

*Summer, Earth Year 2344
Loneel Valley, Betazed*

Trina Xaran was sick with worry. She had turned around and stepped into the tent to get some sunscreen and bug repellent. She told her five-year-old son Sylvan to sit where he was and not move; that she would be right back. A minute later when she stepped out of the tent, the young boy was nowhere to be seen.

She called out to the child, but there was no answer. Everyone who heard her cry came running to help look for the boy. They searched in an ever-widening circle around the camp site, but were bewildered about how quickly the five year old had disappeared. What was more disturbing was the fact that they could not even find any footprints or signs leading away from the log the child had been sitting on. They called out and continued searching even without any way of knowing which way young Sylvan had gone.

Eventually emergency personnel were called in. They scanned the area for almost three days before finding the boy fast asleep in the mouth of one of the nearby caves. Sylvan's father gently woke him, saying, "We have been worried about you. Why didn't you come when your mother called?"

"I not hear, Daddy," the child replied.

"Where have you been?" his father asked.

The young boy thought about it for a moment before answering, "Right here, Daddy. I fell sleep waiting for you."

The elder Xaran probed the mind of his youngest son and saw he would not get a better answer. The child did not have one. It was like the boy had been asleep for the past three days, his recent memories a blank. Xaran scooped his son into his arms and held him, happy that his son was found safe and well.

*Earth Year 2354
A sector of space claimed by the Orion Syndicate*

Ciaran never did like his life aboard the vessel. For the past ten years he had lived here. When he slept he would sometimes dream of the peaceful planet where he used to live. He knew that place was gone. Upon his arrival on the ship, Captain Krena told him that there was an accident on the planet where he used to live and the ship was now his home. Krena had said time and again how lucky Ciaran was that the cargo ship *Brannon* came along when it did and was able to save him. Ciaran may have forgotten what his parents looked like in the intervening time, but he remembered they loved him and if they were alive they would have come looking for him.

During his first few weeks aboard the ship, Ciaran overheard the captain fighting with the only other adult aboard the ship at the time – a man who looked different than both Krena and Ciaran, his wide neck covered with scales and what looked like a spoon embedded into or growing from his forehead. The captain had called this other adult 'Doctor,' and had the odd-looking man physically removed from the ship the first place they docked after Ciaran arrived aboard.

Starfleet had inspected the ship shortly after the spoon-headed man had departed. Ciaran told them what had happened to him and asked if they may have heard anything from his parents. Captain Krena interrupted the boy and told the Starfleet officers that he liked to tell stories to pass the time and that Krena needed to get the child back to his studies.

Now, ten years later, Krena told Ciaran the ship was docking at a space station, and the fifteen-year-old would get to join him on their visit. This was the first time since Ciaran had come aboard that Krena had said he could leave the ship. Ciaran took his time and cleaned up in the sonic shower, putting on the new, clean clothes that Krena had provided.

What Ciaran did not know was Captain Krena had made a rare stop at an Orion-run space station. When Krena realized that Ciaran was beginning to develop telepathic abilities, he knew he would have to get the boy off the ship before he realized the truth. Krena hated losing Ciaran, he had become an excellent ship's mate, but the boy could not learn the truth about what had happened ten years earlier.

Krena had dismissed the Doctor when he found out that Moset had used the boy's DNA in a cloning experiment. When the Cardassian was done he returned the clone he had created to the surface of Betazed, stating that he needed the 'original' for further testing in order to perfect his cloning technique. Krena hated the idea and had the doctor removed from the ship. Knowing he could never return the boy to his family – it would have raised too many questions and Krena would receive the blame – he raised the boy as best he could, less than a son but more than an ordinary cabin boy. However, with telepathic abilities beginning to manifest, he decided the time had finally arrived to sell the boy as a slave and pay off the debt he owed to the Syndicate, which continued to grow. Telepaths

always brought good money, especially young ones like Ciaran, as their owners would be able to determine how the telepath would learn to use their talents. He hated to have to do this, but Krena felt he had no choice. He needed to be rid of his debts once and for all.

Walking through the ship, he knocked on the door to Ciaran's small room and let himself in.

Mid 2391

Starbase 719

Rear Admiral Val'ri Raiajh was looking at the image of her husband Dr. Sylvan Xaran on the main viewscreen above Ops.

"We'll be making our approach in half an hour," he said over the comlink. "Are we still on for dinner at *Liberty Pointe* this evening?"

"Our usual table as always," Raiajh replied. "See you soon. Starbase Ops, out."

As Xaran was moving to close the communications channel, the sound of an alarm could suddenly be heard in the background. Xaran turned to look at the shuttle's pilot, forgetting to close the channel, allowing the starbase crew to watch as the shuttle crew scrambled to correct whatever was causing the alarm.

"I'm reading an accumulation of anti-matter in the core," one of the other crew stated.

"If we can't get this under control, I'm going to have to dump the core!" the pilot stated.

"The anti-matter injectors are frozen!" the first crewman reported. "I can't get the injectors to re-initialize!"

"Core breach imminent!" another crew member exclaimed.

"Dump the core!" the pilot ordered. The crew in Ops could see Dr. Xaran frantically entering commands into the console in front of him. "Doctor! I need the core jettisoned...!"

"I'm trying!" Xaran exclaimed back. "The interlocks are frozen! The computer's reading the injectors are wide open and won't let me dump the core!"

"Someone activate the override!" shouted another voice from off-screen.

"Too late!" the pilot yelled. "The engine is going critical!"

"The override! Activate the over...!"

The main viewscreen in Ops suddenly went blank.

"Get them back!" shouted Colonel Sean Elliott McIntyre, the commanding officer of the Starfleet Marines assigned to *Starbase 719* and the duty officer in Ops. As Security Chief Michelle Petersen tried to re-establish communications, Admiral Raiajh – whose eyes had gone wide when the viewscreen blanked out – suddenly let out a loud scream and collapsed, unconscious, to the deck.

Captain Cathryn Pearson, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, and Lieutenant (JG) Esther Adler – Pearson's personal yeoman – all came running out of Pearson's office on the upper level of Ops, reacting to the sound of the scream they had heard even through the closed door. Likewise, directly across the upper level, Commander Marie Quintero – Raiajh's flag aide – also emerged from the admiral's office, gawking at the scene unfolding below.

"Petersen, contact the infirmary. Have them send up an emergency medical team," McIntyre was ordering as Pearson slid down the rails of the steps down to the lower level, followed quickly by Harkonnen and Adler.

"Mac, what's going on?" the starbase's first officer inquired.

"We were communicating with *Shuttle 17* when we suddenly lost contact," McIntyre replied. "The pilot was reporting their engines were going critical when we suddenly lost the transmission. Commander Petersen has been trying to hail the shuttle and re-establish communications, but without success."

The Vulcan science officer sitting at the nearby science console looked over at Pearson and said, "There can be but one possibility." When Pearson looked back at the Vulcan, she continued, "The way Admiral Raiajh screamed out an instant after we lost communication with the shuttle would lead me to believe that the ship was destroyed with all hands. The Admiral's reaction is consistent with someone who has experienced the sudden, traumatic loss of a bond-mate."

"I'm not willing to accept that possibility until I see proof," Pearson said just as a medical team arrived in Ops and immediately went to work on Raiajh. "Are there any ships in the vicinity that can investigate?"

Lieutenant Ashari Pel looked up from the operations console, holding a communications device close to her ear. "I have the *Pariah* on subspace," she reported. "They were en-route back to the base when their sensors detected something like an explosion. Commander Spaak has already altered course to investigate further."

"Good," Pearson said as she watched the medical personnel lift the still-unconscious Raiajh onto a gurney and push her toward the nearby turbolift. "Have them keep Ops informed of anything they find." Everyone in Ops

could hear the sadness in Pearson's voice as she issued the order before looking back toward where her husband – the station's Strategic Operations Officer – reassured Commander Quintero, both watching the turbolift doors sliding shut.

Pearson had seen her friend Val'ri Raiajh react similarly several times – once years earlier when Dr. Xaran was almost killed by the Qualen aboard the *USS Sarek*, another time when he was trapped behind enemy lines during the Battle of Betazed during the Dominion War – but Dr. Xaran was eventually able to return home on those occasions. Pearson hoped that the friends and family aboard the starbase would be enough to help see Raiajh through the current situation. Raiajh and Xaran had been looking forward not only to retirement in just six months time, but also their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in only a few weeks. Pearson crossed her fingers, hoping somehow Xaran would beat the odds once again as he had done in the past. However, it looked to be a rough road ahead for Raiajh as she would now face those days alone instead.

* * *

Stardate 68709.4

Station Log, Starbase 719

Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson, recording;

I'm not sure what to make of what happened with Shuttle 17 earlier today. When the IMV Pariah went to investigate what happened to the missing vessel, they found absolutely nothing. No ship, no debris, no escape pods, and oddly the energy signature from the shuttle stopped dead at precisely the point of last contact. Spaak and his crew extended their search out in a half light year in all directions and still found nothing.

Sadly, after what was witnessed on the screen and Admiral Raiajh's unusual behavior – she regained consciousness in the infirmary insisting that the shuttle was destroyed along with its occupants – and lacking any other information, I find no other choice than to list the crew of the Danube Class runabout Missouri – designated as starbase Shuttle 17 – as missing in action. Personnel onboard Shuttle 17 at the time we lost contact: Dr. Sylvan Xaran, who holds the rank of captain; Counselor Tobias Wyatt, who holds the rank of lieutenant commander; Ensign Riley Perry and Ensign Jordan Corvalis, both of whose records have been amended to reflect they have been promoted to the rank of lieutenant (junior grade) in absentia.

Captain Konstantin Harkonen has been working with Lt Commander Marie Quintero to handle Typhon Sector matters, while I continue to oversee the running of the station. Vice Admiral Kalin Kale is already en route to the station to assume his duties as sector coordinator ahead of schedule, as Vice Admiral Raiajh, is unable to currently handle her normal duties at present and it is unlikely she will be able to resume doing so before the official date she was to turn over command of the Typhon Sector to Admiral Kale.

Pearson out.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Starbase 719/IMV Pariah

“Revisitation” By Nadine B. Bach

Late 2391

Orion space

Dr. Ves'Dell of the *Pariah* had taken the ship's small slipstream craft into Orion space for a stop at one of the Orion space stations to attend the weekly slave auctions. Commander Spaak had placed her in charge of obtaining a few new stewards for the crew of the *Pariah*. Spaak's own steward had decided to retire, with Spaak's blessing and a generous pension for the Orion woman.

Ves'Dell traveled there, as she had done in the past in the parallel reality she and the *Pariah* had originally come from, in hopes of changing the fortunes of a few. Nalli, the steward for Topuc and Ashari Pel was one she had helped, as was the Third wife of Chor'Ruus. On this visit, Ves'Dell was looking for a female or two to take over for Spaak's departing steward and a male to help the sister of Spaak's First wife, Lady Val, and her two youngest children. Though it had been several months, Val'ri Raijeh was still adjusting to life without her husband, and raising young children was not an easy task, even for a Starfleet admiral in charge of a Federation starbase with all the staff she would ever need.

Shortly after docking her shuttle at the station, Ves'Dell entered the hall where the merchandise was on view prior to being auctioned. Walking up and down each row, she looked over the men and women of various species held in the small cells. Most came from planets well outside the sphere of Federation influence. She passed one cage with barely a glance, then stopped dead in her tracks and backed up, looking with her mouth hanging open at the man sitting inside.

His hair, which had a hint of gray scattered throughout the black, was longer than she remembered, thick and wavy and his arms were muscular – probably due to heavy lifting – but there was no doubt in Ves'Dell's mind who this captive was. She moved closer to the cage and bent down to speak to its occupant.

"I don't know how you survived or found your way here, of all places, but don't worry. I'll make sure you come home with me," was all she said before glancing back and forth, getting up and walking away.

Ciaran looked up at the black-haired, gold-skinned Orion woman as she walked away. He had no idea why she was talking to him, but he did not care. He knew he would not remain in the bazaar long, that he would be purchased yet again; maybe by this stranger, perhaps another. This was the sixth time in forty cycles that he was up for auction, but despite being older than the norm for those being auctioned, he was sure he would sell yet again. Telepaths were always in demand.

* * *

Several hours later, Ciaran and two females – one a green-skinned Orion, the other of a species unknown to Ciaran – were escorted to a small shuttle where he saw the golden-skinned Orion woman who had spoken to him earlier. He was forcibly pushed into one of the seats by one of the guards who had escorted the three to the ship.

Ves'Dell signed for the 'cargo' and made sure they were secure in their seats. Then, after the Orion guards departed, she secured the shuttle and allowed her pilot to depart the docking bay. Once the shuttle had passed the perimeter of the space station, Ves'Dell pressed a hypo against each of their necks. The concoction it contained safely reversed the sedative they were given to keep from acting out or trying to escape from the bazaar. When they were coherent enough to understand, she began her introduction.

"Welcome aboard. I am Doctor Ves'Dell of the *Independent Merchant Vessel Pariah*. Today is your lucky day. In all likelihood, unlike any previous owners you may have had, our crew does not believe in abusing our slaves. When we reach the ship, Ama and Silah..." Ves'Dell nodded at the two female slaves. "...Will be working as stewards for Commander Spaak and his two wives and six children. You will actually receive a salary during the time of your servitude, but for one year your wages will be held in a trust. If, at the end of that time you wish to leave, the money will be yours to start a new life."

Ves'Dell then moved closer to the male and said, "But finding you was truly a miracle! I am sure you are looking forward to being reunited with your wife, Sylvan." Ciaran looked at the Orion woman strangely before raising his hand to let Ves'Dell know he had a question to ask. "You are free to speak your mind, Sylvan, you know that. The Admiral is going to be so happy to see you. Everyone believed you died six months ago in that shuttle accident."

"Apparently you have me mistaken for someone else. My name is Ciaran. I've never had a wife. I'm just a slave with telepathic abilities. I'm sure I can be of some use to this woman – this Admiral you speak of – either as a telepath or perhaps even a steward. I had to cook meals for my last owner, so I know I can do the work."

Ves'Dell was confused by Sylvan's remarks, and chalked it up to some memory loss that must have occurred during the accident that destroyed the shuttle Dr. Xaran had been traveling on. She tried to look reassuring as she said, "We will work it out once we get to the *Pariah*. I'm sure we can help you get your memory back."

Knowing from prior experience that the worst he would most likely get for backtalk was a severe beating, as he knew his telepathic skills were of value, he said, "I thought you said that this *Pariah* was different? If you are going to be using me for experiments then you are no different than the crews of any other ship I have been on."

"You ARE a rather brave one... Ciaran, was it? Or perhaps just foolish. On just about any other Orion ship, you would have been spaced for talking back."

"Unlikely. Telepaths are difficult to come by on the slave market."

“That is true. It cost me more than double what I was expected to spend on three slaves total just to make sure I was able to purchase just you alone,” Ves’Dell admitted. “However, I wasn’t looking for a telepath. The *Pariah* already has several. I know you don’t believe me, but I am taking you home.”

Now Ciaran looked skeptical as he said, “I don’t know who you THINK I am, but I can assure you that I am not he. But we will have to wait until we arrive on your vessel. Then I am sure this wife you say I have will confirm for you that I am not her husband.”

As Ves’Dell settled into her seat, she glanced back at Ciaran with an expression of puzzlement. “Whatever Sylvan has gone through, it must have been a severe trauma to his brain, not to recall his past,” she remarked to herself.

* * *

One day later

IMV *Pariah* at Starbase 719

The shuttle set down in the shuttlebay and Ves’Dell opened the hatch as Lady Val stepped up and into the shuttle. She had her hair pinned back so the new arrivals would recognize that she was of Vulcan heritage. After the Orion doctor explained the circumstances of her purchase, Lady Val looked over the three newcomers – all of whom had their faces down subserviently – and said, “What Ves has told the three of you is true. The only reason Commander Spaak and I have you work for us for a minimum of a year is that we want you to see how the ship and crew function and interact. After that time you may want to stay with us, and you will be welcome to. If not, you will leave with at least enough funds to start a new life somewhere other than the Orion sectors.”

Lady Val looked at the padd Ves’Dell had given to her as she entered the shuttle. The Orion woman’s emotions were quite evident and close to the surface, surprising to Lady Val. It was almost like the anticipation someone has when they want a friend to open their birthday gift! The woman usually was not this exuberant when she returned with new stewards. Then she saw the male as he briefly looked up at her with curiosity, and understood Ves’Dell’s excitement. Though the man looked exactly like Sylvan Xaran, she knew in an instant that he was not. For one thing, if he were, her ‘sister’ Val’ri would already be standing right next to her. She glanced at Ves’Dell with an amused expression before turning her attention back on the three newcomers.

“Ama and Silah – is that your names?” The two females nodded meekly. “You two will be working with my immediate family. Ciaran...” She glanced at the padd Ves’Dell had handed her to make sure she was pronouncing his name correctly. “You will be working with my ‘sister.’ I’m not sure what she is looking for in a steward, but I’m sure you will make her life a bit easier given the circumstances.”

Ciaran was not sure what to make of that bit of information. Before this moment he had only lived aboard smaller ships with limited number of crew, and never another telepath, something he could sense without trying that this Vulcanoid woman standing in front of him was. He wanted to ask a question, but Lady Val continued talking.

“You will each get your own quarters adjacent to where you will perform your duties,” she explained. “While they may be small by our standards, they are private and probably larger than any you have ever lived in before. You will also be given a week’s worth of uniforms, two off-duty outfits and other necessary garments. While on duty you will be required to wear your uniform. Ciaran, your duty schedule will be determined by the Admiral, for whom you will be working. As for Ama and Silah, we will discuss your schedules later. Suffice to say, you will not both be off at the same time.”

Ciaran wondered what this woman he had been purchased for would want. From what he had been able to ascertain from what Ves’Dell had remarked during their travels, she was either recently widowed or her husband had somehow gone missing, and apparently that man and Ciaran looked enough alike that the Orion woman had believed he was that other person. As such, he forgot any questions he had earlier. The rest he would find out as time went on.

* * *

After a thorough and somewhat intrusive medical examination in the *Pariah*’s sickbay by Dr. Ves’Dell, Ciaran was given a tour of the ship by the steward of the vessel’s first mate, a more typical green-skinned Orion named Nalli. It turned out that Nalli was formerly a slave and was purchased by Dr. Ves’Dell before the start of the Dominion War and had remained on board ever since – even enjoying some free time on the base. Nalli showed Ciaran the ample cargo bays, the main galley, the steward’s galley, and his own quarters. Ciaran noted from the

time they spent touring the ship that Nalli had an interesting sense of humor, not something he expected from the woman whose originally raven-colored hair was now heavily streaked with gray.

As the pair finally stepped into what would be Ciaran's quarters, he noticed that the one who introduced herself as 'Lady Val' had indeed been correct. The room was larger than any other he had before, and even included his own personal head. That was different! He had always had to share a common head aboard other ships on which he had served. After a moment, he moved toward the room's wardrobe closet, taking a deep breath before slowly letting it out. Having seen the uniforms that the females on board wore, he tried to imagine what sort of revealing outfit they would have for a male steward.

Opening the door, he was surprised to find the exact same uniform that he had seen the other men on board wearing. Long white pants with a gold-colored silk ribbon over a wider black one down the outside of each leg and a white button-down collared shirt. Looking in the drawers under the bunk he found underwear and socks. At the foot of the bunk, three pair of footwear. One was a lace-up dress shoe, one an ankle boot and the other was the type that he had seen some wear, made to handle more rocky terrain.

As Nalli left Ciaran's quarters, he took a closer look at the clothing that had been assembled for him. Everything looked as if it were made just for him, or at least the man he looked like. The pants looked like they would fit perfectly, but the shirts looked to be a bit tight in the arms and across his shoulders. Apparently his look-alike was in a position that did not require constant heavy lifting, and as such had probably not developed the musculature that Ciaran had. One thing he did notice was the quality. These clothes appeared to be specially tailored and not replicated. They may have been cast-offs, but none of these outfits had the appearance of having ever been worn or cleaned.

Ciaran again remembered the Orion doctor's remarks when he first boarded the shuttle and at the auction earlier the same day. He reminded her so much of someone, that she thought that he was actually that other person. He had a few minutes before having to meet with Lady Val's sister. He stripped off the clothes he had been wearing for the last few days and took advantage of a quick sonic shower before donning one of the uniforms and the ankle boots. Ciaran was not sure if he could believe everything he heard since leaving the Orion station, but so far he had to admit that *something* was different about this ship; even Nalli had told him the *Pariah* was much better than any other ship she had ever served aboard. Once dressed, he decided it was time to face his future.

* * *

Val'ri Raiajh was lying on the couch in her quarters aboard the *Pariah*. Though she was not officially retired from Starfleet yet, she had cut down on her duties to the point of moving her personal belongings aboard the *Pariah*, as she and Sylvan had planned to do before his... disappearance. A little over an hour earlier her 'sister,' Lady Val, told her to expect her new steward. Although Raiajh had insisted that she did not need a personal steward – particularly one that had been purchased rather than hired – both Hans Spaak and her 'sister' insisted, stating that she needed an adult to interact with.

They both understood that Raiajh was still grieving, but they also knew she needed to get back into a normal routine to help with the healing process. She heard the door chime and Raiajh instinctively reached out with her mind to see if she knew who was on the other side. She sensed it was someone new; probably her new steward – Lady Val had called him Ciaran – and that he knew what she had done because he was telepathic as well, so she pulled back, hopeful that he would realize she was not looking to push past his mental defenses. She was tempted for a brief moment to simply tell him to go away, but she promised her sister that she would at least meet the man. After hesitating a moment, she finally said, "Come."

Ciaran had felt the telepathic brush. The momentary touch was surprisingly nonmalignant. It was something he had done many times to determine who was approaching and if they were pleased or displeased with him. In that quick touch he was able to ascertain that she was sad – well, grief-stricken would be a better term – and did not actually want company at the moment, but it was also respectful, pulling back once she realized he was telepathic as well. It was an odd sensation, having someone respect his privacy.

When the door slid open he stepped inside and noticed the woman curled up on the couch. He stepped inside and the door closed behind him, standing and waiting for her to acknowledge him. After a moment she sat up and her disheveled hair settled around her. She looked exactly like the Vulcanoid woman who introduced herself as 'Lady Val,' but one did not need to be a telepath to know she was not the same woman – to see that this woman was hurting. He kept his thoughts neutral and would allow her to probe his thoughts if she desired, but he had to keep up a basic shield to keep from being overwhelmed by her grief.

As he stood there waiting, the door to one of the inner rooms of the quarters opened and two pre-teen girls stepped out. The two nearly identical girls stopped in their tracks when they noticed Ciaran and looked at him

intently for a moment. He was able to quickly tell that the pair were not identical twins because their eyes were different colors. One had black irises that resembled his own, the other with eyes a piercing shade of blue.

The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence for several seconds until one of the girls, the one with the dark eyes, finally spoke.

“Hello. I’m Corrine. I can’t believe how much you look like my dad! I know he’s gone and not coming back, because if there were any chance he could come back to us, my mom would be doing everything she could to find...”

“That’s enough, Corrine,” Raiajh replied weakly, still not facing either Ciaran or her daughters. “Tolek is waiting for the two of you. You know he doesn’t like to be kept waiting; especially when he’s requested the use of the station’s astrometrics lab for a class.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Corrine replied, and headed for the door. As the two left, the blue-eyed girl and Corrine’s ‘cousin’ Valerie paused by the door.

“Please start feeling better soon, Aunt Val.”

Once the door swished shut behind the two departing girls, the two adults were alone. Raiajh finally looked up at Ciaran and said, “Sorry about that. I’m sure you already heard that story a few times over the past few days.”

“I have,” Ciaran replied cautiously.

Even without probing his thoughts, Raiajh knew he was holding something back.

“Please be honest with me, Ciaran,” Raiajh said. “I want you to speak your mind. If you and I are going to be working together, I need you to know that I expect that. Especially if you think it something I don’t want to hear. Please tell me what it is that you are afraid of saying? You won’t be hurt for telling me.”

Ciaran hesitated again briefly before asking, “Do I really look that much like him?”

Raiajh nodded and pointed him over to a holo-photo on the nearby desk. He lifted the object once he was close enough. He realized after looking at the image for a moment that, with the exception of the other man’s short, close-cropped hair, Ciaran could have been looking in a mirror. After a few moments he put the photo down and turned again to Raiajh.

“Does your doctor now believe that I am not this man?”

Raiajh nodded. “She realized the moment she landed and I wasn’t standing there as the hatch opened. However, I have sensed in her the slightest nagging doubt, caused especially by how closely alike you look.”

Ciaran continued to look at the photo on the desk as he said, “I know this may be out of place, but can I expect the same openness and honesty from you that you expect of me?”

“Of course,” Raiajh replied. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Besides you would know if I am holding something back as easily as I would know if you were holding something back from me. I expect you to push back if you feel I am hiding something. The only thing I expect you not to do is try to push past my defenses and read my thoughts, or the thoughts of anyone else on this ship, without permission. There are several telepaths and empaths on this ship, even more aboard the starbase we consider our home port. Everyone expects and deserves privacy. I know you noticed that when I reached out to see who was at my door; that I didn’t push further. I do it out of habit and apologize if I offended you.”

“I... uh...” Ciaran stopped and thought about what Raiajh had said. She was apologizing to him, and meant it. “No one has considered my feelings before.”

“You will find that to be the norm here, not the exception. You may find one of the children attempting to circumvent your mental blocks on occasion, but mostly because they are learning, trying to bend the rules or push their limits.”

“What you did wasn’t offensive. I’ve done it myself many times, usually to gauge the mood of others. Sometimes knowing if I was going to be punished for a specific reason or simply because I was a convenient punching bag sometimes made the deserved beatings easier to tolerate.”

Raiajh cringed when Ciaran mentioned being beaten. “That won’t happen here, Ciaran. Commander Spaak may call himself a benevolent dictator, but he has never demanded the beating of another.” Raiajh’s expression took on a thoughtful look for a moment as she added, “Although there is a rumor amongst some on this ship that he once had a guest publicly spanked for insulting Lady Val.”

“That is a rather odd choice of punishment,” Ciaran commented.

“Well, the rest of the rumor was that he originally wanted to space the offender in question, but Lady Val intervened on behalf of the accused. Hans relented and acceded to his wife’s wishes of a lesser punishment.”

“Now that kind of punishment I’ve heard of! Especially for insulting the commander of a vessel or his mate.”

At that moment, Raiajh's stomach rumbled in protest and she stopped speaking. After several seconds, she finally said, "Sorry about that. My stomach is reminding me I haven't eaten in quite some time. Tell you what; if you don't mind going down to the galley and getting the meal I'm sure Chef has prepared for me, get yourself something – anything you would like to eat – and bring them back here, and I will tell you everything you want to know while we eat."

"You want me to eat WITH you?" Ciaran asked incredulously.

"Why not?" Raiajh asked in return. "I'm sure you must be hungry after your journey. We both need to eat. And it is certainly better than eating alone."

Ciaran was still in shock. "Isn't it frowned upon to eat with your servant?" he asked.

"Ciaran, you don't work for me," Raiajh explained. "You will be working WITH me. I know you don't understand that right now, but in time you will."

Still having mixed feelings, Ciaran nodded and left the quarters. He still was not sure about how things worked aboard this ship; she was right about that much. Yet, something about what she had said so far gave him a little hope.

Ciaran found the galley right where he had left it during his tour of the *Pariah* with Nalli, and when he asked for a meal for himself to go along with Raiajh's food, he was surprised when the El-Aurian man that everyone simply called 'Chef' asked him what he wanted. He found out that despite being part-Vulcan, his mistress would not mind him ordering and consuming a meat-based dish if that was his desire. However, he chose the same vegan dish as had been prepared for Raiajh because it looked good.

Several minutes later he returned to Raiajh's quarters with the food and, true to her word, she invited the new steward to join her in a casual meal – Raiajh sitting on the couch, Ciaran sitting in one of the armchairs across from her, and as the two ate she answered every question he had for her. By the end of the meal, she had given Ciaran much to think about.

* * *

One week later...

Ciaran spent most of the prior two days working with Nalli, effectively learning how things operated aboard the *Pariah*, particularly in regards to how the stewards worked individually with ship's officers to whom they had been assigned and their families during normal operations, and with Lady Val – the ship's purser – when the *Pariah* embarked paying passengers or took on cargo. He still had his trepidations about Doctor Ves'Dell, with whom he had twice-daily appointments since arriving aboard, during which she simply took blood and hair samples before again sending him on his way.

During the days when Ciaran was either working with Nalli or on some independent task assigned to him by Lady Val, Raiajh passed the time working with some of the youngest residents on the ship. She was now teaching T'Mera – the daughter of the ship's first mate Topuc, Sabina – the daughter of Commander Spaak and his Second wife Marie, and Ariana – the daughter of Commander Spaak and his First wife, Lady Val. Then, in the evening, Ciaran shared his evening meal with Raiajh. In the time since his arrival aboard the *Pariah*, Ciaran was learning more about the ship and his position aboard her and was growing confident in his knowledge and abilities. At the same time, Raiajh appeared to look better. Although still mourning her loss, and looking gaunt compared to some of the older holo-images Ciaran had seen of her, the admiral seemed to have turned a corner. And though he knew he looked like the man she loved and lost, serving as a near-constant reminder of her pain, Raiajh made a point of treating him as a unique person in his own right, something which he was thankful for. Especially as he came to realize that everyone on board the *Pariah* was considered family, whether they had signed aboard as a skilled technician or been purchased at an Orion slave auction. A small part of Ciaran hoped that – perhaps one day – he too would be counted among those members.

Ciaran was sitting at the table in Raiajh's quarters, eating dinner with Raiajh and her five-year-old son, Korin. After a few minutes, Raiajh began to notice Ciaran becoming increasingly agitated, letting out his breath in more audible huffs and almost slamming his utensils on his plate.

"Korin, honey, why don't you go find your cousin Thaddeus in Commander Spaak's quarters and go play?" Raiajh said to her son. The boy looked at his mother, confused.

"But I haven't finished my dinner, yet..." he started to say.

"I really think Thaddeus would enjoy your company right now," Raiajh insisted with a surreptitious glance toward Ciaran.

Now Korin let out his own huff of frustration, wondering why he was not being allowed to finish his dinner, before getting down off his chair and heading out the door and down the corridor.

“He didn’t have to go,” Ciaran said once the cabin door swished shut. “I’m fine.” His voice had a gruff undertone that made Raiajh sit straighter and raise an eyebrow. Not only could she hear the agitation in his voice, but there was a look in his eye that almost frightened her. She had seen that look before, and quickly realized what was happening to Ciaran. He was beginning to be affected by the pheromones emitted by the Orion women on the ship.

“I know you wouldn’t hurt Korin. Not under normal circumstances. But I didn’t want to take the chance of him seeing you hurt me, even if it is not intentional.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you either! In the handful of days I’ve been here I have begun to see that this ship is different from every other ship I’ve been forced to serve aboard!”

“I’m glad you feel that way, but right now I need you to follow me,” Raiajh said.

Ciaran looked down at his half-finished plate of food, then back at Raiajh. The look was back in his eyes. “But what of our meal?” he asked, starting to sound a little angry.

“Dinner will keep for a while. Right now I need you to join me over on the base. In the lounge near where the ship is moored.”

“Now?! You do know I have an appointment with Doctor Ves again after dinner?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll let her know,” Raiajh assured.

“Fine!” Ciaran replied with a huff in the same gruff tone. Raiajh could not only hear the frustration in his voice but also his demeanor as he stood up from his seat.

Ves’Dell should have realized what would happen to Ciaran aboard the *Pariah* if left unprepared, but Raiajh knew the Orion doctor still had some belief that Ciaran was actually Raiajh’s late husband Sylvan suffering some extreme form of amnesia. Raiajh knew that Ves’Dell meant well, but bringing an un-bonded humanoid male onto a ship with Orion women was simply asking for trouble.

Raiajh motioned for Ciaran to follow her. The pair walked through the ship quickly. Fortunately, no one they encountered between Raiajh’s quarters and the airlock stopped either of them, as most probably believed Ciaran was helping the admiral with an errand of some sort. Finally the two stepped out of the gangway doors and onto the base, where Raiajh led Ciaran into the nearby lounge. Fortunately, the lounge was deserted, as few of the station residents chose to spend their off-duty time hanging around the *Pariah*’s regular mooring dock unless they had a specific reason. Once they were both inside, she locked the door behind them, then entered several commands into a control padd near the door, releasing a calming agent – similar to a diluted form of neurozine – into the air. Almost immediately, Ciaran’s attitude began to change.

“Why did you lock the door?” he asked, his voice sounding less frustrated.

“Force of habit. When I come in here to be alone with my thoughts, I prefer not to be disturbed by the base personnel or anyone else who happens along looking for a nice view of the spacedock.”

“Do you really think you would be disturbed? This area appears almost abandoned.”

“You never know,” Raiajh remarked. “As you may expect with someone in my position, if people know I am about they occasionally stop by and asked how I am feeling or how well I am doing since stepping down from my duties almost six months ago.”

“Must be nice having people who care about you,” Ciaran retorted in a snippy tone, still reminiscent of his behavior back in Raiajh’s quarters.

“Ciaran, I know you haven’t had the best life and that you feel that no one cares about you as a person, but believe me when I say that has begun to change. I have known you only a week and I already know I would miss your company were you not here.” Although she knew what she was saying was the truth, she realized to herself that it made her feel like she was willingly beginning to forget all the years she spent with her husband. Once, when they first met, Xaran had said to her that Deltans had a hard time being alone, and these last six months proved those words to be most prophetic. Raiajh was indeed having a hard time adjusting to life without him. As she sat down and tried to process what she was feeling, she also felt Ciaran begin to relax and calm down. The neurozine derivative and the distraction provided by their conversation were having the desired effect. He finally sat down opposite Raiajh, a small round table between the two of them.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, thinking she had taken offence at his remark by her sudden silence. “I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know what has gotten into me. I should know not to talk back to you like that.”

“Ciaran, I would never punish you, or allow anyone on the ship to hurt you, for what you said. Remember, I did tell you that I want to hear the truth from you, even if your words are painful.”

"I know you want the truth, but I didn't mean for it to come out the way it did. I'm just... I don't know. I can't explain why I said it. I have all sorts of emotions running through my head, and I don't know why. What's happening to me? Why am I feeling this way?"

"It's the pheromones of the Orion women on board the *Pariah*," Raiajh explained. "Commander Spaak and his engineer try to filter as much of it out of the atmosphere as they can through the ventilation system filters and scrubbers. But it's not a perfect system, and some of the pheromones remain."

"You mean I am being affected by my own hormones?" Ciaran asked, to which Raiajh nodded. "Why aren't the other men aboard the ship affected in the same way?"

"Tolek and Topuc are Vulcan. They have superior control over their own body's reactions to female hormones, not to mention they are bonded to their mates, which tends to counteract the effects. Commander Spaak is married to my 'sister', so he gets protection from the bond they share, along with the bond that has been extended to include Marie, his Second wife."

"And the one you call COB?" Ciaran asked, using that line of reasoning. "He is Orion himself, so he isn't affected, right?"

"Not really. He's still affected. It's one of the reasons he has three wives of his own. But the pheromones in the air aboard the *Pariah* are the reason why you started to become agitated. I realized what was happening when I started to recognize your symptoms."

Ciaran's expression turned to one of frustration again. Raiajh wondered if the neurozine was already wearing off until he asked, "So where does that leave me? I thought that perhaps I finally stumbled onto something good. Will you be sending me back to the auctions?"

"No, we won't do that," Raiajh quickly replied, aghast at the idea. "If you don't want to go back we will do what we can to help."

"What if I want to stay here aboard the *Pariah*? There must be some way!"

"I'm sure Doctor Ves or Jill can come up with some concoction that will..." Raiajh started to say when she was surprised by the sound of the lounge door's locking mechanism cycling. She looked over at the door just in time to see it open and Lady Val enter the lounge with a padd.

"Ves wanted me to give this to you," Val said to Raiajh, handing the padd to her 'sister' before noticing the look on Ciaran's face. "What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Orion pheromones," Raiajh replied before glancing at the padd.

"Ahh! Yes, Ves noticed," Val remarked, quickly realizing the slightly unusual scent in the air must be a calming agent of some sort. "It's no surprise then that I found the two of you out here. Feeling any better, Ciaran?"

"Yes and no," the steward replied. "I'm not feeling the urge to hurt anyone anymore, which is a good thing. But I can't help wonder where that leaves me. Wondering when you are going to take me back to the auctions."

Lady Val looked at Ciaran with a shocked expression. "No matter what transpires here, Ciaran, you are not going back to the auctions! Ever! If you are unable to finish your contracted year aboard the *Pariah*, there are numerous other options available to us! Hans and I have an estate on a small planet in the Beta Quadrant where your skills could prove useful if necessary." She glanced in the direction of Raiajh and added, "Not to mention it would do my sister some good to recover from her trauma in the fresh air and sunshine. With the scent of war on the horizon, we may need to pull out of here unexpectedly."

Ciaran looked at Lady Val like she hit on something obvious that he had never noticed before. "I sense you are right. I've felt that same foreboding on the last vessel I served aboard as well. The Klingons are getting friendly with the Syndicate. The last two ships I was indentured aboard were Klingon. They were a bit brutal, beating me severely when they thought I was lying or reading their thoughts. The females were worse." He noticed Raiajh cringe again at the mention of his physical punishments. "It's fine," he said to her. "At least the beatings, while painful, only lasted for short periods. There was this one female Klingon aboard my last vessel, an armed merchantman, who insisted that I recite poetry to her before she started throwing heavy things at me. I quickly got good at ducking after that."

Both women tried to hide a snicker before Lady Val remarked, "Klingons incorporate conflict into every aspect of their culture, including mating."

Ciaran looked puzzled for a moment as he said, "How did the subject of mating come up in this conversation?"

"Nevermind," Lady Val replied, sharing a subtle smile with Raiajh. "That is neither here nor there."

"I must agree," Raiajh said. "The quadrant is rife with conflict right now. In the seven years I've been in the Typhon Sector, I've witnessed a war between the Federation and the Kairn, seen the fall and rise of an Empire,

albeit a fractured one, and we are aware of the growing relations between the Klingons and the Orion Syndicate. It seems the Federation may be on the brink of war yet again.”

“Things must be getting bad if a ship with Orion origins like yours is taking refuge at a Federation space station,” Ciaran remarked.

Lady Val let out a small laugh, trying to hide it behind her hand, and said, “If anyone around here is taking refuge, it’s my ‘sister!’ Ever since her husband died, she’s been ‘hiding’ aboard the *Pariah*. I was hoping that she would be feeling well enough to participate in her own formal change of command ceremony tomorrow!”

Ciaran looked at Raiajh, who in spite of herself looked mildly embarrassed, and said, “You mean you are not a member of the *Pariah*’s crew?”

“The Admiral?” Lady Val responded with another guffaw. “No. Not yet, at least.”

It was not until Val had addressed Raiajh by rank that Ciaran finally managed to put everything together. He had assumed when members of the *Pariah* crew had called Raiajh ‘Admiral’ that it had been merely a nickname of some sort, perhaps a reference to a past event in her life. Suddenly it all made sense! He looked at Raiajh and asked, “You’re in Starfleet?”

“Technically,” Raiajh replied. “Tomorrow is my official retirement date. The day I formally turn over command of the base to the woman who has been my first officer for the last seven years, and command of the Typhon Sector to another old friend, both of whom have been unofficially running the show here for the last few months since Sylvan was lost.”

Ciaran shook his head, as if trying to comprehend what Raiajh was telling him, then said, “I think I liked it better when I didn’t know that. Starfleet and the Federation say that they care about their citizens, but in reality they don’t.”

“What would make you believe that, Ciaran?” Lady Val asked.

“Not long after I was first taken from my home, only a few days after Captain Krena – my first master – threw that spoon-head doctor off his ship during a stop at *Terok Nor*, we crossed paths with a Starfleet ship. They stopped Krena to conduct an inspection of the *Brannon*. The Starfleet crew saw me, even heard me when I said I wanted to go home, but they didn’t pay me any mind. My parents must have been worried about what had happened to me, but the Starfleeters ignored me when Krena told them some story about why I was aboard his ship. They could have saved me and returned me home, but they just left me with Krena instead. About ten cycles later, he ended up selling me to the Syndicate.”

“I have a feeling whoever those Starfleet officers were, they believed Captain Krena’s story because your parents were not even looking for you, Ciaran. There was no alert of any kind that you were missing,” Lady Val explained. “Doctor Ves finished her tests. That was the reason I came looking for you both. What she determined may answer some of the questions you have had about yourself along with her own questions regarding Sylvan.” She gestured toward the padd still inactivated in Raiajh’s hand. “It even answered questions I didn’t even know I had.”

Ciaran did not hear anything after the first sentence Lady Val had spoken. “What do you mean they weren’t looking? I recall that females were more treasured than males on the planet I originally came from, but my parents cared about me and loved me!”

“I’m not saying they didn’t care about you,” Lady Val explained. “They just weren’t looking for you because they did not know you were missing! Think about it Ciaran. Would you continue to look for something after you believed you had already found it?”

Ciaran, his initial anger quickly fading, was even more confused now. “What do you mean they stopped looking because they had already found what they were looking for?”

Lady Val again pointed at the padd and said, “It’s all right there on Ves’ report.”

Raiajh finally activated the padd and began to read the contents to herself. She was shocked to read that analysis of Ciaran’s hair and blood samples confirmed he was in fact Sylvan Xaran. Another part of the report referred to an old first responder statement from Betazed that described an incident when a young boy named Sylvan Xaran had gone missing for several days during a family trip to the Loneel Valley almost fifty years earlier. Then, as she read further into Doctor Ves’Dell’s report, Raiajh looked up at her ‘sister’ with wide eyes before looking back at Ciaran.

“Ciaran, you said there was a doctor of some kind aboard Captain Krena’s ship? You called him a spoon-head. Did you mean he was a Cardassian?”

“If that is what you call them,” Ciaran replied. “They always looked to me like someone impaled a spoon into their foreheads.”

“You said that doctor and Captain Krena had some kind of disagreement that caused Krena to dump the doctor off at *Terok Nor*. Do you know what caused that falling out?” Raiajh asked.

“No. All I remember is it happened within days of me being taken aboard the *Brannon*,” Ciaran said. “Though I always felt it had something to do with me, I never asked Krena.”

Raijeh entered a series of commands into the padd, calling up a picture from the station’s library computer. She then showed the image to Ciaran, asking, “Is this what the doctor looked like?”

Ciaran looked at the screen. It displayed a middle-aged Cardassian male with thinning hair atop his head. “I think so,” he said unsurely. “I swore that I would never forget his face, but fifty cycles is a long time.”

“Yes, it is,” Raijeh agreed. “But I don’t think your mind is suspect on this one.” She showed the picture to her ‘sister,’ who nodded in agreement. “The only reason I suspect I am right is that Doctor Crell Moset was known to have conducted unethical experiments, including genetic experimentation on both telepaths and children.”

Thoughts began to occur to Ciaran as pieces of the puzzle that made up his life began to finally fall into place.

“You said my parents weren’t looking for me! Why is that? What did he... that Doctor Moset... do?” A sudden idea occurred to Ciaran, and a chill ran up his spine. “Genetic experiments!” he repeated. “Cloning! I’m a copy aren’t I! He took some child and made a copy of him and I’m it! Aren’t I?”

Raijeh looked up from the padd she was still reading and said, “No, you aren’t the copy.” This statement confused Ciaran even more. “It was the clone that Moset sent back to the planet’s surface.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ciaran asked.

“I’m sure. Even without looking at the data here, I’m sure.” When she still saw Ciaran’s bewilderment, she explained, “I have known both my late husband Sylvan and you. YOU are the stronger telepath. And the genetic comparison Doctor Ves performed between your DNA and the records we have on file for Sylvan show flaws in Sylvan’s genetic structure that do not exist in you. It would make perfect sense that Moset would want to hold onto the ‘original’ for further experimentation, as any defect in the cloning process would only increase with each generation. But it sounds like your Captain Krena had morals of some kind, considering he sent Moset packing soon after cloning you. Not that those morals made him take you back to your rightful family or keep him from selling you to the Orions the moment your Betazoid telepathic abilities started to manifest themselves.”

“Is that what the test results say?” Ciaran asked.

“More or less,” Raijeh replied. “It would explain some of Sylvan’s quirks,” she then said to Lady Val, who nodded in agreement. “There were some treatments that Ves tried on him that did not work like she expected. And his telepathic abilities were never as strong as any other member of his family. He had difficulty with his telepathy, to be blunt.”

“When I first arrived here, I thought that Sylvan’s telepathic weakness came from a head injury he had suffered many years ago,” Lady Val explained further. “This data could even explain why he didn’t die from his injuries in this reality.”

“In THIS reality?” Ciaran asked, again confused.

Lady Val glanced at her ‘sister’ with an amused expression as she said, “I guess Val hasn’t explained everything to you yet. She and I are not technically sisters.”

“You are not twins?” Ciaran asked.

“No, not twins. We aren’t clones either,” Raijeh stated. “Lady Val and most of the crew of the *Pariah* originated in a different quantum parallel reality. One that is very close to our own. We are, in essence, the same person – to a point. We were both born the same date, both served in Starfleet aboard the starship *Arcturus*, both met and married Sylvan Xaran. But in her reality, Sylvan died of a brain injury that occurred during an alien attack aboard the starship *Sarek* that wasn’t attended to in time. In this reality, he survived.”

Ciaran was starting to understand. He had heard about theories regarding alternate realities and ways they could be accessed by a former owner who had intended to exploit those alternate dimensions for a profit if a safe manner of travel between them could be discovered. “What about this reality’s *Pariah* and her crew? Are they aware of a duplicate of their ship and crew existing?”

“The crew of the *Pariah* in this reality died during the Dominion War,” Raijeh explained. “On a mission this crew survived because Lady Val had become a member of their crew right before the mission that killed the crew and destroyed the ship in this universe.”

“How were you able to find out about that?” Ciaran asked. “That they died during the war?”

“Just like I had in my reality,” Lady Val replied. “The Federation needed a ship to get behind enemy lines. As the Orions had remained neutral during the conflict, Starfleet contracted them to send a ship.”

Raijeh continued, “What we didn’t know was there were some in the Botchok Planetary Congress who were jealous of Commander Spaak’s success, especially since he was a human in command of an Orion vessel. In this reality the Orions sold out the *Pariah* and her crew to the Cardassians, and they flew straight into the trap the Cardassians and Dominion had set for them. In Lady Val’s reality, since she was there aboard the *Pariah*, and was

better aware of the tactical situation at the time, she suggested an alternate route to their destination, one the Dominion had not considered as a possibility, and that allowed them to complete the mission and return to Federation space successfully.”

“What happened differently in this reality that you were not aboard the *Pariah*?” Ciaran asked, his curiosity regarding alternate dimensions growing as the conversation progressed.

“Several things,” Raiajh replied. “Chief among them being I was not in the city of San Francisco when the Breen attacked Earth, so I was not present to be kidnapped by the Breen and sold to the Orions as a slave and wasn’t in a position to be acquired by Spaak in this reality.”

Ciaran seemed shocked by the revelation. He turned to Lady Val and said, “I thought you were the Commander’s wife. I had no idea you are his slave.”

Lady Val nodded and said, “Not a slave in the way you are thinking. The station where I was handed off to the Orions was a government-run station, not an outpost run by the Syndicate like where you were acquired. Things are handled differently at government-operated stations. The legalities are more intricate and the contracts are different as well.”

Still unsure about her feelings regarding what had been revealed to them all that evening, Raiajh looked at Ciaran and said, “I’ll talk to Hans and reimburse him what was paid at the auction and make sure you have enough credits to get by while you acclimate to life in the Federation. I have a place on Earth where you can stay as long as you need.”

Realizing that Raiajh was suddenly offering him his freedom away from the *Pariah* and its crew, Ciaran looked as if he had lost everything, including hope. “I guess I don’t have much of a say in this matter.” He got up and started to walk toward the door. “I will go back to my quarters and wait. I was hoping to use the year I was allotted to show that I can perform the job that had been expected of me. And in my brief time here I saw the way the crew interacts with each other. It’s more like a family than a professional relationship, and I was hoping that I could one day prove myself and, perhaps, become a part of that family.”

Before either Raiajh or Lady Val could say anything, Ciaran stormed out of the lounge. When the door closed behind him, rather than head back to the *Pariah*’s gangway, he turned and headed further into the station, intent to explore some of it. He had never been allowed to roam freely before in his life, and at the moment he did not care if his actions would get him into trouble. He wanted to experience what it was like to be free, even if it was only for a short period of time.

* * *

The following morning, Raiajh did not think much of it when she did not see Ciaran roaming the corridors of the *Pariah*. Figuring he was probably still upset over the revelations of the previous night, she figured he was probably alone in his quarters, attempting to comprehend what his place in the galaxy would be. Instead, for the first time in nearly half an Earth year, she dressed in her Starfleet uniform. It surprised her how badly it now fit, hanging loosely in places. Removing the uniform, she placed it back in the replicator and had the computer scan her and replicate one in a size that would fit. Satisfied that she finally looked presentable, she departed the *Pariah* and headed to the change of command ceremony in the botanical garden on station level 850.

Raiajh would have preferred a simple private change of command in Ops instead of the grand public ceremony arranged by both her own aide, Lieutenant Commander Marie Quintero, and Admiral Kale’s, Lieutenant Commander Galen DuLac. For the last few hours, Raiajh had been feeling lightheaded and somewhat ill. She had not slept well the previous night, thinking instead about Sylvan and how much she wished he could have been present; that they were finally going to have the future they spoke about many times over the last few years. Raiajh was still unsettled about now having to live that future alone. All she wanted at this point was to turn around and go back to the privacy of her stateroom on the *Pariah* – to hide away and be left alone with her thoughts. She joined the dignitaries on the platform, which included the Federation Ambassador to the Romulan colony of Vorte, the Governor of the Federation colony world Persephone, Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral Penji Fil, and several of the fleet’s highest officers, including her relief as sector coordinator, Kalin Kale. The ceremony began with Captain Cathryn Pearson taking the podium at the center of the stage and thanking all in attendance before explaining the histories of the Federation’s presence in the Typhon Sector and *Starbase 719*.

After several minutes of speeches by some of the dignitaries, including a rambling collage of thoughts from Admiral Fil, Captain Pearson finally introduced Admiral Raiajh and invited her to the podium. Raiajh stood up and began to approach where Pearson stood, but after a few steps she felt everything start to spin. In seconds, Raiajh collapsed to the deck, unconscious. Both Pearson and Kale rushed to the prone Raiajh, as Doctors Ves’Dell and T’Pannia pushed their way through the gathered crowd to get to the stage, followed closely by Professor Tolek.

Reaching the dais the two female doctors began examining Raiajh. As T’Pannia scanned the unconscious woman with a medical tricorder, Ves’Dell took a more ‘old fashioned’ approach and checked her pulse by pressing her fingers first to her neck, then at her wrist. In doing so, she was also able to assess the fact that the bones in Raiajh’s wrist were protruding more than they normally would.

“The Admiral is extremely dehydrated,” T’Pannia remarked. “We need to get her to Infirmary 1 to run more tests to determine what exactly is wrong.”

“I agree moving her to the infirmary is the best course of action,” Ves’Dell replied. “But you don’t need any fancy tests to figure out what’s wrong. Look at the gauntness of her face.” Ves’Dell directed Tolek to pick up the unconscious admiral and start carrying her to the nearest turbolift before any medical response team had even arrived as she added, “Not only that, but if you feel her wrist you would easily see that she has lost somewhere between ten and twelve kilos over the last six months.”

“That alone shouldn’t cause her to faint like this,” T’Pannia countered.

“Val’ri usually weighs in the vicinity of fifty kilos. Ten to twelve kilos would account for almost a fifth of her body mass. I wish I could have caught it earlier, but Val’ri has kept herself locked away and I was out of the Typhon Sector for a while.”

As the group continued toward the base’s main infirmary, Ves’Dell used her communicator to contact Commander Spaak and asked him to meet them there.

* * *

After storming out of the lounge, Ciaran made it as far as the Bastogne Lodge – enjoying a drink and a meal with no credits in his name to pay for it – before the bar’s manager Shifty Powers called station security. After spending over a shift and a half in a detention cell asking – and eventually pleading – for the security personnel on duty to contact the *Pariah*, and another half-hour trying to explain to Commander Michelle Petersen who he was and that he was a recently-purchased member of the *Pariah* crew did she finally relent and contact Commander Spaak to come and straighten out the situation and verify the identity of the man who looked so much like the station’s deceased Chief Medical Officer but who called himself Ciaran, in the hopes that Spaak would be able to shed some light on the situation.

It took Hans Spaak almost half an hour to reach the detention area after receiving the call from Petersen, arriving with the station’s Strategic Operations Officer to claim his wayward crewman. He had forgotten to tell either Raiajh or his own wife to tell the new arrival not to venture off the *Pariah* before they were able to get credentials for him, and it usually took longer than a week for new arrivals to wander away from the ship on their own. Spaak was both intrigued and impressed by the fact that Ciaran asked for retrieval by the *Pariah* crew. It had been his experience that those who left the ship unannounced, especially the ones that had previous owners who often treated their property badly, usually never returned. After what he heard from his First wife the previous night, it was no wonder that Ciaran had run off. He wondered what he himself would do if he learned he had been replaced in his happy family life by an inferior copy. But Spaak was even more surprised that Ciaran asked to be returned to the ship.

Spaak paid the fines and fees owed due to Ciaran’s transgressions, and while the security personnel processed the charges, Spaak stepped up to the cell where Ciaran sat on the bunk.

“I will have the Admiral apologize to you for her words and deeds last night,” he said through the forcefield. “She had no authority to say what she said. It is I who decides who stays and who goes aboard my ship, not her. I will also make sure she reimburses me for the fine and the cost of your food and drink at the Lodge last night.”

“There’s no need to have her apologize, sir,” Ciaran replied, his face downcast. “She’s obviously been under a great deal of stress over the last few months. I’m sure it doesn’t help that I am a visual reminder of what she has lost. I sense she feels she’s being pushed to move forward but she’s not yet willing to.”

“I don’t care if she’s not ready,” Spaak remarked. “After today she is no longer a Starfleet officer. We are shipping out in a few days and I need her to be ready to assume her duties aboard the *Pariah*.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Ciaran explained. “It is not simply that she isn’t willing to move on. She doesn’t WANT to move on.”

“I know she lost someone close to her, but it doesn’t negate her responsibility to her children,” Spaak countered. “Not to mention the promise I made to her husband to make sure she doesn’t follow him to the afterlife.”

“A promise doesn’t change what happened,” Ciaran stated. “Nor will it keep her here if she doesn’t have a reason to stay.”

“My wife survived his death in our universe. The Admiral has what it takes to do so here too.”

As Ciaran did not have a response, he was relieved when Spaak's communicator chirped. Opening it, he answered, "Spaak here."

"Hans, it's Ves. The Admiral collapsed during the ceremony. We are taking her to Infirmary One."

"I'll meet you there in a few minutes, once I'm done with station security and our errant crewmember. Spaak out." He closed the communicator and turned to the security officer, "Am I free to take custody of my crewmember?"

"Yes, Mister Spaak," the security officer replied, pressing a button on his panel to turn off the forcefield in front of the cell. "Commander Petersen has given permission to release him to you. He's free to go."

Ciaran got up from the bunk and exited the cell, coming to a stop in front of Commander Spaak. Spaak nodded and the two walked out of the detention area, followed by Harkonnen, and headed toward the station core turbolifts. Once the trio reached the lifts, Spaak said to Ciaran, "I want you to head directly back to the ship and report to Lady Val. No stops! Konstantin will make sure you get back without any further problems."

Ciaran looked Spaak directly in the eyes and said, "Sir, if I may, can I go with you? I know I should not have run off last night, and I want to make sure Ms. Raiajh is going to be well again."

After pondering the request for a moment, Spaak replied, "Fine. I know you were purchased to assist her. I see no harm in bringing you along. Just stay out of the way."

Although he agreed to let Ciaran tag along, Spaak was surprised the steward had even asked. From what his First wife had told him about what Raiajh had said to Ciaran the previous night, one would think the man would want nothing to do with her; yet here he was following along to make sure she was going to recover.

* * *

Infirmary One was a blur of activity as everyone worked on Admiral Raiajh, attempting to stabilize her condition and determine exactly what was wrong with her. While others performed more extensive testing, Dr. Ves'Dell of the *Pariah* worked to get an IV into her so she could start giving Raiajh fluids and nutritional supplements. Dr. T'Pannia still wanted to run tests, but in Ves' mind there was no doubt about the fact that the woman had lost too much of her body weight. Once the Orion doctor was done and had started a saline drip, she turned to see Commander Spaak walk in followed by Ciaran. The *Pariah*'s master joined a small group off to one side that included Admiral Kalin Kale and Captain Cathryn Pearson.

"They are running more tests to make sure she doesn't have any organ damage, but she is extremely underweight," Dr. Ves'Dell explained as she joined the group. "She's lost almost twelve kilos in the past six months since Sylvan died. I was hoping he was not lost to us, that I had found him when I came across Ciaran." She looked at the steward before turning her attention back to Spaak. "But that only led to more questions and few answers. Right now I'm more worried about Admiral Val than our new crewman."

Dr. T'Pannia, the starbase's interim Chief Medical Officer following Dr. Xaran's disappearance, joined the group to add what she had learned from her exam.

"Although Doctor Ves'Dell and I have different approaches to medicine, her assessment is correct. When Doctor Xaran died, the Admiral weighed fifty kilos. Doctor Xaran worked with her to help her maintain that weight, and without that help she would probably have only maintained an average weight of around forty five kilos, much as the Lady Val does. However, she is currently weighing in at thirty seven point nine kilos, which is much too thin for her body frame. She may look Vulcan, but she was raised Deltan and is more Deltan emotionally than she lets on. I know from my discussions with her that while she was not close to her brother and only had a working relationship with her mother that was not overly close, she shared a close emotional relationship with her grandmother, and was greatly affected by her death. Following her transition to the 24th century, she grew closer to her husband Sylvan than any other family member. She may still have her children, but that is a completely different type of relationship. With the loss of her relationship with Sylvan, she's lost. She's only held on this long because of her Vulcan genes. Had she been completely Deltan, she likely would have died in Ops the day *Shuttle 17* exploded."

"Like many of the Deltans who were serving aboard the *Arcturus* did when we suddenly found ourselves thrust eighty years into the future and their bonds to their families back home were suddenly ripped apart," Kale remarked.

"Precisely. And unless there is a way to give her back what she's lost she's going to die. Sometimes our will is stronger and it wins out, but this type of behavior is common amongst Deltans with close familial ties when that tie is abruptly broken. Since she considers all of you her family and friends, you will need to decide how to proceed."

Dr. T'Pannia left the group, which had grown by three with the addition of Lady Val and the Admiral's two youngest children while she spoke, to ponder the future of the unconscious Raiajh.

* * *

While those who cared about her stood nearby and discussed her fate, Val'ri Raiajh found herself standing in a field that looked like the area around Jenarra Falls on Betazed. Yet something about it felt very different. She started to look around, trying to figure out what was not quite right about the scene when she started hearing a young girl calling out to her.

"Mommy! Mommy, you're here!"

Raiajh turned to see her daughter Elayne running toward her. She fell to her knees and embraced the girl she had lost several years earlier because of her brother's selfishness and stupidity. "I've missed you," Raiajh said. "I've missed you and your dad so much! Is he here too?" she asked with trepidation.

From behind her a male voice replied, "I'm here too, Imzadi."

Raiajh spun around to see Sylvan Xaran standing there. He helped her up and then promptly embraced her. After holding her for a few moments, he whispered in her ear, "I love you so much. I wish you could stay, but it's not your time. You have to go back."

Holding her husband tighter, Raiajh said, "No! I want to stay here. I need to be here with you and Elayne."

"I know you want to stay. I want you to stay too, but that is not for us to decide. You need to go back. You need to live your life." Xaran released his embrace and held his wife at arm's length. "I want you to find love again, as much as it may hurt you to hear that. As much as I know you don't want to, you *need to* Imzadi. Remember when we first met? I said you were more Deltan than even you let yourself believe. It's still true. Just let it happen. Think of it as keeping a promise to me." He embraced her once again and held her a moment longer before he said, "You need to go now."

"No! No, no, no!" Raiajh cried as she tried to hold on, feeling herself being pulled back. The field in which she had been standing blurred in her vision.

* * *

In the station infirmary, Admiral Kale had dismissed himself to return to Ops in order to handle station matters in Pearson's absence as Cathryn and the others discussed Raiajh's fate.

"We need to do something, and soon," Dr. Ves'Dell was saying. "We're lucky she hasn't died already, but her heart rate is extremely fast – even for her – while her pulse is very weak. It is as if the Deltan half of her is willing herself to die, but her Vulcan half is fighting against that desire."

"She took Sylvan's death harder than I thought she would," Lady Val remarked. "Even I hadn't taken it to this extreme when I lost my own Sylvan. But likewise my Sylvan was kept on life support long enough for me to say a proper good-bye, and Val'ri was married to her Sylvan for much longer and his death was so sudden and unexpected!"

"Could the fact that he turned out to be a clone also have something to do with the differences in their bond and why she is having such a hard time?" Spaak asked.

"Perhaps," Lady Val replied. "Though I'm leaning more toward the probability that the number of years they shared has more to do with it. The longer you and I have been married, the deeper and stronger our bond has become. I'm sure the bond Val'ri shared with Sylvan likewise grew stronger over time."

"What if she was given a new bond-mate?" Spaak asked. "Would that help stabilize her condition? Give her something worth living for?"

"Bonding an adult against their will is normally frowned upon," Tolek objected before glancing back at his daughter's unconscious form. "However, in this case, it may give her a renewed sense of purpose. But the question remains, should we proceed down this route, who?"

Shocking everyone, Spaak replied, "I'll do it. I promised Sylvan that if something ever happened to him, I would make sure Val'ri was..."

"Absolutely not!" Lady Val interjected before her husband had a chance to finish. "She has no desire to be your Third wife, and I have no desire to share you with anyone beyond Marie."

"You would rather let her die?" Spaak asked his wife. "I, for one, do not wish to see that happen! Besides, my promise..."

"I have no wish to see my sister die either," Lady Val remarked. "But you aren't the one for her! I'm afraid if you allow yourself to be bonded with her, she may not be happy with your decision, or worse, it would exacerbate her condition and end with the same result as if we do nothing. Besides, you said from the beginning, I have the final say in matters such as these, and I'm putting my foot down! It will not be you!"

"Fine," Spaak relented. "But that only brings us back to the same question... If not me, than who?"

Off to the side, Corrine Xaran was sitting with Ciaran, upset that she was not being allowed to participate in the conversation.

"She's my mother!" Corrine fumed. "I should be allowed to take part in the decision making process!"

"Do you really believe that at your age you are mature enough to make such decisions?" Ciaran asked in a tone that he hoped was understood not to be meant as an insult.

"I know she doesn't want to live anymore since my father is dead. I just wish I knew what they were discussing," the girl confided in him.

"Do you share you share your mother's desire that she die?" Ciaran asked.

"What?! No, of course not! As much as I miss my Dad, I want my mother here with me! I'm sorry if that sounds selfish, but Korin and I still need her!"

"You aren't being selfish, Corrine," Ciaran assured. He then pointed over to the others with his chin and said, "They don't want her to die either. They are talking about bonding her to someone to help give her back something of what she is missing. Commander Spaak has offered himself, but Lady Val is vehemently against it, and the others aren't sure about that suggestion either."

"You've been using your telepathy to listen in on them?" Corrine asked, shocked at the idea.

"Force of habit," Ciaran admitted with a shrug. "I will apologize to everyone when this is over and will accept my punishment."

"Don't do that! I know my Mom will truly give up if Uncle Hans bonds her. It's not that she doesn't like him. She just doesn't like him *that* way. And like I said before, I don't want her to die!"

Ciaran looked at the girl, his head full of thoughts. Some of the thoughts were strange even to himself. One thought that shocked him was that he might prefer being back aboard the Klingon freighter that had sold him to the most recent slave auction than his current situation. Finally he said, "Stay here. I'll see what can be done so what they are discussing won't happen."

Corrine was not sure what Ciaran could do, being no more than a steward aboard the *Pariah*, and a fairly new one at that, but she sat and waited and hoped for the best.

Unnoticed, Ciaran walked over to the group just as Spaak was asking the question, "If not me, then who?" Everyone was surprised when a voice answered.

"Me. I'll do it."

Everyone turned to face the unexpected response. Not sure if he heard what the question was, Lady Val stepped closer to the steward and asked, "Ciaran, do you know what it is you are volunteering for?"

"Yes, my Lady. I'll bond your sister," Ciaran replied. "It would not be the first time I have been bonded to someone. One of my past owners, someone who was almost as kind to me as all of you have been in the short time I have been here. I think she died near the end of the war between the Federation and the Dominion. I always felt something, something I could never describe, but then one day when she was traveling off-world, it was suddenly gone. A few days later a member of her family took me back to Orion space and I was again placed up for auction. Truthfully I miss the feeling." Ciaran glanced back to where the young girl was still sitting, watching the adults with wide, fearful eyes. "I know being bonded doesn't necessarily lead to marriage, but I made Corrine a promise to do whatever I can to keep her mother from dying. If that means bonding with her, then so be it."

Professor Tolek looked at Ciaran curiously. "I know amongst Betazoids, bonding does not always lead to marriage, but amongst Vulcans it commonly does, much more often than not. You have been aboard the *Pariah*... what? All of a week? You barely know my daughter. Her 'sister' has told us what she said to you last night. One could surmise that after such a remark, you would – at the very least – dislike or be indifferent to my daughter."

"I don't dislike her at all, sir," Ciaran responded. "She said what she did because she was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Spaak asked.

"Afraid of forgetting what she had with Sylvan if she gets too close to someone else," Ciaran replied. "She said it because she doesn't want to risk getting close to anyone else. And as for barely knowing her, is it not common amongst Vulcans to bond their children in preparation for future matrimony at a young age to someone they either barely know or don't know at all." Tolek had to nod his head in the affirmative. "I know this is different, as we are both adults, but she needs something to help stabilize her condition. Corrine may only be a child, but even she believes that bonding her to Commander Spaak is the wrong choice."

As all the other adults turned to look at Corrine sitting across the room, Ciaran looked over at Spaak and added, "Sorry, sir."

Before Spaak had a chance to speak, Tolek emphatically stated, "Bonding an adult against their will is unheard of."

"And how would bonding with me be any different in that regard to forming a bond with the Commander on Ms. Raiajh?" Ciaran asked. "I'm also relatively sure you don't want her to die. I'm not going to push anything on her. I just want to give her some of my strength and let her know that she isn't alone. I know my place on the *Pariah*. I'm not doing this to gain anything for myself. I'm doing this because I want to see Ms. Raiajh get better and for her children to continue to have a mother. I promise to sever the bond once she has recovered enough."

"Breaking a bond is not the easiest thing to do," Lady Val remarked. "Bonded or not, if you ask to leave, she will let you go."

"I know," Ciaran said. "She already tried. But if or when I decide to go, if I ever make that decision, I want it to be my choice. In the meantime, I will give you the only thing I have to give, and that is my word. No matter what happens, I will stay for the allotted year."

"If we are going to do something, we must do it before T'Pannia returns," Ves'Dell chimed in. "However, I am still unsure about this path. Val'ri's vital signs are weak, and as much as it may help, she may not even survive a bonding. But at the same time, she definitely won't survive if we don't try something! Medically, there isn't much that can be done for her beyond giving her palliative care and a nutritional supplement through the IV. If she survives the next few hours, the medical staff here in the infirmary will start her on a high calorie liquid meal through a feeding tube, especially if she remains unconscious."

"I can help initiate a bond if we are going to do this," Lady Val stated.

"No, I'll do it," said Tolek with a hint of resignation in his voice. "If you do it, you might accidentally create a three-way bond because the two of you are essentially the same person. Come, let's do this before I can logically think this through and change my mind."

Tolek walked over to the biobed where Admiral Raiajh lay, followed by Ciaran and the other adults. Everyone but Ciaran kept their distance to allow Tolek room.

Tolek initiated the process by placing one hand on his daughter's head in a near-traditional mind meld position. The other he placed on Ciaran's, who stood close by. The Vulcan professor closed his eyes and recited a few words in his native language as his face took on a look of total concentration. There were no flashes of lightening, no sound of the rumble of thunder. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary aside from a Vulcan pressing his hands against the faces of two other people. After a few moments he removed his hands from both their heads.

At almost that same instant, the alarms on Raiajh's monitor panel above the bed went off, alerting the infirmary medical staff to rally around the patient. T'Pannia had no choice than to order Raiajh's family out of the ward. They moved to a nearby corridor where they could continue to monitor what was happening. After several minutes of the med staff working feverishly to stabilize Raiajh, Corrine watched from behind the glass with tears streaming down her face, repeating over and over, "Please don't let her die."

As soon as the medical staff had managed to stabilize the admiral when she surprised everyone by not only waking up, but sitting up. Just as suddenly, Raiajh began pawing wildly at the back of her head, as if she was trying to dig something out of her skull. "Get it out! Get it out!" she began to cry. "I want to go back! Let me go back!"

A pair of nurses, one on each side of the biobed, grabbed Raiajh's arms to keep her from either hurting herself or tearing out the IV in her arm, while T'Pannia grabbed a hypo and pressed it to her neck. After a moment, Raiajh slumped and the nurses lowered her back to the bed and let her sleep the sedative off.

* * *

Three days later
Infirmary One

Dr. T'Pannia walked over to check the vital signs displayed on the panel above the biobed. Everything was within Raiajh's normal range. T'Pannia was growing ever more concerned that her patient had not yet woken up. She knew from personal experience that Vulcans could spend days in a healing trance, but she had never known Raiajh to enter a similar state before.

As she continued her examination of Raiajh, T'Pannia heard someone walk up to the bed.

"How is she doing? Do you think she will wake up soon?" Although the accent was different, the voice was still eerily familiar. He had been present in the infirmary the entire time, while other members of Raiajh's

family came and went. Dr. T’Pannia had even allowed him to use one of the sonic showers normally reserved for infirmary staff so that he would not have to leave unwillingly.

“When she is ready, she will wake up. The sedative wore off almost two days ago. Whatever is happening, it is beyond my control at the moment. Just be patient; she’ll wake up,” the doctor assured Ciaran.

“I hope so, for the sake of her children,” he said. “They need her more than anyone realizes. Corrine may be putting on a brave face, but inside this is tearing her apart. She just lost her father not long ago. I don’t think she could bear to lose her mother as well.”

“Completely understandable,” T’Pannia remarked.

“What about you?” another voice, this time female, asked. Ciaran and T’Pannia looked toward the sound’s origin and saw Counselor Kathleen ‘Kitty’ Hawk, Admiral Kale’s wife and one of the base’s newest medical staff, walking over. She addressed her next remark directly to Ciaran. “You have been here the whole time.”

T’Pannia introduced the counselor to Ciaran, who then answered Hawk’s question by saying, “Counselor, for the majority of my life I’ve been owned by one person or another. It’s just habit more than anything. What if Ms. Raiajh needs something when she wakes? Commander Spaak wants me to do the job I was brought on board for, which is to work with her and watch over her. I’m not sure what I can do right now to work with her, but I know I can at least watch over her.”

Dr. T’Pannia excused herself, as she still had her rounds to complete and several other patients to check in on. However, Kitty Hawk remained.

“Everyone has feelings, whether or not we are allowed to express them, Mister Ciaran,” she remarked.

“Just Ciaran, please. Of course I have feelings, but I don’t wish to discuss them. Not with you or anyone else. If it is fine with you, I’m just going to go back to sitting quietly in this chair that I have used for the past three days and wait.”

“As you wish,” Hawk replied. “I’ll check back in on the two of you later.”

Ciaran simply shrugged and returned to his seat as Counselor Hawk walked away. The next few hours passed peacefully, with only the occasional nurse or orderly stopping by, recording one reading or another on Raiajh’s chart, and moving along. The whole time Raiajh still remained asleep. At one point, after another visit by an orderly, Ciaran noticed that some of Raiajh’s hair had fallen in front of her face. While she was still under sedation, two days earlier, Lady Val had come for a brief visit and had removed the hair clip Raiajh had been wearing to allow her to rest more comfortable. For the past hour Ciaran had been studying her face as she slept. He wondered how Sylvan Xaran – his clone – had met Raiajh? What had made them decide to marry? He decided the story behind their relationship had to be something either extremely mundane or something extremely unusual.

Wanting to continue studying her face, he absentmindedly lifted his hand to move her hair away. His fingers gently brushed her cheek and the pointed tip of her ear as he tucked the wayward strands back. As he drew his hand back he hoped he did not disturb her as he noticed her begin to stir. He pulled his hand away quickly, not sure how she would react.

Raiajh felt the unfamiliar, rough, calloused fingers brush against her face and around the tip of her ear. It felt strange and familiar at the same time. Not a touch that she knew, but one she thought she should know. Her curiosity outweighed everything else, so she broke the healing trance and returned to consciousness. Opening her eyes, she noticed the head of wavy black hair peppered with gray and the muscled arms of a man who had done a lot of laborious heavy lifting work for all of his life. She blinked a few times to adjust her sight to the lighting of the infirmary ward, as one piece of Vulcan physiology she did not inherit from her father was the nictitating membrane common in Vulcan eyes. Once her vision had adjusted, she tested her voice, feeling the feeding tube that snaked through one nostril and down her esophagus and into her stomach. She successfully managed in a soft, yet scratchy voice, saying, “Hey.”

Ciaran was startled at first, then finally looked right at Raiajh and said, “I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to wake up. The doctor said your sedative wore off two days ago.”

“I know. I was in what Vulcans call a healing trance. It helped me deal with both the physical trauma my body has undergone the last few months and the added mental trauma of the past few days.”

“Sorry about that,” Ciaran replied.

“Why are you sorry?” Raiajh croaked. “After what I said to you in the lounge that night, I’m surprised you are here.”

Ciaran shrugged. “It’s not the first time someone misdirected their anger at me. In the past when it has happened, I usually had a new black eye or broken bone for my troubles. I got off easy this time. I’m sorry I got angry and ran off like I did, but I got to see a bit of this starbase. I was never able to wander off alone like that before. Every other time I’ve been out in public it has been in the company of my owner or one of his or her

minions watching over me. It was liberating. Well, until station security picked me up for not having identification or credits to pay for the meal I ate. Looking like a dead man doesn't help."

"Sorry about that. Standard policy instituted by security, suggested by our Strategic Operations Officer due to the growing tensions between the Klingons, the Romulans, the Rihannsu, and occasionally the Orions. How did you get free of custody?"

"After about a day they finally let me contact the *Pariah* and Commander Spaak came and bailed me out. By the way, he's got a bill for that he intends to give you at some point." The remarks almost made Raiajh smile slightly. Ciaran continued, "He said this was the first time he had someone run off and request to be returned. Said it took guts, as in most cases if a runaway slave is found and returned to a ship they are severely punished or even spaced."

"Why did you?" Raiajh asked. "Ask to be returned to the *Pariah*, that is. You could have asked for asylum. Any officer aboard this station would likely have granted that request."

Ciaran looked at Raiajh with a strange expression. "Seriously? I've already stated I don't much care for the Federation, so why would I ask them for asylum? I would rather take my chances on the *Pariah*."

"I'm sorry. It's been a rough few days," Raiajh remarked. "I do remember you mentioning that. I'm still trying to comprehend the logic behind what my father did to me... To us."

"Perhaps I can explain?" Ciaran said. "Your father visited last night while you were still unconscious. We spoke for some time, and he told me some of the reasons why he had relented and performed the ceremony that bonded us together. As strange as this may sound talking about a Vulcan, he loves you." Ciaran paused to see what sort of reaction this would elicit from Raiajh. "He loves you and didn't want to lose you again so soon. I admit I'm not up to speed on all the nuances of the relationships in your family, but Tolek wants to make up for all the time he missed with you. He can't do that if you aren't here."

"That isn't logical, Ciaran."

"He admitted that himself. That what he did wasn't logical. But what parent IS logical when it comes to their child? You would do anything to protect your own children, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would," rasped Raiajh. "But I don't think I would go to the extreme that Tolek did, especially if my child were capable of making their own choice." She paused for a moment realizing that therein was where the difference lay. At the moment a choice needed to be made, she had been incapable of making her own choice. After a moment she nodded and then added, "I believe I understand now. What's done is done. It's too difficult to be undone."

Ciaran nodded and after a moment he finally said, "Are you hungry?"

"A little," Raiajh replied. "But that can wait a minute. I do have a question for you. Why?"

Ciaran stood and walked over to the replicator mounted on the wall and entered several commands on the interface. A tall glass of pink colored liquid with red specks materialized and he carried it over and placed it next to her.

"Doctor T'Pannia said you can have one of these when you wake."

Raiajh began to work herself into a sitting position. Ciaran saw her struggling and helped her up so she could drink the item he brought over.

"Lucky me," she replied. "A strawberry protein shake. Now sit and stop avoiding the question."

"Not avoiding," Ciaran remarked as he handed Raiajh the glass. "Just thinking about how to best answer that question. I guess I can just tell you how as I don't have an answer to why." Raiajh nodded and waited for him to speak. After a few moments to collect his thoughts, Ciaran began. "It started when Commander Spaak came to retrieve me from the station's detention center and he received a call from Doctor Ves that you were here. He was going to send me back to the *Pariah* to await whatever would happen when I asked if I could join him here. I felt that I let you down because I wasn't there. If I was with you, perhaps I would have seen you were sick and alerted Doctor Ves." He took a breath and continued, "Sorry I got off track. We came here and I took a seat in the waiting area with your daughter Corrine, who was very worried about you. Without even realizing it at first, I started listening telepathically to the others as they were talking about your condition. Corrine was shocked that I was listening in, but actually glad that I did because she knew no one else would tell her what was happening to you. When I mentioned to her that Commander Spaak said was thinking of bonding with you over Lady Val's objections, Corrine became concerned. She was worried you would die if Commander Spaak carried through with his plan. She just recently lost her father. She didn't want to lose you as well. She was so concerned, I said I would do what I could, so when the question was again raised about who could bond with you and try to pull you back from the brink, I volunteered. I want to assure you, I'm not expecting anything. If you still want to send me away, I'll go. But I knew what it felt like to grow up without parents when I needed them most, and I had a chance to help to make sure two kids didn't have to go through what I did."

“My children living with me here aboard the station would have been well taken care of by Hans and Lady Val. It’s not exactly the same, but they would have been with family.”

Ciaran smiled and remarked, “You make it sound like you have other children.”

“I do,” Raiajh confirmed. “Corrine and Korin are just my youngest. I had seven children altogether. One died when she was seven. My oldest two, Charissa and Jonathan, were adopted when their biological parents, Sylvan’s brother and sister in law, died in a rock climbing accident a week after Sylvan and I were married on Earth. Both are now married and live with their families on Betazed. My other two, Katrina and Julian, are currently on Earth with my mother, settling in and preparing for higher schooling.” A look of pride appeared on Raiajh’s face as she added, “Both want to be doctors, like their father.”

Raiajh watched Ciaran’s face as she mentioned her children. His face remained neutral, except for the mention of her deceased in-laws, Korin and Ellie. She was not sure if it was because of their tragic demise, or from his remembrance of a family he vaguely knew and lost long ago, but that was something she would not push today.

“Not exactly what you expected?”

“I didn’t know what to expect,” Ciaran admitted. “But I won’t leave because of it unless you want me to.”

“I won’t send you away, but if you ever want to go, Ciaran, all you need to do is ask.”

Nodding, he asked, “So what happens from here?”

Raiajh shrugged slightly before saying, “Only time will tell. I promise you that I will never stand in the way of any decision you make. You will always be free to make your own decisions about your life free from any interference from me or anyone else on the *Pariah*. Once I formally turn base operations over to Cathryn and Admiral Kale, I will be leaving with the *Pariah*, and head back to Federation space. We will make our first stop at Bel Terra...”

Raiajh paused as Ciaran held up his hand. “It doesn’t matter where the ship goes,” he said. “As long as you have no problem with me being there. And from what you said it seems you are fine with me staying. It does seem a one hundred and eighty degree turnaround from the other day when you were talking about sending me away.”

“I was scared,” Raiajh admitted. “Scared that if you stayed I would forget that I lost someone who meant more to me than anyone else in the universe. Someone who was my life!”

“I’m not here to take that away,” Ciaran assured. “I’m only here to make your life easier than it has been for the past several months. I’m not expecting anything else. If you want to break our bond, I’ll understand. No one wanted you to die, and we couldn’t think of anything else that would assure your survival. I can understand everyone’s thinking.”

Ciaran decided the time had come to open himself up to Raiajh.

“As I told Commander Spaak and Lady Val, back during your war with the Dominion, I was bonded against my will to one of my owners. After some time, I began to realize I shared a feeling with her. After a time, I began to enjoy that feeling. It became an important part of my life, my existence. Then one day – I later learned it was near the very end of your Dominion War – that feeling was suddenly gone. It was something I thought was a link to my old life; the one that was taken from me. Until a few days ago I never knew what that link was.” Ciaran moved just a little closer to Raiajh and added, “I know it may not lead to anything, but for the first time, I feel more complete than I have in as long as I can remember.”

“I know,” Raiajh agreed. “I feel it too. That sense of... completeness.” She leaned closer to Ciaran and asked, “Can I tell you something? But you need to promise not to laugh.”

“I won’t,” Ciaran promised. He then offered his supposition, “When you woke right after we were bonded, you cried out, ‘Let me go back...!’ Does it have something to do with that?”

Raiajh nodded subtly as she said, “I saw him and Elayne.”

“Elayne is the girl you lost?”

Raiajh again nodded and continued in a defeated tone, “I saw them. I held them. I wanted to stay with them. He said I had to come back.”

“That’s nothing to laugh at,” Ciaran said. “In fact, Commander Spaak became a bit withdrawn when he heard you cry out like that. It made me believe that he may have had an experience like that in his own past, though it’s not my place to push. He has the ability to discern when someone is trying to read his mind. It is most unusual for a human.”

“He insists he’s not capable doing anything like that,” Raiajh remarked, her tone indicating she did not believe it either. “You will find that it is best to refrain, especially on the *Pariah*, when it comes to reading minds.”

“It has become such second nature to me, it will take time for me to learn that one,” Ciaran replied. “Things are just so different here. It is the first time I have served on a ship with other telepaths, not to mention so large a crew.”

“And you will keep on learning. I know everything is new for you, but knowing Commander Spaak as I do, you gained a lot of respect from him by asking to be returned to the *Pariah*. That took strength, especially not knowing what was in store for you once you returned, since you left without permission.”

“Whatever it is, it is. And whatever he can think of, it can’t be worse than explaining to a young girl that I couldn’t keep my promise to save her mother.”

“That is a pretty bold promise,” Raiajh remarked. “But I’m sure she would have forgiven you in time, realizing that there was nothing you could have done.”

“But you didn’t see her face when your heart stopped right after the bonding,” Ciaran explained. “She may spend quite a bit of time with her cousins Valerie and Hans, but she is still extremely close to you and needs you.”

“I know,” Raiajh acknowledged. “Corrine and I are close. And I am thankful for what you did. It has given me back a sense of stability that I lost when Sylvan died. The empty, lonely feeling was getting to be too much to bear. I just wanted to be with him again. It scared me because I thought I was beginning to forget him.”

“I doubt it. It takes more than just meeting someone new to make you forget someone so important from your past. Those memories you made can’t be taken away. They become part of you and your family.” He stopped when he saw the tears in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Just now you sounded so much like him,” Raiajh said with a sniffle. “What you said and how you said it.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be, Ciaran. You can’t change the way you are. Considering the circumstances, there are going to be times when I see him in you. It can’t be helped. Even accounting for nature vs. nurture, there will be things that are the same. The two of you have had drastically different upbringings, but there will still be things that will remind me. It’s just what is.”

The pair remained quiet for a short while. Finally, Ciaran looked at Raiajh and said, “Again... What happens now?”

“Hopefully T’Pannia will let me out of here soon,” Raiajh replied. “Then I’ll formally turn command over to Cathryn and Kalin and soon after that the *Pariah* will depart the starbase for perhaps the final time.”

“I meant with regard to the bond?” Ciaran said cynically.

“I don’t know. I’m not ready for a new relationship just yet. I don’t know if I ever will be. But I won’t try to send you away. So how about we wait and see what happens?”

“I understand,” Ciaran replied. “I’m just happy you aren’t throwing me out an airlock for what I did.”

“I’m not angry with you. Or anyone else. While there was no logical solution, what was done is done with my well-being in mind. I learned on my own that logic does not dictate your actions when it comes to a child.”

As the pair conversed, Dr. T’Pannia passed by, having completed her rounds, and finally noticed Raiajh was finally awake and sitting up.

“It is agreeable to see you awake, Admiral,” the doctor said as she approached, noticing the glass of nutrients in her hand. “And with a bit of an appetite it seems.”

“I am a bit hungry, Doctor, but I would prefer something more appetizing than this protein shake,” Raiajh replied. “It was never one of my favorites.”

“You will need to drink them about three times a day, and you can start eating solid foods again in a day or so, at least until you are back up to forty-five kilos. If you can keep that protein shake down, I’ll see that you can have either plomeek broth or Terran miso soup for your dinner this evening. If you can keep that down as well, and I see no reason why you shouldn’t be able to, I will release you back into the care of Doctor Ves’Dell, who will continue to monitor your progress.”

“I understand,” Raiajh said, reluctantly taking another sip of the protein shake.

* * *

Three days later, feeling stronger though still looking gaunt, Raiajh donned her standard Starfleet duty uniform and made her way to the Operations deck for the final time.

The change of command ceremony was brief – more along the lines of Raiajh’s original preference for a change of command, not the elaborate public ceremony organized by Pearson and Quintero – before Kale and Raiajh walked up the stairs and into the office that was now-formerly hers. Her touches to the office, including her original desk chair from her office on Earth, had already been removed and packed away a month before Kale arrived on the station. The few remaining personal items were packed up into containers by the station staff while Raiajh recovered in the infirmary, and the office was fairly Spartan, Kale not having been willing to move his own items into place before Raiajh was gone.

“It is good to see you up and about again, Val,” Kale remarked.

Raiajh still looked pale, but she felt better than she had in weeks. “Thank you, Kalin. It has been a rough few months for me, but I feel I’ve finally turned a corner, as humans say. Sylvan was a part of my life for nearly half of it. While he is no longer here with us, many of his memories, including the ones we created together, will remain with me.”

“The station crew misses you already,” Kale informed Raiajh. “Just remember you and the *Pariah* will be welcome back here as long as I’m sector coordinator, so we hope you will visit when you can.”

“It may be a while before the *Pariah* gets back out this far again,” Raiajh remarked. “And even longer for me. After a leisurely trip through Federation space, stopping at a few of the non-aligned worlds along the way – including Bel Terra, we plan to head toward the Briar Patch.”

“I know my new S.O.O. was hoping that the *Pariah* would stick around a little longer,” Kale said. “Konstantin wanted to speak with Commander Spaak about what the Commander refers to as ‘the coming darkness’.”

Kale gestured to the couch that remained beneath the large window that looked out into the depths of space, and after retrieving drinks from the replicator for them both the pair sat down and continued their conversation.

“Hans has been talking about the coming darkness since the destruction of Romulus, Kalin,” she said.

“So I heard a few nights ago over drinks in the Lodge,” Kale replied. “From both Spaak and Captain Harkonnen. Not sure where they’re hearing their stories from. The latest reports from Starfleet Intelligence...”

“I recommend you listen to what Konstantin says,” Raiajh advised. “Take even more heed if it comes from both Konstantin and Cathryn. While I’m sure Starfleet Intelligence does their best, there are things happening out there even they don’t know. The Orions and the Klingons are acting strange. It is becoming increasingly difficult to tell where the Orion Syndicate ends and the Botchok Planetary Congress begins. The Syndicate is gaining more control in the Orion government, and that’s not a good thing. And with each passing month, the *Pariah* is becoming less and less welcome in Orion space. Ves has said that during her last trip she was almost turned away from a Syndicate-run port. The only reason she was allowed landing rights was because she was only there for the slave auction.”

Kale sputtered the drink he was sipping when she mentioned the slave auction. “Spaak uses slaves on his ship? I wasn’t aware...!”

“Of course not,” Raiajh assured. “He may buy people from the auctions, but he then frees them. He offers them employment for a year with wages, and at the end of that year gives them the option of staying and becoming a permanent member of the crew, or leaving with the fair wages they have earned to begin a new life. Over the years a few have run, but when that happens, Hans doesn’t pursue them.”

“The one who was always hanging around the infirmary when you were unconscious... The one with the... family resemblance... Was he purchased at an auction in Orion space?”

Raiajh understood Kale was choosing his words carefully as not to upset her. “Yes, Ciaran is one of three that Ves picked up the last time she went. However, she purchased him from the bazaar not because he was strong and could perform heavy manual labor, but because she thought he was Sylvan. We... I mean, Lady Val and myself... had a hard time getting her to believe that Ciaran wasn’t Sylvan. In the end tests proved it could not be him.”

“Science doesn’t lie?” Kalin asked.

“Something like that,” Raiajh replied, purposefully vaguely, not wanting to discuss the matter further. “I hate to run off so suddenly, Kalin, but the *Pariah* is preparing to depart, and I can’t be late.”

“Hard to be late on a ship that won’t leave without you,” Kale remarked with a grin. “And besides, you could always stay if you wanted.”

“I could, but it is your sector now, and Cathryn’s station. My time here has come to an end. Take care Kalin,” she remarked, nodding her head to the Centaurian male.

Kale raised his hand and spread his fingers to display the traditional Vulcan sign of greeting and farewell. “Live long and prosper, Val’ri.”

Raiajh returned the salute and replied, “Peace and long life to both you and your wife, Kalin.”

There seemed nothing more to say, until finally, with a sad tone, Kale said, “Very well. Dismissed... Admiral.”

With that, Raiajh stood from where she had been sitting on the couch and walked out of the office without a backward glance. She said a brief farewell to Kale’s aide, Lt. Commander Galen DuLac of Avalon at his desk, then made her way out of the office and rode down the closest lift one last time. Before she had a chance to turn and head toward the turbolift bank, everyone in Ops stood and snapped to attention. Colonel Sean McIntyre raised an electronic boson’s whistle to his lips and – after activating the station-wide intercom – blew the traditional three note call. Then Lt Commander B’Elanna Torres announced crisply, “Vice Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, Federation Starfleet,

Retired... Departing!" It was all Raijah could do to maintain her cool demeanor. She nodded in thanks to the crew in Ops one last time, while inside was desperately holding back tears from forming in her eyes. As she turned and headed toward the nearest turbolift, the Ops crew started applauding. The doors swished apart to admit her, and then closed behind her; taking her away from 719 and toward her future.

The End... and a New Beginning...!