

*Personal log, Val'ri Raiajh recording, stardate 66436.5:*

*The USS Besiege has just left the planetoid Panmunjom, where I held what I consider a very productive meeting with my counterpart in the Kairm Imperial Military regarding transit rights through sector 50110. We are now en route back to Starbase 719, where my husband and I look forward to some leave that we plan to spend with our family.*

The Leviathan-class starship *USS Besiege*, a vessel whose basis was an enlarged version of the Defiant-class and originally intended as a last line of defense against the Borg threat in the 2370's, traveled at warp speed back toward the Typhon Sector. The willingness of the Kairn taisho in charge of the sector bordering the Fifth Fleet Area of Responsibility and the Morain Alliance to meet and discuss issues not directly addressed by the peace treaty signed between the Federation and its allies and the Kairn Empire the previous year had allowed Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh – the Starfleet Typhon Sector Coordinator – to combine her expected annual inspection tour of one of the Fifth Fleet vessels with the necessary transit to the neutral planetoid Panmunjom, where the peace treaty had been negotiated. By having her inspection tour occur aboard the starship most often docked at the starbase assured Raiajh there would be no surprises and that the crew would be more than happy to simply write-off most of the inspection as long as no obvious problems became apparent.

On the narrow bridge of the *Besiege*, the Vulcan-Deltan Vice Admiral was standing beside the command chair, where Captain William McLeod – a human man with an admiration for the Klingon culture he tried to emulate in many ways – sat, the two former shipmates – Raiajh having been the *Besiege*'s first commanding officer over fifteen years earlier with McLeod as her first officer – simply talking.

As the pair continued their conversation, the port egress door opened and the *Besiege*'s current first officer, Commander Taras, stepped onto the bridge and over to the command chair opposite Admiral Raiajh.

"Excuse me, Captain," Taras said. "Commander Tabaranza requests permission to conduct an experiment on the warp drive."

"An experiment?" McLeod repeated, his long hair – pulled back in a pony tail like many Klingon warriors – flipping the opposite direction as he turned his head in Taras' direction. "What kind of experiment?"

"Commander Tabaranza believes he has developed a way to align the dilithium crystal matrix at the quantum level," Taras explained, presenting a padd to the captain. "He believes that, if successful, it will increase warp engine overall efficiency by more than 20%."

McLeod stole a glance back at Raiajh for a moment, who looked interested in what was written on the padd the captain was now holding, before looking back at Taras and saying, "Does he have to do this now? We are, after all, having an inspection tour at the moment." He nodded his head in Raiajh's direction.

"Mister Tabaranza stated he needs to maintain warp 7 for at least six hours in order to complete the alignment, and that our normal patrol route in the vicinity of the Typhon Sector never allows for that speed for that amount of time."

"What happens if we should need to speed up or slow down if some emergency or confrontation should occur?"

"Mister Tabaranza assures me his alignment will not affect ship's responsiveness. He would merely need to start the alignment from the beginning again at the next available opportunity," Taras explained.

McLeod exchanged a look with Admiral Raiajh for a second before saying, "Fine. Tell Commander Tabaranza he has permission to perform his experiment."

"Thank you, Captain," Taras acknowledged, taking back the padd with the engineer's proposal on it. "He'll be so pleased," the first officer added before exiting through the port-side door.

Several hours later, Lt Commander Evazian Tabaranza had everything he needed to perform the quantum alignment set up, tested, and in place. A device of his own design was attached to the door of the dilithium articulation frame in the warp core, which glowed with ethereal light.

“Still maintaining a steady warp 7, Commander,” Lieutenant Franco reported from one of the consoles at the front of engineering. “Stage two of the alignment appears complete. Minor power fluctuation on the EPS conduits, but nothing the flux constrictors couldn’t handle.”

“Very well,” said Tabaranza. “Stand by for final alignment shift. If this works as planned, power levels are going to jump momentarily until the computer can compensate and partially close the injector assemblies.”

“All systems are standing by, Commander,” Franco confirmed.

Tabaranza moved over to the equipment attached to the warp core, entering in a series of commands into the control panel. He then turned to his assistant and said, “Shifting final alignment in five... four... three... two...”

As he reached zero, Tabaranza pressed the activation control. For a half-second the ball-shaped warp core glowed brightly before unexpectedly going dark. A moment later, the rest of the engine room followed suit.

In his ready room, Captain McLeod was reading a report on his desktop monitor when first the monitor went blank, then the lights in the ready room extinguished. This was followed a second later by the sickening lurch of the *Besiege* dropping out of warp and the inertial dampers not being able to keep up as they too lost power.

McLeod closed his eyes and sighed before reaching into one of his desk drawers in the total darkness and removing a palm beacon he kept there for just such an occasion and made his way to the bridge, having to manually force open both his ready room door and the starboard bridge egress door to get there.

“Status?” McLeod asked, shining the beacon around until he found Taras standing over near the operations console, where the officer manning it tried several combinations to try and reactivate the functions.

“It appears Mister Tabaranza’s experiment did not go as planned,” Taras replied.

“You think?” McLeod commented. A second later, normal lighting returned to the bridge and all the consoles began re-booting.

“It appears Mister Tabaranza is still with us,” Taras remarked.

“Go compile an assessment of any damage we may have sustained, Commander,” McLeod ordered as he deactivated his beacon and moved toward the command chair. “Attention all hands on the bridge, the captain has the deck and the conn.”

As everyone acknowledged the change in status and started their own recovery procedures, the helmsman trying to figure out the ship’s exact location, the tactical officer the status of the ship’s shields and weapons, and the operations manager exactly how much power they had and where it was needed at the moment, McLeod sat heavily in his command chair, wondering how this incident was going to look in the admiral’s inspection report.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Besiege*!

## Star Trek: *Besiege*

### “Quantum Leap” By PJK

Based on story ideas by Nadine B. Bach and Peter J. Koester

An hour later, McLeod was back in his ready room. Sitting in the chair across from him was Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, the Typhon Sector Coordinator, while standing at parade rest in the middle of the room was the *Besiege*’s chief engineer, Lt Commander Tabaranza. Almost all the ship’s regular systems had been restored and the *Besiege* was back on course toward *Starbase 719* at warp 4, finally allowing McLeod the opportunity to review a preliminary report on what had occurred in main engineering.

“What caused the total and complete loss of all power?” the captain asked, putting the padd down on his desk.

“Well, captain, as I’m sure you’re aware, one of the unique properties of dilithium is its ability to allow anti-matter to pass through its crystal matrix in a controlled manner, which is what allows us to mix matter and anti-matter in a weaker magnetic field than would otherwise be required.”

“Of course,” McLeod replied. “That’s what differentiates dilithium from ordinary quartz crystals. Any first year Academy cadet knows that.”

“Well, my experiment was intended to bring each dilithium atom into alignment on the sub-atomic level. Unfortunately, I miscalculated the alignment plain.”

“What does that mean?” Raiajh asked, injecting herself into the conversation.

“It means when the crystals aligned, they aligned perpendicular to the anti-matter flow in the articulation frame,” Tabaranza explained. “Without intending to, I shut the spigot through which the anti-matter was flowing. As soon as the computer detected the imbalance, it automatically shut down all power transfer functions. Otherwise, we could have experienced a catastrophic anti-matter disparity that could have quickly resulted in a warp core breach.”

McLeod looked over toward Raiajh. The Vulcan-Deltan woman seemed to be trying to hide a slight smile as she looked back.

“At least it’s good to know your safety features are in working order,” she remarked.

“You’re a big help, Val,” McLeod commented before turning his attention back to his chief engineer. “No more experiments like this without further simulation trial, so you know in what direction you’re aligning the crystals. Now, dismissed.”

“Aye, sir,” Tabaranza replied, quickly retreating from the ready room like a dog with its tail between its legs.

“What next?” McLeod asked, half-rhetorically. “One of the few times we have you out here aboard the *Besiege* with us and we nearly succeed in blowing up the ship.”

“What’s next is I need to contact Cathryn via subspace,” Raiajh said, referring to Captain Cathryn E. Pearson, her executive officer back aboard the starbase. “I need to let her know we’re not going to be back as quickly as we originally intended, and that she is probably going to have to greet the Tholian Ambassador who is visiting the station to negotiate with some of the Romulan representatives attempting to re-establish the Senate.”

“Ooh, fun,” McLeod remarked sarcastically. “You sure you don’t want me to keep you stuck out here for a few more days just in case.”

“No, Sylvan and I would really rather get back and relieve my parents of the burden of watching their grandchildren so we can start my leave on time,” Raiajh replied as the pair got up and headed out of the ready room and onto the nearby bridge. “But thanks for the kind offer.” As the pair emerged on the bridge, Commander Taras was sitting in the command chair and looked over as McLeod and Raiajh walked over.

“Commander, open a hailing frequency to the station,” McLeod ordered. “The Admiral wants to talk to Captain Pearson.”

“Aye, Captain,” Taras replied before ordering, “Lieutenant Capodanno, hail the station.” A moment later, the main viewer changed to an image of the interior of Starbase Ops. A young female Starfleet officer Raiajh did not immediately recognize was standing at the middle of the image.

“This is *Starbase 719*. Go ahead, *USS Besiege*.”

“This is Admiral Raiajh,” the admiral said as she stepped forward between the helmsman’s seat and the command chair. “I would like to speak with Captain Pearson please.”

The lieutenant on the screen looked puzzled for a moment, then said, “Stand by, *Besiege*. Admiral Pearson will be right on.” The viewscreen then blinked back to the view in front of the *Besiege*, which showed stars streaking past at moderate warp speed.

“Please correct me if I’m wrong,” Raiajh said, turning to look at both Taras and McLeod. “But I could have sworn I heard that lieutenant refer to Cathryn as admiral?”

“Is Cathryn having delusions of grandeur and assuming your title when she had to assume your duties while you were out here with us?” McLeod asked, a smile forming on his face.

“Who was that lieutenant?” Taras asked. “I do not think I have ever met her before.”

“Neither have I, which leads me to believe she recently arrived aboard and that maybe she was mixing up my rank with Cathryn’s,” Raiajh said just as the viewer returned to the subspace channel. The admiral turned to look back at the screen, her eyebrows knitting in annoyance as another unfamiliar face filled the view. The woman was human and appeared to be approximately 60 years of age, with a face lined by both years of smiles and frowns and hair that had turned mostly grey in color, only a touch of its original brunette along the front.

“This is Admiral Pearson,” the woman said. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry, it appears my communication has been misdirected,” Raiajh said. “I’m trying to contact Captain Pearson aboard *Starbase 719*.”

“I’m Rear Admiral Elisabeth Pearson, commanding officer of *Starbase 719*,” the woman replied, starting to appear perturbed herself. “And who are you?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, and I’m the commanding officer of *Starbase 719*!” This prompted a look of both astonishment and anger on the strange woman’s face. “I’m trying to contact my Executive Officer, Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson.”

“Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson was my grandmother,” the woman on the viewscreen informed. “And she passed away over fifty years ago!”

Raiajh looked at Captain McLeod, who gestured to his operations officer to cut off audio on the communications channel. After the lieutenant complied, Raiajh asked McLeod, “What has happened? Cathryn... dead for fifty years?! Did we somehow travel forward through time?”

“Unlikely, Admiral,” Commander Taras remarked. “Did you notice both the lieutenant in Ops and that woman claiming to be Admiral Pearson are wearing the same Starfleet uniforms we are wearing? Starfleet has never maintained a uniform style unchanged for more than twenty years in its entire history. I do not believe it is possible we could have jumped ahead in time.”

“There’s one way to find out,” McLeod remarked, taking a position alongside Raiajh and ordering the ops officer to open audio again.

“Excuse me... um..., Admiral. This is Captain McLeod of the *USS Besiege*. This may sound like a very odd question, but what year is this?”

“You’re right, Bill,” the woman on the viewscreen replied, obviously recognizing McLeod. “It is an odd question, but I’ll play along. It’s 2389. Stardate 66437.3, to be exact. Now I have a question for you: Why is the *Besiege* halfway across the Typhon Sector and approaching the station instead of patrolling the Morain Neutral Zone like you were assigned? Is something wrong with your ship?”

“That’s an understatement,” McLeod replied, glancing briefly at Raiajh.

“And who is the Admiral standing next to you,” the woman claiming to be Pearson added. “I was unaware of any other flag officers being in the AOR at present, and I’m afraid I’ve never met her before. I’m understandably curious as to how she got aboard your ship as well, considering you haven’t been docked at the station in nearly six months.”

“She’s Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, and at least until this morning she was the commanding officer of *Starbase 719*,” McLeod replied. “And we were docked at the station less than a week ago!”

“Okay, that’s enough of that!” Pearson scolded. “I need to know what’s going on, and I’m not going to be able to do that over subspace. I don’t care whether your ship is operational or not, Bill. The *Besiege* is ordered to return to base immediately.”

“Very well..., Admiral,” McLeod replied before looking at his first officer. “Increase speed to warp 8. I want to get back there as soon as possible and get this all cleared up.”

“Aye, Captain,” Taras replied before ordering, “Helm, increase speed to warp eight.”

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, the *Besiege* approached *Starbase 719* and passed through the spacedoors into spacedock. It took several minutes more for the *Besiege* to dock nose-first with one of the hub gangways.

McLeod waited by the airlock door, adjusting the baldric sash with several Klingon awards on it he had earned when the *Besiege* had operated alongside Klingon forces during the Dominion War. As he finished adjusting his uniform components, Admiral Raiajh and her husband, Dr. Sylvan Xaran – who besides his duties as starbase chief medical officer was also the senior medical officer aboard the *Besiege* for the journey, as McLeod's doctor was on leave – walked down the corridor to join the Captain.

"This so-called Admiral Pearson has ordered you and I be escorted to her office in Ops," McLeod explained to Raiajh. "I assume our escorts are awaiting us on the other side of the gangway."

"Let's not keep them waiting," Raiajh said, taking the lead through the airlock. As the door cycled open inside the station, all three could see six security officers waiting for them at parade rest. Raiajh was both surprised and not to realize the senior officer of the squad was station chief of security Commander Michelle Petersen. Petersen looked over all three new arrivals, looking curiously at the Vulcan-Deltan woman and the Betazoid man accompanying her before addressing Captain McLeod.

"Admiral Pearson has requested we escort you to her office, Captain."

"Escort away," McLeod remarked with a gesture of his hand toward the nearest turbolift.

"It's good to see you again, Michelle," Raiajh said as she walked past the security chief, curious what her reaction would be.

"Have we met, Admiral?" Petersen asked as she fell into step behind the three who had come from the *Besiege*.

"Apparently not," Raiajh said with a glance toward her husband.

The trip to Ops was rather cramped as all nine traveled in the same turbolift. McLeod doubted any of the security guards could have even drawn their phaser had he or his companions actually tried anything troublesome. A short time later, the doors opened in Ops and everyone pried themselves out of the lift before Commander Petersen started directing them toward the stairs on the starboard side of Ops, the ones that led to Raiajh's office. As she crossed the space toward the stairs, Raiajh – who probably knew *Starbase 719* better than anyone, including the engineers that designed it – started to notice some things out of place. For one, the security/tactical console and the engineering/operations console had been reversed. She also noticed the LCARS interface on all the consoles around the space, which were normally based in the cool colors of blues, grays, and whites with only occasional red indications for items of distinct importance, were now showing mainly yellow, red, and hot brown colors. She wondered who had authorized the operating system changed, as such a request would normally have had to go through the base commanding officer.

Five of the security guards waited at the bottom of the stairs as Petersen and one other guard escorted their guests up to the door at the top, which swished open at their approach. Raiajh was about to greet her flag aide, Lt Commander Marie Quintero, and ask her what had gone on aboard the starbase in her absence, but was shocked to see a male Vulcan lieutenant sitting behind the desk instead.

"The admiral asked to see Captain McLeod and his guests as soon as possible," Petersen said to the Vulcan lieutenant.

"The Admiral is expecting you," he replied, touching a control on the desk that opened the inner office door. Petersen gestured for those she was escorting to enter the door, then followed close behind as the fifth security guard waited out in the reception office.

If Raiajh had been surprised by the change of color scheme on the equipment in Ops, she was positively shocked by what had happened to her office. Instead of the clean white walls and Federation blue carpet she had grown used to after three years aboard the starbase, the walls were colored a deep mauve with real wood trim, the carpet a dark blue color a shade darker than an Earth sky at dusk. There was no evidence of any children's toys anywhere in the room – not even the box of crayons that Corrine usually left on one of the tables. On one side of the office, in place of her own semi-circular desk with the dark transparent work surface, a large, ornate wooden desk sat with the woman McLeod and Raiajh had seen on the viewscreen sitting in the high-backed chair behind it.

"Good, you're here," she said, activating the intercom on her desk. "Exec, this is the Admiral. Our... guests have arrived. Could you please join us in my office?"

“On my way,” responded a familiar-sounding male voice with a hint of an accent. Raiajh and Xaran exchanged looks as Admiral Pearson got up from her chair and moved over to stand in front of McLeod.

“Now, Captain, I’ll ask you again. Why are you here and not patrolling the Neutral Zone against Morain incursions? You know what those damn squirrels did the last time we slacked off on our patrols!”

McLeod looked at Pearson wide-eyed, at a loss for words. “I... um... A **Morain** incursion...?”

Raiajh started to take a step toward McLeod and say something when the office door swished opened again and a man with a goatee walked in. Raiajh turned to see who had stepped in, her face taking on a look of relief.

“Konstantin! Finally someone who...!”

“Have we met..., Admiral?” Konstantine Harkonnen asked as he looked strangely at both Raiajh and Xaran, identifying Raiajh’s rank by the insignia on her chest.

“Come on, Konstantin. Enough games,” Xaran said with a tone bordering on frustration. “You know who we are!”

“No, Commander, I’m afraid I do not,” Harkonnen replied.

“You don’t know any of us?” McLeod asked. Again, Harkonnen made a strange expression, but this one looked as if he thought McLeod was the one pulling a practical joke.

“Of course I know you, Bill. How could I not, after serving together so closely as your tactical officer aboard the *Besiege* during the war? At least until the... the incident... that nearly ended my career.” Harkonnen looked over at Admiral Pearson with a look of pride and added, “I’d probably still be nothing more than a Commander if not for Elisabeth.”

It was as he spoke that Raiajh noticed the rank insignia Harkonnen wore, that of a Starfleet captain.

“You...?” she said, not sure if she wanted to yell, cry, or simply faint away. “**You’re** the station’s XO?”

“For three and a half years now,” Harkonnen replied. “And who exactly are you?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out ever since the *Besiege* contacted me a few hours ago,” Admiral Pearson remarked, looking at Raiajh like someone who had caught a spy. “So I did a little research.” Pearson picked up a padd she had on the desk and started reading from it. “You claim your name is Val’ri Raiajh, correct? A Vice Admiral in Starfleet?”

“Yes,” Raiajh replied. “And until recently – apparently – the commander of this very starbase.”

“According to the records I managed to locate, there **was** a Val’ri Raiajh serving in Starfleet.”

“Was...?” Xaran could not help but comment.

“Yes, a long time ago. Almost a century, in fact.”

Pearson presented the padd to Raiajh, who started reading through the information it displayed as the admiral continued to talk.

“The woman born Val’ri Raij on the grounds of the Deltan Embassy in Sausalito, California in the year 2262, currently known by her married name of Val’ri Sarne, has been living on Betazed since the 2290’s.” Pearson noticed a look of recognition pass between Raiajh and Xaran when the name Sarne was mentioned. “According to Starfleet records, Val’ri Sarne retired from Starfleet at the rank of Commander in 2315. She settled permanently on Betazed where she and her husband raised a family while operating the Sarne family vineyards. Apparently, as the daughter of one important Deltan diplomat and sister of another, Val’ri Sarne participated in occasional diplomatic duties on behalf of the Federation, but retired from public life completely in the 2340’s. She’s currently 127 years of age and enjoying retirement with her husband, Sorkan.”

Again, Pearson noticed the look pass between the woman claiming to be Val’ri Raiajh and the commander wearing the medical blue uniform.

“That’s impossible!” Raiajh protested. “I wasn’t even around during the 2290’s!”

“Obviously,” Harkonnen remarked, looking closer at the woman in front of him. You appear to be of Vulcan stock, which means you would likely age at a slower rate than a normal human would. I would estimate your age, based on those factors, to be approximately 45 to 50 Earth years of age, putting your birth year somewhere around the early 2340’s.”

“No, I mean I skipped over those years,” Raiajh tried to explain. “As a lieutenant, I was assigned to the *USS Arcturus*. In 2288, we were assigned by Starfleet to go back in time to Earth’s 20<sup>th</sup> century and study their

history. Something went wrong and instead of going back in time, the *Arcturus* moved forward in time and reappeared nearly eighty years after it left. Look it up! It's not a secret!"

Pearson looked angrily at Raiajh before returning to her chair behind the ornate wooden desk. Activating her computer monitor, she called up more records.

"You've done your research," Pearson remarked, looking briefly at Raiajh. "Val'ri Sarne was assigned to the Tikopai-class *USS Arcturus NCC-1807* as a lieutenant from 2287 until her assignment to Betazed in 2290. The *Arcturus* itself continued on in service for another fifteen years until it was decommissioned and scrapped in 2305."

Raiajh, Xaran, and McLeod all looked shocked as Pearson called up a new file and continued reading from it.

"The name *Arcturus* lived on in two subsequent starships, the *USS Arcturus NCC-2107*, an Excelsior-class starship in service between 2311 and 2349 and the *USS Arcturus NCC-46207*, an Ambassador-class starship which was decommissioned shortly after the end of the Dominion War in 2376."

"Your records are wrong!" Raiajh insisted. "The *Arcturus* was assigned a mission of historical research – specifically trying to locate the origin and purpose of the being known as Gary Seven – in 2288. The time warp went wrong and the entire crew found itself in 2367, just months after the Battle of Wolf 359. That was when I met my husband, Sylvan." Raiajh gestured toward the Betazoid man next to her.

Pearson accessed more records, then looked at Raiajh and Xaran smugly.

"According to these records, Starfleet considered exploratory missions through time, and some were even in the planning stages, but Starfleet cancelled them by the late-2280's when the admiralty decided it was too risky, too great a chance of altering the time line as we all know it." Pearson now turned her attention on the man standing beside Raiajh. "Now what did you say your name was? Sylvan?"

"Commander Sylvan Xaran. I'm a doctor and a counselor." He looked at his wife before adding, "And I thought I was the chief medical officer of this base."

"Let's see, shall we?" Pearson commented before accessing still more records. "Xaran, Sylvan. Starfleet rank: Lieutenant Commander. Current assignment: Counselor at Starfleet Medical, San Francisco, Earth." She looked up at Xaran and asked in a tone suggestive of someone who caught the cat in the act of eating the canary, "And what brings you all the way out to the Typhon Sector, LIEUTENANT Commander? If that's who you really are? Because according to these records, you're still in San Francisco right now. Just like Val'ri Sarne is still on Beta..."

"We're exactly who we say we are!" Raiajh started to protest. "We're just trying to figure out why everything else is so out of place!"

"Commander Petersen," Pearson said, turning to her security chief. "Place these two under arrest under suspicion of espionage and lock them in the brig until we can figure out who they really are and what to do with them." She then turned her attention on McLeod and added, "And as for you, Bill... I don't know if you're a part of this plot or were somehow duped, but until I figure it out, you're confined to your quarters aboard the *Besiege*. Commander, take them all away."

Neither Raiajh nor Xaran could understand what was happening to them. Both just followed along behind Harkonnen and McLeod – Petersen taking up the rear – and were re-joined by the other five security guards waiting outside. Several minutes later, Raiajh and Xaran were each placed in adjacent cells in the starbase's main brig facility and the forcefields were activated before Peterson escorted Captain McLeod back to the gangway airlock and his ship.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Raiajh was laying flat on her back on the bunk inside her cell. In spite of her discomfort, she refused to move, simply staring at the ceiling above her, thinking to herself that if they ever figured out what had happened to them and were able to get back to the starbase they knew, her first task would be replacing all the brig mattresses with something thicker and more comfortable.

*'You know what I would like right now?'* Raiajh heard her husband project from the cell next to hers.

*'A key code to lower the forcefields?'* the admiral suggested.

*'Actually, I was going to say a tuna sandwich made by the Pariah's chef, but a key code to get out of here would be nice too,'* Xaran replied, projecting his thoughts directly into his wife's head. *'What do you think has happened, Imzadi? Why is everything changed?'*

*'Something has affected the timeline, though for the life of me I can't figure out how,'* Raiajh replied mentally. *'Evidently, in this timeline, the Arcturus never got lost in time. But I can't think of anything we or anyone else aboard the Besiege did that could have changed history so radically and left us unchanged.'*

Raiajh heard the door outside swish open. A moment later her superior hearing picked up the guard at the security station saying, "No, sir. They've been pretty quiet the entire night. Not even any conversation." She smiled slightly knowing she and her husband could never be overheard if they did not want to be.

A moment later the door leading into the cellblock itself opened and two men walked in, one remaining back by the door, the other moving directly over to the wide forcefield of Raiajh's cell.

"Val, are you okay?" asked the voice of Bill McLeod. Raiajh looked over, then quickly sat up on her bunk in a single smooth movement.

"Aside from a sore back due to these sub-standard mattresses, I am well," Raiajh replied. "What are you doing here, Bill? I thought *Admiral* Pearson had you confined to your quarters?" Raiajh's emphasis of the starbase's apparent commanding officer's rank made it clear what she thought of the woman and the situation she had placed Raiajh and her husband in.

"Konstantin escorted me here," McLeod replied with a thumb toward the man still standing near the brig door. "He doesn't share the Admiral's suspicions that you are both spies, though he's not quite sure what you are. In the meantime, I've got the ship on lock-down, with orders that no one leaves and no one comes aboard, not even the so-called admiral. If they think Sylvan is supposed to be on Earth right now, I didn't want to cause any more complications if anyone else aboard the *Besiege* is supposed to be assigned elsewhere. Any clue what happened to us?"

"I can only assume that history has been changed somehow, and that in this new history the *Arcturus* and her crew never disappeared from their original era," Raiajh answered. "Since you, I, and everyone aboard the *Besiege* recognizes the change, it implies we did something to instigate it, though I have spent the entire night trying to figure out what it was anyone in the crew could have done that would have altered history a century ago and have been unsuccessful."

"It couldn't have been the Kairn, could it?" McLeod suggested. "After all, this happened just after you had that meeting with them."

"Doubtful," Raiajh replied. "I do not believe the Kairn technically capable of traveling through time. And besides, if they did, it would have likely been with the goal of eliminating the Federation's presence in their area of space. But *Starbase 719* is still here, in the same location."

"Is there anything I can do that might help figure out what caused the change?" McLeod asked.

"Yes. Admiral Pearson mentioned yesterday that Val'ri Sarne is still alive and living on Betazed," Raiajh said. "Get in contact with her. Perhaps she knows something about this timeline's history that can help us figure out what went wrong? If she asks who you are, just tell her you are a friend of Cathryn Pearson's granddaughter."

As she spoke, Raiajh noticed Captain Harkonnen moving closer to where McLeod was standing in front of her forcefield, trying not to look interested in the conversation that was occurring. "Good morning, Konstantin," she finally said.

"You act as if you know me well, yet I'm sure we've never met," Harkonnen said, dropping all pretense of disinterest and walking over next to McLeod. "I'm sure I would remember someone like you."

"Where we come from, you, your wife and I are friends," Raiajh stated. "Close friends. You are also my Strategic Operations Officer. I wish you could somehow remember that."

"My wife?!? I'm sorry," Harkonnen replied. "But I just find all of this too hard to believe. I'm not married, and I doubt I ever will be. Maybe Admiral Pearson is right? Maybe you are spies after all?"



“Contact the *IMV Pariah*,” Raiajh suggested. “Speak with its commander, Johannes Spaak. His wife is my sister. They will confirm who I am!” Raiajh insisted. However, instead of an understanding or willing expression, Harkonnen’s face turned unexpectedly angry.

“If you actually are a spy, as the Admiral suspects, you really need to perform your subject background research better,” he said, his voice low and threatening. “Or are you deliberately trying to re-open old wounds?”

“What? What did I say wrong?” Raiajh asked with worry. Harkonnen’s tone even drew Xaran close to the forcefield of his cell out of curiosity.

“If you knew anything about Admiral Pearson, you would know it was she that sent our cousin, Hans von der Spaak, on a mission to smuggle supplies into the occupied Betazed during the war, a mission he never completed because the *OSNS Pariah* was destroyed by the Jem’Hadar!”

“I know that the *Pariah* of our reality was destroyed during the Dominion War, but two years ago the *Pariah* and Hans Spaak from a different quantum reality emerged into...”

Raiajh suddenly went silent as the implications of what she was saying suddenly sunk in.

‘*Sylvan, you don’t suppose...?*’ she asked telepathically to her husband.

‘*That perhaps this time it is we who crossed the quantum barrier between realities?*’ he asked in reply.

Raiajh’s eyes went wide, an expression visible to both Harkonnen – who still seethed with anger – and McLeod.

“What is it, Val?” McLeod asked.

“I believe I understand what has happened,” Raiajh explained. “History has not been changed. Not for us and not for those living here.”

“Then how...?”

“Somehow, as we transited back to the base from Panmunjom, the *Besiege* crossed into a different quantum reality. One in which the *Arcturus* never traveled through time.” She then addressed the other man standing in front of her. “Captain Harkonnen, I need to speak with Admiral Pearson right away. I believe I now know what has happened to us, and if I am correct, we can prove we are who we say we are.”

\* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, in the station’s main infirmary, Admiral Pearson watched skeptically as her chief medical officer scanned Raiajh, Xaran, and McLeod with a specially configured tricorder before then turning the scanner on himself, Captain Harkonnen, and finally the admiral herself.

“Well, Doctor?” she asked, her tone implying she did not expect anything unusual to have been detected.

“The scan confirms it, Admiral,” the medical officer stated to Pearson’s shock. “Raiajh, Xaran, even Captain McLeod are all exhibiting a different quantum signature than any of us. As far fetched as it sounds, everyone who arrived here aboard the *USS Besiege* yesterday – including the ship itself – is from a different quantum reality.”

Pearson looked at Raiajh in amazement. She then stepped closer to the Vulcan-Deltan woman and said, “It appears I owe you an apology..., Admiral.”

“Apology accepted, Admiral. I admit, I had a similarly hard time accepting Hans Spaak’s story when he first arrived aboard my reality’s *Starbase 719*,” Raiajh said. “Now that only leaves the main question; how do we get the *Besiege* and everyone aboard back to the reality where we belong?”

“It would probably help if we knew how your ship crossed boundaries to begin with?” Harkonnen stated. “It’s not a common everyday occurrence. I doubt your ship just happened to slip through an open door between realities.”

“More common than you might believe,” Xaran remarked, drawing Pearson and Harkonnen’s attention. “Several months after the *Pariah* showed up at our base, the starship *USS Independence* from their same original reality showed up to deliver his wife and family to Spaak. Then the ship left and, we assume, returned to its own reality easy as pie.”

“How?” Harkonnen asked.

“We don’t know. We never went aboard the *Independence*,” Raiajh explained. “We don’t know whether they used some naturally occurring phenomenon or accomplished it by technological means.”

“That would have been a handy piece of information to know right about now,” McLeod remarked.

“I think keeping it secret was done on purpose, Bill,” Raiajh suggested. “After all, do we really want starships moving from universe to universe as easily as we warp from star system to star system right now? Imagine the damage that would cause?”

“Either way, it’s not important right now,” Xaran interjected, trying to steer the conversation back to where it was supposed to be. “How do we figure out how we got into this reality to begin with?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” McLeod answered. When all eyes were on him he said, “It has to have something to do with Commander Tabaranza’s little experiment with the warp drive!”

\* \* \* \*

A short time later, Raiajh, Xaran, McLeod, Admiral Pearson, Captain Harkonnen, Lt Commander B’Elanna Torres – the station chief operations officer – and Lt Commander Evazian Tabaranza were all gathered in the briefing room on the upper level of Starbase Ops. As Tabaranza explained the procedure he had been attempting, a graphic display of the atomic makeup of a dilithium crystal was projected holographically over the center of the table.

“The next stage was aligning the crystal at a molecular level, forming a stronger crystal – one that would be resistant to decrystallization – while also increasing engine efficiency by 5%. I was complete with that stage of the experiment by hour four and a half,” explained Tabaranza as the holographic representation shifted slightly, the dilithium atoms forming near perfect cubes. “It was during the final stage that we experienced trouble.”

Tabaranza explained how his device, connected to the articulation frame, if it had worked, would have caused all the sub-atomic particles that made up the dilithium atoms to align with each other down to the electron orbits. The intent was to create the purest form of dilithium the universe had ever seen, one that would not only regulate the passage of anti-matter but align it in a way the magnetic constrictors used in all Federation warp cores could never hope to achieve. If successful, it would have been a new breakthrough in warp propulsion dynamics.

“...But instead of forming sub-atomic waveguides, I created a block that prevented the anti-matter from passing through at all. The anti-deuterium hit the crystal like a waterfall hitting a rock and splashed everywhere inside the intermix chamber. Some of it combined with deuterium atoms well above the plane of the articulation frame, the rest hit the constrictor walls. Both resulted in a power surge that caused the computer to shut everything down point eight-eight seconds after the final alignment of the crystal.”

“So you were trying to align the crystal at the quantum level?” Torres asked, looking at the *Besiege*’s engineer with what could be interpreted as contempt. The half-Klingon woman folded her arms across her chest. “You’re lucky you tried this experiment on a fifth-generation warp drive. If you had tried it on anything prior to the launch of the Galaxy-class, the computer would not have reacted quickly enough to avoid a warp core breach. You’d all be dead.”

“We believe it was that power surge that caused the *Besiege* to cross boundaries,” McLeod stated to the starbase crew. “According to sensors, for that brief instant when the crystal aligned improperly, every atom making up the *Besiege* and everything aboard it shifted at a quantum level. We can easily replicate the conditions and cause the surge again. The only problem I see, based on my discussion with Commander Tabaranza before this meeting, is we have no way to steer ourselves.”

“Why worry about navigation as long as you make it into your proper quantum reality?” Harkonnen asked.

“That’s what the Captain means by steer, Comm... Captain,” Tabaranza replied. “We can likely pass through the barriers between realities, but we have no way of determining which reality we will emerge into. We could wind up in the same – if not a bigger – problem as we have here.”

“What do you mean, Commander,” Raiajh asked.

“Think of the multiverse as a huge building containing hundreds – perhaps thousands – of rooms, Admiral, each room representing a different reality.” As Tabaranza spoke, he replaced the crystal molecule hologram with an

image of the theoretical building he was talking about, with one room in particular colored green. “Those rooms closest to our own reality – the green room in this hologram – share more similarities than those further away on the other side of the building. How do we know, as we pass through each wall in the building, when to stop so we are in our own original reality?” Tabaranza added a small representation of the *Besiege* passing from room to room through the walls, stopping in one room adjacent to the room that represented their original reality. “We could wind up in a reality so similar to our own that we can’t tell the difference, except that another *USS Besiege* with all of us aboard already exists there.” Tabaranza then moved the holographic *Besiege* to a room far on the other side of the building. “Or, we could emerge in a reality where the Borg has taken control of the universe and wind up quickly assimilated. It’s really a coin toss, depending more on luck than on our equipment.”

“There has to be some way of controlling the shift,” Raiajh insisted. “The *Independence* did it when they brought Lady Val and her children to join Hans aboard our station and then left to return to their own reality just as easily.”

“If only we had an example of the equipment that *Independence* used,” McLeod remarked.

\* \* \* \*

With adequate proof that those who had arrived aboard the *Besiege* were who they claimed to be, Admiral Pearson released Raiajh and Xaran from the brig, but continued to confine all of them aboard their starship in order to avoid any potential complications arising from the interaction of people from different realities.

In the cabin aboard the *Besiege* that Raiajh and Xaran shared, the admiral sat at the desk, staring at the monitor screen as she looked up information on any technology that could be employed in returning the starship to its proper reality. She was interrupted by a call from the bridge.

“Admiral Raiajh, this is Commander Taras.”

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“You have an incoming subspace communication, Admiral.”

“Route it down to my cabin, Commander,” Raiajh ordered. A moment later the screen on the monitor changed from the technical information Raiajh had been studying to the face of an older woman.

“This is Admiral Rai...”

Raiajh’s voice caught in her throat as she recognized the face. There were slight traces of grey in her hair – which was pulled back on one side of her head to reveal a pointed ear – and lines alongside her eyes and lips, but it was obvious to Raiajh that she was looking at herself, albeit an older version. If she had been human, Raiajh would have guessed her age to be somewhere in the range of 60 years old. *‘Is this what I will look like in another century?’* she asked herself.

The woman on the other end of the communication was equally silent, apparently amazed by what she was seeing on her own screen, a mirror looking eighty years into the past. After what seemed like nearly a full minute of looking at Raiajh with eyes that seemed to reflect having lived a much different life than the woman at which they were looking, a life that was more content than Raiajh’s own, the other woman finally said, “I would not have believed it if I did not see it myself.”

“I concur with your statement,” Raiajh replied. “I assume Captain McLeod’s efforts to reach you were successful?”

“Obviously,” the 127 year old Val’ri Sarne replied. “When I received a message from a starship captain who claimed to be ‘...a friend of Cathryn Pearson’s granddaughter...,’ I have to admit I was intrigued. I lost track of Elisabeth not long after Cathryn died, as I did not maintain regular contact with her son, Stephen. I wondered why a friend of hers would be trying to contact me. Then when he told me of your plight, I couldn’t decide whether he was a liar, a fool who had been misled, or if he was telling me the truth. I had to contact you and confirm your story for myself.”

“Well, here we are... Refugees from our own quantum reality desperately seeking a way back home,” Raiajh remarked. She then went on to explain to Sarne their dilemma; that the *Besiege* could easily pierce the quantum boundaries, but could not necessarily find their correct reality.

“It is fortunate you contacted me then,” Sarne remarked. “For the past decade, since the return of the *USS Voyager* to the Alpha Quadrant, I have been peripherally involved in a project with Starfleet Communications Division intended to surpass normal subspace communications by transmitting in the quantum slipstream band.”

“I have, of course, heard of the quantum slipstream drive the *Voyager* used briefly in their effort to return home,” Raiajh commented. “But I was unaware of any communications application.”

“Just as subspace radio uses the same subspace our warp drive employs to travel faster than light, allowing radio transmissions in the highest of warp factor speeds, slipstream radio would allow for the transmission of messages in the high trans-warp speeds, allowing near-instantaneous communication almost anywhere in the known galaxy,” Sarne explained. “With modifications, the slipstream radio transmitter may be able to act as a quantum frequency controller as your starship pierces the boundaries between universes and allow it to emerge in the correct quantum reality.”

On the screen, Raiajh could see her counterpart place an isolinear chip into a slot reader.

“I am transmitting the plans of our prototype slipstream radio transmitter now,” Sarne said. “I hope it is of help to you.”

“Thank you,” Raiajh said before a slight smile appeared on her face. The smile puzzled Sarne on the screen, so Raiajh explained, “It seems a little narcissistic for me to be thanking someone who is essentially myself.” Sarne, now seeing humor in the situation, smiled back as well.

“Good luck, Val’ri,” Sarne finally said. “Betazed, out.”

Raiajh stuck an isolinear chip into the reader slot below the monitor screen as the Federation emblem appeared on the screen, downloading the plans for the device onto it. Once the plans had transferred, she tapped her combadge and said, “Admiral Raiajh to Commander Tabaranza.”

“Tabaranza here, Admiral.”

“Meet me in main engineering, Mister Tabaranza,” Raiajh ordered. “We have work to perform.”

\* \* \* \*

It took two hours to build the slipstream transmitter based on the plans Val’ri Sarne had sent, then another five hours to modify the equipment to act as a controller and connect it to the engineering equipment that monitored and adjusted the warp field generated by the nacelles. Tabaranza and his assistant Franco performed most of the work, with Raiajh assisting and offering advice when needed. Raiajh finally left the engineers to their work when it came time to test the new device through computer simulations, a process that took another three hours. By the time the engineers were finished – satisfied with the simulation results – it was late in the evening, and both Raiajh and McLeod agreed it made more sense to make the attempt to return to their own quantum reality the next morning.

Raiajh then contacted Admiral Pearson, requesting permission to meet with the base commander in her office. Pearson agreed, dispatching one of Commander Petersen’s security guards to the airlock to escort the admiral to Ops.

Once inside the office, Pearson offered Raiajh a seat and some refreshments. Raiajh accepted a cup of Tarkalian tea.

“What is it you wanted to see me about, Admiral?” Pearson asked as she sat down behind her own desk after retrieving a cup of tea of her own.

Raiajh looked around the office, which was still both familiar and unfamiliar. “Your taste in decorating is very similar to... Well, I guess she’s not actually your grandmother, but the Cathryn Pearson I know in my reality. She prefers dark colors and real woods too.” Raiajh looked at Pearson across the desk, adding, “I wondered what the Cathryn in this reality, the woman you knew, was like? What kind of life she lived?”

Pearson described what she knew of her family history, that Lieutenant Cathryn Pearson resigned from Starfleet shortly after learning she was pregnant with a son; that she lived with her family in Canada for about a year after Stephen Pearson was born before moving to Eindhoven, Netherlands, where she started a job as a supply clerk with a new shipping company that would eventually go on to become a major shipper within Federation space and beyond, and that she never married.

It then suddenly dawned on Admiral Pearson that the woman sitting across from her was – in essence – the same woman her grandmother used to tell her stories about, the woman with the funny pointed ears who once told her grandmother about finding herself lost on Earth of the past and getting drunk on sugary soda before managing to get back home to their starship where no one believed her story. She asked Raiajh to tell her more about her grandmother.

“The Cathryn Pearson I knew over a century ago in my own reality is the same one I still know today,” Raiajh said. “She seemed ill-at-ease aboard the *Arcturus* working with supplies, but excelled after transferring to tactical and security and is currently the best first officer I’ve ever worked with, in line to become commander of the entire starbase,” Raiajh admitted.

“That sounds a little like my own career path,” Pearson remarked. “My family wasn’t too sure I had made the right decision when I joined Starfleet and entered the Academy in 2346, but once I reached the fleet as a tactical/security officer, I too excelled. Shortly after the Dominion War ended they offered me a position in the command field, and I haven’t looked back since.”

The pair continued to talk for several more hours, more and more like old friends as time went on. Eventually, after Raiajh had nearly finished her third cup of tea, her combadge sounded.

“Sylvan Xaran to Val’ri Raiajh.”

Raiajh excused herself, then tapped her combadge.

“Go ahead, Sylvan.”

“Val, it’s nearly 0100 hours. I was about to go to bed in preparation for the big day tomorrow, and was surprised to not find you in our quarters.”

“I just had some... last minute business to conduct with Admiral Pearson. I’ll be back aboard the ship in a few minutes.”

“I’ll wait up for you,” Xaran said before adding, “Xaran, out.”

“It was a lovely evening, Elisabeth,” Raiajh said as she stood up and returned her cup to the replicator, where it promptly dematerialized. “I wish I could say let’s do this again, but if we’re successful in the morning...”

“I know, Val. I’m just glad – after the way our relationship started – we could end it on a friendly note,” Pearson replied. “I just wish I could spend more time with you learning about my grandmother.”

“There is a way,” Raiajh said as she moved to the door, pausing to look back at the admiral. “Contact Val’ri Sarne on Betazed. I’m sure she would love to hear from you, and she knows the woman who was your grandmother a hundred times better than I do.” Raiajh then offered her final salutation and stepped out the office door.

She was amused to find the lieutenant from security who had escorted her up to Ops asleep on the couch in the reception area, snoring loudly, his boots hanging over the arm of the chair. She smacked on the soles of the man’s boots, startling him awake.

“My apologies for taking so long. You may escort me back to the *Besiege* now,” she said.

\* \* \* \*

At 0900, the regular bridge crew with the addition of Commander Taras, Admiral Raiajh, and Dr. Xaran were on the bridge of the *USS Besiege*.

“Stand by to depart,” McLeod ordered from his seat in the middle of the bridge. “Hail spacedock control.”

“Hailing frequency open,” acknowledged Lt Vulpis from ops.

“Spacedock control, this is *USS Besiege*, requesting permission to depart spacedock.”

“*USS Besiege*, this is Starbase Ops,” replied the voice of Captain Konstantin Harkonnen. “You have permission to depart spacedock through Spacedoor 2.” There was a pause for a moment before Harkonnen’s Russian-accented voice added, “Good luck, Bill.”

“Thanks, Konstantin. *Besiege*, out.” McLeod then turned his attention towards his crew. “Clear all moorings. Thrusters at station keeping.”

The spacedock tractor beams that kept the *Besiege* in place while docked released. The starship's helmsman spun the compact starship on its Z-axis, facing the nose toward the slowly opening spacedoors ahead. Once of adequate width, the *Besiege* started moving forward. Within seconds they were past the doors and beyond.

"We are clear to navigate, Captain."

"Very well. Where should we go?" McLeod looked up at Raiajh.

"We really don't need to go anywhere," Raiajh observed. "Just as long as we can go there at warp 7 for six hours."

McLeod nodded, then looked forward at the viewscreen once again. "Helm," he ordered. "Set course 020 mark 0. Ahead, warp 7."

"Course plotted and laid in. Accelerating to warp."

A moment later, the Leviathan-class starship jumped away into warp speed.

\* \* \* \*

Five hours later, the *Besiege* remained at warp 7, still on course 020 mark 0. Chief engineer Tabaranza had spent the entire shift repeating his crystal realignment, and now he was nearing the point of the procedure that would align the dilithium at the quantum level.

"Captain," the Vulpis said. "Engineering states they are prepared to initiate the final phase of the alignment."

"Is the quantum slipstream control panel functioning as anticipated?" the captain asked.

"Functioning as designed," Ensign Malanga, one of the junior engineers who normally stood the night watch in engineering reported from the master situation monitor at the rear of the bridge. The display had been converted over to remotely monitor the new quantum control unit that would hopefully allow the *Besiege* to return to its correct reality. "At least, as far as we can tell. We won't know for sure until we actually use it."

McLeod turned his chair around to look at the ensign monitoring the new device. The young officer was being attentive to the readouts, so Admiral Raiajh – who was likewise monitoring the device – looked over at McLeod and nodded. "Our correct quantum signature is programmed into the device," she assured.

"Fingers crossed everyone. Q'aplA!" McLeod called out, spinning his chair forward again before instructing Lt Vulpis, "Inform Mister Tabaranza he has permission to initiate the final phase of his alignment."

The word was passed to main engineering. Tabaranza shared a significant look with Franco, then entered the commands into the control panel.

"Shifting final alignment in five... four... three... two... one... NOW!"

On the bridge, the lights suddenly went dark and McLeod had to grip the arms of his command chair tightly as the *Besiege* dropped out of warp and the inertial dampers again failed. The captain could feel the ship tumbling end over end. The sound of someone falling could be heard and McLeod recognized Taras' voice hissing curse words softly next to his chair.

It took a few seconds longer than the first time for the lighting to return. As consoles reactivated and systems started up again, McLeod looked over to see his first officer in a sitting position on the deck, blood dripping down Taras' face.

"Doctor, you have a patient here," the captain advised, prompting Xaran to pull out his dermal regenerator and start working on the first officer's injury. "Status?" McLeod finally asked.

"All readings on the quantum slipstream controller appear nominal," reported Raiajh. "Hopefully that means it worked."

"Engineering to bridge."

McLeod exchanged looks with Raiajh before activating the intercom. "Go ahead, Mister Tabaranza."

"I'll have warp drive back up and running in a few minutes. But, Captain, I'm not sure if the procedure worked properly," Tabaranza reported.

"What do you mean?" McLeod asked, alarm running down his spine.

“The first time I performed the alignment, the atoms aligned in such a way at the quantum level that the crystal was perpendicular to the flow of the anti-matter.”

“Yes, I know. What happened this time?”

“This time the atoms aligned at a 45-degree angle to the plane. It sent all the anti-matter spewing toward the starboard side of the intermix chamber. I’m not sure what effect, if any, it may have had on our passage through the quantum boundary between realities.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Raiajh said, stepping over next to the center seat. “Lieutenant Vulpis, hail *Starbase 719*. Tell them I want to speak to Pearson.”

McLeod noted silently that the admiral had not used any rank to identify who she wanted to talk to. He gazed at the main viewscreen, silently praying their attempt to return home had worked. After several seconds, the viewer blinked to show the interior of Ops.

“Oh, thank the Goddess!” Captain Cathryn Pearson said, obvious relief on her face as she spoke. “Where have all of you been, Val? You’ve been missing for almost 72 hours!”

“It’s a long story, Cathryn,” Raiajh replied. “Just inform my parents of our arrival so they can meet us with the children.”

“We expect to be back in spacedock first thing in the morning. Request permission to dock at that time, Captain,” McLeod requested. “We’ll tell you everything once we’re back in spacedock.”

“Very well. I’ll reserve the private room in the Lodge for tomorrow afternoon. I can’t wait to hear it. And Val, I’ll inform your family of your status. *USS Besiege* has permission to dock in slip 2-Alpha as soon as you arrive. See you when you pull in. *Starbase 719*, out.”

As the viewscreen returned to its image of the distant stars, slowly moving as the *Besiege* continued to drift until Tabaranza could restore warp power, McLeod looked up at Raiajh.

“Looks good so far,” he said.

“Perhaps it was the crossing of our fingers that provided the extra degree of safety we were seeking?” the admiral replied.

\* \* \* \*

Starbase 719

*Stardate 66448.8*

A couple of hours after the gathering in the Bastogne Lodge, Val’ri Raiajh and her husband Sylvan Xaran were having a discussion in the living room of their quarters.

“If you’re uncomfortable with the idea, then I won’t do it,” Raiajh remarked.

“It’s not that I’m uncomfortable, it’s just... ehh!” Xaran replied, not sure how to word what he was feeling. “Look, if you really need to make this call, go ahead.”

Xaran may not have been able to give word to his feelings, but Raiajh was able to feel it. There was definitely a vein of jealousy when it came to the person Raiajh wanted to contact; especially since the pair ran into the person in question at Anatessa Kitrin’s wedding at his estate just prior to the war and his typical way of greeting Raiajh. Before that instance, Xaran had hoped the man would not remember who his wife was, as he had made no attempt to contact her after the *Arcturus*’ reappearance in 2367. It turned out that the man not only remembered, but had decided at the time that it would be inappropriate to contact Raiajh, especially considering her sudden marriage to Xaran.

“We’ve had this discussion time and again, Sylvan. We had never been anything more than friends. I have shared with you my memories of that one day on Risa when we met,” she told him.

“I know, I know. Val, you know the last thing I want is to lose what I have.”

“Sylvan, it’s just a hypothetical question. It’s not going to change things between us, but if it really will bother you...”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Xaran said as he headed toward the front door of the quarters, grabbing the royal blue lab coat that had been tossed over the back of the couch as he passed.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve been away from the infirmary for more than a week,” Xaran replied, pausing briefly before entering the hall leading to the door. “I need to... to check on some lab results I sent in before the *Besiege* left the base last week.”

“Are you sure?” Raiajh asked, both her eyebrows raised.

“Yes, I’m sure I need to go to the infirmary,” Xaran replied and quickly headed out the door.

A reply followed him telepathically. *‘I meant are you sure it doesn’t bother you.’*

*‘Make the call, Imzadi,’* his response said.

Raiajh continued to look at where her husband had disappeared into the hallway for several moments more, then finally got up and moved over to the comlink. Touching the control panel to activate it, she said, “Ops, this is Admiral Raiajh.”

“What can I do for you, Admiral?” replied the duty officer.

“Please open a channel to Betazed. I need to contact the following private subspace transmitter.” She then input a series of code numbers into the control panel. “Route it here to my quarters when you get through.”

“Aye, Admiral. Stand by.”

The comlink monitor flashed to the image of a silver Federation emblem with the words ‘Stand By’ superimposed in sky-blue. Nearly thirty seconds later, the emblem was replaced by the image of a Betazoid man’s face.

“Hello, Beautiful,” the man said.

“Hello, Sorkan. It’s been more than a hundred years. When are you finally going to get those eyes examined?” Raiajh said jovially in return, causing Sorkan Sarne to laugh in return. He did not look all that different than the time they first met on Risa over a century before, perhaps just a touch more grey in his hair and a few more laugh-lines around his eyes, but having an El-Aurian father helped in that regard. “How are Jonathan, Anya and Misha doing?”

“Oh, very well,” Sarne replied. “Misha just had her first haircut last week. Charissa and Enitan were there too. We took lots of holophotos to share with you and Sylvan.” Sarne’s solid black eyes seemed to penetrate Raiajh for a moment before he added, “But you did not call me across ten sectors simply to hear about a baby’s first haircut, did you?”

“Actually, I had the most interesting experience a few days ago, and it led me to wonder about something,” Raiajh remarked, confirming Sarne’s assumption. “A hypothetical question...”

“I’ve never been one for hypothetical questions, but what is it that you want to ask?”

“Sorkan...,” she started to say and then paused as she tried to figure out how best to word her question. Finally she said, “In what ways do you think your life may have been different if the *Arcturus* had never disappeared a century ago?”

“I don’t really know,” the man on the other end of the communication replied. “What surprised me most, after I found out about the *Arcturus*, was how deeply I was affected by the event; losing someone who had become such a good friend...”

**The End**