

STAR TREK CHIMERA

ReMastered

1x01: "*DAY ONE*"

Written By Alex Matthews

Created by Jonathan Crosby-Bromley

Based on 'Star Trek'

created by Gene Roddenberry

"Star Trek and all related marks, logos and characters are solely owned by CBS Studios Inc. This fan fiction is not endorsed by, sponsored by, nor affiliated with CBS, Paramount Pictures, or any other Star Trek franchise, and is a non-commercial fan-made film intended for recreational use. No commercial exhibition or distribution is permitted. No alleged independent rights will be asserted against CBS or Paramount Pictures."

Copyright (c) 2023

Produced by Sojourniverse Productions

starring

CAPTAIN MORGAN BATESON Kelsey Grammer
COMMANDER GABRIEL BUSH William H. Macy
LT. COLONEL MARUUL Oscar Issac
LT. COLONEL LARREKA Jennifer Anniston
DR. ALLISSA MENDLOR Felicity Huffman
COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER RIVERS David Schwimmer
LIEUTENANT SOJEN Ben Wishaw
LIEUTENANT N'CARA Margot Robbie (voice)
WITH
LT. COMMANDER DARREN TEL Daniel Radcliffe
AND
JASON BUSH Dane DeHann

guest starring

ADMIRAL KIRSTEN CLANCY Ann Magnuson
ADMIRAL EDWARD JELLICO Ronny Cox
MINISTER JARRA HESSIK Carrie-Anne Moss

2401, STARDATE 78312.5

The Beta Rigel star system. Home to fourteen planets that orbit Rigel-A, the primary star, and billions of life-forms of multiple species, including the indigenous Zami, Chelon and Jelna. In the centuries since they discovered their place in the wider galaxy as a whole, it has also welcomed those from other worlds to call it 'home', including humans and many other members of the United Federation of Planets.

For over two hundred years, the United Rigel Worlds and Colonies and Federation have been friends and allies, but now that relationship has fractured and broken down. Thanks to the meddling of the long-thought-dead species, the Iconians, the so-called 'Demons of Air and Darkness'.

In 2399, 197 years since the citizens of Rigel voted to join as a full-fledged member state, that alliance ended with the Rigel system seceding from the Federation...

...except for one planet. Rigel IV.

Home to many Federation citizens spread across the four small continents the fourth planet has. This includes the native 'Hill People', a tribe of nomadic Zami who have rejected many of the trappings of modern society and embrace the ways of their ancestors. Thousands more have made lives for themselves in the small but grand cities dotted across the planet, such as Vanir, Gorar, Thursvyl and Kodesh.

The people who call Rigel IV home still believe in the message and work of the Federation, leaving them to stand apart from the other members of the United Rigel Worlds. Instead, they remain as part of the Federation, hoping to act as a bridge for the time when the other planets of the Rigel system decide to rejoin.

Wedged closed to the Ranler Mountains, on the continent of Ahuma, stands Starbase 134. The final bastion of Starfleet's presence in the system in the two years since Rigel IV became the only planet in the system to remain as part of the Federation. Although the rest of the United Rigel Worlds may no longer be members of the Federation, there still exists many trade, commerce, ship-building and defence agreements between the powers.

And Darren Tel was about to call it home.

The twenty-seven-year-old newly promoted lieutenant commander stood in the forward observation gallery of the *Sovereign*-class *Starship Yamato*. Looking out at the planet below. He thinks back on the last four years of his career serving on the personal flagship of Admiral Edward Jellico. It's been an experience, to say the least.

But today is a new beginning. He grins with unabashed glee and excitement at the idea of his new post, that of Assistant Chief Security/Tactical Officer. Although he wouldn't be head of a department, his promotion and transfer orders had explained that he would be involved in all command level decisions and discussion. So, he knows this is no time to get complacent.

[Bridge to Commander Tel. The Starbase is ready for you, sir.]

The comm-call snapped Darren out of his quiet rumination. It was time to leave. He'd already said his goodbyes to the few friends he'd had on board. As an up-and-coming junior officer moving up on the

command track, he'd had a pretty heavy work schedule. Besides, making friends had never really come easy to him.

But he was thankful for the all-round practical hands-on education, training and experience he'd received aboard the Yamato these past four years.

Now it was time for Darren Tel to start a new chapter in his life...

* * *

Outside the large Command Centre of Starbase 134, Commander Gabriel 'Gabe' Bush stands ready to welcome the newest member of their oddball family. He can't help but be taken aback a little by how young the new arrival looks to him. But Gabe, a man out of time, has been feeling the years a lot more of late, so he puts those initial impressions to the side. Better to let Lt. Commander Tel show him what he's capable of first, before making any conclusions.

With that in mind, Bush stepped forward and offered both his hand and his most charming smile, "Mr. Tel. Welcome to Starbase 134."

"Pleasure to be here, sir." Tel is surprisingly laid back, just about capable of concealing the butterflies fluttering around his stomach. It impresses Bush a little. Most new arrivals were overflowing with eagerness, but not this guy. His grip was also impressively firm as he took Bush's extended hand and pumped it with vigour.

As the young man adjusted his grip on his duffel and carryall, Bush stuck his thumb over his shoulder, gesturing to the massive red-hued building behind him, "The Residential Block is right over there so let's get you settled first. Then we can get to the Chimera Nickel Tour afterwards."

As Bush leads the way, he can see the curiosity burning in Tel's eyes. He knows exactly what the young man is wondering. "You're wondering about the 'Chimera' bit, right?"

Bush then goes on to explain, enjoying playing the 'wise old man' role, "It comes from the early days of the base's dedication, back in the 2200s. See, some starbases don't just get numerical designations, they also a 'name', like Starbase Earhart or Yorktown. Although it's not in any official paperwork, Starbase 134 is also known by personnel stationed here as Starbase Chimera."

Tel's eyes were wide with wonder, as this is all new to him. Somewhat shyly, he admits to Bush, "But then I've only ever served on starships, so I guess it's not that much of a surprise."

Bush couldn't help but laugh a little, patting him on the shoulder in an almost avuncular manner. He points out that there are a few things about life on a planet-bound starbase he will have to get used to. But even only having met Tel mere minutes ago, Bush is confident he'll fit in easily enough. "Just make sure your sense of humour is functioning and you're ready to roll up your sleeves when the going gets tough and you'll do fine."

* * *

After the tour was done, having returned Tel to his apartment, an exhausted Gabe Bush was glad to call it quits. It wasn't so much playing tour-guide and babysitting that had tired him out, but rather the bombardment of follow-on questions. To say Darren Tel was inquisitive would be grossly underselling it. Not only that, but they'd been well thought out and built upon a general understanding of starbase operations and idiosyncracies.

Still, relieved to have been soothed by a sonic shower, happy he was out of uniform and into some much more looser-fitting clothes, Bush arrived to visit his son Jason, for their weekly father/son evening.

Stepping into his son Jason's abode, he smiled at some of the keepsakes dotted around. The older-model of combadge that had been in use during Jason's own brief tenure in Starfleet. Various sketches of starships, doodles and designs that had come to his brilliant mind. The degrees he'd earned both in college and postgrad. Bush is incredibly proud of his son, the genius, reminding him so much of his late mother.

As they sit down and eat, Jason only has one topic in mind - he wants to know all about the newest member of the Chimera family.

"You'll find out tomorrow for yourself," Bush teases, with a twinkle of delight in his eyes, "I mean, you'll be in the morning huddle, right?"

Jason shot him a mock-angry glare, but couldn't keep a smile off his face, "Come on, Dad. Give me something to go on with!"

With a soft chuckle, Bush tried to think how to summarise the intense young man he'd met earlier. "Well," he started, "He's driven, that's for sure. He survived serving under Admiral 'Get-It-Done' for four years, so bonus points for that." Thinking over the insightful questions that Tel had posed, it made Bush realize something, "You know, actually, in a lot of ways, you two are a lot alike."

"Really?" Jason couldn't help but be intrigued. It wasn't every day that they got anyone new transferring to Rigel IV.

"Oh, yeah," Bush confirmed, as he digs into his meal, his appetite getting the better of him. "I think you will like the guy."

Jason sat back, absently playing with his own meal. Guess we'll see tomorrow, he wondered.

* * *

Whoa... Even a day later, it's still takes my breath away.

His mouth agape in awe and respect, Darren Tel takes in the view of the Command Centre of Starbase 134. Or, as he was now trying to get used to, Starbase Chimera.

Darren knew of the rumours. That Starbase 134 was not exactly an ideal posting. That the base itself was a rundown, backwater outpost. He'd kept those kinds of thoughts to himself, though, as Bush had proudly given him the grand tour the day before. Any allusions and doubts he may have had were quickly dispelled by the Executive Officer's comprehensive walkabout.

But Darren was also aware that the building was an outdated design that had not received significant any real improvements since its commissioning. This was the second iteration, the first being built shortly after the collective Rigel worlds had joined the Federation. But this current assortment of buildings did not look like any Starfleet installation that Darren was familiar with.

It had been commissioned and designed by a native Zami by the name of Dha'Za Diah, to replace the first base after it had been almost leveled during the Federation and Klingon war of the late 2250s. Several other parts had been added afterwards, like the dedicated Residential Block and the Advanced

Starship Design Bureau Facility. Each maintaining the design principles and contours of the previous buildings, so they flowed and merged well together, instead of looking like some kind of patchwork assortment.

The sudden and abrupt noise from the engines of shuttlecraft passing near overhead broke Darren out of his momentary stupor. If I don't get a damn move on, I'm going to be late for my first day!

But as he made his way into the reception foyer, everything that Darren had spent the last few weeks studying up on, the schematics, floorplans and blueprints, all flew out of his head in an instant. As embarrassment threatened to overwhelm him, he realized he had no idea where to go!

As Darren tries to get his bearings, he is caught completely by surprise by Jason Tel who, seeing his lost look, tries to offer some help. Much to their mutual embarrassment, Darren let out a startled and high-pitched yelp, nearly jumping out of his skin. Jason, trying not to laugh, quickly offers an apology to the mortified Darren, who tries to act nonchalant. It was made even worse by the fact that he was immediately taken by how good-looking Jason is. He could have stared into those eyes for hours.

Jason offered a warm smile, completely oblivious to the fact that it made him appear even more attractive. Having already deduced who Darren is, he offers his hand and introduces himself, "I'm in charge of the Theoretical Propulsion division over at the ASDB Facility. I also act as a liaison with the command staff."

Darren is taken aback and more then a little impressed, since Jason looks only a little older then him, but he's running his own department with the Bureau. That's when the name hits him, "Wait a minute? Bush? As in...?"

Jason grinned cheekily, "Yeah, Commander Bush is my dad." His eyes twinkled with amusement, "Play your cards right, I can put in a good word for you."

Darren couldn't help but laugh, suprising himself a little. He wasn't normally this comfortable talking to a perfect stranger. But something about Jason just put him immediately at ease. Even his initial chagrin was a distant memory. In fact, both of them seem disappointed when their hand-shake finally ends.

Jason offers to lead Darren to where he needs to be, since it's the same place he himself is heading. As they walk off together, Jason's own curiosity gets the better of him, as he starts trying to get to know Darren. They discuss his service under Admiral Jellico, the learning experience it was and how different life on a starbase is compared to service on a starship.

Darren also has questions of his own, as he can't help but be a little curious about Bateson. The man is a legend, the idea of serving under him daunting, even after surviving Admiral Jellico. He had wanted to quiz Commander Bush, but it hadn't felt appropriate. Jason, though, as a civilian might be more willing, "Any pointers you can offer?"

"The captain's a good man," Jason offered with utter sincerity. "Hell, in a way, he's been almost like a second father to me over the years." He points out that, technically, Bateson is one of the oldest serving captains in the fleet, "What Bateson doesn't know isn't worth knowing. He'd be an admiral if that was what he wanted."

Jason looked back at Darren with an intensity that surprised them both. Rising to the defence of a man who'd been part of Jason's life for as long as he could remember, "If you've heard anything bad about him, my advice is to just ignore it. They're talking out their asses."

His gaze softened, his blue eyes almost like a mirror of Darren's own, "Can he be a hard-ass? Tough? Yeah, but it's only for the better of everyone around him."

* * *

Jason's words bounced around Darren's brain as he found himself under the close scrutiny and stern countenance of the esteemed Captain Morgan Bateson.

They stood in the somewhat cramped Station Commander's office, just off the main floor of Central Ops. Through the double doors, there was a clear view of the main work area, split into various sections of consoles and responsibilities. In the centre of it all was a large conference table that acted as a holographic situation display for the senior officers when required.

But all Darren had eyes for at the moment was the intense gleam of Bateson's foreboding glare as he sized up his newest officer. He felt a cold trickle of sweat make its way down his back, wondering just how long he was going to be before he withered under the captain's gaze. Maybe he's realizing he made a mistake in choosing me for the job..?

Darren's growing doubts and concerns were quickly ended when Bateson broke into the biggest grin, his eyes glinting with amusement as he chuckled. "Sorry, Mr. Tel, I couldn't keep up the 'grouchy' act any longer!"

He stepped around the desk and extended his hand, "Welcome to Starbase Chimera, son." He pumped Darren's hand with vigour belying his age, "Good to have you on our team."

"It's an honour to be here, sir."

Bateson grinned with pride, "You bet it is, young man. We know the rumours and non-too-friendly comments that this old place gets. But it's all bull. We've made something of this place and its mission." He clapped a supportive hand on the younger man's shoulder, "Come on, I know you met a few of my senior officers, but let me introduce you to the rest."

* * *

As Darren spoke with the captain and Commander Bush, Jason studied the new arrival and latest member of the Chimera family intently. Paying close attention to just how snug his uniform fit him, especially the way that the pants fitted the younger man's posterior. He's got a nice ass...

"See something you like, Jason?"

The teasing yet snarky comment brought Jason up short. He quickly stood a little straighter and cleared his throat, more than a little self-conscious now, as the person who had spoken slinked up to him. "I don't know what you mean, Larreka."

The blonde haired Romulan, Chimera's chief science officer, shot him a dubious look, "Oh, please. You haven't taken your eyes off him since you both walked in." She smiled coyly, her eyes twinkling just enough to make him realize how much she was enjoying tormenting him, "Has our newest recruit caught your fancy?"

Jason rolled his eyes at her playful comment. Larreka wasn't your traditional Romulan. Although born and raised on Romulus, having served in the Imperial Star Navy, she had lived among humans since the destruction of her home-world. He'd once asked his father why it appeared she seemed so intent on being so unconventional for a Romulan. He had explained that while it may look that way, it was really just her way of coping with everything she'd lost. Of forgetting the horrors she'd witnessed when her home, family and children had been lost in the Supernova of 87.

He finally responded with equal humour, "It's not every day we get someone new joining our merry bunch of misfits and miscreants." He shrugged, trying to exude an air of nonchalance, "Just enjoying the novelty for as long as it lasts."

Her lips pursing, Larreka didn't seem to buy what he was selling. "Uh-huh," she replied, before looking back to where Jason's father was now introducing Darren to his immediate superior, Commander Chris Rivers, the starbase's chief tactical officer and head of security.

"Welcome to Chimera, Lt. Commander." As was his usual manner, Rivers was rather stony-faced and sombre. He didn't offer his hand, either. Instead just fixing a cold stare at his new deputy. Jason just about made out the brief flicker of doubt that crossed Darren's face. Poor guy. Chris isn't exactly the easiest person to talk to. "We're in for a full day of it and I want you taking lead on it."

"On what, sir?" Darren asked, leaving Jason impressed with how calm and collected he sounded, despite facing down his supervisor's gloomy and dire expression.

Rivers replied with a sour look, "We have a contingent of high-ranking officers from Starfleet Command on their way for a meeting with representatives from the Rigellian Trade Commission. So, as you can expect, security will need stepping up."

Larreka abruptly scoffed, stepping forward with a determined stride, "Oh for Erebus's sake, you're doing it all wrong, Chris!"

Jason couldn't suppress a smirk, or the amused snort he made, as the Romulan continued, "At least let him meet everyone first. The last thing the poor lamb needs is for you to scare the living daylights out of him on his first day." She locked eyes with the irritated Rivers. Even before the tactical officer broke and looked away first, Jason had known who the victor would be. No-one could face down Larreka for long.

With a gleeful smile, Larreka turned to face Darren, offering her hand politely, introducing herself with a casual air. "It's a pleasure to met you, Mr. Tel."

Before Darren had a chance to reply, Larreka then swung an affectionate arm around Darren's shoulders. Jason couldn't help but grin at the wide-eyed surprise in the young man's features. "Now, since you've met our Exec, his dashing son and our sour-puss chief of security," she drawled, "let me introduce the rest of this motley bunch."

Jason watched as Larreka then began pointing out the remaining senior officers standing around them, giving them each a succinct and very-Larreka-like intro. "The one in the bulky suit and helmet is N'Cara. She's our Intelligence Officer. She may look scary but trust me, she's a sweetheart."

The Breen officer's vocal synthesiser squeaked out an electronic protest, then was followed by a modulated but pleasant voice that even to this day, Jason would swear sounded almost like an old Earth Australian accent, "Thanks, Larreka... I think?"

Carrying on, Larreka then indicated the next individual, "The brooding man in black is Maruul, our Chief Engineer. No sense of humour, just like the esteemed Mr. Rivers, but he keeps this old place running, somehow. The younger gentleman with the shaggy hairstyle and beard is Sojen, our Ops Officer, without whom the Command Centre would fall into ruin."

She smiled slyly, "You'll notice both have the same pointy ears as I." A playful wink at Sojen, "But whereas Maruul and myself are Romulan, sadly, Sojen is only a Vulcan."

The aforementioned Vulcan gave Larreka the classic 'raised eyebrow' in response, before offering a traditional salute to Darren, "Welcome to Rigel IV. Mr. Tel. While some of the base personnel are, as you can see, somewhat irreverent, we have made do."

"Indeed," Maruul dryly commented, his arms crossed against his broad chest, not looking amused in the slightest, "Our Science Officer also seems to believe she is our resident comic relief."

Larreka let out an disgruntled moan, "Oh, lighten up, Maruul!" She shook her head, "It's people like you that give all Romulans a bad name! Honestly, you're more of a stick-in-the-mud than our security chief!"

Rivers grunted noncommittally in reply. Maruul's glower hardened even further at his fellow Romulan, but it was evident Larreka didn't care one jot to either of their reactions. Jason had to work hard to keep his own amusement off his face, not wanting to either encourage the science officer or insult the two more serious men by reacting. While he may be a simple civilian now, Jason worked closely enough with the people in the Command Centre that it just made his life inordinately easier if he kept neutral and uninvolved in situations like this.

Instead, he just offered the barest hint of a smile at Larreka, before she continued to make the rounds with a wide-eyed Darren...

...which enabled Jason another chance to enjoy the view of the new arrival's posterior.

* * *

As benefiting the size of a planet-based station with room to spare, the Infirmary of Starbase 134 was a sight to behold. While the equipment and layout may not have been on par with a *Sovereign*-class ship of the line like the *Yamato*, it was still impressive.

But as Darren took his place on the bio-bed on which he was to undergo the routine medical exam of any new transfers, it wasn't only the infirmary itself that caught his attention.

The starbase's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Allissa Mendlor, was conducting his exam. As he lay down and remained still while she ran the tricorder over him, before comparing its readouts to the overhead scanner array, Darren tried his best to hid his curiosity as he tried to recognize the doctor's race. Something about the subtle, elegant cranial ridges kept bugging him.

He felt his face flush with embarrassment when Dr Mendlor fixed him with a wary look, her lips pursing, "You can just ask me, Lieutenant Commander, if you really want to know."

Darren couldn't help himself, and she had given permission. "You're Elaysian?"

"That's what they tell me." Her response was tired and resigned. Darren realized with shame that this was obviously either a touchy subject, or one she had often tread with other people.

But the way she responded peaked Darren's curiosity further, despite himself. Although he had trained primarily as an engineer back at the Academy, before moving into the command division as his career progressed, he had grown up with an archaeologist for a father. He had been taken to a dozen planets before his 10th birthday and had been exposed to so many new and exciting life-forms that xeno-anthropology had become a kind of hobby. He knew enough about Elaysians in general to notice the distinct lack of the exoskeleton support harness that they had to don in order to function in the gravity of planets not their own.

Still, he had no desire to pry any further, so kept his questions to himself. It's never a good idea to piss off the person in charge of the hyposprays, as his dad had once told him. "Sorry, Doctor." He meant it too and hoped his sincerity was coming across, "I hope I didn't offend you?"

The gruff smile, combined with the wry twinkle in her eyes, lifted Darren's spirit's a little. "No, Mr Tel," she replied gently. "But thank you for the apology."

She tapped a final sequence into the tricorder, "Suffice to say, I have a long and involved history, but it's not one I share easily."

Believe me, I get that. Darren mentally shook away the errant thought. Now was not the time to go down that particular dark memory lane. He focused back on the here and now as Allissa concluded, "Your physical is done with. Everything is just as it was with your last on the *Yamato*, but it's always good to have a more present base-line."

He offered thanks before slipping off the bed. He was immensely glad to be out of range of any medical scanners as the doors opened to admit Jason Bush. If he hadn't, they would have easily picked up the jump in his heart-rate at seeing the son of the station's Executive Officer. *Calm down, you moron! You cannot fall for the boss's son on your first day!*

Still, when Jason smiled at him, Darren felt butterflies in his stomach, "You good to go?"

He nodded, desperately trying to act cool and nonchalant. "Sure. Why?"

Jason's smile grew impish, "Because, as your unofficial guide to all things Starbase Chimera, I think it's time I help you explore more the sights my dad showed you yesterday."

As much fun as that sounded, Darren knew it wouldn't be happening, "I would like that, but I think Commander Rivers has other plans." He indicated the PADD that he'd brought with him to the Infirmary, as given to him by Rivers earlier, before he'd been summoned by Dr Mendlor. "He's given a list of jobs he wants me to get dealt with before we have to play host to Admiral Jellico."

Jason's smile dimmed just enough that Darren hated himself for ruining the moment. He shrugged casually, "Sure, I understand. But feel free to give me a comm when you're off-duty."

This time Darren grinned with delight, "Count on it."

* * *

"What we've got here," Morgan Bateson stated in as blunt a manner as he knew his officers were accustomed, "is the potential for a shit-show of a pissing contest."

As always, Gabe's grin matched Bateson's own, while Chris Rivers remained as dour and implacable as always. In the sanctum of his office, Bateson knew he could talk and comment in a way rather

unbefitting a man of his rank, age and station, behaviour that would not be acceptable in front of the crew.

His and Gabe's friendship stretched back years, decades - hell, even centuries, really. While he hadn't known Chris as long, though, he still felt comfortable enough with the man, whose career he'd been at the beginning of. Whose career he had worked to pull out of the gutter it had almost ended in a few years previous.

Less of that, Morgan, he chided himself. Focus on the nest of vipers coming your way.

"Admirals Jellico, S'Tira and Graasch will be beaming down from the *Yamato* in a few hours," he explained, "and they have still not deigned me to be briefed on just what the hell they're here for."

Bush grunted, "That sounds like Jellico, all right. Keeping us hanging as long as he can."

Rivers didn't seem convinced, "Maybe. Do you have any clues or ideas, Captain?"

Bateson pondered the question. It wasn't every day that three of the most senior flag officers of the Federation Starfleet paid a house call. That the C-in-C insisted on attending the meeting via holo-comm. Had his actions sparked this outcome? "I'm not certain, Chris, but it could be the proposal I submitted to Starfleet Command a few weeks ago. One I've been working with Minister Hessik with to approach the Governing Board with when I get approval from the brass." Or if, he admitted privately.

Seeing this curious looks of his two trusted officers, Bateson continued, "There are still so many displaced refugees from what we went through with the Iconians, then the damned Borg attacks. Refugees who need a place to call home."

"The Rigel system has plenty of space to spare," he reminded them. "Dozens of class-L or class-M moons around Rigel VIII alone. So why not put it to use? With a little work, a little love and support, people could make themselves a permanent home here."

"You really think they'll go for that?" Rivers made no effort to hide his doubt and disbelief. Bateson couldn't blame him, either. It was a big plan, but it wasn't he'd suggested lightly.

"The Rigel system may have left the Federation," he pointed out, "but they're still allies with us. They still have shipbuilding and reconstruction contracts with Starfleet. They didn't argue about us staying on here, either. They're not the enemy, Chris."

Rivers scoffed, "No, not the Rigellians, Captain. I mean Starfleet and the Federation." His face twisted with disgust, "Remember, it wasn't that long ago they abandoned Picard's 'Grand Plan' to save the Romulans. What makes this different?"

"Because we're not Admiral Picard," Bateson stated, pointedly emphasizing the retired and venerated officer's former rank. "Neither are we the same organization. We've learned our lesson after everything that happened back then."

Though, he conceded Rivers had a point. But the optimist in Bateson, the spark of hope that had allowed him to rebuild his life in a new century and help all of his displaced crew from the Starship *Bozeman*, won out. "But if they need reminding, that's what we're going to do."

"Because if we don't, then we'll just make those same mistakes all over again."

* * *

This is becoming the “Day One From Hell”...

After hours of jumping through the numerous and various hoops that had been provided by Commander Rivers, Darren was finally off-shift and taking a well deserved rest break to catch his breath and grab a needed meal.

Not having had the chance to eat at all during his hectic schedule, he'd been ravenous by the time he'd got to the replicator. Now, as he pulled his meal from the slot, his tray fully loaded, Darren abruptly realized that the Mess Area he'd found himself nearest to was actually rather busy. There were a few solo tables he could sequester himself, but he hated the idea of eating alone in a room full of people - talk about socially-awkward. But, balancing that, he loathed the idea of forcing himself into a random group of diners.

Thankfully, a playful whistle and a waving hand ended his deliberations. Darren smiled as he recognized Jason Bush, seated by himself at one of the smaller tables. He made his way over, not too quickly mind, but still hoping to come off as 'casual' and not 'desperate for salvation' as he felt.

“Hungry?” Jason eyed the plate of food Darren placed down on the table top with amusement. “I take it Commander Rivers is running you ragged?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Mindful of his company, Darren took his time eating, not wanting to look like a glutton any more than his sizeable meal already painted him as. “Is he always like that?”

Jason offered a pained smile, “Chris is a complicated guy. If you buckle down and keep at it, though, he does lighten up.” He grimaced, “A little, anyway.”

“Complicated how?”

It was like the floodgates had opened. It was all the invitation Jason had needed. Over the course of the next hour, Darren's hunger was finally abated, while his curiosity about the people he was now working alongside was only partially sated. Jason was insightful, direct but also compassionate and honest in his guide to the “who's who” of Starbase 134.

Eventually, much to Darren's pleasure, the subject came around to Jason himself. “I grew up on starships,” he explained. “A Starfleet Brat, that was me. After my mom died, that was when I met Dad for the first time, properly. It wasn't so different then my life with Mom, either.”

He then regaled Darren with the story of his all-too-brief Starfleet career. “It was a mistake from the beginning. Nothing against Starfleet, I mean, I did grow up surrounded by the service, but it wasn't for me. I never went to the Academy, I graduated from Luna University with two PhD's.”

It charmed Darren immediately how it said it so matter-of-factly, without any hint of pride or arrogance. He was enraptured by the story as Jason continued, “But Starfleet approached me, offered me a commission straight to the rank of full lieutenant and asked me in to join a think-tank on starship design.”

His handsome face took on a sombre look, “But it wasn't the career I wanted. Sure, I loved the work, even got promoted to lieutenant commander based on my input, but I couldn't take all the regulations and bureaucracy that a Starfleet group had around it. I just felt so stifled.”

“So when the Advanced Starship Design Bureau offered me a civilian job, rather than lose me completely, that was when I resigned my commission.” He then smiled somewhat devilishly, “I even convinced them to let me set up shop here once the captain and Dad took the assignment here. They tried to call me back when Rigel left the Federation, but I straight up refused.”

“Well, that’s my story.” Darren’s heart plummeted when Jason looked at him quizzically, “What about yours?”

Come on, Darren, you knew this would come out eventually. He tried to act nonchalant as he played with the remains of his food. “I, uh, would have thought you already knew the basics.” He tried to soften the overall harshness of his words with a smile, “I mean, considering how well informed you are about everyone else.”

“I’m a Tel. That’s a pretty well-recognized name. My grandmother was Admiral Helena Tel. She died before I was even born, but I heard all about her growing up, as you can imagine.” He still felt pride at being related to a Starfleet hero. She may not have been a Kirk, Picard or one of the ‘legends’, but she was still iconic in her own way.

“But most people immediately think of the ‘Grave Robber’ Russell Tel when they hear the name now,” he admitted with regret and shame. “Aside from the name, we’re nothing really alike.” When was the last time he and Father had even spoken? Darren couldn’t remember. “We don’t exactly have the relationship you and Commander Bush have.”

Jason’s frown and curious eyes asked the question without speaking. After a moment to ready himself, Darren decided he’d already opened the door, so there was no point closing it now. “He was not very accepting when he found out that, when it comes to romantic relationships, I prefer to exclusively date other men.”

Jason’s face was a picture of shock and disdain, “Are you telling me that your father was homophobic?” He scoffed in disgust, “Does he realize it’s the 25th freaking century? How can a man who digs up alien cultures be so parochial?!”

Darren remained silent, although he was immensely gratified how Jason immediately seemed to condemn the elder Tel for his outdated attitudes. After being rejected by his father, and enough said about his mother, it had taken a long time for Darren to finally be comfortable again with his sexual identity.

But Jason’s next words took Darren’s breath away, “My Dad didn’t even bat an eye-lid when I came home with my first boyfriend.” Jason actually giggled, “Although, to be fair, I think I did it mostly to get a reaction out of him.”

Before Darren could articulate whatever reply his brain would have eventually come up with, his combadge chirped, interrupting the moment. [Rivers to Tel. Report to the Hanger Bay for away team assignment.]

He tapped the insignia on autopilot, “Tel here. Acknowledged.” It was only as he accepted Jason’s offer to show him the best way to get to the Hanger Bay that Darren realized he hadn’t even asked for any mission details.

I wonder what fun task the Chief is setting me up with now..?

* * *

It had been a while since Darren had been given the opportunity to take the helm of a vessel. His primary duties on the Yamato had been focused on more technical abilities, learning the ins and out of starship operations. But he'd kept his piloting skills up to date as often as he could.

When he'd reported to the Hanger Bay, situated underground and underneath the main concourse of the Chimera 'campus', his awe at the size of the facility had been extinguished rather quickly when Commander Rivers had explained his assignment.

I'm acting as a glorified chauffeur? After all the work I just put in over the last day making sure the base will pass an Admiral's Inspection? He had not been impressed.

But then he'd laid eyes on the USS *Shayaz*, an *Allegheny*-class runabout he'd be using to conduct the mission. Then all disappointment had vanished. A growth of the older but still reliable *Danube*-class runabouts, the newer design took structural elements of the *Defiant*-class escorts. These newest batch had come directly from the Rigel VI Shuttle Integration Facility before it had closed its doors for the final time.

As he took the shuttle out of the atmosphere of Rigel IV, Darren snuck a quick look over his shoulder at his travel companions. Larreka stood over Sojen's shoulder at an ancillary console on the portside of the cockpit. Both studying what looked like an assortment of planetary survey data, at least that's what it appeared to be to Darren.

It made sense. The mission was put in motion because of some unusual readings picked up by a probe conducting scans of the moons of Rigel VIII. Or, as Commander Rivers had called it, 'weird'. The moons were part of some plan that Captain Bateson was putting together, which Rivers had not explained further on.

Darren focused on his instrument readings as he laid in the course and set them off at full impulse. Larreka slipped into the co-pilot seat next to him, offering him a brief smile. It still took some getting used to - a smiling Romulan. Sure, they were not as stoic or unemotional as their Vulcan cousins, but the few Romulans Darren had served alongside, either as part of Starfleet proper, or exchange officers like Larreka and Maruul, had always been reserved and distant.

Not Larreka. According to Jason, she had a wicked sense of humour, which he had glimpsed at the morning briefing and her introductions. Whereas Maruul acted as Darren had come to expect of Romulans, Larreka seemed to delight in being contrary. That was part of the reason she wore a Starfleet uniform, but with her Romulan rank insignia, not the traditional uniform of the Imperial Fleet.

"In case you're wondering," Larreka suddenly announced, interrupting Darren's train of thought, "I requested you as our pilot."

She tossed a quick look over her shoulder at Lieutenant Sojen, "My young friend and I are both more than capable of flying this tub, but we also have a lot of work to do with checking the probe's readings. So, I wanted someone else along, who can watch the controls and keep us from flying into anything."

With a twinkle in her eye, Larreka then winked at Darren, “Plus, I wanted you to know that we do also do some science and exploration out here. It’s not all bureaucracy and meetings. Visiting Admirals and whatnot.”

“Good to know, ma’am.”

The Romulan woman cringed, clutching at her chest dramatically, “Oh please! Never call me that again! I may be close to twice your age, Darren, but I’m not a ‘ma’am’, just yet.” She fixed him with a mock-serious look, “None of that ‘Lieutenant Colonel’ malarkey, either. Just call me Larreka.”

She then offered a sympathetic look, “By the way, don’t worry about all your hard work getting everything up to snuff going unrecognized. Chris Rivers may be uptight, cranky and in serious need of a sense of humour, but he would never take credit for someone else’s work.”

While he took some comfort in Larreka’s words, Darren was also a little mortified she was that easily able to read him. Am I that transparent? I really need to work on my poker face...

* * *

“Commander Bush?”

The conversation Gabe Bush was having with Chris Rivers was interrupted by the voice of Lieutenant Neiman, the Ops Centre supervisor. Looking over, Bush saw her standing and over the shoulder of Ensign Nagel, the current shift’s communications officer, “What is it, Lieutenant?”

The young woman, a native of Alpha Centauri, looked at him wide-eyed, “Sir, the transporter complex just signalled to let us know that Admiral Jellico and his entourage have just beamed down.”

“What the Hell?” Chris Rivers sentiment match Bush’s own. The security chief looked at Bush incredulously, “They’re not due to be here for another two hours.”

Leave it to Admiral Get-It-Done to jump the gun for some reason, Bush privately griped. He held his tongue, though. Whatever his personal feelings for Jellico, his rank and position deserved the appearance of respect. “Maybe there’s been a change in whatever plans they have that brought them here in the first place?”

Rivers scowled, but any response was curtailed as the doors to the Ops Centre opened. The tall form of Edward Jellico, decked out in full admiral’s uniform, complete with four boxed pips, strode in. Following closely behind was a female Vulcan, Admiral S’Tira, and a Tellarite man, Admiral Graasch, dressed up just as much as Jellico.

The trio strode forward as one, heading directly for stairs that led up to the captain’s ready room. Bush made his way to intercept them. He’d faced down Klingons, Borg and plenty of other threats. He could handle these three. “Admirals, welcome to Starbase 134.” He put on his most charming smile, “We weren’t expecting you until 1900 hours.”

Jellico glared at him with icy-blue eyes. “Circumstances changed, Commander. We need to see Bateson now.”

It didn’t slip Bush’s notice that Jellico oh-so-deliberately avoided using Bateson’s rank. Thanks to the quirks of time-travel, technically Bush and Bateson both had longer service history than either of the three admirals. To not even use the man’s rank was a clear sign of disrespect in Bush’s book.

It seemed Rivers had the same thought, as he stepped up behind Bush, “Captain Bateson is currently in a meeting.”

The senior admiral’s glare slowly morphed into an open sneer of disgust at the officer addressing him. “I was addressing the station’s Executive Officer. Not the man they laughably call their chief of security.” Jellico glowered even more, “What Bateson was thinking when he recruited you, I’ll never understand. Hell, if I’d been running your court-martial, I’d have thrown you out of the service altogether.”

Before Rivers could respond in any way that would further provoke the Admiral, Bush interposed himself, physically and verbally, between the two. “Admiral, our recruitment practices aside, Commander Rivers is an officer under my command. I would ask you refrain from inflammatory comments, especially since my officer is correct. The station’s commander is indeed in a meeting.”

Jellico’s belligerent glare refocused on Bush. He saw the look in those eyes. This was not a man used to having anyone stand up to him. But Bush was not intimidated in the slightest. He’d faced many a playground bully in his years. Jellico was just one more.

The cool and calm voice of the Vulcan S’Tira interjected, “Our sudden arrival is not a slight, Commander Bush.” She stepped up next to Jellico, “Rather an indicator that the subject of our meeting can no longer wait, due to the need for the *Yamato* to leave earlier than expected.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Bush replied smoothly, appreciating the glimpse of clarity as well as her attempt to ease the tension. “I’ll let the captain know.”

“That won’t be necessary.” With having gotten the last word, Jellico moved past Bush, heading up the stairs with his companions following. There was no point even trying to warn Morgan - they’d be at his door in no time.

Instead, he looked to Rivers. He caught a brief flash of the hurt the younger man must have been nursing from Jellico’s harsh words. “You okay, Chris?”

River remained dour-faced, “It’s nothing I haven’t heard before, Gabe.” He crossed his arms, setting his shoulders a little higher with whatever pride he still carried. “Besides, I couldn’t care less what that asshole thinks.”

Then, he cracked a small, wry smile, “I already have enough guilt and self-loathing to deal with.”

With that, Rivers about-faced and headed off to check his array of security consoles, leaving Bush to watch him go sadly. Leaving it be for the moment, Bush looked back up at the captain’s office as the doors closed behind the three admirals.

Good luck, Morgan. You’re going to need it.

* * *

Morgan Bateson valued the skills and abilities of all his crew. He had brought this group together and made a ragtag family of sorts. It was an action he took pride in, keeping in with the spirit of the first commander of this very Starbase.

But he still couldn’t quite get used to the sight of his Intelligence Officer.

As he listened to Lieutenant N’Cara’s report, as she succinctly went over the details outlined in the PADD she’d already given him, it continuously struck Bateson how she was a shining example of what the Federation strove for.

A Breen, N’Cara wore an all-encompassing environmental suit, with her specially-designed Starfleet uniform worn over it. One of only a handful of Breen officers in the service. An idea many would have thought ridiculous, given how until very recently, the Breen had been an active threat against the Federation. N’Cara was of a group that had distanced themselves from the Confederacy, having grown up in Federation space.

It made the report she was finishing up all the more difficult for her to deliver, but with her vocoder’s amusingly-programmed Australian accent, she did it with grace. “It seems that whatever alliance there was between the Gorn Hegemony and the Breen Confederacy has fractured.”

Reminds me of the brief arrangement between the Klingons and the Romulans back in the 2260s, Bateson considered. He remained silent as N’Cara continued, “Breen ships have started to make aggressive moves into Tholian-held territory, which has resulted in ships under Starfleet and civilian control getting caught in the crossfire. Fighting has even spilled over into Talarian space.”

Bateson grimaced. As much as he knew his place was at Chimera, he sometimes missed commanding a ship of the line. He’d been without a ship for over six years now. These kind of reports, fleet updates about far distant areas of the Federation, really brought home the idea that he was stationary, that he couldn’t just fly off to the rescue as quickly as he once had.

As N’Cara continued, Bateson abruptly became aware of the approach of three figures towards his office entrance. He did a double-take when he realized just who they were as the door chime sounded. He slowly stood as the doors opened to allow Admiral Jellico and his entourage to enter. “Admiral Jellico, Admiral S’Tira, Admiral Graasch, I wasn’t expecting you for a few more hours.”

Instead of answering, Jellico looked to N’Cara, who was now clutching her PADD to her chest, “You’re dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Bateson clenched his jaw. He should have expected such a breach of protocol from a man like him. Nominally, it should be Bateson himself who dismissed the junior officer directly under his command. That was why N’Cara tilted her helmeted head towards him for permission. He gave a simple nod in reply.

As the Breen officer vacated the room, the intercom chirped, [Captain, we’ve an incoming holo-transmission from Starfleet Headquarters.]

The final player in whatever this damn meeting is about, Bateson realized as he answered his executive officer, “Pipe it through, Gabe.”

Thanks to the built-on holographic projectors, the lithe and silver-haired form of Fleet Admiral Kirsten Clancy shimmered into being. The sharpness of the transmission showed Bateson that the Commanding Officer of Starfleet had earned a few more worry-lines and wrinkles in the few years since he had last seen her.

With little preamble, Clancy began. “Captain, Admirals. Are we ready to get down to business?”

“I believe so, Admiral,” Bateson replied before Jellico to try to assert control once again. “If you’d like to each take a seat, we can begin by reminding ourselves about the details of my proposal.”

“Morgan.” Something in Clancy’s tone made Bateson pull back from offering the PADDs he thankfully had already prepared and had on hand. He then saw the conflicted expression on her handsome face. “I think you might have misunderstood what this meeting is about.”

Enough of these damn games! More than a little aggravated, Bateson forced himself to reply calmly, “With respect, ma’am, I have no clue what this meeting is about, since no one had chosen to inform me. I was assuming...” *No, be honest, Morgan.* “Actually, I was hoping it was about the proposal I submitted to HQ.”

Clancy speared Jellico with an angry glare. The man didn’t seem to pay it any heed. Instead, he looked to Bateson himself. A disturbingly wolfish grin took form as he spoke, “What this meeting is about is quite simple, Captain Bateson.”

“We’re here to decide if the time has come to finally shut down and decommission Starbase Chimera.”

=====

“Are you out of your god-damned minds?”

The words were out before Morgan Bateson even realized it. But he didn’t regret them. Sure, they were perhaps more colourful and loud than necessary, but they got his point across.

Given what the hardhead Jellico had just told him, Bateson wasn’t going to apologize either. In fact, he enjoyed how red-faced the man got at being addressed by a lower-ranking officer like that.

“Watch your tone, Captain.” Graasch came to the defence of his fellow admiral. “Especially since, as Admiral Jellico stated, the decision has not been made yet. Merely that it is being considered.”

“The reasoning is sound and logical,” added S’Tira coolly. “Given the crises the Federation faced in the last decade alone, strains on resources and equipment, combined with the Rigellian Trade Commission’s continued stance on ‘doing things for themselves’, how can the presence of this Starbase and its personnel be justified any longer?”

“Rigel may be independent, yes,” Bateson conceded, “but part of our continuing presence here is because of our agreements with the Trade Commission and the Rigel V Shipyard Authority--”

“An agreement that is already being renegotiated on the premise that Starbase 134 may no longer be serviceable and that its mission has come to an end.” The smugness in Jellico’s voice got Bateson’s ire up. *He’s trying to get a reaction off me, the bastard.*

He refused to give him the satisfaction. Instead, he folded his hands behind his back as Jellico continued, “Face facts, Captain. This system’s importance is not what it used to be. True, the Rigel shipyards helped keep the fleet going after the loss of Utopia Planitia, but we’ve regained a lot of ground now.” He scoffed, “I mean, how many years has it been since the Shuttle Integration Facility on Rigel VI closed down?”

“Three years, seven months and sixteen days,” S’Tira answered without a moment’s hesitation. *Apparently, Vulcans really don’t understand rhetorical questions.*

Clancy had the decency to look at least a little embarrassed, “With our Embassy on Rigel V, we already have a direct line to the Trade Commission, which means Chimera’s mission statement has been downgraded significantly over the last few years.”

Jellico rolled his eyes for a moment, then carried on, “Let’s be honest here, all of us. This starbase is woefully understaffed., the infrastructure outdated and totally unnecessary.”

Bateson ground his teeth so much his jaw ached. When he’d first come to Rigel IV, it was true, Starbase 134 had been a mess. A string of bored and reluctant commanders had led to the outpost becoming a sorry state. Forming its reputation that it was a dead-end assignment to see out the twilight of a career. Bateson and his people had changed all that, but Chimera still lacked behind more modern facilities.

But Jellico continued to twist the knife, as it were. The admiral grimaced, “How you convinced Commander Tel that this posting would do his career any good is beyond me. I had high hopes for the young man.”

That’s it! Bateson dropped his arms to his sides, his hands curling into fists as his growing anger at Jellico’s diatribe got the better of him. “Why, you--!”

Clancy’s stern tone cut him off before he could begin to use more florid language to describe Jellico in detail, “I think we’ve given Captain Bateson enough to think about for now.” Her holographic avatar faced the three admirals, “Thank you, Admirals, for delivering this message in person for Starfleet Command.”

Jellico, glaring daggers at Bateson, who responded in kind, gave a curt nod to Clancy before about-facing and exiting without another look to Bateson himself. Graasch, at least offered a polite nod to both him and Clancy, as did S’Tira.

Letting out a ragged, frustrated breath, Bateson sagged into his chair. He waited as Clancy took one across from him before finally addressing the elephant in the room, “Why, Kirsten? It was you who urged me to take this assignment.”

“Mostly to avoid one of my most experienced and dedicated officers from being ‘put out to pasture’, Morgan,” she admitted with obvious reluctance. “You do not have many friends or supporters back at HQ. Thanks to the whole ‘Oh Fiasco’, I’m under a lot of pressure. This is one front I might not be able to fight back on at full strength.”

Bateson sympathized, to a degree. The revelation that Commodore Oh, Chief of Starfleet Security on Earth, was actually a deep-cover Romulan operative two years ago had sent shockwaves through the service. Her involvement in the Attack of Mars, the domino effect it had on two quadrants, it was mind-boggling.

But he couldn’t let it go. “We’re needed here, Admiral.”

Her next words, spoke with such passion, took him by surprise, “I know you are, Morgan. Believe me. Your mission, what you’ve done here in six years, despite what Edward says, what the analysts tell me, is still very important. Not just to me, or Starfleet, but the Federation as well.”

“I want Chimera to be here for the day when the Rigel system realizes that they will always have a place in the Federation. Worlds have come and gone before. Cait, Andor, to name a few. But they came back because they understand we’re stronger together.”

“Loosing Rigel, and all it stands for, was a big hit to the Federation. A whole lot of pointless posturing on both sides meant pride got in the way. Having you and your people reminding them every day that we’re still here no matter what, is important. That we’re here for them regardless.”

While Bateson was gratified to know Clancy was on his side, it was easier said than done. The Rigellian Home Guard, the defensive wing of the Trade Commission that now protected the sovereign borders of the system, were efficient to deal with any and all situations that once were the purview of Starfleet. Chimera’s personnel were rarely involved in any interdictions or conflicts these days.

Somehow, we need to remind them, to show them what Starfleet, its personnel of scientists and explorers, not just soldiers and warriors, still has to offer the system, even if they aren't Federation members.

He just wish he had some clue how to do that...

* * *

“Sensor scans confirm the probes reading. Beginning deeper scans.”

Sojen’s matter-of-fact update on the status of their mission did nothing to take the edge of Darren’s growing unease.

For whatever reason, he had started to get antsy an hour or so after he had established a standard orbit around their destination. The moon was unremarkable, one of dozens around the massive gas giant that was Rigel VIII. Class-D, minimal atmosphere, unable to sustain any life without atmospheric support domes, which would take time to construct.

Still, the readings from the probe had been ‘weird’ enough to grab Larreka’s attention, so they were staying put until her curiosity was satisfied.

“Well, that’s interesting.” Larreka’s muttering pulled Darren’s attention away from his own instrument readings. She must have sensed his gaze, because she afforded him a brief look, “Picking up materials not native to the moon’s surface. Metallic composites and alloys of some kind. Spread over what appears to be an impact crater.”

It didn’t take a science officer to put the facts together. “Something crashed there?”

She nodded, attention back on the displays of her console next to him, “A ship, of some kind. Possibly within the last few days. Definitely not Federation or Rigellian-made, though, from the data so far.” She tapped another sequence of instructions into the panel, “Let’s see if we can figure out where our uninvited guest came from.”

“Why uninvited?”

Although Darren’s question was addressed to the Romulan, it was Sojen that answered, “We have not been informed of any missing ships in the system, as per standard protocols. Neither have we detected any distress calls within the time frame Lt. Colonel Larreka indicated.”

Larreka stretched, in an almost cat-like manner, “We’ve got some time while the computer runs an analysis on the scans.” Darren suddenly felt very much under a microscope as she abruptly fixed a curious, appraising look his way. “So, Darren. I couldn’t help but notice the attention you’ve been paying a certain civilian member of the command crew..?”

Darren felt his heart leap into his throat. *Oh God! Was I that obvious about everything?!* He couldn’t help but feel utterly mortified. He was supposed to be a professional, but here he was being caught checking out the Executive Officer’s son.

He felt his cheeks flush, very aware how hot and embarrassed he was feeling, as Larreka’s eyes twinkled with mischief, “There’s nothing wrong with appreciating what’s available to you. We’re all adults here.”

Darren tried to think of some kind of response, but instinctively understood that any denial would sound as false as it truly was. Was he attracted to Jason? Absolutely. He wasn’t blind. But there was something about him that felt like it called out to Darren on a deeper level, beyond physical attraction. Even after only a day since meeting him.

“Besides,” Larreka continued, clearly enjoying Darren’s discomfort, “if I’m any judge, I would say that Jason was just as taken with you, too.”

“Really?” He cringed inwardly at the eagerness and high pitch of his reply. But Darren’s heart beat that little bit faster.

“While I am not averse to social commentary,” Sojen suddenly interjected, “I am not comfortable with this level of ‘gossip’ during an assignment.” The Vulcan sounded almost pained, but maybe Darren was projecting his own growing awkwardness at being the centre of attention.

Larreka answered him by simply sticking her tongue at him, “Spoilsport.”

Before Sojen could offer any more of a reply beyond the arching of an eyebrow, the proximity alarm echoed through the cockpit. All attention refocused on displays and readings as the three of them slipped back into ‘work mode’,

It was Darren who provided the answer to their shared concern, “Four ships, coming out from behind the moon. They used it to mask their approach.”

Sojen filled in the specifics, “Identified as *Dagger*-class scout-ships of the Rigellian Home Guard.” There was a weighted pause, “Their weapons are armed.”

“Open a channel.” All hint of amusement was gone from Larreka’s voice. She sounded like a completely different person.

Sojen’s panel beeped several times before he could move to oblige. “They are hailing us.”

At her nod, Sojen accepted the signal. A holographic screen formed across the cockpit viewport’s HUD. A severe-looking Jelna exomale appeared, [Attention Starfleet vessel. Your presence here is unnecessary and not called for. Return to Rigel IV airspace.]

“Rigellian ship, this is Lt. Colonel Larreka of Starbase 134.” Her tone was polite and friendly, but Darren could hear the underlying steel in her voice. “I am the Science Officer. I’m happy to offer assistance with--”

[Negative.] The Rigellian officer's glower intensified, [This is an internal Rigellian matter.] He offered a smug grin, [We have no need of your help.]

His visage vanished as the channel was abruptly closed. "Charming fellow," Larreka murmured. "Darren, take us home. We're clearly not wanted."

He acknowledged the order, quickly bringing the Shayaz about and setting the course. He kept their speed at half-impulse at her order, so she could run passive scans as they left. They'd only started on their way a minute or two when the computer reported its analysis of the initial scans was complete.

Whatever Larreka saw in those results must have been something unexpected. Almost the instant she read them, she looked to Darren with wide-eyed shock. "Increase speed to maximum, Darren."

"Captain Bateson needs to see these readings ASAP."

* * *

Bateson could not believe what his Science Officer was telling him. What he was hearing. "There's a Tholian ship crashed on the moon?!"

"Exactly." With a problem on hand, Larreka was the picture of professionalism. The sarcastic jibes and quips gave way to scientific and methodical thinking. "We didn't get as much data as I would like, but I can estimate from the isotopic decay that the ship, no bigger than a shuttlecraft, crashed about a week ago."

The concern and worry of the rest of the senior staff, gathered around the situation table of Central Ops, was palpable. Not surprising, especially after Rivers spoke next, "We've gone over all our security sweeps of the system for the week, but there's no indication of Tholian activity anywhere in or around the Rigel system."

Gabe gave Bateson a sour look, "But we did notice an unusual spike on Home Guard ships throughout the system's outer edges. With a particular focus on the orbital path of Rigel VIII, especially over the last four days."

Bateson realized what his Exec was getting at. "They knew." Indignant anger bloomed in his chest, "They knew, but didn't bother to tell us."

"What about survivors?" Naturally, Allissa Mendlor's first concern was for any possible patients who would need tending. "I doubt anyone on Rigel V would know how to care for life forms like Tholians."

Larreka shook her head, expression grim, "Judging from the impact crater and the spread of wreckage, I doubt anything could have survived, even if the moon had an atmosphere the Tholians could survive in."

"Do we know how or why it crashed?"

The Romulan answered with a shrug. "Not without more detailed scans," she elaborated, "but I doubt the Home Guard will allow that."

Several shared nods of disgruntled agreement indicated that the rest of the command crew shared Larreka's assessment of the Home Guard's chances of cooperation. The two that didn't, Darren Tel

and Jason Bush, were instead quietly muttering between themselves as they looked over a couple of PADDs Darren had brought with him.

“Mr. Tel.” Rivers spoke bluntly, annoyed, “Do you have something to share with the rest of the group?”

All eyes fell on the new officer. Darren swallowed at the sudden increase in attention, but continued, “Sorry, Commander. Mr Bush and I have been looking over the scans and we both noticed something unusual.”

Rivers’ scowl deepened, “You mean beyond the obvious?”

Bateson felt a twinge of pride when he saw Darren meet his direct superior’s unimpressed glare without flinching. “Yes, sir,” he responded evenly, before looking to Bateson. “While the sensors on the *Shayaz* were primarily focused on Lt. Colonel Larreka’s find, they also picked up some unusual flux within the local fabric of space.”

“There’s that word again. Unusual how?” Bateson questioned.

It was Jason that answered, somewhat animated, “A minor ripple of quantum variance. Like a microscopic quantum fissure opened for a few moments, changing the dynamic of space-time for the briefest of moments.”

As much as Bateson admired the sheer level of genius his godson had been gifted and his eagerness for new phenomena, sometimes it left the older man feeling like the village idiot. “Which means?”

Jason’s pale face flushed, “Sorry. Essentially, the quantum barrier of the area around the moon was penetrated. Crudely, I’d say, too.” He frowned in thought for a moment, “If you think of a standard slipstream drive as using a laser scalpel to pierce the barrier, this was more like someone used a hammer and chisel.”

N’Cara’s distinctive vocoder squawked with agitation, “Are you saying the Tholians have mastered slipstream drive?”

Jason looked uncertain. He looked to Darren for back-up, who quickly stepped in. Interesting, Bateson mused, before focusing on what his newest addition was saying, “Mastered? No, not at all. But begun experimenting with? It looks that way.”

* * *

The idea that the Tholian Assembly might have access to quantum slipstream was not pleasant. While the technology had become almost standard among Starfleet and their allies, certain other powers lagged behind, the Tholians chief among them.

Tholians were historically territorial and xenophobic. They had no desire to interact with their interstellar neighbours, but would randomly annex systems and worlds near their space to spread their influence. Their space had borders along Cardassian, Talarian, Breen and Federation space, which usually meant conflicts on each of those fronts at any given time.

From what N’Cara had told him, it was the Breen who currently had incurred their wrath. If they were now using slipstream, it would mean they had the ability to launch offensives deeper than they had attempted before. It was a concern that Starfleet Command had shelved years ago when the technical

analysts had decreed that because of the unique mineral composition of both their bodies and their ships, slipstream travel would prove deleterious to them.

So much for that idea, it seemed.

But even with unsettling development, Bateson would rather be facing down a squadron of Tholian dreadnoughts with just the original *Soyuz*-class USS *Bozeman* at his command, then be dealing with Edward Jellico again.

Unfortunately, I'm not that lucky. The only saving grace that this time, it was only the admiral's holographic avatar being transmitted from the *Yamato*. The *Sovereign*-class ship had broken orbit a few hours ago to head to Rigel V, for the three admirals to continue talks with the Shipyards in person, no longer simply via subspace.

Jellico's hologram stood alongside Admiral Clancy's, the Commander-in-Chief having been brought in at Bateson's prerogative, due to the nature of their findings. While the older woman mulled over the implications of what Bateson had told them, Jellico reacted with the typical bluster and irritation that had become his hallmark since his promotion away from captaincy.

"What of it?" He crossed his arms, glaring at Bateson again, "Yes, the idea that Tholians have finally figured out how to use slipstream is a problem, but if this crashed ship is any indication, they're still working out the bugs."

Thankfully, it seemed Clancy understood the point Bateson had made, "But why did their ship end up this deep in Federation space? Was this an accidental jump, or is landing a ship in the Rigel system, a now-independent nation-state within the confines of the Federation, an indication they're planning on making some kind of strike?"

Jellico's glower intensified, "If - or when - they make an entry into our space, we can be ready for them." An arrogant smile took shape, "But any attack on the Rigel system is no longer our problem, is it? The Trade Commission made that abundantly clear."

"The Rigellians made their own bed. I say we let them lay in it."

Again, Clancy beat Bateson to the punch - almost literally, since Bateson's hands had curled into fists as the admiral delivered his opinion. "Oh, enough, Edward!"

Her avatar faced him down with a rising ire that the holographic depiction captured perfectly, "Look, we get it! You're taking the departure of Rigel from the Federation a tad personally, for whatever reason. But give it a fucking rest!"

Bateson barely stifled his grin in time. Kirsten Clancy had mellowed somewhat the last few years, but she still could swear like the proverbial sailor. Her casual use of the 'F-Bomb' had become a running joke, thanks to her upbringing on a Federation border world. Word was, even old Jean-Luc Picard had earned a few himself.

Jellico, mouth opening and closing rapidly like a fish for a moment, managed to muster enough remaining dignity to dip his head in supplication, "Of course, Admiral."

"Good." Clancy turned back to Bateson, her eyes narrowed, "Morgan, whatever happens, if the Tholians are coming for Rigel, we need to be ready. Do you think you have enough goodwill to get your people involved in some way?"

He nodded briskly, “Yes, ma’am, I do.” He offered a wicked smile, “I think I have enough pull to get, at least, a look-in on this situation.”

“Good man.” She stood straighter, “I’m hereby authorizing Starbase 134 to offer any and all assistance to the Rigellian Home Guard that may be required.” She paused, just for a moment, “With their approval, of course.”

Bateson acknowledged the order, glad to finally feel like his hands were no longer being tied by Starfleet bureaucracy. Now, he would just have to put in a call to get them moving through Rigellian red-tape.

A haze of photons made him aware that Jellico’s transmission had ended, dismissed by Clancy to get on with his own mission. Bateson found himself alone with Clancy’s hologram, who was now nervously chewing her lip. “This could be the beginning of something big, Morgan.”

He chuckled bitterly, “Yeah, I’m very aware of that. Any words of wisdom, Kirsten?”

She shot him a resigned, wry look, "Don’t fuck this up, Morgan.”

“For all our sakes.”

* * *

Larreka was in, what humans call, ‘seventh heaven’.

Part of the reason she’d eagerly jumped at the chance of joining the Officer Exchange Program was to do more cutting edge scientific research. Starfleet was light-years ahead of what remained of the Romulan Star Empire, when it came to scientific research that had no real practical applications. Much of what science and technology was about in the Empire was now aimed purely on survival, of finding a way back to the light out of the dark that the Supernova had brought on the Romulan people.

There had been other reasons, of course, for her wanting to leave Romulan space as far behind as she could, but she didn’t want to think about those right now.

Not when there was a mystery to solve. Unfortunately, doing so while head to toe in environmental hazmat gear was more than a little annoying and uncomfortable.

Judging from the noticeable fidgeting of Maruul, she wasn’t the only one. Of course, her fellow Exchange Officer was more than likely extra uncomfortable due to wearing a Starfleet-issue suit, not a Romulan-designed one. Maruul was an excellent engineer, but given how dissatisfied in general he seemed to be with working in a Starfleet installation, Larreka often wondered what had brought him into the Program. He still wore a basic Imperial Navy’s technical-division uniform, whereas Larreka had embraced her Starfleet uniform, albeit with her military rank insignia. Maruul’s was lacking much of the usual ostentatious elements of their fleet’s uniforms, but it set him apart from everyone else at Chimera.

She often wondered if it was a deliberately choice, to keep people at arms length. But part of what Larreka loved about Starfleet, and Chimera in particular, was its ability to bring together disparate souls and individuals to work in unison. She held out hope that before Maruul inevitably left, he lightened up and learned that lesson.

Still, enough of dwelling on that. Larreka refocused her attention back on her tricorder, while both Maruul and Sojen wandered around the crash-site of the Tholian ship. They'd been here for three hours, under the watchful gaze of their 'escorts', a platoon of troopers from the Rigellian Home Guard under the command of a young second lieutenant.

It had been hard to tune them out at first. They were constantly interrupting the working silence with situation updates and reports as they patrolled around the impact crater. Cutting in front if one of them wandered somewhere they shouldn't be. But once Larreka had begun to sink her teeth into the problem, she had paid them little heed.

Maruul, though, was another matter. When he bumped into her for the third time in as many minutes, she glared openly at him, "Will you pay attention?"

"Sorry." There was a complete lack of any real apology in his single utterance. He wasn't even looking at her, his attention once again on the nearest group of troopers. She was surprised to hear him growl in anger, "Do they not trust us?! Must they watch us like common criminals?!"

Larreka was exceptionally glad she'd agreed to Sojen's suggestion they switch to a private channel to talk, while keeping an ear on the troopers own channel in order to respond as and when required. It was never a good idea to insult a host. "Calm down, Maruul. They're just doing their jobs."

His under-the-breath comment caught her off-guard, "I feel like I am back home in the Empire under all this scrutiny." In the years she and Maruul had served together, she'd never heard him say anything even faintly negative about home. To hear him say something like that so randomly, it took her completely by surprise.

It took a moment for her to realize that Sojen was addressing her, "Lt. Colonel, could you come and check these readings?"

She quickened her pace to join Sojen a few meters away. He was studying what looked like the largest piece of hull they'd come across on their survey. "Please, would you scan the fragment?"

It only took a few seconds for her to see what Sojen had called her over for. She whistled in concerned awe. "Severe quantum stress indicators."

Sojen nodded his helmeted head, "I agree. It appears that the ship was unable or unaware of how to maintain the correct phase variance while within the slipstream."

An experimental prod from her gloved finger caused a section of the fragment to break off with ease. It then crumbled to dust and floated away in what little gravity the moon had. "The ship's hull lost integrity during transit. It would have cracked open like an egg even if they'd had a controlled landing."

"The same could be said for the crew, which I estimate was no more than two occupants, based on the ship's size." Sojen commented quietly. "Their carapaces may have suffered the same kind of stresses without adequate protection and disintegrated when the ship fell from slipstream."

Not a nice way to go. Larreka shuddered at the thought.

"I could use a little help over here!" Maruul's agitated voice caught both her and Sojen's attention. She soon understood why the notoriously solitary man was now requesting help.

He'd moved over to a large collection of debris, but was now being surrounded by almost the entire platoon of troopers. With care in the low gravity, Larreka made her way over as fast as possible, switching back onto the shared frequency, "What's going on here?"

The troop commander stepped forward to intercept her, with surprising ease and grace that she envied almost immediately, "Just a slight misunderstanding."

Maruul hissed in fury, pulling his arm loose from the grip of one of the troopers, "They didn't seem to appreciate my assertion that we need to take samples back to 134."

The lieutenant whirled to face Maruul, "Those 'samples' are under the supervision and purview of the Rigellian Home Guard, not Starfleet and its... 'associates'."

Before Maruul could use his mouth to make more trouble, Larreka butted in, "What kind of samples?"

Maruul took a moment to compose himself before replying. "Benamite crystals." He shrugged, a somewhat comical action in his hazmat suit, "Well, the dusty residue of what I think are benamite crystals, anyway."

"You found a slipstream core?" Sojen's curiosity was just about audible, even through layers of Vulcan control.

Maruul pointed to a melted heap of something buried under the rubble. "I found something that could have once been a quantum core."

"As I said," the lieutenant felt the need to add, "anything found here is the property of--"

"Like you could tell a quantum core from a waste extractor!" Maruul exploded with derision. "Just let us do the job we--"

"That's enough!" Having adjusted her volume gain, Larreka took no small amount of glee in watching everyone flinch as her voice echoed loudly in their helmets. She lowered it back to normal before continuing, "If you two could stop acting like humans and ditch the male posturing, we all have work to do here."

Maruul grunted noncommittally, but backed off. The lieutenant remained standing where he was, the picture of military bearing and posture. "Lieutenant, may we contact our starbase, to sort this out?"

With a begrudging nod, Larreka tasked Sojen with doing as she suggested. *Spare me the wounded egos of men...*

* * *

Having friend in high places once again paid off for Starbase Chimera.

In this case, the fact that Bateson was old friends with Jarra Hessik, the Minister of the Interior for the Governing Board, paid dividends. Thanks to her input, as well as a sly promise from Bateson to finally deliver that case of Chateau Picard he'd promised long ago, the remains of the quantum core were now ensconced within Chimera's science lab.

It wasn't much to look at, at least to Jason and Darren, who had joined Larreka and Maruul in studying it. A hunk of ruined technology that should have pierced the spatial membrane between the physical realm they existed in and the quantum veil that allowed slipstream velocities.

At least all harmful radiation had been decontaminated before its transport to Larreka's domain. Although the lab complex had not updated much in the last decade, the equipment still beat out the civilian and military hardware available to the Rigellians. If it hadn't been a matter of pride, Chimera should have been the only obvious place for this curiosity to go.

But what those instruments were telling them was only confusing them all the more.

"It definitely started out like as a standard quantum core," Jason opined. His gaze was fixed on the overhead displays, as he tried to ignore the close presence of Darren next to him. Larreka and Maruul each worked controls panels on either side of the examination dais.

Maruul grunted, apparently in agreement. If the older Romulan ever smiled, he might actually be good-looking, but that moment had never come. "It's been heavily modified, but I do recognize certain construction elements of both Federation and Romulan slipstream generators."

"But those modifications don't make any sense!" Larreka sighed heavily with frustration, massaging her forehead ridges, "I mean, they look like they were done in a rush, not to mention the sheer amount of power they must have been pouring into it."

"That might explain these scans." Jason pointed at several subspace telemetry readouts on the displays. "Those flux readings were essentially quantum 'leftovers', due to the sheer amount of power. Scar tissue on the fabric of reality from the assault it suffered."

Darren was taken aback by the softness in Jason's voice. It was almost as if he felt sorry for the abuse that space itself endured.

He quickly returned his attention back to the work when he felt Larreka's gaze on him. Saw the cheeky wink she gifted him. *Keep your mind on the job, Darren...*

* * *

Captain's Log, star date 78195.8: The revelation that Tholians have indeed created a working slipstream drive could be calamitous. If the Assembly is indeed already launching vessels such equipped, we need to be ready, especially if Rigel has entered their crosshairs. We need to up our game, especially when it comes to both theoretical and practical research into quantum slipstream travel.

Thankfully, Admiral Clancy agrees with me. However, since the Governing Board still has a degree of reticence when it comes to protracted dealings with Starfleet, we need to come at this from another angle. Therefore, I already have in mind a suitable pair of candidates for an away mission.

"Us, sir?"

It had been a long time since Jason had gone on an away assignment. Even during his brief career as a Starfleet officer, he'd rarely strayed further than his own office. Since he started work with the ASDB, he'd gone on occasional trips, lecture tours and university or research complex visits.

But this was going to be very different. At least he'd have good company, though.

In Captain Bateson's office, Jason sat next to Darren Tel, trying hard not to be aware of how close they were sitting together. Instead, he concentrated on the station commander as the older man outline his plan.

"Yes, Jason, you and Mr. Tel." Bateson looked haggard. Given the revelations, as well as the rumours flying around the base that the Admiralty were discussing decommissioning Starbase 134, he must not have been getting much rest.

"Starfleet itself doesn't have much goodwill with the Governing Board as a whole. So, I want to send you two in as our unofficial 'diplomats', as it were."

Darren asked the question Jason had been considering, "But, sir. Aren't Admiral Jellico and his party already there?"

Bateson shook his head, "Their meeting is directly with the heads of the Rigel Construction Guild, separate from any governmental dealings. I want you two to meet with Minister Hessik, who has agreed to meet you at the Shipyards."

"Jason, as a civilian with the ASDB, you hopefully won't have the stigma from wearing the uniform. That's why you'll be the lead on this assignment." His steely gaze then wandered to Darren, "Darren, you'll provide escort and back-up, so Mr Bush isn't totally alone." He offered a wry grin, "You might not receive the warmest welcome, but you do have the technical acumen to keep up and assist Jason in convincing the Minister what needs to be done."

"Understood, sir." Darren's firm response and brief nod seemed to be the only reaction he was offering. Jason, though, still wasn't convinced. He was a propulsion theorist, a starship designer, not an ambassador or envoy.

His doubts must have been written across his face, as Bateson offered a sympathetic, supportive smile, "I can't order you to do this, son. But you know I wouldn't ask this of you if I didn't have complete faith in you." He then winked playfully, "Plus, I don't have a lot of other options and we're pressed for time."

Emboldened by his godfather's faith in him, as well as his honesty, Jason felt his doubts waver and evaporate.

He was a Bush. He had this in the bag. *I've got this.*

* * *

The hours since the departure of Darren and Jason had not passed easily for Gabe Bush.

He was very aware that his pacing of the deck around the situation table, as well as his constant looking over the shoulder of the officers and technicians on duty at the post, was getting on everyone's nerves.

They'd received two reports since their arrival at the Rigel V Shipyards. The first was just to let them know of their arrival. The second had not been encouraging. Darren had reported that, despite Jason's efforts, it was not going in their favour.

It had been a long shot, then had all known that going in. But, still, it had been hard to to get hopes up. Would everything they had been working for in the Rigel system come crashing down around them?

Bush's morose thoughts were interrupted by a series of sensors alarms coming from the stations that fell under Larreka's purview. The science officer bolted for them, easing away the duty officers to check readings for herself.

Her eyes widened as she took in whatever it was displaying, before delivering her report to the rest of Central Ops, "I set our orbital arrays on active scan, keeping an eye out for any more fluctuations in the space/subspace barrier of local space."

"They found something." Bateson, stood at the situation displays, phrased it more as a statement than a question.

Larreka nodded slowly, "Some kind of--, well, I guess you'd call it a 'quantum surge', I suppose? Very near to Rigel VIII. Only lasting a few moments, but enough to trigger an alert."

Bateson whirled on Bush, "Any response from the Rigellians?"

Bringing up active sensor feeds and system-wide alerts, Bush felt the blood rush from his face as he saw what was happening around Rigel V. "You could say that, sir."

Oh hell. This was not going to end well...

* * *

This is not how I imagined my first away mission would go.

His hands clamped over his ears, Darren was trying to muffle the deafening bleating of the alarm klaxons resounding through the laughable 'quarters' that he and Jason had been unceremoniously shoved into. But it only eased the decibel levels an appreciable fraction.

He looked to Jason, who instead of doing the same, was enduring the aural assault at full blast, instead keeping his hands free to manipulate the console of the room's solo computer terminal. "What's going on?"

Jason, wincing in pain from the noise level, offered a brief shake of his head, "Not a clue, but like hell am I just sitting around waiting to be told."

With speed Darren found impressive and a little intimidating, he watched as Jason effortlessly bypassed whatever standard security firewalls and lockouts had been put in place on the guest terminal. Within moments, Jason had full access to the Shipyards mainframe and was pulling up the latest data screens.

He couldn't fault the man his work, either. They'd been due to meet with Minister Hessik again when the meeting had been cancelled after alarms had started going off. The guards who had been their 'escorts' had sent them back to their room, which had then been locked behind them. No word of explanation. The room even lacked any viewports to allow them to see whatever activity had Shipyard personnel in a fluster.

"Darren..." Something in Jason's voice made Darren's blood turn to ice. The stunned look he gave him only made him colder. "They've scrambled a dozen Home Guard defensive cruisers. With orders to proceed at maximum impulse to an area of quantum instability forming near Rigel VIII."

This is it, Darren realized with growing horror. The Tholians are invading...

* * *

“There’s severe quantum stresses,” Larreka reported, her voice as emotionless as a Vulcan’s that it made Bush shudder to hear it so devoid of feeling. “An area of instability is forming that could lead to an aperture.”

“You mean a slipstream exit vortex?” Bateson asked for clarification.

Larreka studied her readings for a moment longer, as her expression grew more confounded, “I-- I’m not sure, Captain. There’s something strange about these readings.”

“She’s right,” Maruul added. “They’re not like any slipstream formation models we’ve studied in the past.”

“I have Admiral Jellico on the line, Captain,” interjected Sojen at his Ops console.

The central viewscreen flickered into life, showing the bridge of the *Yamato*, Jellico in the command chair. [Seems like we have a situation developing here, Bateson.]

Bush scoffed, glad he was out of viewer pickup. *Gee, ya think, Admiral?* Bateson remained impassive, “Agreed, sir. We’re prepared to offer any assistance we can. What about you and your crew?”

Jellico’s expression hardened, [If and when the time comes, the *Yamato* can take care of herself and the other Starfleet ships in the system. We can evacuate you and yours if need be to. But I will not risk my people to fight for a system that may already be lost to us.]

“Sir?” Like Bush, it seemed Bateson couldn’t believe what he was hearing coming out of the admiral’s mouth.

[If the Rigellians had been upfront with us from the start, we might have had more warning about an attack,] Jellico defended himself. His face turned sombre, [But I’m not the bastard you might think. If they ask for help, we’ll assist, but we have to be realistic.]

[*Yamato*, out.]

The screen went dark. Bush started at it in furious disbelief. “What a damn coward!”

“Stow that talk, mister.” Bateson glared at him angrily for a moment. “While I disagree with his stance, he’s a Starfleet Admiral, so remember that.”

Bush muttered a contrite apology, as Bateson joined him and Rivers near the Tactical consoles. “Besides, he didn’t order us not to prepare in any and all ways we can.”

He tossed a look over his shoulder at Larreka and N’Cara, “Ladies, would you be so good as to keep your eyes peeled for anything. I want to know so much as a micron of movement out near Rigel VIII.”

Then, he faced Maruul and Sojen, “Boys, do what you can to get as much sensor gain as you can. Give us as detailed a picture of the areas as you can manage.”

Finally, he looked back to Bush and Rivers. “Gabe, Chris, how many ships do we have docked at Rigel V?”

Rivers answered straight away, “Five ships, excluding the *Yamato*, sir. But only two are combat-ready, the *Magellan* and the *Nathan Hale*.”

Bush remembered the ships from a daily update. Both *Inquiry*-class cruisers, they were tactically superior ships. Rivers continued, “The other three are all in the mid-stages of massive overhauls with their crews on shore-leave.”

Bateson sighed but nodded, “Understood. Gabe, I need you to contact their C.O.s Have them ready whatever they can, even if it just means getting their impulse engines on-line long enough to get clear of any fighting.”

His expression became grim, “They deserve to be kept up to date, just in case Jellico doesn’t feel like sharing. Then you need to get *Chimera* ready for combat. Prep our weapons batteries and shield generators. Begin moving all non-essential personnel and civilians into emergency shelters.”

A sudden nagging realization hit Bush. Something in the way Bateson was talking. “Just what are planning on doing, Morgan?”

Bateson grinned sheepishly, “You’ve know me too long, old friend.” That wasn’t an answer, Bush realized belatedly, as Bateson looked back at Rivers, “Chris, you and me have somewhere we need to be.”

Bush felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. *I really don't like the sound of that...*

* * *

There was nothing either of them could do but watch.

In the now-thankfully-silent quest quarters, Jason remained sitting as he watched the surveillance feed he’d brought up on the terminal display. On it, the twelve *Trident*-class defensive cruisers were exiting their docking berths and heading deep into the Rigel system.

The system I call home with my family is about to go to war, but I'm stuck on the sidelines! Jason shook his head, a fierce determination welling up from within. *No, no way in Hell am I sitting this out!*

Bolting from his seat, he began examining the door entry panel. *Maybe, if I pull off the front and get into the guts of it..* As he began his work, he felt Darren step up next to him. “What are you--?”

He wasn’t in the mood for explanation, so he kept it brief, “We need to get out there and do something.”

When he felt Darren’s hand on his shoulder, though, he stopped. Looked deep into the icy-blue eyes. “I agree,” the Starfleet officer said. He then showed Jason the sonic screwdriver he held. An older model, but heavily modified, with a blue diode on the tip. “But I think this’ll be a faster way.”

Impressed, Jason stepped aside as Darren began tweaking the settings on the device and used it to quickly override the panel. Second later, the door opened with little fuss. “The only thing my father even gave me that was actually useful,” he explained.

However, any celebratory mood the two shared was extinguished as they walked out of their room to come face to face with a squad of Shipyards Security officers. “Oops..?”

Using the phaser rifles for emphasis, the guards soon guided the two humans down the corridor and into a turbo-lift. Without meaning to, with the close quarters of the lift, Jason's fingers brushed Darren's. To his surprise, he felt Darren's intertwine with his. Gripping them tightly, offering comfort and support while also taking the same from him.

Even with everything going on, it was a nice feeling.

Finally, the lift opened up again, the guards pushing them out. Jason was surprised to find that they had been brought up to Flight Ops Control, the main command centre for the Shipyards docking administration.

In the midst of the flurry of activity of the staff stood Minister Jarra Hessik. The statuesque Rigellian Zami woman was dressed in official robes befitting her station as Minister of the Interior. One of the highest-ranking members of the Governing Board below the Directors of each member planet or colony of the United Rigel Worlds.

After consulting with one of the staff, she gave them an aggrieved look, "We don't take kindly to breaches of our internal network, gentlemen." Her expression then softened, "But I imagine you dislike being kept in the dark, either, so let's call it even, hmm?"

She waved them forward, as Jason uttered a silent prayer of thanks that Jarra was an old friend of both Bateson and his father's. Thanks to their good working relationship having evolved from a genuine friendship before hand, she was more approachable and less guarded than many of her political brethren.

"Our ships are on course to Rigel VIII," she explained, pointing to a tactical plot on the overhead screen. "If the Tholians are launching some kind of offensive, we'll be ready. The projected size of the aperture appears to be small enough for several ships."

That doesn't make any sense, Jason realized. Why give the game away if this wasn't a full-scale invasion or attack. But his ruminations were cut short when a new sensor contact appeared on the monitor, fast approaching the Rigellian Home Guard flotilla.

"What is that?" Hessik demanded of a technician.

"It appears to be an *Allegheny*-class Starfleet runabout, Minister."

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was more than likely flying it. Jason looked to Darren, seeing the same look of realization in his eyes. Despite having only joined their kooky group a few days, he got it.

There's only one man crazy enough to be in the thick of it in a runabout...

* * *

"Attention, ships of the Rigellian Home Guard, this is Captain Morgan Bateson of Starbase 134, aboard the USS *Shayaz*."

Sitting at the co-pilot's console, allowing Chris Rivers to take the *Shayaz* where it needed to be, Bateson focused on keeping his tone even, voice diplomatic and nerves steady as he addressed the armed ships now focusing on his small craft.

“We are here purely as observers. We will not get involved without being directly engaged in any hostile actions. The defence of this system is under your control. However, should the need arise, we are ready to act as a direct link to Starfleet if or when you might need any assistance.”

He cut the comm channel, looking to Rivers, “Any change?”

River curtly shook his head, “No active weapons locks or scans on us, Captain. They seem to be buying it for now.”

The chirp of an incoming hail pulled his attention from sensor screens. It elicited a grimace, “It’s the *Yamato*.”

Bateson winced, “Probably Jellico wanting to read me the Riot Act for being out here.” With a determined stab of a control, he silenced the alert. “He can wait, we have more important matters to deal with and so does he.”

Bateson deliberately ignored the rare wisecracking grin River shot him, although he privately admitted it was nice to see something other than a frown on the tactical officer’s grizzled face.

It also felt good to ignore the pompous ass. Even though he was probably going to pay for it later...

* * *

[What in the blazes is that man thinking?!

It was rare to see a senior Starfleet admiral that red-faced with apoplectic rage. It took everything Gabe Bush had not to laugh at the sight. But as Executive Officer of Starbase Chimera, the veteran knew how to keep a poker face intact.

“Captain Bateson is doing what he’s been ordered to do, Admiral.” His voice even and pleasant, Bush kept his posture relaxed at parade rest as he faced down Jellico via viewscreen. “What his mission here at Rigel IV has been about since he took command.”

“He’s doing anything and everything he can to keep the Rigel system and the Federation allied at any cost. Orders given to him directly by the Commander in Chief of the Federation Starfleet. Orders which supersede any other orders given to him by a ranking officer.”

“That includes you, Admiral. Although, I would also add that we are still proceeding with preparing for possible evacuation if it becomes required. Captain Bateson is not needed here to facilitate that, so he’s going where he can do the most good.”

Jellico gritted his teeth loudly enough to it to be heard over the audio pick-up, [Here’s hoping it doesn’t backfire on him. *Yamato*, out.]

That ass really does need to always get the last word, doesn’t he. Bush pushed all thoughts of Jellico aside, focusing on what really mattered. “Status?”

“On schedule with evac prep,” Sojen answered succinctly.

Larreka stepped down to the command floor, arms crossed defensively over her chest. “What happens now?”

Bush sighed, suddenly fatigued, “We wait. We pray. We hope.”

All he really knew at that moment was that they'd bought enough time for the Rigellian fleet, along with the *Shayaz*, to get to Rigel VIII. What happened after that, well, it was one of two limited options. Either they'd got it all wrong, and this was all a big blow-up over nothing...

Or they were about to be pulled into a war.

* * *

It was like watching space ballet.

With grace belying their size and shape, the dozen *Trident*-class cruisers moved into defensive postures, forming a tight-knit formation around the area of space that sensors projected was suffering severe quantum stresses.

"They're going weapons hot, shields at full strength," reported Rivers, interrupting Bateson's quiet admiration of Home Guard fleet manoeuvres. "Can't say I blame them, either."

Grunting reluctant agreement, Bateson silently hoped that diplomacy could win out with whatever was about to go down. Phaser fire would quite literally ignite a shooting war that neither side would come out off unscathed.

But it was the sensor scan data he was reading that truly confounded Bateson at the moment, "Larreka, are you getting this?"

[Affirmative, Captain,] came the Romulan's reply over the channel they'd established. [It's peculiar, definitely.]

"No sign of any ships," Rivers confirmed, "just some very strange subspatial flux."

[But it's over such a relatively small area,] Larreka murmured. [And the variances are all over the place across the entire region.]

"Theories?"

He could hear the uncertainty in the science officer's voice, [Perhaps the beginnings of a slipstream exit aperture, but it must be very unstable. That would track, though, with the modified core from the Tholian ship.]

Rivers cocked an irate eyebrow, "I hear a 'but' coming."

There was a huff of irritation, [However, I don't understand why it's taking so long to form! I mean, that isn't normal. Apertures open or close almost instantly.]

"Whatever changes the Tholians made to the technology to make it work for them may be responsible," Bateson postulated, but readily willing to admit he was no scientist. But it gave him an idea, "Maybe we can use that, though. Can we do something to halt or stabilize the quantum flux? I don't know, seal or prevent the aperture before it finally forms."

[Maruul here, Captain,] his Chief Engineer spoke up, [That's actually not a bad idea.]

No need to sound that surprised, Bateson griped, as the Romulan continued, [Normally, like Larreka says, because they form so fast, it would be impossible to prevent it. But because this one's different, we could fire a phase-resonant graviton pulse.]

The techno babble went right over Bateson's head, but he kept on listening, [You can rig the deflector to do that easily enough if I send you the parameters. That should destabilize any forming quantum matrix.]

Rivers confirmed the receipt of Maruul's instructions with a nod, as Larreka chimed in, [In theory, yes. But it's never been done before. I mean, it's not like this has been looked into with any appreciable research.]

"No time like the present." Bateson then instructed Rivers to begin the necessary reprogramming of the deflector. There was no time to waste.

[Morgan.] Larreka sounded worried, [This could do irreparable damage to the fabric of space. It could also destroy any vessels that may be within a slipstream heading this way.]

"If we can end a battle before it begins, Larreka," he answered honestly, hearing how hard his voice sounded, "then we have to this."

"But it's not just my decision to make."

* * *

Morgan Bateson's visage dominated the viewer in Flight Ops Control. [We don't have a lot of options here, Minister.]

"Captain Bateson," Hessik began, glowering at the image, "while I appreciate you putting yourself out there alongside my people, the Home Guard is capable of handling the situation."

[Of that I have no doubt, Minister, if it comes to a fight.] Bateson replied smoothly. [But we can avoid a fight to begin with if we do this. The *Shayaz* is a ship prepped for slipstream upgrades, our deflector can fire the pulse via those modifications. Your ships can't.]

[Jarra, please] he then said softly, but still in a tone that carried meaning and hope. [Rigel is my home, too. I've lived here for over six years now. I cannot sit back and watch harm come to it if I can help it.]

Darren could see Hessik wavering in her stance. Her arms were crossed across her chest defensively, while she was nervously rubbing a thumb and forefinger together. Bateson continued his case, [If the Tholians invade, this system won't survive. Not without the help of friends and allies. Despite the Board's issues with the Federation Council, we are still very much both your friend and ally.]

[So let us help.]

All eyes in the room fell on Hessik. If she was aware of the scrutiny, she gave no clue. She only had eyes for the pleading Bateson. Darren realized belatedly he was holding his breath, waiting for her to make a decision.

"Do it." Hessik said the words almost too silently for anyone to hear. Then she stood a little straighter, and repeated herself more firmly. "Do it, Captain. You have my authorization."

She then tossed a look at the duty officer, "Signal our ships to back off for the time being and allow Captain Bateson to try his solution."

"Let's pray it's the right move."

* * *

The blackness of space was lit up by verdant green fire.

The *Shayaz* had rocked as the graviton pulse had been fired, but now Bateson and Rivers were being blinded as well as shaken as the pulse took effect.

“Detecting a massive quantum fluctuation!” Rivers reported over the din of alarms.

[It’s not an aperture opening!] Despite everything, the comm channel had maintained, allowing Bateson to hear Larreka’s incredulity. [By Erebus, it’s some kind of distortion field, using quantum-phasing!]

The energy of the pulse expanded in the blink of an eye, before winking out in a flash of emerald glare. Bateson blinked away afterimages in his retina, then found himself gaping open-mouth at the sight out of the *Shayaz*’s forward viewport.

Where once had been only space, there now sat a trio of Tholians ships. Ships that looked like they’d been through Hell and back. Twice.

“Three *Webspinner*-class cruisers,” Rivers confirmed. “Minimal power. No shields or weapons in evidence. In fact, their hulls have been badly ionized.”

[From being inside the field,] Larreka added with amazement, [If I’m reading these sensors right, they synchronized their shield harmonics using a quantum modulation, acting as a unified whole.]

Bateson tried to wrap his head around it, “You mean it was a kind of quantum cloak?” As he studied how beat-up and haggard the ship were, just from looking at them, it hit him,

This wasn't an invasion. This was a hideaway.

* * *

“What do you mean, they were hiding?”

Bateson was beginning to get used to starting down Edward Jellico. Once again, the admiral’s holographic avatar appeared alongside Kirsten Clancy in Bateson’s ready room. But this time, he was also joined by Gabe Bush, Larreka and N’Cara.

“The Tholians are refugees, Admirals,” he calmly explained. He looked to N’Cara, allowing the Intelligence Officer to take over.

“There was a Breen attack on Assembly holdings recently,” the Breen officer explained. “These ships carry survivors from a Tholian scientific colony researching slipstream travel. When the attack happened, they used their prototype test-ships to flee. The crashed ship was a scout that opened a slipstream that the other three followed through.”

Larreka took over, “However, their trip was a rough one. The scout fell out of slipstream and crashed. Mostly from the modifications they made to expand and hold the slipstream for the other ships. Tholians being as they are, they made further modifications to fashion a way to hide in the quantum barrier.”

“They would have stayed there, hidden, making repairs before leaving quietly,” Bateson concluded, “but the crash brought too much attention. That, along with the field being jerry-rigged, it was just a matter of time before they were discovered.”

“We thought it was an invasion.” Jellico muttered, ashamed and defeated. “If the Rigellians had gone in weapons blazing--”

“It could have been on defenceless ships,” Clancy finished, just as shell-shocked. “We’ve have been pulled into it, when we’ve barely recovered from the Iconians, the Borg, it would have thrown the Quadrant into upheaval again.”

“Not to mention the Gorn and Breen nipping at our heels, both Klingons and Romulans getting antsy, or the Cardassians still stewing behind their own border,” Bateson not-so-subtly reminded his superiors.

Clancy spared him with a dirty look before facing Jellico, “Admiral, you have your orders. I want the *Yamato* to head out ASAP.”

“Acknowledged, Admiral,” Jellico replied crisply. He then spared a brief glance and nod to Bateson, “Good work, Captain.”

With that, his image shimmered away, leaving Bateson more than a little stunned. He looked to Clancy, “What orders?”

“The *Yamato* is offering escort to the Tholian ships. They managed to get their warp drives on-line now their quantum cores are powered down. Jellico will guide them in an expedient course back to Tholian space.” She pursed her lips, crossing her arms, “A delegation from the Diplomatic Corps will join them mid-way, to see if there is any non-military assistance we can offer in their conflict with the Breen.”

N’Cara’s vocoder made a derisive squawk of static that was politely ignored by everyone present. Bateson dismissed his officers, leaving him alone again with Clancy’s hologram.

“You took a hell of a big risk, Morgan,” Clancy chided, although it also sounded like she admired him as well. Take the win, he reminded himself. “It could have gone very wrong, though. Plus, neither of us are on Edward’s Christmas card list.”

“Somehow, I’ll live with the disappointment.”

Clancy grinned widely, “Still, good work. Not every day you get to go riding to the rescue again, is it?”

The full-throated laugh felt good. “That it did! But I know not to get used to it.”

It was true. He knew those days were behind him. That was why he’d left behind commanding a starship to accept the stability and grounding that running a starbase allowed.

But it was fun to remind himself of the ‘good old days’ every once in a while...

The End