw tensed. The lightness in the room dimmed, and she felt the undercurrent of his professionalism reassert itself as he responded, "The computer didn't 'go crazy,'" he said, his voice measured but firm. "The ship's prefix code was compromised. Whoever held control sent us back into Gorn space at high warp, likely to continue the illegal activities. I assumed command under regulations, as the senior line officer on deck."

Montgomery had known exactly what had happened, but she had chosen to feign ignorance, hoping her flippant remark might unsettle him, perhaps loosen the dynamic between them. Instead, his subtle but pointed reaction made her feel uncomfortably exposed, as if she'd overplayed her hand. The sharpness in his tone left no room for the casualness she'd intended. The apology slipped out before she could catch it, automatic and instinctual. "I apologize," she said, her voice softer. "I didn't mean to imply-"

Leo cut her off with a wave of his hand, his expression easing back into something more neutral. "It's all right. We're just getting to know each other."

"I appreciate that, but..." Montgomery hesitated, feeling uncharacteristically awkward. "Erm, in my line of work, it's natural to use certain tactics to get information." As she spoke, she realized how effortlessly Leo shifted between commanding presence and disarming charm, leaving her off balance. She realized, contrary to her initial assumptions, he wasn't the novice to command she had expected. It was she who was being kept on her toes.

She quickly grasped the power of a skilled attorney in command. Leo's sharp observational skills and his ability to see through her professional facade were both impressive and unsettling. Mentally, she noted to review his history in court-martial cases. "I shouldn't have assumed anything," she admitted.

"No, you shouldn't," he replied, his tone neutral. Then, he smiled, diffusing the tension. "But as I said earlier, I believe for this partnership to work, we need open communication. Otherwise, we're just at odds, and I don't think that's what OSI had in mind when they sent you here."

Montgomery sighed, placing her mug down gently on his desk. "You're right, Leo. One hundred percent." She leaned back, gesturing with both hands, trying to bridge the gap between them. "I want to meet those expectations, and I will."

"As do I," he replied, his eyes locking onto hers with the same intensity she had felt from Admiral Stulot. The weight of his gaze made her sit up straighter. Then, just as quickly, his smile returned, disarming her once again. "Let's start over. How would you like to run things?"

Montgomery considered his question carefully, knowing she needed to approach this partnership with tact. She couldn't afford to seem inflexible, nor could she present herself as someone easily swayed. "Well, Captain... *Leo*," she began, correcting herself as she adjusted to his preference for informality. "I believe in clear, structured operations, where everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. My team will operate independently but remain tightly integrated with ship's command when necessary. We'll focus on delivering intelligence that's not only relevant but actionable."

She paused, measuring his reaction, before continuing. "I prefer efficiency, but I don't micromanage. I expect trust—both ways. You'll find that I value precision, and I'll work hard to ensure you have everything you need without stepping on toes."

Montgomery allowed a small, thoughtful smile to appear. "That said, my door's always open, and I expect we'll have frequent conversations. Open communication, as you've already suggested, is key." Her posture remained composed, but her tone softened ever so slightly. "I'm here to serve the mission, just like everyone else."

Leo took a measured sip from his mug as she outlined her approach, his eyes locked on her the entire time. When she finished, he gave a slow, approving nod. "I couldn't agree more," he began, his voice steady. "I know you'll have access to intel above my clearance level. There will be things you know I won't." His gaze didn't waver, the weight of his words settling between them.

"But trust," he continued, leaning forward just slightly, "is something I'll be relying on. Trust that you won't leave me hanging when it counts. That you'll bring me into the loop when my ship or her crew might be at risk." His tone was calm, but the meaning behind it was clear. He wouldn't allow for any ambiguity when it came to the safety of his people.

She affirmed vehemently, "I promise, here and now, that I will never withhold information vital to the ship's safety. On my word as a Starfleet officer."

"That, Captain, is exactly what I needed to hear," Leo said, his smile widening—a smile she recognized instantly, the kind an attorney gives when they've secured the verdict they wanted. "Now, let's get into the specifics." His tone shifted to one of business, as he leaned in slightly. "I understand you and your team will likely be managing covert operations from time to time. Let's establish the procedures and expectations upfront. I want to make sure we're ready to provide any resources you might need, whenever you need them."

Heat crept onto Montgomery's cheeks as the realization hit—Leo had expertly maneuvered her. A faint smile ghosted across her lips, amusement flickering at the edges of her composure. Acknowledging his skill, she allowed her mask to slip, offering him a genuine smile for the first time. In that moment, she understood precisely why Admiral Saavik promoted him to command.

For the first time in a long while, she found herself undeniably intrigued.

"Of course," she said, her tone lighter now. "But before we venture too far down that rabbit hole, I wonder if you might do me a favor?"

Leo leaned forward, his hands clasped on the desk, curiosity clear in his eyes. "What is it?"

Montgomery reached across the table, her fingers closing around his in a gesture that bridged the gap between command and trust. Her smile deepened as she said,

"Please, call me Monty."

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