

# Dark Territory

## Movements in Light and Shadow

By DarkKush

### Dark Deeds

**Verex III**  
**May 2376**

"I don't enjoy lying to my son," Samson Glover grouched, a cross expression twisting his normally gentle face.

"We all do things that are uncomfortable at times," Garth Logan replied, wincing at the sharpness of his tone. "It's the price of duty," he added quickly, with far less bite. He reached out a hand and squeezed Glover's shoulder. "I...President Santiago wouldn't ask you to do this unless the security of the Federation was at stake."

"Are you sure it's the security of the Federation, or Santiago's reelection prospects that are more in peril?" Adm. Thuosana Shanthi spoke up. The prim admiral had silently watched the exchange between her old friend and Logan, Santiago's chief of staff. Though both she and Glover had signed on to the plan hatched by Logan and the Federation Security Advisor Hetal'laal'ak which resulted in Samson 'resigning' as head of Starfleet Security and her own 'reassignment' to Starfleet Administration, Shanthi was still concerned about the legality, but more so the decency of what she had agreed to do. She also didn't like keeping her husband Dotsavi or her son Kuenre similarly in the dark. Thuosana was beginning to wonder if she was getting too old for the skullduggery she had once relished. It was clear to her that Samson had. Glover had appeared to visibly age in the few days it had taken him to travel from visiting the military stockade at Jaros II to see his son Terrence and inform him of the destruction of the *Aegis* at the hands of Cardassian militants.

Shanthi felt largely responsible for the loss of the ship and seventy-five of its crew. It had been her stubbornness that had shortchanged the *Aegis* from having its most senior officers at the helm during the mission to capture Gul Javin En'Roel, the leader of the Crimson Shadow terrorist faction. And she was also responsible for placing Commander Jeffrey Thorpe in charge, more concerned with his willingness to stay within the box than perhaps his readiness to command.

Though she had shared her concerns or guilt with no one, and had praised Thorpe's quick response to the disaster, Shanthi couldn't help wondering if the whole tragedy could've been averted if Terrence had been in command. Captain Glover had been instrumental in dismantling the True Way, another Cardassian terrorist sect, mere weeks before the *Aegis* was destroyed.

Terrence hadn't been really been the locus of her wrath; it had been his Executive Officer, Lt. Comm. Ivan Cherenkov, a former member of Starfleet Special Missions, who had showed the same reckless disregard in helping shutdown the True Way that he had on Kespyrtt III several years ago, a near disaster that had almost cost her career and blackened the reputation of the Federation.

Shanthi couldn't help but chuckle now at her old self-righteousness. If she failed in her current mission, the damage done to the reputation of the Federation would make the Kespyrtt snafu appear as harmless as a jaunt to Risa.

Logan regarded her. "Care to let us in on the joke Admiral?" He asked, his voice light with a mirth not matched by his eyes. Immediately, her familiar, comfortable reserve cloaked her black humor and unease.

"Idle thoughts," she said tightly. "Nothing more." The man nodded in response, though Shanthi knew he didn't believe her.

The chief of staff was a blandly handsome man, with a mop of thick, curly dark brown hair. He was almost a totally innocuous sort, almost forgettable except for his eyes. The pale blue orbs that revealed everything Shanthi needed to know about him. His insistent, predatory gaze unnerved her.

Both she and Samson had used their resources to check into the mysterious Logan's background to get the measure of the man, and had run into several dead ends that suggested carefully obscured ties to the intelligence community. Logan's public bio was that of a successful venture capitalist that had spent considerable years developing business interests outside the Federation before moving to Cygnus VII where he became associates with Martin Santiago, then the Cygnian representative on the Federation Council.

Logan was a key contributor and advisor to Santiago's dark horse campaign to unseat Federation President Jareh-Inyo in 2372 and had been one of his most trusted confidantes throughout Santiago's tempestuous term.

At least he was loyal to Santiago, Shanthi figured, to propose such a radical plan to keep the Benezar system from seceding to the Romulan Star Empire. Most pundits were certain, and Thuosana couldn't help but agree, that if the Benzites voted in plebiscite to join the Romulans it would devastate Santiago's campaign. With the slow progress of reconstruction efforts, a

planetary crisis on Aaamazzara, Alshain atrocities in Son's space, and the raging Cardassian insurgency, the Santiago Administration had been beset by a horde of problems. It had energized his opponent, retired Admiral Norah Satie, and her calls for an isolationist course for the Federation had taken on a new appeal. In all honesty, Shanthi would be glad to give Norah, an old friend and colleague, her vote. Another reason this mission distressed her was because if it was successful it might keep the rudderless Santiago muddling through another four years. What the Federation needed now was a strong leader and a clearer vision.

But Shanthi was a patriot, and she couldn't turn down a chance to stop the Romulans from gaining a foothold into Federation territory, even if she had to help subvert a lawful election to do it.

"Admirals Glover or Shanthi might not have any additional questions, but I do," Lt. Daneeka, former head of Security at Deep Space Nine, barreled in. Normally Shanthi would be hostile to such impertinence, but this time she was thankful for the Bolian's bluntness. Perhaps she would be able to voice the doubts that had become rooted in the admiral's throat. Logan turned slowly to the other woman, the disquieting mild expression still on his face.

"Please elaborate Lieutenant," he replied. Shanthi had expected more fireworks, on both ends between the two. Daneeka had taken part in Adm. Leyton's abortive coup of the Federation, the event that launched Santiago's presidential campaign in 2372. Santiago had made great hay attacking the Admiral and his minions. Daneeka had served time at the Supermax and then Jaros II, before Admiral Ross, with the support of her colleague Captain Benjamin Sisko had gotten her sentence reduced.

As part of the orchestrated 'head rolling' following the loss of the *Aegis* and the security breaches on Deep Space Nine, that had actually turned the station's defensive array on Cardassian Premier Natima Lang, destroying her ship and her along with it, both Lt. Daneeka and Commander Ousanas Dar had been removed from their posts at the space station.

Typical of his Romulan heritage, Dar stood apart from the conversations, his ridged brow wrinkled in intense observation.

"Okay, if you need me to spell it out to you," Daneeka said in response to Logan's inquiry. "You want us to work with Reman terrorists,"

"And Benzite partisans," Logan interjected quickly.

"Reman terrorists," Daneeka pushed on, ignoring Logan's interruption, "to destabilize the geostructures that birth and nourish the Benzites with some type of probe?"

"It's a modified Iconian probe," Logan reiterated.

"Similar to the one that destroyed the *USS Yamato*, and almost destroyed both the *Enterprise-D* and the Romulan *Warbird Haakona*," Dar added.

“Well, it’s similar, but has been changed to neutralize the obvious vulnerabilities in the probe,” Logan replied.

“You want us to unleash some type of computer virus, disrupt an entire planet, even putting lives at risk...” Daneeka’s skin flushed a darker blue with each word she spoke.

“We are certain that the risk of Benzite lives is minimal,” Logan responded.

“Perhaps,” Glover spoke, his voice querulous, “But what about the resultant Romulan crackdown that you are counting on to turn the Benzite populace against secession?”

Logan made to speak, then pulled his lips tightly together. He stepped back from the circle starting to enclose him. The chief of staff smiled. “This is why I assembled all of you here, and why I felt it necessary to meet with you one more time before you embarked to the Benzar system. In order for this to work we don’t need martinets, we need independent thinkers, who understand the larger consequences of this mission if something goes wrong.” He paused, looking into the eyes of each person. Shanthi was ashamed of herself that she wanted to look away when his cold gaze reached her. “Rest assured that this mission will go forward. Advisor Hetal’laal’ak has signed off on it. The President, of course, is unaware of it...plausible deniability and all, but it does have the support of the Starfleet Intelligence and Command. This mission will go forward whether you participate or not, though I would prefer that some of our best minds on Romulan affairs oversee it.” Logan paused again, a challenging glint in his eyes. After there were no takers, the chief of staff continued, “Admiral Glover, you are one of our foremost Romulan scholars, and Commander Dar, your defection from the Romulan Empire has made you an invaluable source of intelligence, Admiral Shanthi, with your role at Starfleet Administration, you can work under the sensors to provide needed information and resources to the infiltration team.” Logan paused again, a small sigh escaping his lips. Daneeka squared her shoulders, “And Lt. Daneeka, at least you’re good with a phaser, and I’m sure that our Reman counterparts can appreciate that.”

Daneeka smirked. “And I didn’t think you could find even one nice thing to say about me.”

“It was a challenge,” Logan smiled, “but you are all here because the Federation needs you. The Romulans can not be allowed control of the Benzar system. We are certain that the referendum being proposed by the Romulan-controlled Benzite government will not be fair and once the Benzites see the cruelty inherent in the Romulan response to any social disturbance it will benefit them.”

“Only at the cost of a few lives perhaps,” Daneeka mumbled. “Or a civil war?”

“What was that?” Logan pretended not to hear her.

“Nothing,” the Bolian replied. “When do we depart?”

“Admiral Glover has already arranged transport for you three aboard a Corvallen freighter. Admiral Shanthi and I will return to Federation space. The media thinks I’m on goodwill mission to Aaamazara, so it behooves me not to be discovered in the Borderland.”

“You could always say you were taking some much needed R-and-R at one of the Orion pleasure dens,” Daneeka quipped.

“Maybe after the election,” Logan replied.

“If you two are through sparring or flirting, let’s get on with this,” Samson replied. “Ousanas and I have already made arrangements with our friends in the Romulan underground, and Romulans are damn near as punctual as Cardassians.”

“I would tend to think we are more punctual,” Dar said, with a hint of mocking pride. Glover snorted.

“I’m glad everyone is in good spirits,” Logan said. “It will help with the esprit d’corps.” He held up his arm and tapped several commands into the silver bracelet on his wrist. With one finger hovering, Logan said lastly, “If you succeed, you all will receive the thanks of a grateful nation...and Administration. I don’t think I need to remind you of what might happen in the event that you are captured.”

“No, you don’t,” Glover remarked. “Ousanas, Daneeka, and I are no longer Starfleet officers. We are private citizens, and if we are captured we will not be protected under the Treaty of Algernon or the Seldonis IV Convention.”

Logan nodded, a grave expression on his face. “Forgive me but I had to make sure we were clear here,” he said, glancing at Daneeka.

“I’m as much of a patriot as you,” Daneeka replied hotly. “Even more so.”

“Perhaps,” Logan smiled, “We’ll see.” Before the Bolian could respond, he tapped the final code on his bracelet and disappeared in a sparkle of golden light.

“I guess that’s our cue,” Samson said, pulling out a slender Orion-made communicator from his rough hewn brown tunic. Both Dar and Daneeka were similarly dressed. In order to mix in with a crew of Corvallen mercenaries, they had to look the part. “Krum informed me that he would be at Processing Station-14 within the hour. I suggest we get going.”

Daneeka wrinkled her nose. “It just doesn’t sit right with me that we’ll be hitching a ride with slavers.”

“There’s going to be a lot of things that don’t sit right with all of us even after this mission is complete,” Glover said wearily. “But let’s worry about that later.” The Romulan and Bolian turned to exit the small room.

“Samson, a word?” Shanthi lightly touched the man’s forearm.

“You two go on without me, I’ll catch up with you shortly.” After the other two officers had left the room, Samson turned back to Shanthi. “What is it Thuosana?” He asked gently, clamping his hands over her shoulders. Ever since their Academy days, Samson had always been a rock for her.

She had briefly fantasized about him being much more, until he came back from a mission with a fiery woman named Deitra in tow. She eventually moved on and found happiness with the similarly gentle Dotsavi, a member of the Diplomatic Corps. Dotsavi, forever the starry eyed dreamer, could never understand the demands of safeguarding the Federation like she or Samson did. He was the only person she felt she could confide in at the moment.

“Are-are you really sure this is the best course of action?”

“What’s with the hesitancy?” He answered her question with one of his own. “That doesn’t sound at all like you Thuosana.”

She gave him a brief smile. “I haven’t been myself lately.”

Samson rolled his eyes in mock consternation. “Then who are you then?” He kneaded her shoulders, his strength seeping into her.

“I made a bad call putting Thorpe in command of *Aegis*. If I hadn’t been so damned stubborn, maybe seventy-five lives and a *Prometheus*-class starship wouldn’t have been loss.”

“Maybe,” Samson answered, his willingness not to dissuade her doubts was both stinging and invigorating. “But it doesn’t do a damn bit of good to second guess yourself. You didn’t earn all those pips on your collar for making bad decisions.”

She nodded slowly. “I guess. But lately, things just haven’t seemed so clear-cut...”

“Well, fortunately for us, this is the first massive conflict the Federation has endured on our watch. Sure, the dustups with the Klingons, Cardassians, Tzenkethi, and the occasional scrapes with the Tholians or Talarians have cost us far too much in blood and treasure, but we’ve never faced anything like this. Never. It’s going to take all of us sometime to come to grips with the war and its aftermath, and there will be mistakes made along the way. But we can’t let that slow us down. We chose the uniform...or maybe it chose us. But in the end, what difference does it make?”

Shanthi shook her head slowly. “It’s been over forty decades and you still seem to make things seem brighter than I have ever been able too.”

“It’s a gift,” Samson chuckled, before his expression grew serious. “And a survival mechanism.” He gave her shoulders another firm squeeze. “See you soon.”

“Count on it.” Shanthi replied with more resolve than she had felt in a long time.

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## Layover

**Aeroshuttle *Bullard***  
**(The Badlands)**  
**June 2376**

***Aquiel***

“Well, that’s the last communication buoy,” Commander Jeffrey Thorpe rapped his knuckles across the dim flight control console. “Hopefully someone friendly will pick it up soon.”

Sitting in the co-pilot’s chair beside him, Lt. Comm. Aquiel Uhnari glanced nervously out the aeroshuttle’s viewport, tracking the small oval buoy as it streaked away into the violently colorful starscape. “I’m more concerned about the buoy getting hit by a solar flare like the last two, instead of running into or tipping off Cardassians or pirates.”

She absently rubbed her left hand. It was still smarting from the pounding she had given her useless terminal after helplessly watching the second communication buoys quickly succumb to the deadly environment surrounding them. The Haliian engineer hoped that their craft wasn’t next on the menu.

“If I knew we were going to run into a subspace mine I would’ve brought my 3-D chess board,” Thorpe joked weakly. Aquiel responded with a wan smile. Jeffrey wouldn’t last a micron at *Charnock’s Comedy Cabaret*, but at least he was trying to make the best of a harrowing situation and she appreciated it.

Though Aquiel’s smile slowly faded as worries about the danger they were in outflanked her façade. The trip to Bryma to deliver medical supplies quelling a *Rudellian plague* outbreak had gone easily enough, as had the return voyage to Deep Space Nine. Until the *Bullard*’s long range scanners had activated the variable geometry detonator of a cloaked pulse mine. The only thing that had saved them was that the scanner had tripped the mine at a far enough distance to avoid the full brunt of the blast. Unfortunately the shockwave had disrupted the ship’s systems, knocking most of them offline.

They had quickly donned EVA suits to work on restoring auxiliary power. It had taken them hours just to bring auxiliary life-support back online. Commander Thorpe had manually launched the buoys, which Aquiel privately thought might’ve been why their trajectory was too close to the flares. But she had kept her thoughts to herself. She doubted she could’ve done any better, plus she had enough work restoring the structural integrity



field. The *Bullard* currently had no defensive shields or weapons, but at least if they happened to drift or be pulled into a gravitational anomaly, there chances of being crushed by gravimetric forces were now only sixty percent. Which wasn't much to cheer about, but at least it was better than nothing. And she was happy to be out of that clunky space suit.

"Permission to go aft sir," Aqiuel asked.

"You don't have to sir me, Aqi," he replied. Thorpe was one of the few people onboard the station that even knew her nickname, and the only one she now felt comfortable hearing it from. The nom de guerre evoked a lot of memories for her, some not so pleasant. But it was the only thing her mother had given her that she still owned, and Uhnari would never relinquish it. She smiled humorlessly. She could count on one hand the number of people who called her Aqi in the Fleet, the last being Geordi, her special friend, her *Oumriel*, from the *Enterprise*.

Even Commander Ivan Cherenkov, her lover, hadn't known her nickname or much about her past. She had never shared the *canar* with him, the sacred empathic bonding ritual that tied the thoughts of *Oumriel* together. Geordi had been the last man she had experienced *canar* with. Aqiuel had given her body to Ivan, but had been reluctant to share everything with him.

For the last several weeks she had pondered the nature of that reluctance, especially in light of the last time she had seen Ivan before he left for Jaros II, Aqiuel had rejected his marriage proposal. Ivan was very caring in his own way, strong and forthright, but there was a darkness nestled within him. She had sensed it as soon as she met him, and on some level her own darkness had reached out to him. Their lovemaking had been passionate, almost desperate, two scarred souls holding on to each other for dear life. But Aqiuel knew she couldn't live her life that way. But she also knew that she wasn't good enough, 'pure' enough for a man like Geordi, or even Jeffrey.

However, Aqiuel sensed Thorpe had feelings for her and she couldn't deny that she wanted to share the *canar* with him. But she wasn't completely certain that she wasn't just on the rebound. Uhnari had determined that she wouldn't make the first move.

## ***Thorpe***

In the dim lighting Commander Uhnari's eyes glinted like ebony moons. Thorpe's chest constricted. "Yeah, I really wish I had brought that board game along." He wanted to smack his forehead for being so tongue-tied, uncomfortable memories of his adolescence springing to mind.

Even though he had been a basketball standout, he had never been much of a jock. After practice, he always hustled to the library. He had had his

nose stuck in *Clash on the Fire Plains*, while missing out on years of human and interspecies interaction, and it was really coming back to bite him in the ass now.

He hoped that Aquiel couldn't see that he had turned the hue of an Andorian *redbat*. Thorpe tugged on his matching red collar, the air growing stuffy.

"Are you alright Commander?" Uhnari's voice was a mixture of playfulness and concern. "I can attempt to readjust the environmental controls again."

"No," Thorpe shook his head, "That's quite alright. Just having life-support and structural integrity are good enough...for the moment."

Aquiel nodded. "Permission to go aft sir?" She repeated.

"Oh," Thorpe wagged a finger at her, "Of course. Sorry about that."

"Nothing to apologize for sir," Uhnari replied, sliding gracefully from her seat.

"Please, call me Jeffrey, we've been through too much to be so formal with each other." With Aquiel as his Executive Officer, they had both survived the destruction of the *Aegis*. Seventy-five crewmen hadn't.

Though Thorpe had lied to Counselor Dax and a battery of other psychologists, he hadn't gotten over the loss of the *Aegis*. The ghosts of those crewmen, the vast majority of which he couldn't remember their names or faces, visited him every night in his dreams. It was a torturous ordeal, a spectral chorus blaming him for their deaths. He hadn't told anyone about the nightmares because he believed his accusers, and it was the least he could endure for causing so much pain to so many families. First the Nightingale Incident, then the loss of Dr. Hizeal and a child among others at Lakesh, and now seventy-five more victims to add to his list of failures.

Over the last month it had become a struggle for Thorpe to carry on. Fortunately, presently commanding the *Defiant* wasn't the dangerous assignment it had been in the run-up to, and during, the Dominion War. After the station's weapons had been used to assassinate Cardassian Premier Lang, there had been a regime change at the station.

Colonel Kira, the stations' former commander, was still recovering from serious brain damage caused by one of the conspirators in Lang's murder. Counselor Dax and Dr. Bashir spent almost as much time down on Bajor attending to the colonel as they did at their posts. Rear Admiral Monica Covey was the new station chief. She had divided her command, giving the station duties to Bajoran Colonel Jatarn Yaro and leaving him in charge of the *Defiant*.

The terrible tragedies that had occurred at the station, and also in the Crolsa System where the *Aegis* had been lost, had seemed even to give the Cardassian insurgents pause. They had scaled back their operations

significantly as Lang's shocking demise had swung Cardassian public opinion strongly against the militants.

Admiral Covey often told him that his role in neutralizing Gul En'Roel, the mastermind behind the notorious Crimson Shadow sect, also had a role in dampening insurgent ardor, but the ghosts always drowned her out.

As Aquiel glided past him, the question slipped out of Thorpe's mouth before he could catch it. "Why are you going aft?"

The Haliian tensed slightly, then turned around slowly to face him. "I..."

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, "It's none of my business."

"No," Aquiel smiled, "I was going to practice the *Horath* for the next *Batarael*. I thought it might help me pass the time."

"*Horath*?"

"It's a Haliian song of celebration, sung each year at the *Batarael*. My sister Shiana had made me promise that I would return home to participate in the *Batarael* and sing the *Horath* for our family. I haven't been home...in a long time. Shiana is so thrilled at the prospect that she's already talked to her commanding officer on the *San Jacinto* to request leave, even though the holiday is almost six cycles away."

"I didn't know you sang," Thorpe smiled, perking up. This woman continued to fascinate him.

"It's not something I do often," Uhnari looked down and then away, staring into a bulkhead. "Mainly when I am alone, but I used to sing to Shiana when she was a child. I also sang for my family at *Batarael*...and for my *Oumriel*." She said the last part so quietly that it was almost a whisper.

"*Oumriel*?" He asked, chiding himself for not being more familiar with Haliian language and customs.

"It means 'special friend'," Aquiel was looking at him again now, and Thorpe felt a familiar heat and redness creeping over his cheeks.

"Oh, I understand," he said softly, unable to remove the wistfulness from his tone.

"I don't think you do," Aquiel said. "But one day...maybe." She was quickly swallowed by the shadows in the shuttle's corridor.

Jeffrey hated that the soundproof walls prevented him from hearing Aquiel sing, but even he wasn't daft enough to sense that there might be something

occurring between them. But he would be damned if he ruined something else. Until he could be certain that Aquiel shared his interest he would keep his feelings to himself.

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## The Devil You Know

Kiessa Monastery  
(Bajor)  
June 2376

Dr. Julian Bashir's hands were scraped and bloody, but he enjoyed the distraction. At the moment, he preferred the heat, sweat, and dust of the rebuilding project more than the clean modulated environs of Deep Space Nine's infirmary or of the claustrophobic atmosphere of Colonel Kira's small cottage in Dahkur Province.

At least here, among the throng of Bajorans and offworlders: Starfleet, Bajoran Militia, clergy, and civilian he could be more useful than he was either on the station or with Kira. At least he could see more tangible results of his labor. Instantly the thought made him feel small and self-indulgent but the doctor couldn't deny it. Dark times gripped the Federation. He had hoped that the end of the war would usher in an age of peace, but things had only continued to spiral out of control. Even after enduring a near genocide, recalcitrant Cardassians continued to shed blood over their benighted worlds. The cycle of violence had recently claimed the life of the Cardassian Republic's leader, not to mention the station's Lt. Easun of Delta and countless others. His dear friend Elim Garak, who was missing, was accused of the crimes.

Julian knew a few things about Garak's past with the Obsidian Order. And as much as he hated to admit it, he knew Garak was capable of performing an assassination, or of casually murdering anyone that might stand in his way. But after many lunches, dinners, and conversations spanning years, Bashir also knew Garak to be an honorable man, a true son of Cardassia. Garak would never do anything to imperil the survival of his people, despite what the Cardassian authorities, and many in the Federation believed.

Bashir had thought hard about taking a leave of absence and going in search of Garak himself. Trade Provost Mintof Urlak, the leading candidate in the special elections to determine Lang's successor, was the most fervent proponent behind the theory that Garak was the assassin. He had been extremely helpful in providing all records about the destruction of Lang's ship, the Iloja, by DS9's weapon's battery. The sensor logs had recorded several beam outs. The transports were far from conclusive proof that Garak had survived. But Urlak had disclosed much of Garak's past to Federation authorities. Julian didn't need to see any additional evidence to know that

Garak had the proverbial nine-lives. He had seen it enough times in the seven years that Garak had been aboard the station.

He didn't like how Urlak was smearing Garak's name on such scant evidence, but the doctor hadn't known where to start his investigation. Actually, he had known to whom he might turn, but the thought of doing so revolted him. So, he had tried to quell his suspicions and help Admiral Covey ease into her transition. Plus, he had wanted to stay on hand to attend to Colonel Kira.

The damage done to her cerebral cortex by the Ceti eels used to turn Kira into an unwilling accomplice in Lang's murder had caused nearly irreparable harm. It had forced Julian to consult with Dr. Toby Russell in an attempt to genitronically replicate portions of the colonel's brain. So far the operations had failed.

Admiral Covey had been able to get word to Odo about Kira's precarious position. Before he had left the station for Kiessa, Covey had informed him that Odo would be returning to the Alpha Quadrant with Dominion medical technology. Julian was grateful for the news, and for the opportunity to see his old friend again. Things had changed so rapidly aboard station, with the successive changeover in personnel that it didn't feel much like home anymore. If Ezri wasn't still there DS9 would be almost alien to him now.

Even with Ezri still there he didn't like spending much time aboard station. After hearing the announcement about the rebuilding of Kiessa Monastery, broadcast on the Bajoran's planetwide comnet, Julian had jumped at the chance to join in. It's destruction during the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor had been one of the many infamous outrages committed by the Cardassians.

Physical labor, without the demands of thought, did have its curative effects, or so Bashir tried to convince himself. Though he knew that there was another reason he had attended the rebuilding. The event would also be the perfect meeting place to allay any suspicions.

Sliding his spackle back into the weighty tool belt around his waist, Bashir wiped a wave of sweat off his brow. So far he hadn't seen who he was looking for, but the doctor was certain the man would be here. It would be impolitic not to be at this media-heavy event.

Unclipping a canteen from his belt, Julian took a sip preparing to return to work. As soon as he bent down, a shadow fell across him.

"Dr. Bashir, this is a most pleasant surprise." Julian got up slowly, making sure to hide the disgust on his face.

"Minister Tenva," he gave a short bow. "The pleasure is all mine." Tenva Otos, decked in a gray cover-all absent any dirt, smiled.

"We're all here to do our part," he replied. "Care to take a break."

It looks like that's all you've been doing, Bashir wanted to tell the politician but he kept his mouth shut. Bashir hated to admit it, but he needed Tenva, and would have to indulge the man.

Away from the workers, cameras, and onlookers, Tenva led him to a cool stand of trees. Underneath the shade, Tenva touched the earring dangling from his right ear. "I've just activated an auditory nullification field around us," he said quietly. "It should muffle our conversation."

Julian nodded, a knot forming in his stomach.

"So, why have you summoned me Doctor, are you ready to join us?" Tenva's smile was smug.

"Perhaps," Bashir tried to be coy, but he was tired, not only physically but emotionally, spiritually, and he didn't have time for games. "But I need information first."

Tenva sighed. "Listen Doctor, I'm not Sloane. When I was given your account I told my superiors so. But they still insist on seeing some potential in you that I don't. But let me make this clear, you don't haggle with us. You don't request. You join us or you don't." The Bajoran started to walk away from him.

"Wait," Julian said, his tongue feeling leaden in his mouth. "Okay," he lowered his head.

"Is that a 'yes'?" Tenva asked.

"Yes," Bashir nodded, hoping that in the Celestial Temple above them Captain Sisko wasn't looking down on him at this moment. "I'll join you."

"Despite your self-righteousness I've never doubted your honesty or sense of honor," Tenva replied. "You've made a wise choice. In these perilous times..."

"Can the speech," Bashir spat, angrier with himself than Tenva, "Just tell me what I need to know."

"I assume this is about the Cardassian?" There was just the slightest trace of distaste in the Bajoran's voice. "Garak?"

"Yes," Bashir forced himself not to shout. The operative was really trying his patience.

"Rest easy Doctor, he's alive," Tenva said.

"Really?" Bashir could hide his relief. "Where is he? Is he okay?"

"Somewhere...in Cardassian space."

"I need more information than that." The doctor demanded.

"And I need you to perform your first assignment for us," Tenva shot back. "If you are successful you'll learn more."

"And if I'm not?" Bashir challenged, even though he knew he had already lost.

"Garak will be the least of your concerns," Tenva remarked, with glacial sincerity.

## Crossing Swords

### Deep Space Nine

July 2376

#### (Commanding Officer's Quarters)

Rear Admiral Monica Covey had just shrugged out of her duty jacket when her door chimed. "Great," she muttered, plucking the black coat off the back of her couch. She zipped it up as she stalked the short distance to her door.

"Edward, I'm really not in the mood for another ten rounds," she said before the door opened. She was fortunate that the complaint had gone unheard because the man at her doorstep wasn't Vice Admiral Edward Jellico. In fact it was someone she actually liked, and once in the past, had really liked.

"Will?" Covey's annoyance was quickly devoured by surprise and curiosity. "What are you doing here? I wasn't informed that the *Enterprise* would be making a pit stop."

Commander William Riker of the *Starship Enterprise* smiled broadly. "Actually, the *Enterprise* is taking part in the reconstruction effort at Starbase 375. I had a little free time, so I borrowed a shuttle and decided to take a little 'Sunday Drive' as my father used to say." Covey was a little taken aback, not only by the man's sudden arrival but also at his lack of facial hair. She had never seen Will Riker without his beard.

Covey nodded. "I understand. I've been chained to my desk for so long these last few months I haven't gotten a chance to explore this sector of space even." The admiral sighed. "I envy you."

Still smiling, Riker asked, "May I come in?"

"Of course Will," Covey moved to the side, and the tall man ambled in. "Forgive me but it's been a trying day. And I'm not operating at full power."

"No need for apologies, I saw the *Cairo* docked at one of the Upper Pylons on my way in." That was the only hint that the commander needed to say for Covey to realize he knew the source of her frustration. Jellico's former command had been the *USS Cairo*, and since he had become an admiral he had a propensity for commandeering that ship to use as his personal shuttle service whenever she could. Covey felt sorry for the long-suffering captain, a Bzzit Khaht named Shnel, for having to endure Jellico's frequent visitations.

"I take it you've had a run in, or two, with the good Admiral Jellico?" She pondered, with a resigned smile. Riker's own smile shriveled up, and the man straightened his shoulders. His bright blue eyes dimmed.

"I would rather not talk about it," he said tersely. Covey threw up her hands in supplication.

"Fine," she said. Batting her eyes and lowering her voice to throaty purr, Covey asked, "So what did you come here for then Will? That time we spent together on Risa a couple years back was great, but I didn't know I left such an impression."

Riker's smile returned, as well as an unfamiliar blush on his cheeks. Riker was many things, but bashful wasn't one of them. The man had changed. Had it really been that long since Covey's shore leave from the *Chevalier* had coincided with Riker's downtime following the loss of the *Enterprise-D* in the Veridian system?

The admiral was sure that time had changed Riker like it did with everyone, but she was more certain that the commander's new shyness had a more corporeal cause. "So, who is the lucky lady?"

Riker chuckled, "I'd rather not talk about that either Sir."

"Such modesty," Covey clucked. "And since you just popped up on my doorstep in the middle of me taking off my uniform," she paused to wait for Riker's response. She laughed softly when his right eyebrow arched like a Vulcan's. The commander's eyes flashed with mischief. He hadn't changed too much, "you can forgo all the formalities. So, what can I do for you?"

Covey sat down on her brown Talarian leather couch. She couldn't make the adjustment to the uncomfortable Cardassian furniture that both her predecessors, Captain Sisko and Colonel Kira had learned to live with. Sometimes Monica wondered if she was getting too soft, or taking advantage of her position. At other times, she didn't really read so much into it. She liked what she liked, simple as that. Covey patted an empty area of the couch beside her.

Riker angled his large frame onto the couch, sitting almost on the edge. "I don't bite Commander," Covey teased.

"You might after you hear what I have to say," the commander's voice had taken a more serious tone. He shifted his bulk to look at her, his features hardening.

"Go on," Covey encouraged, even though she had a feeling she knew what he was going to say.

"First off, I came here of my own accord," Riker began.

"All right," the admiral nodded.

"Captain Picard had nothing to do with this."

"So, I take it this is about the Alshain," Covey sighed, rolling her eyes toward the heavens. "First Jellico laid into me and now you."

Riker paused, placing his tongue into his cheek, a flash of mischief flaring in his eyes, "An interesting word choice Admiral...but that's not what I'm trying to do."



“So, what are you trying to do?”

“I’m here to implore you to change your position. Supporting Captain Picard’s plan to lead a humanitarian mission into the Briar Patch is the right thing to do.”

“Don’t get me wrong Will, I sympathize with Jean-Luc. I know that you and your crew are personally invested in the reconciliation of the Son’a and Bak’u. I also know that the Alshain’s management of former Son’a territory has been less than stellar.”

“It’s been more butchery than management,” Riker said curtly, before adding. “Sorry for the interruption.”

“No offense taken,” Covey said, her mind clicking back to the arguments she had made to Jellico. “The Alshain are our allies. If they hadn’t opened up a third front against the Dominion, and held the Son’a in check, who I don’t have to remind you joined the Dominion after you thwarted them from removing the Bak’u from the Briar Patch then this war might’ve gone on longer than it did.”

“I understand that,” Riker conceded, “But the ethnic cleansing the Alshain are doing now is wrong. The war is over, but this drive of theirs to reclaim a mythical past at the expense of not only the Son’a, but the Tarlac, Ellora, and now the Bak’u, amounts to nothing less than genocide.”

“From your point of view,” Covey countered.

“What does that mean?” The commander couldn’t hide his exasperation. The admiral mirthlessly smiled.

“The Alshain and the Son’a have a very tortured history similar to the Opium Wars between the British and Chinese empires of Old Earth. There is a near century or more worth of perceived wrongs the Alshain feel compelled to right.”

“And you’re content to allow such bloodletting?” Riker hotly charged.

“No, I’m not,” Covey snapped, her own temperature rising. “But we might not have much of a choice. Starfleet is stretched to the limit as it is. Wading into the Briar Patch will only incense the Alshain. They are a very prickly people, very thin skinned. Riding roughshod over the way they are conducting affairs in Son’a space might be perceived as a provocation.”

“Admiral, I understand that you are the Federation’s foremost expert on the Alshain.”

Covey raised a hand to stop him. “That’s not true, Commander Seb N’Saba, a former crewmate of mine from the *Cuffe*, holds that honor.”

“Fair enough,” Riker nodded, “But if it hadn’t been for your efforts, the Alshain wouldn’t have joined the Federation Alliance.”

“And I wouldn’t have been burdened with this fifth pip,” Covey glowered, flicking the last small metal pip on her red collar.

Riker grinned. “I could think of worse fates.”

“Wait till you get there Will, you’ll see what I mean. Picard had tons more experience than I did, and you see he was wise enough to steer clear of promotion.”

“You might have point there,” Riker admitted. “I’m still having too much fun to even go for the center seat yet.”

“Which is a shame,” Covey remarked, erasing the smile from Riker’s face. “Because with the dearth of capable officers right now, Starfleet needs people of your caliber at the forefront.”

“Being the Executive Officer on the Federation flagship is enough forefront for me at the moment,” Riker replied. Covey shrugged, deciding to let the matter drop. She hoped Riker would take the hint and give her the same courtesy.

“I never said it didn’t. I had a load of fun as XO on the *Cuffe*,” valued memories flashed through Covey’s mind of her time aboard the *Nebula*-class vessel. Though her exit from the ship hadn’t been as optimal as she had hoped, her bad blood with Captain Diaz, *Cuffe*’s CO at the time, could never erase the memories of the good times she had, or of the friends she made. When she had learned of *Cuffe*’s destruction at the Battle of Cardassia Prime, it had struck her as hard as the death of a close friend.

“I’m glad you can relate,” Riker chuckled.

“I can also relate to the outrage you feel about what’s going on in the Briar Patch,” Covey hated herself from bringing back up the subject again. She didn’t owe Riker any explanations for her opposition to the humanitarian mission, but Covey felt the need to try to explain her views as clearly as possible. She doubted that she could convert Riker, in a way she hoped that she couldn’t. His idealism was refreshing and reminded her of how she used to be. The admiral also knew that at least Will would give her views a fair hearing out, unlike Jellico, who had come hell bent on making Covey toe the party-line, which she refused to do. “The Alshain have admittedly committed excesses, and they have failed to liberate the Tarlac and Ellora as they promised the Federation Council they should. But they have been stoked by the victory over the Dominion. I’m afraid they will not relent to perceived Federation interference. And if they don’t, what are we really going to do? Has Picard even thought of that?”

Riker paused. “Captain Picard isn’t a starry eyed dreamer. He would never propose a plan without consideration of all contingencies.”

“Really?” Covey challenged. “Well, I’ve yet to hear an exit strategy, from either Picard or Jellico. Despite being the ‘Alshain expert’, neither of them, nor the Federation Council, seems willing to take heed to my warning that the Alshain will not back down.”

“I think the Federation Council is confident that the Alshain aren’t willing to engage any Starfleet ships in battle.”

“I don’t share their confidence, I think it’s too large a gamble,” Covey replied. “But then again, I’m only a Rear Admiral so what do I know?”

“Quite a bit,” Riker said sincerely. “That’s why I hope that things don’t turn out as terrible as you’re predicting.”

“Time will tell,” Covey replied morosely.

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## Reunion

**Jupiter Station  
(Sol System)  
August 2376**

“What do you mean you haven’t seen Dad in months?” Terrence Glover barked at the screen.

Worry slithered over his Uncle Sheldon’s face. “Has something happened? I just received a message from Samson about two weeks ago. He said he was on Earth, adjusting to retirement.”

Glover frowned. “And I got a message from dad around that time too, saying he was adjusting to you and the Kurlan monsoon season.”

Sheldon snorted. “Sam would say that.” The archaeologist leaned forward, his face almost touching the recording device that was sending his image across subspace. “It appears that Sam has been less than forthcoming with both of us. More than likely he didn’t want either of us to be worried.”

“Which makes me very worried,” Glover remarked. His uncle nodded.

“Do you think he’s on one of those secret missions Starfleet occasionally thrusts you both into?” Sheldon’s voice had a conspiratorial tone. “That was one of the reasons I never signed up, I wanted to freely pursue my scientific endeavors without all of that other stuff.”

“I know,” Glover stifled a sigh. Whenever the demands of serving in the Fleet had precluded Terrence from staying with either of his parents, he had usually been shuttled off to spend time with his Uncle Sheldon when he was a child. The great part about those excursions had been the wonderful planets his intrepid uncle had taken him to. Unfortunately, along with the history lessons, and the immersion in myriad cultures, Sheldon had tried to convince him to not ‘give his life away’ to Starfleet to only die in some meaningless skirmish or an unfortunate encounter with a spatial anomaly.

When he was younger, Terrence had tried to get his uncle to see that he lived his life just as precariously, perhaps even more so because the man often worked alone, on desolate alien worlds. His uncle had never recognized the saliency of Terrence’s point. As he grew older Glover realized it was best to just let the man rail and get it out of his system.

Satisfied that the archaeologist was finished with the familiar refrain, Glover pressed forward. “Listen Uncle Sheldon, I’m going to look into this with some of my friends in the Fleet. I will find out what’s going on.”

Sheldon gave a bared teeth smile. "Of that I have no doubt. You have your mother's tenacity." He paused, his eyes growing large and sad. "But be careful and pull Sam's ass out of whatever fire he might be in."

"I will sir," Glover promised before deactivating the link.

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## **Jupiter Station (Five Hours Later)**

"Terrence, it's been a long time," Captain Tryla Scott remarked slowly. Glover could feel her eyes dissecting him through the screen. "I know this can't be a social call so what can I do for you?"

"Tryla," he remarked crisply, his coldness as much engendered by the dead ends he had run into for several hours as the awkward reunion. Scott had once been both his commanding officer and lover when he served aboard the *Renegade*. After Scott had unwittingly become possessed by neural parasites in an alien conspiracy to take over Starfleet, their relationship had collapsed. Tryla had left Starfleet for the Nyberrite Alliance on the rim of charted space. It was only the Dominion War that brought her back. Even though the parasites had taken much from the woman, making her almost a shell of what she once had been, her sense of duty still remained unbreakable. Terrence was glad to see that.

"My father...he told me that you came to see him...that you had given him crucial intel that played a major role in my rescue from the True Way," Glover grimaced as memories of the days of torture he had endured at the hands of the Cardassian terrorists flitted through his mind. "Thank you."

"Despite the way things ended between us," Scott started slowly, speaking softly. "I still consider you a friend. And even if you weren't, you're a fellow officer and I wasn't going to let you be murdered by those bastards."

Glover smiled in spite of himself. That's the steely resolve he was used to seeing.

"So, how's Jasmine?" Glover's smile evaporated, and his throat closed up. At one time he hadn't been able to see anyone but Tryla as his wife. But after things imploded between them, Terrence eventually found a happier port of call. Well, it had once been happy, he realized sourly. Jasmine had been horrifically injured in the early stages of the Dominion War, losing an arm, a leg, and suffering a host of internal injuries that had taken away her ability to bear children. She had just revealed that last piece of news to him right before both of them were sent to the Jaros II military stockade for ninety days. Jasmine had been sentenced for her part in flaunting Admiral Shanthi's orders to help rescue him. Glover wasn't going to let his wife or the other members of his senior staff suffer alone.

Jasmine hadn't talked to him since, refusing to communicate with him during the scant times Warden Thasate had allowed inmate cross-gender interaction. The female prisoners had been placed on another continent, and Glover hadn't seen his wife for three months.

After their release the senior staff had been temporarily placed at Jupiter Station awaiting reassignment. Jasmine had requested separate quarters. The barb hadn't quite stung as much this time because Glover was still reeling from the destruction of the *Aegis*, and the loss of seventy-five of his crew, that had happened shortly after he had been incarcerated on Jaros II.

He had spent the remaining months languishing in a private hell, reviewing his mistakes, battling his demons and doubts, fearful of the future for the first time in his life. His father had always been a rock for him, a guidepost. He had hoped to spend some time away from Starfleet, with his father and uncle, while he figured out his next move.

Now that his father was missing, Glover wasn't sure what to do. He didn't know how much more he could take. And in some way, Scott seemed to sense the depth of his pain, his loss.

Her eyes crinkled slightly. "I didn't mean to pry," she gingerly offered.

Glover shook his head slowly, with far more weariness than the usual. "Jasmine...she was doing fine...the last time I saw her." Scott's eyes widened and her lips pursed as if she wanted to ask a question. Terrence was grateful that she remained silent.

After a passage, Tryla spoke again. "Is this a secure line?"

A dark flame lit in Glover. He quickly tapped a few controls on his desktop, in parting his personal security code. "It is now."

"Listen Terrence, I don't know a lot, but I've heard that your father's removal at Security wasn't so cut and dry as the Federation News Service would have people believe."

"Go on," his voice hardened and his eyes bore into the screen. Tryla squirmed a little under the man's scrutiny.

"Like I said, I don't know much. But I know Samson is doing something in the Benzar system."

"The Benzar system?" Glover sat back, stroking his chin as his mind tried to catch the curveball Tryla had just thrown him. He quickly tried to recall any pertinent information about the system from the depths of his memory. The Benzar system had been conquered by the Dominion, but the Romulans had liberated the system shortly after joining the Federation Alliance.

Glover also recalled that the Romulans, in typical fashion, didn't want to leave. "Of course," Terrence said more to himself than Tryla. With his father being a noted Romulan expert it would make sense that he might be involved

in some type of negotiation or other black project to resolve the Benezar question before phasers were drawn.

"Care to share your epiphany with me?" Scott asked, a small smile warming her features.

"Do you know if anyone accompanied my father?" Glover asked, ignoring her question.

Tryla squinted, as she appeared to be sifting through her mind for the information. "I...believe the Romulan...Dar...was with him."

"That would make sense," Glover remarked, feeling a little bit more relieved. Though he had no doubt that his father was probably risking his life at the moment, Terrence did feel better that Ousanas Dar was with him. He had seen the two in action together before and he knew they were a formidable pair.

"Thanks Tryla," Glover said. "You've been a great help."

Scott rolled her eyes. "Really? I didn't say much of anything."

"It's more of a quality versus quantity thing," Terrence replied. "So...what have you been up too?"

"In the middle of doing a tour in Cardassian space," Tryla answered dryly, her voice now grim.

"I hope everyone is all right." Glover said.

"Yes, there have only been a few minor casualties so far. The insurgents have scaled down a lot of major operations after Gul En'Roel's remains were identified. I hope it's taken the teeth out of the insurgents." Tryla remarked.

"I had wished for the same thing when we bagged Gul Keshet and gutted the True Way, but then came along this En'Roel character," Terrence spat. "Those Crimson Shadow snakeheads took my ship away from me."

"I know, and I'm sorry for your loss," Scott said. "It's been a rough time for all of us. I hate to say it, but this lull in major insurgent activity just gives me the feeling that their planning something big."

"Well, with you on patrol, those bastards might think twice," Glover offered. Tryla laughed. He hadn't heard the musical laughter of a woman in quite some time.

"Terrence, maybe you should quit the Fleet and get into Public Relations. I think Santiago needs all the help he can get."

"He needs something all right," Glover agreed, even though he wasn't sure what. Santiago seemed like a decent enough man, but his inability to handle the problems besetting the Federation was handcuffing Starfleet at a very portentous time. "But whatever it is, I doubt I can help him."

Tryla nodded. "Fair enough." Switching gears she said, "It's really been good to see you again. I have to go, but don't feed your dark thoughts. Terrence, I've only met your father once, but from what I could tell, he's tough, a survivor."

“I know,” he remarked quietly, his fears receding slightly. “It has been good talking to you as well Tryla.”

“Something tells me I’ll be seeing you again on this side of space soon. I have a few more months left on this tour of duty, and I know Starfleet won’t allow one of its hot properties to sit out for too much longer.”

Glover couldn’t help but chuckle. “Hot property”?

“Positively smoking,” Tryla laughed.

“You need to stop,” Terrence said, knowing he shouldn’t be so friendly with his former lover; a woman he still had unresolved issues with, especially while he was in a vulnerable state. But it did feel good to slip back into old patterns...for just a little while at least. “The next time I see you, the first round of Arcturian Fizz is on me,” Glover offered.

“You got it,” Tryla flashed him a smile before signing off. Guilt, loneliness, and desire played a discordant symphony inside him for a long time after.

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