

STAR TREK CHIMERA

ReMastered

1x02: "LONG DAYS JOURNEY INTO NIGHT"

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Based on 'Star Trek'

created by Gene Roddenberry

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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

As he cast his gaze around the Chimera Lounge, the main center of rest and relaxation of Starbase 134, Captain Morgan Bateson looked for one officer in particular.

The crowds of officers and enlisted personnel had gathered to celebrate the news that with the upswing in positive relations between the Federation and the United Rigel Worlds, Starbase Chimera would not be decommissioned. It had been a long night of back-slapping and merriment, with Bateson breaking out his own private stash of genuine, non-replicated and fully alcoholic Saurian brandy. But now, the group was thinning as people retired to their bunks to face the challenges another day on Rigel IV would inevitably bring.

After many a hearty congratulations from what felt like every member of his stalwart and dedicated starbase crew, Bateson was glad to finally have a moment to himself. To collect his thoughts on the mammoth task that sat before him. Kirsten Clancy, the Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet herself, had given him a no-holds barred and characteristically blunt assessment of just how difficult a job he had.

But Bateson was a man who craved challenges, as befitting a man of his upbringing in the mid 23rd century. He had a tough-as-nails crew and a command staff of seasoned and experienced officers and advisors who told him what he needed to hear, not what they thought was best.

The newest recruit to the group was currently standing on the balcony edge of the Lounge. He wasn't alone, either. Leaning against the railing, Darren Tel's eyes were captivated not by the sight of all the twinkling lights that dominated the night sky, but instead focused exclusively on the face of his companion. From Bateson's current vantage point, Jason Bush's gaze was likewise just as mesmerized by Darren's. Neither of them paid any attention to a sky that was already beginning to fill with morning light, thanks to Rigel's two suns. Their hands were interlaced on the railing, fingers caressing slowly, caught up in each others' presence in the beginnings of a blossoming attraction that had been obvious from the second they'd met on Darren's first day on Rigel IV.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" The voice of Gabe Bush, Starbase 134's First Officer, was filled with paternal pride. Bateson stole a quick look, catching the almost wistful faraway look in the moustached man's eyes as Bush took a sip of his club soda. "Kinda makes you long for the days of first love again."

A casual listener might not have picked up on the mild undercurrent of pain that tinged Bush's words. But Bateson had known this man for more years than he cared to think about and remember. He had helped Bush pull himself together not once, but twice, because of the grief loosing a cherished lover. It was something he hoped that he would personally never have to endure.

Taking a sip of his own drink, a glass of real Saurian brandy from his private stash, Bateson decided to move the subject on to other, more frivolous topics. "It's just good to see people enjoying themselves. Letting their hair down."

Bush let out an amused snort into his own drink, "Literally as well as figuratively." He indicated a couple dancing the night away on the main floor. With a start, Bateson realized who it was. *Good Lord, how much have those two had to drink?!*

Larreka and Chris Rivers, their bodies intertwined with nary a picometer of space between them, danced friviously to the Betazoid jazz thumping through the lounge's sound system. True to Bush's words, the Romulan science officer had indeed let her caramel-blond hair loose from the up-do she

normally wore it in. Both had loosened their uniform jackets, their torsos pressed together as they danced the night away.

"They're going to be feeling it tomorrow," Bush commented. He shot a sly look towards his superior officer. "I told you that sharing the 'good stuff' wasn't the best idea."

Bateson grimaced. *You may have been right, old friend.* Saurian brandy wasn't as potent as Romulan ale, but it had a quick kick if you weren't ready for it. Given their good news, it had felt like the right time to break one of his bottles out of storage, but perhaps he should not have been as generous with he had been.

Bidding his X.O. a good-night as Bush called it and made his exit, Bateson left Larreka and Rivers to their energetic dance-moves to get back to the business at hand.

As he walked out onto the balcony, Bateson felt a small stab of embarrassment and guilt for interrupting what was clearly a private moment. But as much as he was a romantic at heart himself, and was beyond pleased to see a possible young love forming before his eyes during such troubled times, Bateson was also a practical man who understood that duty would often rear its head at the most inopportune times.

Politely clearing his throat as unobtrusively as he could, Bateson stepped forward as both younger men turned to face him in mild surprise, "Apologies for interrupting, gentlemen." He offered a soft smile as he met Darren's curious gaze, "But I'm afraid I need to speak to Commander Tel for a few moments."

Having known Jason Bush for the entirety of the young man's life, Bateson knew just how whip-smart and savvy he was. Whether it came to warp theory, quantum physics or, thankfully, interpersonal communication. He knew Bateson wanted to have some private time of his own with Darren. But it was only with reluctance as he pulled his hand away from Darren's. "I'll go grab one final drink before they finally shut down the bar."

Bateson nodded a thank-you, allowing a disappointed Darren a moment to watch as Jason walked away. Finally, he turned his gaze back towards his commanding officer, "Is there something I can do for you, Captain?"

"I wanted to personally say well done to you," he began, enjoying the look of surprise on the young man's face. "Being sent into the lion's den, as it were, surrounded by hostile politicians and soldiers is not exactly everyone's cup of tea."

Darren felt a familiar heat of embarrassment at the praise. The mild blush only made him look younger than his 27 years. "You and Commander Rivers are the ones who flew a runabout into a massing armada ready for battle with unknown forces, sir." He smirked, "Having that going on, along with Admiral Jellico yelling in your ear, isn't what I'd call an easy route, in comparison."

He's right about that. Bateson allowed a mild chuckle, "How you survived even a short time on the *Yamato* with him, I'll never know." He cleared his throat, making a point of looking at least a little contrite, "Though, far be it for us to speak ill of a superior officer, eh?"

"Of course, sir." He knew it was the alcohol he'd imbibed, but Darren couldn't help but feel like he could relax around Morgan Bateson. He was nothing like Admiral Jellico, a man who seemed to delight in keeping his crew at arm's length.

Probably going to have a hell of a hangover, I doubt he's used to the real thing, Bateson couldn't help thinking, at the slightly-glazed eyes and conspiratorial smile.

"I have high hopes for you and your career while you're with us here, Mr. Tel." he offered. He waited a moment, hoping the pause would lend some extra weight to his next words, "I know you want to make your mother eat her words."

Darren's good mood and wide smile vanished so abruptly that it took Bateson by surprise. A horrible chill ran through his spine, like a trickle of ice water, as he stammered a response, "You-- you're aware that..?"

Bateson nodded, "Yes, I know who your mother is." Daniella Reese, the recently appointed Chief of Starfleet Tactical, had made many waves in recent years. Her hawkish attitude to Federation defense was becoming something of the standard of late. "I am also aware that you and she had some rather heated debates regarding your posting here."

The sting of shame Darren felt at that moment almost physically hurt. Seeing just how embarrassed his words were making the assistant chief tactical officer, Bateson changed his approach, "But that has not and will never affect the status of your assignment. You have a place here for as long as you want it."

Darren coughed, clearing his throat as a transparent cover for how awkward he was feeling at his superior officer's words, "I-- I appreciate that, Captain."

Offering what he hoped would be seen for what it was, a comforting smile and encouraging nod, Bateson bid the young man good-night. "I'll see you in the morning."

Turning, he wasn't at all surprised to see Jason eagerly waiting in the wings to sweep back in and resume their previous 'discussion'. Finishing the last of his drink and plopping the glass down on the nearest empty table, Bateson headed out, looking forward to the comfort of his bed and the bliss of restful sleep.

Tomorrow was a new day.

* * *

The primary of the two Rigel stars rose high that morning, its light heralding the beginning of the day. The smaller twin, a mere pinprick compared to its larger sibling, was visible in the clear blue sky. The light caressed the collection of buildings and structures that was collectively known as Starbase Chimera, and for the most part, was welcomed by all.

But one particular resident, forced awake as the brightness hit his face through the open window, wasn't too thrilled. Waking reluctantly, Darren Tel rubbed at itchy, burning eyes, as what felt like a herd of Berengerian dragons marched through his cranium. *Urgh... what the Hell did I drink last night?*

Wanting nothing more than a glass of water to ease the sandpaper rubbing his throat, Darren shifted his weight on his bed, blinking as he looked around. He spotted the chronometer in the wall display above the desk, grimaced when he realized he was due on duty in less than an hour. I need coffee.

Hungover, muddled thoughts grew more confused. *Where'd that vase come from? Wait, this isn't my apart--*

"Morning." The sleepy but content voice of Jason Bush is enough to grab Darren's undivided attention. But the teasing glint in Jason's eyes fades as he sees the look of bewilderment in the eyes of the person currently sharing his bed.

The memories of last night, frighteningly crystal clear to Darren's chagrin, came rushing back. "Oh..." He didn't need to look under the covers to know that neither he nor Jason were wearing any lick of clothing. In fact, the majority of what they'd worn the night before now covered the bedroom floor. "Fuck..."

Jason cleared his throat, trying to maintain his dignity, all warm and fuzzy feelings he'd been nursing since awakening 20 minutes ago gone. "Yes, we did. Several times." He heard how sharp he sounded, but frankly, he didn't care right now. It had been a while since he'd woken up next to anyone. This isn't how he'd imagining it going.

Darren's face turned a brighter shade of red, as he practically scrambled from the bed, grabbing at what he hoped was his uniform. Pulling it on as fast as he could, as he tried to say something - anything - to cover how chaotic his thoughts were, only managing to mumble, "I-- I don't usually do this. We were--"

"Yes, we were," Jason interrupted, trying to tamper down his own growing embarrassment and ire, "But we're both adults. You didn't force me, and I certainly didn't--"

"No, God! No, not at all!" Darren was mortified, realizing he was sending all the wrong signals, to a guy he really, really liked. "This is just coming out all wrong," he finally admitted.

Seeing just how worked up and upset Darren was becoming helped bleed away Jason's anger, at least partially. "Look, why don't you sit down. We can talk--"

"I-- I have duty soon, I'm sorry." Darren backed away, holding the rumpled pile of clothing he hadn't managed to pull on yet in front of him defensively. "Maybe later..?"

Given the lack of conviction in his voice, it wasn't clear who he was trying to reassure. But Jason just nodded slowly, "Sure. Okay."

They stared at each other for a few long, arduous seconds before Darren finally turned his back on Jason and made as hasty an exit as he could. Sitting up in bed, all alone, still feeling the heat from where Darren had been laying only moments ago, Jason pulled the covers up close.

That could have gone a lot better, he commiserated morosely. Feeling far too alone, and far too exposed. Neither of them had done anything to be feel ashamed or guilty about.

So why had Darren reacted like that?

* * *

Bateson sat at his usual place at the head of the rectangular master situation workstation, that doubled as a briefing and conference table for the senior staff in Central Ops. His regular cup of coffee in hand, the aroma wafted through his nostrils and banishing the final vestiges of last night's intoxication as he continued listening to his officers give their department reports and updates.

Allissa finished her report by bringing up an away mission she would be leading, "The oceanography research team to study the undersea ridge formations is due for their standard 30-day medical and mechanical check-up."

Larreka, in her role as Science Officer, then briefed them about the work being conducted by the team from the Rigellian Science Institute. She didn't look any worse for wear considering her 'antics' of the night before, and was exuding excitement as she explained what the purpose of the team's research was, "They're here to see if Rigel IV is a good place for a possible application of the Atlantis Protocol."

It was an incredibly intriguing and ambitious concept. The Atlantis Protocol was so named after the man-made geofomed continent back on Earth. Given the number of refugees that still flooded into the system since the Iconian and Borg incidents, an extra landmass or two to settle them was appealing, even if it would take at least several years to take effect.

As Larreka finished her summation, Bateson listened with half an ear. Part of being a commanding officer was being able to keep an eye on an overall situation at all times, even when performing other duties of command. Given all his years in the role, Bateson was experienced and keyed in to things around him. So, as he outlined various tasks for officers to see to, and listened to reports from the department heads, he noticed two things.

The first was the the light-hearted and cheerful air of the previous night's celebrations had begun to fade somewhat. Now that Chimera was staying put, the hard work and daunting task they had - to fly the Federation flag in a system where trust in the UFP was at an all-time low, hung heavy. But Bateson had a strong degree of faith in his crew and what they could - and would - deliver.

The second thing was the somewhat overt formality and stiff demeanour Darren Tel was projecting. Gone was the affable but dedicated man that had arrived not so long ago. Something was definitely eating at the young man, but he was doing his damndest to show a professional and dedicated front.

Add to that the marked absence of Jason Bush from the morning huddle. Although not technically part of the command hierarchy, Jason's role of Liaison for the Advanced Starship Design Bureau and his involvement in operational decisions within Chimera was part and parcel of everyday life on Rigel IV. For him to miss a huddle wasn't like him.

The meeting coming to an end, everyone went off their separate ways, each to their own tasks. Bateson watched as Darren headed to a free workstation. It was like the proverbial dark cloud was hanging over his head. Even if he hadn't seen how close the two young men had grown so quickly for himself, Bateson could still do the math in these kinds of situations.

Still, if it was that kind of situation, his best action would be to stay out of it for now. *Don't worry about it, until you have to...*

* * *

Packing her medical kit, Allissa Mendlor reviewed her mental check-list of everything, satisfied it all seemed in order. As CMO, she could have naturally delegated the relative menial task of field medical certification to one of her attendings or senior residents. She had rounds to conduct, charts to sign off and various in-progress experiments that needed checking on.

But while the scientific endeavour that the research team were setting the groundwork for was intriguing, Allissa had another motivation. Driven by her natural inclination to act as a 'den mother', if she remembered the term used by Gabe Bush a long time ago. Down to her concern for a fellow officer - and her close friend.

"I think I made a very big mistake."

Looking around, Allissa found Larreka, the very person she had just been thinking of. The lack of a friendly smile and a snarky but friendly jibe immediately set warning bells off for Allissa. Well, more of the same. She'd been nursing some concerns for her Romulan friend since the morning huddle. Although she'd seemed fine to the casual observer, Allissa recognized the telltale signs that something was bothering her.

She waved the other woman in, "Come in, have a seat."

As Larreka squirmed in the chair across from her, Allissa remained silent. Allowing her to work through it at her own pace. A point Larreka was thankful for, even if it only compounded the embarrassment and mortification she was feeling at the moment. Finally, she just came out with it.

"I had sex with Chris." *Oh, Erebus's flame. That just made it all the more real.*

Eyes wide as saucer in mounting disbelief, Allissa listened as Larreka laid it all out for her. Trying to wrap her brain around what she was hearing. "You did what?! Are you insane?!"

Larreka's grimace of shame said it all, "You don't have to make it sound that horrendous."

Offering a mumbled apology, Allissa tried to process this new information. "Was it..?"

A sharp shake of the head was her initial answer. "I don't want to think about it." Squaring her shoulders, Larreka looked her dead in the eye, "Can you prescribe me a dose of emergency contraception?"

Allissa felt understanding and sympathy swell within her, "Of course." She immediately stood and moved to the medical replicator in her office. As she called up an appropriate Romulan-safe option, she had a duty of care to ask, "Neither you or Rivers took any prophylactic measures?"

Larreka squirmed again, her shame growing in leaps and bounds, "Well, neither of us gave it much thought at the time." She eventually shrugged, "I mean, I haven't taken any contraceptive injections in years, and I'm really not comfortable asking him either, so..?"

"I understand." With the hypo prepared, Allissa placed in on Larreka's neck, giving her the standard read-through of possible side effects and to contact her immediately if any odd symptoms presented themselves.

"Whatever they are, I'll deal with them," Larreka responded stonily, "I would just rather be safe than sorry." The hypo hissed as it delivered the injection directly into her bloodstream, and with it a growing sense of relief. If only it could wipe her memory of her behaviour as well.

"Would you like me to tell you the chances of a Romulan and human conceiving on their first try?" In the years she'd known Larreka, she'd never seen her so vulnerable. Allissa hoped the casual manner of her question would reassure her friend.

It didn't seem to do the trick. "Please don't. Even a small probability of it happening is too much of a risk." Her voice dropped to a near-whisper in shame, "Especially not like this."

* * *

Considering he'd skipped breakfast that morning, Darren was surprised he wasn't feeling hungrier. But then, the hurt and hangdog look all over Jason's handsome face this morning flashed before his eyes, eliminating what little appetite he'd developed.

I screwed up.

Entering the Lounge, Darren studiously kept his gaze focused on the closest replicator. He didn't need to look over at the spot where he and Jason had spent hours talking, swapping more stories. The casual intimacy they'd shared that had lead to the first time in a long time that Darren had felt... whole.

Only to blow it all the kingdom bloody come upon waking up and acting like a complete moron!

Taking his meal, a turkey sandwich on rye, extra mayo with a side salad and a glass of Altarian spring water, that he didn't even remember requesting, Darren made a quick visual scan. It was with a bizarre mixture of relief and disappointment that he saw Jason wasn't present. He knew at some point he'd have to face him, but for now, it was on hold.

The thing is, he really liked Jason. There was something about the two of them together that had just clicked, something Darren had never experienced before. What had happened hadn't been an accident or a drunken mistake; he'd gone into it eyes wide open and willing, if fueled with more confidence than usual thanks to the three glasses of Saurian brandy he'd had.

Now, he'd be lucky if he could manage to find any words with which to offer a heartfelt apology for acting like so scandalized. That is, if Jason was even willing to hear him out.

For now, he approached a table where Lieutenants Sojen and N'Cara were sitting. The Vulcan officer found himself curious and mildly surprised at the sight of the younger man asking if he could join them. "Of course, Mr. Tel. You are most welcome to."

N'Cara, who naturally wasn't eating due to wearing her snouted helmet, instead reading over some PADDs, looked at Darren as he sat. "Something wrong, Darren?"

Darren was glad that at least N'Cara had taken to using his given name when in off-duty locales. Although he did outrank them, they both had been in service to Starfleet longer than he had, and were both senior command staff. It felt weird that they should address him as 'sir', so he'd made an open request that they avoid that as and when they could.

Still, it unnerved him that the besuited alien woman, whose face was totally obscured, was reading him so easily. "What makes you say that?"

Within her helmet, N'Cara frowned, not liking how on-the-spot her question had seemed to have put Darren. She, as had everyone else present last night, had seen just how 'friendly' Darren and Jason Bush had become, once the inebriation took affect. *I would have thought he'd be riding that happy for a few days at least.*

It was Sojen that gave voice to what the Breen was thinking, "I believe the lieutenant's concern stems from the fact that you have not sat at your usual table with Mr. Bush." An eyebrow arched upward, "His absence at this time has too been noted."

Although Sojen was not one to, as humans put it, 'gossip', he was aware of the rumour mill that ran throughout Chimera. Its main topic of discussion of late had been the developing romantic connection between the assistant chief of security and the son of the starbase's executive officer.

Darren's growing feelings of embarrassment and dread were almost too much to take. He pushed away his untouched meal, now totally without appetite. "Has everyone been keeping tabs on us?"

While romance was not something Sojen was himself currently interested in pursuing for himself, he did admit a minor, non-distracting enjoyment of watching those kinds of relationships flourish around him. He would be disappointed if this burgeoning relationship was to flounder before it had even really started.

N'Cara tried to be as sympathetic as her vocal modulator would communicate, "Well, everyone could see how well you two were hitting it off last night." She leaned in closer, her volume lowered to just above a whisper, "Did something happen?"

Yeah, something did, Darren groused to himself. Me. I happened.

I really, really screwed up.

* * *

The *Shuttlecraft Nimoy* cut through the empty sky of Rigel IV, high above the crystal clear waters of the Brentah Sea. Under Maruul's expert guidance, the type-9 shuttle's destination was a small coastal region on the continent of Hypuria. The home of the Hill People, either in the two ancient cities of Vanir or Thursvyl, or the come-and-go encampments and settlements where those of a more nomadic nature resided.

The Rigellian Science Institute team, as Larreka was currently reminding herself via reports on a PADD, were visiting each continent and conducting their underwater studies using remote drones to map and scan the seabed. Hypuria was the last on their check list, after Panara, where the main hub of Federation civilization was located, and Ranlar, where Starbase 134 and the ASDB Complex were located.

Each of the three occupants were aware of the heavy silence looming over the cockpit. Normally, on any other mission or assignment he'd undertaken with Larreka, Maruul would be doing his best to ignore her innane chatter and oh-so-playful banter. Usually at his expense, more's the pity. But no, not today. Instead, he found himself almost missing the banal commentary she would deliver endlessly.

Larreka, sat next to Maruul at the co-pilot position, was ignoring the queasiness that had not yet settled in her stomach. She could come up with several reasons for it. Perhaps it was a result of Maruul's flying, but as much as her fellow Romulan could be an insufferable ass at times, he was a decent pilot. More likely it was a side-effect like Allissa had mentioned from the medication. A physical reminder of her stupid, stupid mistake. Her shame.

Allissa lurked in the cramped aft section, checking and rechecking the small cache of equipment she'd brought. Wedged inbetween her own supplies and Maruul's engineering gear, her eyes would occasionally look over at her friend, who studiously avoided meeting her gaze.

Like Maruul, she found the silence to be unnerving, so totally out of character for Larreka. The science officer was normally so effusive, the proverbial 'life of the party', cracking jokes and breaking the ice. But whereas Allissa knew why Larreka was so subdued and wanted nothing more than to bring it up in some way to help her friend talk through it and not bury it, Maruul was clueless. So this was not the time or the place.

As soon as we land, I'll try and talk to her, Allissa promised herself. Hoping that it wouldn't be that much longer.

The Gods smiled on her, it seemed, as Maruul broke the silence, "Coming up on Hypuria, now. We'll be at the coordinates for the base camp in a few minutes."

Finally! Putting her PADD aside, Larreka brought the communications system on-line and sent the standard greeting message. The response should come back momentarily, then they could land the *Nimoy* and get down to business.

Except... no reply came. "Odd." She tried again, this time opening the channel directly, "This is Lt. Colonel Larreka of Starbase 134, please respond."

Still nothing. The awkward atmosphere of the shuttle was now suffused with a mixture of curiosity, concern and confusion. Bringing the sensor array to life and tapping in several quick sequences into her panel, Larreka waited with baited breath for the results to be display for her attention.

"Picking up the base camp. The outpost seems intact, but I'm not picking up the usual level of electromagnetic signatures."

Maruul brought the sensor feed up on his own heads-up display, cycling through the data, frowning, "Their comm system is online, but no one is answering."

Allissa left her perch and crouched in low, "Run a bio-scan."

Almost afraid for the results, Larreka felt her stomach drop. Allissa leaned in ever closer, greatly disturbed with what she was reading.

"We need to land. Now. Something is very wrong there."

* * *

"They've been poisoned?!"

Bateson couldn't help his incredulous outburst. It was a sentiment shared by the members of the senior staff present in his ready room. Bush, N'Cara and Rivers each listened with growing disbelief as Larreka explained the situation over the open comm channel, her image displayed on one of the wall screens.

[That's what Allissa is saying, Captain.] The science officer wore an oxygen rebreather over the lower part of her face, while the danger of continuation was looked into. [All personnel are accounted for. We found them all crammed in the central work space in the main structure.]

Bush let out an thankful breath, "They must have taken shelter. Those rigs are designed to be used as an emergency safe space during unknown incidents."

Larreka nodded in agreement, [That seems to have been the case. Whatever caused this didn't hit everyone all at once with the same intensity. But it didn't trip the atmospheric purification system they had installed until it was done so manually.]

Behind the Romulan, Allissa and Maruul could both be seen moving to assist a ragged assortment of civilians. Bateson spotted at least one Chelon, two Jelna, as well as non-native Rigellian species, like Chandir, R'Naari and Trill. "Whatever happened, it happened fast."

[That's Allissa's theory, too,] Larreka confirmed. [She's running some basic tests but she didn't bring the right kind of equipment for this kind of incident.]

"We'll scramble an emergency medical team with everything you'll need." Bateson assured, turning to Rivers. "Chris, take care of that, you'll head out with a security contingent as well."

"Aye, sir." Was it Bateson's imagination, or did his chief of security hesitate for a split-second? He shook it off fast, though, making his exit back into Central Ops.

Promising Larreka that they'd be out as quickly as possible, Bateson closed the channel. Time to focus on matters he could take care of himself while waiting for more information. Turning to his intelligence officer, Bateson issued his orders, "Put your ears to the ground, see if you can pick up any talk of an attack. Maybe this is an attempt to take out their project?"

As N'Cara followed Rivers out, that just left Bush, who already knew what order was coming, and advantage of having served with Bateson as long as he had, "I'll get hold of Minister Hessik, see if she may have heard any rumours that maybe need some closer attention."

"Good man," Bateson replied. A cold anger chilled his blood while lighting a fire in his belly. They may not have been his direct personnel, but an attack against anyone on Rigel IV was a personal affront to his 23rd century sensibilities.

He was not going to let this stand.

* * *

Within the relative safety of the *Shuttlecraft Whittaker*, Allissa was glad to be free from wearing the rebreather that they needed to wear while outside for the moment.

The *Whittaker*, a type-17 heavy-duty shuttle, was more spacious than the *Nimoy*, and had a separate aft section that was configurable depending on need. With the equipment brought out by the EMT team, it had currently been set up to be a combined medical bay and bio-lab. The computer's link back to Chimera allowed Allissa to conduct her analysis at a brisk pace, and only moments after inputting all the data and running it, she found her hunch confirmed.

"They're all suffering from carbon dioxide poisoning," she explained to Bateson over the comm screen, as Larreka and Maruul joined her from the forward cockpit where they'd been running scans and whatnot. "Honestly, we are lucky no-one succumbed, given their blood-gas readings."

[Was this an attack?] Bateson questioned.

Larreka's answer took them all by surprise, "I don't believe so."

Striding over to the console below the active screen, the science officer begin tapping in commands. It felt good to have a problem to dwell on, and Larreka was determined to throw herself into this one. The image of Bateson shrank to a small window, while computer-generated graphics played out to Larreka's commentary.

"What we're seeing is the fallout from a limnic eruption. A large CO² cloud that then expanded to the surrounding region," she explained to her dumbfounded audience. "Because carbon dioxide is denser than air, it has a tendency to sink to the ground, which then simultaneously displaces breathable air."

Allissa nodded in agreement, "Which explains the cases of hypoxia, because when the victims gasp for air, they asphyxiate instead."

Bateson wasn't convinced, [I'm no scientist, but I thought those kinds of eruptions occurred around deep water lakes, not oceans. Don't they also trigger tsunami-like events.]

Larreka nodded, "Right on both fronts, Morgan."

Maruul decided it was time to add his own thoughts on the matter, "We performed an intensive scan while we waited for the EMT team to arrive. The local region in a generalized radius of five kilometers had been saturated with high levels of CO²."

"Thankfully," Larreka concluded, "this was essentially a small-scale eruption. The initial cloud formed by the eruption had completely dissipated."

[But you don't think this was an attack?]

Larreka shook her head, "Not in a conventional sense, at least."

"I haven't detected any kind of impact site or debris consistent with a weapons payload that could have delivered this, sir." Maruul added.

"There is one lead, perhaps." Larreka brought up that she had been talking with the recovering lead scientist of the oceanography team. "Their deep-sea probes picked up a sizeable underwater quake a short time before the first signs of trouble."

Bateson busied himself with his desktop console. Holographic screens appeared for him to scrutinize. [Nothing on our own sensor nets picked it up.]

"They wouldn't," Larreka explained, "This area is tectonically and geologically stable, so it wouldn't be routinely monitored. Their probe just got lucky. The quake itself was minor, but what is significant is that it occurred in the first place because there are no known fault lines or submarine volcanoes within hundreds of kilometers of here."

"At least, there shouldn't be."

* * *

Executive Officer's Personal Log, supplemental: Commander Tel and myself are heading out with a submersible aquashuttle to pick up Commander Rivers and Colonel Larreka for an underwater scouting mission. Part of me wants to use the time to have a little talk with Mr.

Tel, to see if he knows just why my son seems to be holing up in his office, but given everything that now seems to be going on, I think it would be best that everyone remains on-task.

Through the large forward viewport of the *Kotto*, the Brentah Sea's crystal clear waters got murkier and harder to navigate the deeper the *Flyer*-class vessel descended. As the visibility was reduced to almost nil thanks to whatever was kicking up sediment from the sea-bed, the sensors became the only way to see where they were going.

Sitting at the helm, it reminded Darren of the holoprograms his father had used to run of 'Old London Town', complete with thick fog. One of the only fond memories he had of his time with Russell Tel, Darren pushed it to the back of his mind. With Commanders Bush and Rivers, both manning secondary positions, practically breathing down his neck, now was not the time to be distracted.

Taking a tighter grip on the manual controls as some kind of tremor ran through the *Kotto*'s entire spaceframe, Darren eased the sleek ship through the turbulence. Bush squinted as he read the sensor displays, "Coming up on the epicenter of the seismic activity."

Larreka, enconced in the aft compartment and monitoring sensors, called out over the active intercom, [This whole undersea shelf is supposed to be tectonically stable. There shouldn't be any activity like this.]

A far-too-loud metallic clunk made everyone jump in surprise. Rivers did a quick perimeter scan, that revealed the unlikely source. "Picking up debris, I think? Fragments, some kind of parametallic alloy, artificial origin."

The external temperature readings on the helm display suddenly began to shoot up, "Outside temp is rising, too."

[Erebus's eternal fires, this is extraordinary.] Larreka's voice was practically an awestruck whisper. [Darren, hold our position, and apply a polarisation filter on the viewport, that should let you see what I'm seeing.]

Doing as instructed, Darren looked out again - and felt his heart jump into his throat. The muttered curses and exclamations of Bush and Rivers agreed with him.

Fathoms under the surface of the ocean, the fires of Hell were burning.

* * *

"It's a volcanic fissure. Newly formed and highly unstable."

In the briefing lounge on the command deck of Chimera, a more private area for meetings of a sensitive nature, Larreka found herself once again giving a rundown of recent events. Alongside the senior staff of the starbase, Minister Hessik was also in holographic attendance with several scientific advisors.

It was Hessik who broke the shocked silence with the first of a hundred questions that were bursting through her brain. "How is this possible?"

Standing at the large wall display, Larreka indicated the visual scans they'd taken on the *Kotto*'s extended dive-down. Overlaying them at various times was sensor readouts and topographic scans to

highlight certain points. "It shouldn't be, not normally. That region has showed no signs of activity on this scale before, and there are no known extinct or dormant submarine volcanoes in the region."

"This was artificially created, and rather crudely."

Bateson practically spat in disgust, "Someone did this deliberately?!"

"Yes and no, Captain," Larreka responded, enjoying a moment of cryptic mystery before continuing. Pointing to a mineralogical analysis, she explained further, "The fissure is centered above a deep, previously undiscovered seam of boridium and irillium ore."

A whistle of awe from Bush, "That would be enough for a lot of private parties to partake in some underwater claim-jumping." He sat up straighter, leaning forward as he put more pieces together for himself, "The parametallic remains, they were from some kind of aquatic mining base?"

N'Cara's distinctive voice answered him, as she took a place next to Larreka, "That's our working theory for now. But they were either greedy, ignorant, idiotic or a dangerous mix of all three."

Another metallurgical scan appeared. "They didn't just try to mine it. Traces of exotic materials indicates that they used high-grade explosives to try and speed up the extraction process."

"They blew themselves to kingdom come," Allissa chimed in, seated next to Bush, addressing Hessik directly. "We found organic remains, which is overstating it more than a little. No way to get an accurate I.D., unfortunately."

"What about the limnic eruption you mentioned?"

Allissa was quick to assure Hessik's concern, "A result of a blow-back effect from the explosion. It released an underground pocket of CO² which has already dissipated and was a one-off event."

Unfortunately, Larreka's next report dampened whatever relief had just been present, "The bigger problem remains, though. This fissure is ignited and doesn't appear to be burning itself out any time soon. In fact, it could become totally self-sustaining, the beginnings of the new submarine volcano that could become a dangerous environmental hazard for both aquatic and land environments."

Hessik let out a rattled breath, as her advisors spoke in hushed whispers among themselves, "I will get the Science Institute to look into this immediately. Any assistance Colonel Larreka can offer would be accepted readily."

With a promise from Larreka to do what she could and call in some favours, and with a quick exchange of pleasantries, Hessik and her entourage vanished. Bateson dismissed the assembled senior staff, but not without a pointed not-an-order to provide any and all assistance their departments could offer to deal with this crisis.

At his subtle gesture, N'Cara and Rivers remained behind with him and Bush. "Have you heard anything back from your sources?"

N'Cara's electronic grunt of dissatisfaction summed up her feelings, "Not as much as I'd like. There have been some rumblings about more of those die-hard separatists wanting to cause some more trouble, but so far it's nothing concrete. I'm conferring with Rigellian Central Intelligence, but they're 'reluctant' to share what little information they've gleaned from interrogations and assets they'd rather not reveal to someone in Starfleet."

Unbidden, but knowing his C.O. well enough to pre-empt the question, Rivers spoke up, "I still have some contacts, all unofficial and off-the-books, that might be willing to share. Let me see what I can do."

"Good man." Bateson let his officer go to work. He was confident his staff would get the job done and find answers for what had gone on in practically their back-yard.

But this was one of those times that the role of a commanding officer, to delegate tasks to those more suited to what was needing to be done, just didn't 'cut the mustard' and left Bateson feeling like he had nothing to contribute.

Nothing... but wait.

* * *

"Larreka, can we talk?"

It wasn't so much saying the words outloud that made Chris Rivers cringe, more the fact that he saw how much the lithe Romulan woman flinched at the sound of his voice. *This is not going to be fun.*

Walking just ahead of him in the security corridor outside Central Ops, Larreka swallowed what little of her pride remained, making a conscious effort to relax her stiff posture. Chris, bless him, wasn't a bad guy, and he hadn't forced her to do anything she hadn't wanted - *Hells, I made the first move, after all*, she remembered.

"Look," Rivers started, so uncomfortable that he almost looked cute. "About the other night--"

The words burst forth from her mouth at an alarming rate, but Larreka knew if she hesitated, it would only make things worse. She needed to control the narrative, get ahead before things went downhill. "Chris, no, please, let me go first."

"It was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened, but it did. It was..." She struggled for a word that wouldn't offend a fragile human male ego, "Well, it was very enjoyable, from what I remember."

"Really?" Rivers had to admit to himself at least, he was relieved to hear her say that. Not just that she enjoyed it, but that she too did not have a full recollection of the evening. The truth was, aside from some very hazy but pleasant moments, he barely remembered much of their night together. Not after the 4th or 5th shot of Saurian brandy with a Denevan tequila chaser.

"You were a more than adequate lover." Larreka allowed a small smile, if just for Rivers' benefit, as she ignored the stab of phantom pain in her heart. "But, like I said, it was a mistake. I think it would be best if we just carried on like it never happened."

Rivers found himself nodding, very much relieved, his concerns and fearful assumptions put to rest, even if he was... he wasn't really sure, actually. "Of course, I totally agree."

"Well, then," Larreka continued, "If you'll excuse me, Commander Rivers?"

"Carry on, Colonel." He watched as she headed down the corridor. Not running away from him, but definitely moving at a brisk walk. It left Rivers alone to process how he felt, and he still couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Was he disappointed? Offended that she so casually dismissed him? Grateful that she felt the same way he had - for the most part anyway..? Maybe it was a mix of all of those and some others he still had yet to figure out.

It wasn't like he hadn't had lovers since his divorce from Alicia. But they'd not been someone he worked with. Still, it all seemed to be settled for now. I hope.

Turning and heading back down the corridor, feeling a little better than he had for the last 24 hours, Rivers disappeared from view as he entered Central Ops--

--unaware that, further down the corridor, a red-faced Darren Tel stepped around the corner.

He hadn't meant to eavesdrop! He had been heading to Central Ops himself, having completed some reports that needed the signature of the current duty officer. It wasn't his fault that two of his superior officers were having a rather intimate discussion in a public intersection.

He could have backed off, gone back the way he came, given them some space. But he'd panicked. Frozen up, only able to shuffle just enough out of sight as Larreka had walked off, so she didn't see him.

Hearing the two of them, their mutual decision to just pretend whatever had happened between them hadn't happened, hit far too close to home for Darren's taste.

I really need to talk to Jason.

* * *

Gabe Bush knew his son pretty damn well.

He'd been responsible for raising Jason since the boy had been six-years-old, since they'd both lost the boy's mother, Angela. No matter what assignment Starfleet gave him, he had brought Jason with him, and made sure his education continued to flourish while in the environs of a starship.

He knew Jason was the type of man who kept himself busy. Even when he was off-duty and relaxing, he always had a project or some such going on. If he's hurting right now for whatever reason, he'll be using work to ignore that pain. Just like he's learned from his dear old Dad.

So it was with surprise that Bush walked in to Jason's office on the top floor of the ASBD Complex, to find him sat at his desk, booted feet planted squarely on it, idly tossing a Bajoran springball from hand to hand. "Is this a new theoretical immersion play you've developed?"

"Dad? Hey!" Caught with his figurative pants down, Jason jumped up from his chair. He looked at the ball in his hand, quickly dropping it onto the desk surface. "Oh, no, I was just... well, 'not thinking', if that makes sense."

Bush approached his son, "Is that what you've been doing all day? I've been meaning to check up on you all day when you weren't in the morning huddle, but things got a little out of control."

Jason smirked, "Yeah, I heard." The cheeky glint fades quickly, "But, no. I've been doing work here and there, but I haven't really been able to focus on anything for long. My mind has been wandering a lot."

"Because of last night?"

Jason blushed, "What have you heard?"

"Nothing at all," he admitted. "Darren had been a perfect gentleman and not said a word about anything that may have gone on. But I'm not blind, Jay." He put a comforting hand on his son's shoulder, "I can see how much you two have connected, and everyone last night saw just how..." Bush grinned wickedly, "how 'friendly', shall we say, you'd become."

Jason's blush grew hotter as his embarrassment grew exponentially. *Oh, great!* But as much as he loathed being the centre of the starbase gossip mill, he wouldn't have minded if something good had come of it.

Given the way Darren had bolted, he must have obviously thought it was a mistake. "I don't know if we're going to be 'friendly' any time soon, or even again, Dad."

Bush let his son vent for several moments, understanding his anger and humiliation, but he also knew a little about Darren Tel's psycho-social make-up, thanks to prodigious record-keeping by Starfleet counselors and therapists.

"Don't write him off just yet," Bush finally advised. "You are a little older and wiser, and Lord knows you had plenty of liberal, free-spirited role models growing up."

Jason chuckled, which was a good sign, "Yeah, it definitely cancelled out the more conventional thinking of you and Uncle Morgan."

Okay, that was a fair point. But before Bush could offer a comedic retort, there was a chime from Jason's desktop computer, as the computer announced an incoming text message.

Pulling up a holographic display, Jason felt his heart skip a beat as he read it, "It's from Darren. He's asking me to come over. 'To talk', he says."

With an encouraging endorsement to go for it, Bush took his leave, hoping that the bounce in his son's step wasn't misplaced or going anywhere any time soon.

* * *

"So, you wanted to talk?"

Trying to act as relaxed and nonchalant, and not like the bundle of nerves he was, Jason sat in the couch as Darren sat next to him. *He doesn't seem to mind being up close, that's a good sign, right?*

"Yeah, I'm glad you came over, it means a lot," Darren reiterated as he'd said when Jason had actually shown up. He had to take a few breaths to control his breathing, otherwise he was afraid everything he'd been mentally preparing to say would just spill out all in one go.

"About what happened last night?" An apology didn't seem sufficient, but it was all he had, so Darren had resolved to be totally upfront and honest. "It's not normally something I would do."

"But it wasn't a mistake."

Jason frowned, unable to maintain a facade of calm and collected as he remembered how exposed he'd felt that morning, "Then why did you run out like that?"

"Because I freaked. Totally freaked, and I felt horrible afterwards and didn't know how to deal with it, or with you." Darren shook his head, all those emotions flooding back as he tried to sort through them. He looked Jason in the eye dead-on, "Because, I really like you, Jay."

Jason's heart leapt into his throat. 'Jay' wasn't something anyone called him but Mom and Dad, and only in private. It was their private little nickname, but coming from Darren, it elicited a totally different feeling within him. "I really like you, too," he managed to whisper.

Without thinking about it, both of them reached out their hands at the same time, their fingers intertwining, taking comfort and support from each other.

"I feel... connected with you. In a way I never have with anyone before, and I know it sounds crazy because we've only just met, but with you it feels like it doesn't take any effort to let my shields down."

"What do you mean?"

Darren sighed, explaining how much he'd struggled at the Academy, at school - not with the curriculum or the workload, but the social cliques and niceties that sometimes just left him feeling confused. It was a feeling Jason himself was all too familiar with - being light-years ahead academically of people the same age as he was had always made it a struggle to fit in outside of coursework and the like.

"There was one guy, in my 3rd year, I kind of 'dated', but it wasn't anything serious at all, more a friend with benefits arrangement," Darren admitted, "and there were one or two hook-ups during shore leaves while I was on the *Yamato*, but I've never really had anything meaningful, a real emotional connection."

"Until I met you."

Darren's eyes were almost glowing with honest intensity as he poured his heart out to Jason, who felt honoured that he was being opened up to in such a way. "I don't want to screw this up, especially after how amazing last night was. How right it felt. How right we felt."

Jason couldn't resist poking Darren a little, "We were pretty damn hot together, weren't we?"

Darren let out a whistle of awe, "Like, Oh my God..."

The two of them laughed in unison, now practically sitting in each other's lap, what nerves and anxiety they'd had about this 'talk' all but forgotten.

"So, maybe we slow things down a little for now, huh?" Jason queried. "Keep the whole 'getting to know you' phase going for now?"

Darren nodded sagely, feeling immense relief, "I think that would be a good idea."

There was a moment of unspoken exchange, each sizing the other up for a moment, before they each leaned in, their lips caressing those of the other person. A tender, sweet kiss, a promise of more to come later on, when they were ready.

* * *

It was the sun in his eyes that woke Darren again, the next day.

But this time, there was no surge of panic, no confusion as to where he was.

No, this time, he was right where he wanted to be. "Good morning, you."

Blinking away the last traces of the night's sleep, Jason, naked as the day he was born, pressed his body into that of his bed-mate, equally as nude, and smiled tiredly. "Back at you."

Darren nuzzled into the nape of Jason's neck, enjoying the musky scent. "Okay, maybe it won't be that slow after all, huh?"

The two of them, cuddling together under the covers, basking in the morning light as it played through the open window, laughed...

The End