

Previously in Star Trek: Starbase 719/IMV Pariah...

After it appears that Starbase 719 Shuttle 17 was destroyed with all hands lost when Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh felt the bond she shared with her Betazoid husband, Dr. Sylvan Xaran, become severed, the Vulcan-Deltan woman nearly died from the loss. Raiajh was saved when her family arranged to bond her to another, a former slave discovered in Orion space who looks amazingly like Raiajh's deceased husband.

And now the continuation...

Val'ri Raiajh and her 'sister' Lady Val were sitting with Marie Quintero on the couch in the quarters the latter two women shared with Commander Johannes Spaak and their children aboard the *IMV Pariah*. The three women were enjoying freshly brewed tea as they spoke of Raiajh's issues with Ciaran, her new bond-mate. To the contrary of the hope of Spaak and his wives, Raiajh and Ciaran did not get closer after her near death experience and the strange circumstances of their bonding. In fact, Ciaran appeared to be doing everything in his capacity to avoid Raiajh, including working with Topuc, the merchant ship's oddly-behaved, emotional Vulcan science officer who has been doubling as its engineer.

"I don't know what to do," Raiajh explained. "Ciaran said he was willing to try a few months ago, but it seems he is doing what he can to avoid me. Especially now, since Hans decided he wasn't going to be my steward any longer. Still, it doesn't bother me too much. I'm not sure if I am ready for a relationship at this point in time."

"Perhaps you are both afraid," Quintero offered. "Ciaran still isn't sure of his status on this ship. He was offered larger quarters, but declined, stating that the quarters he had were sufficient. It is possible he is not sure of himself. After all, he was a slave for many years. It has to be a shock to his system for him to process that he is a free person after fifty years of being forced to do the will of others. On the other hand, you never actually dated anyone other than Sylvan. It makes me wonder why he was jealous of Mr. Sarne."

"I don't know what to think, Marie," Raiajh remarked. "Yet, your explanation is logical. I never understood Sylvan's estranged behavior with Jonathan's great grandfather. I was never able to pinpoint why he felt the way he did. It was perplexing, but the one thing I did know was that Sylvan loved me more than anything else. Sure he tried to shut me out from time to time despite knowing it hurt me, but even during those times his love never wavered."

Lady Val then chimed in with, "It could also be that Ciaran doesn't know how to act. Remember, before coming here he never had a choice. He was a slave for almost all his life; told what to do and how to do it. We will be meeting up with the Graceful Flyer in about two days. Maybe what he needs is a little push in the right direction. A party with dancing might be just the push. I'll make sure he helps Nalli set up the secondary cargo bay for the festivities. This way she will be able to fill him in on what to expect."

"How will that be different from being told what to do?" Raiajh asked. "The only difference is he is going to feel a bit out of place because Orion parties tend to have the appearance of placing the males in places of honor, and the females subservient to them. Considering his lowly status his entire life, he is likely to have a problem dealing with the attention and it may open up a Pandora's Box of emotions for him."

"We can deal with that if it happens," Lady Val stated. "Hopefully, he will just realize that he is a member of this crew who has the same rights and abilities as everyone else."

"True," Raiajh agreed. "He is still learning to be his own person. I just hope this party doesn't make him feel like he is being pushed to do something he may not want to do."

"Like baby birds, we all need a push sometimes," Quintero countered. "Who knows? Perhaps he wants to be pushed in the right direction but is not sure how to ask? This opportunity may be just what he needs."

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Personal Logs

“Homecoming” By Nadine B. Bach

“Part 1 - Starting Anew”

Mid-March 2392

IMV Pariah

Three months after departing Starbase 719

En-route to Bel Terra

Raiajh stared out the viewport in the small viewing lounge Commander Spaak had built into the ship during his last refit. She liked the view of the stars that the room provided, even when they were Doppler-shifted when traveling at conventional warp speeds. Not to mention the room was quiet. The children had plenty to do aboard the small starship besides their regular studies and kept occupied. They rarely ventured into the lounge.

Behind her she heard the footfalls of someone walking in. She knew who it was; the gait had become familiar to her these last few months. This had also become a nightly ritual, since leaving *Starbase 719* at the very end of the previous Earth year.

Raiajh was looking and feeling better than she had in a long time. Her weight was almost back to optimum, having weighed in that morning at forty-four and a half kilos. Raiajh knew she could not have done it without the help of the person who had just entered the room behind her.

“Good evening, Ciaran,” she said to the sound of his footsteps.

“Good evening, Val,” Ciaran replied. “Have you eaten your dinner yet?”

“Not yet. Corrine and Korin were off with their cousins and it is not enjoyable eating alone.”

“You know you need to eat,” Ciaran scolded.

Raiajh turned to look at the newcomer as she said, “I finished my two other meals and all three of my protein shakes. I was waiting for you to finish helping our guest get settled in so you can join me.”

“You shouldn’t wait for me. There are going to be times I won’t be able to join you.”

“I know. I also knew that today wasn’t one of those days. Tarleya isn’t one to ask for much. She would have been happy sharing quarters with Ves until we rendezvous with the *Graceful Flyer*. After a few months assisting the Romulan government she was ready to accept any accommodations to return home. For her, home is now her son’s ship.”

“Commander Spaak treats her like family.”

“In a way, she is. Her son is my nephew, and technically Lady Val’s as well. Not that my brother ever acknowledged him when he was alive.”

“Your brother doesn’t sound like he was a nice person.”

“He wasn’t,” Raiajh replied simply.

Ciaran nodded. They had agreed that since they would have a few days off after docking with and taking on supplies from the *Flyer* in the morning, it would be best if they shared a mind-meld and learn about each other. As the pair began to walk toward the ship’s mess, Ciaran asked, “Was I supposed to receive an earnings statement today? Commander Spaak did say it would be a year before I saw any money.”

“Hans had a change of mind after that night in sickbay three months ago. He said that while you had erred by leaving the ship without authorization, your actions that night showed you were willing to accept blame for your actions when you asked to be returned to the Pariah after you were picked up by station security. Hans also considers you family.”

“When did he decide that?”

“That same night. Technically, by the Vulcan traditions, the bonding of our minds is considered a betrothal.”

“Do you believe that?” he turned around and faced her, forcing her to stop and look up at him.

“I am still not sure what to believe, Ciaran,” Raiajh admitted. “We haven’t talked about it since that night. For now, let’s grab something to eat and we can begin that mind-meld tonight instead of in the morning. That way you and I can be on even footing when we do talk afterward about how to proceed.”

Ciaran turned again and continued walking side-by-side with Raiajh.

“I have been both looking forward to this and fearful of it as well. It is a chance to learn more about each other. Although I admit that there are things about me that you may not like.”

Raiajh countered, “I have the same feelings. There isn’t much we can do about our pasts. At times all of us need to make decisions that go against our nature, Ciaran. Things we do either to survive or to protect a way of life that we have grown to expect. I have done things I wish I could have done differently and I am sure you have as well.”

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As the two sat down for what would most likely be a long evening, Raiajh explained to Ciaran how the experience would be initiated and that he was free to break the connection at any time. Ciaran specifically asked if she could show him what love was after he imparted information about the one other master he had had who was almost as good to him as Hans and those aboard the *Pariah*.

Raiajh explained that passing along that information was difficult, as people felt the emotion differently, but she would do her best.

First Ciaran had shared a bit about one of the ‘owners’ he’d had; a young woman named Yannari, the one whom he served before and during the Dominion War. Experiencing Ciaran’s story, it did not surprise Raiajh that the two had become close and had eventually shared an intimate connection. Yannari had treated Ciaran more akin to a mate than a slave. It was no wonder that he grieved for the loss of that bond despite the fact no one ever thought to tell him if she was alive or dead. But one result of that relationship was, though he did not know it, Ciaran already had a good idea of what love was and was not.

Raiajh then shared with him a bit of what she had experienced with her husband and the memories – what few she had to share - of his family. To give him a comparison she also shared a memory her father had shared with her not long before they found Raiajh’s mother Karinara alive and well...

Stardate 64759.4
Starbase 719

Sitting in the quarters that were provided for his use, Professor Tolek of the Vulcan Science Academy awaited his daughter, Rear Admiral Val’ri Raiajh, the base’s half-Deltan/half-Vulcan commanding officer.

A year and a half earlier he finally revealed his relationship to the woman, despite the fact that he told her mother that he would not reveal such details during her lifetime. Although Karinara Raiajh was declared dead in early 2288, a year after the ship she was aboard had disappeared, Tolek had never told anyone he still felt that the woman was alive, somewhere, even almost a century later.

About half an hour after shift change, Raiajh arrived. Tolek greeted her with a hug after the door closed behind them. Raiajh was more surprised by her father the better she came to know him. While in public he displayed the logical façade Vulcans were famous for, in private he showed emotion to family and close friends. Today, he had asked her here for a reason; to share with his daughter one of his memories of the woman who was her mother.

A mind-meld between two people is an intimate act, regardless of their relationship. Depending on the relationship, the type of intimacy differed, but it was still intimate. Until now, he never told anyone about his relationship to the former Deltan Ambassador.

As the two settled into a seated position on the couch, Tolek initiated the link between the two.

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Professor Tolek was on sabbatical from his teaching position at the Vulcan Science Academy to work on some research on one of the planet's colonies, a colony devoted to scientific research.

One evening Tolek had decided to take a break from his work and headed out to the colony's one restaurant. It was while eating that he looked up and saw her.

The woman was strikingly beautiful, standing a little over one hundred and seventy two centimeters in height. Her complete lack of hair only added to her beauty. However, as a Vulcan, he was not affected by the pheromones she produced in the same way other humanoid males often were.

She had apparently noticed his slight smile as she made her way over and sat down at his table with him.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked. "I don't like eating alone."

"Please," Tolek replied, standing and offering the only empty chair at the table. "I would certainly enjoy the company of a beautiful woman who can hold an intelligent conversation."

Settling into the chair she was offered, the woman blushed slightly. "I'll take that as a compliment," she remarked. "My name is Karinara Raijah."

"As it was meant to be," Tolek replied regarding the compliment. "I am Tolek of Vulcan."

"You appear different from many Vulcan men I've met," Karinara remarked. "I could have sworn I saw you smile when you looked at me the first time."

"I am sure that is because most of the Vulcans you have met are members of the diplomatic corps, and they tend to be ardent followers of Surak," he stated. "This has a tendency to cause many non-Vulcans to believe all Vulcans are emotionally stunted. But I am not. I follow the teachings of Jurok, who taught us that we can still experience some emotions yet be governed by logic."

"I enjoy learning new things, and it seems that I have today. I would love to learn more, if you are interesting in sharing this information," she replied.

"That would be agreeable," Tolek said quietly. "I normally teach at the Vulcan Science Academy, but I am here to do a little research on the colony."

"That sounds interesting. I'm taking leave from my diplomatic duties to my home world to partake in some of the scientific wonders of this community," Karinara replied somewhat vaguely. "Something that I would like to complete before my mother retires from her position as Ambassador to Earth and I take over for her."

"I can understand that," he said smiling. "That kind of a job is a very heavy burden for someone as young as you to pick up so quickly."

"It was something that I've trained for my whole life. I would love to one day depart that information to a daughter of my own," Karinara replied.

"That must be a great pleasure for you and your family," Tolek said, smiling slightly. "To pass the job from mother to daughter."

"It has been done that way since the ambassadorship was created when the Deltan Union joined the Federation. It is the reason why I'm here. Four years ago I worked with some of the scientists here to have a son. I have returned here to now try for a girl. I had hoped the last time I was here I would have had a girl. This time, I've decided to be more specific in my intentions. Please do not get me wrong. I don't mind, nor do I regret having a son first. I hope he will be there to protect his sister as they grow." Karinara paused for a moment, studying the Vulcan man's face and trying to ascertain his emotional state. "I must be boring you, Tolek. I don't think you want to hear me talk about this."

"If I was bored, I would have said as such," Tolek replied. "I am just amazed that you are setting out specifically to have a daughter instead of just trying to see what fate is going to give you. A person can have more than one child. Sometimes fate wishes that you have more than one. Large families are quite elegant, and at times much more conducive to a healthy and happy childhood that is very rewarding to both the parents and the children."

"Deltan families are usually small," Karinara explained. "Usually just one or two children. Also, my position is usually passed down from mother to daughter, unless I didn't have a daughter or there were other extenuating circumstances that would prevent a daughter of mine from fulfilling that position. It's why I'm looking to have a girl this time."

"I see," Tolek said seriously. "I believe there are times when you should tell convention to, as the humans say, 'go to hell,' and that you will follow your heart to live the life that you want to live."

"I want nothing more sometimes, but I would not be able to remain in my position if I didn't follow convention when I need to. I've learned that following convention gets me what I want, but I don't mind playing

outside the rules when it suits me,” Karinara Raiajh replied with a shy smile. “I was wondering something. May I buy you a drink?”

“I would like that,” Tolek said smiling. “I have developed a taste for an Earth beverage called ‘chocolate milk.’”

Karinara Raiajh called the waiter over and ordered the beverage for both of them. Once the waiter had departed, she asked, “Chocolate milk? That is an interesting choice of beverage. However, I can understand why that would be your preference. I have found that the sugars in chocolate have an intoxicating effect on Vulcans.” As she spoke, Karinara’s body language took on a flirtatious tone. She was finding an emotional attraction to this Vulcan and she wanted to get to know him a bit better.

As the two continued to flirt with one another, the waiter returned with their unique choice of beverage and his own body language revealed his amusement with the couple’s choice of drink.

After Karinara sipped from her glass, she looked at Tolek again with a somewhat surprised expression. “I approve of your choice,” she remarked. “This beverage does have a unique taste matched by nothing else I have encountered in the universe.” She took another long sip of the brown liquid before continuing, “Tell me a bit about what brings you to this backwater colony? After all, this isn’t exactly the paradise of the Federation.”

“I’m here to take part in several studies,” Professor Tolek replied, “I can’t tell much more than that... because it’s all very proprietary, and the people I’m working for are not ready to share their work just yet. But it’s something that they are promising will help bridge many gaps between the people of the Federation...”

“I’m sure it’s important work,” Karinara remarked. “But I was thinking that you were here to cast aside convention also, if only for a short while.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Tolek replied with a not-so-subtle smile.

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Starbase 719

Tolek terminated the meld. Val’ri Raiajh looked at him for an extended moment before saying, “Knowing my mother, the event you just shared with me doesn’t surprise me. But why show me that?”

“I wanted you to know that while we were both on Nisus, the two of us had actually grown quite close. Although I knew that once we left Nisus, nothing could come of what happened, I still had fallen for your mother. It is the main reason why, even long after losing touch with her, I have not married.”

“There is no shame in loving someone,” Raiajh remarked.

“I know. After she told me about you and then allowed me to visit you that one time after you were born and released from the hospital, I spoke with her privately. I asked her to marry me. It was the logical thing to do even though I knew what she would say. She cared for me, but she also cared about her work. Marrying me would have meant that she would have had to renounce the position she had spent her entire life training for, something she was not ready to do.”

“She was passionate about her work,” Raiajh admitted. “Yet she must have been disappointed when I was born. She wanted someone who could follow in her footsteps and she ended up with me instead.”

“No, Val, don’t ever think that!” Tolek protested. “Your mother loves you and was she was never disappointed. You are her daughter ...and mine. Despite the way you came into the world you were born to two parents that loved each other. That alone means that you are not a disappointment.”

“I noticed that when you speak of Mother, you speak of her in the present tense,” Raiajh remarked.

“Think about it,” Tolek implored. “Search your feelings. The familial link between you and your mother. You should feel it still. If your mother were truly gone, that link would be broken. There is a bond between your mother and me. That bond still exists. Do not ask me how or where, but I know she is still alive. I still feel her. Hopefully one day we will find her. And although I promised I would never reveal to you that I was your father while she was alive, I could no longer justify keeping that knowledge from you. If we ever find her again, I can only hope that she will forgive me.”

Raiajh looked at Tolek thoughtfully before remarking, “I can understand what you are saying about the links. When Sylvan was severely injured in battle several years before the Dominion War, for almost five minutes I thought that he was gone as the our bond felt so tenuous and distant, as if not really there. With Mother it has indeed felt like she is still with us, but I have always thought that it was just because I was not willing to believe that she was dead and that by holding onto that feeling, she was not really gone. I find it curious that you say you feel something too.”

* * *

Now it was Ciaran who broke the meld.

“It is strange that in the latter part of your memory, your father appears much older than he actually looks.”

“My father IS much older than he looks. When my daughter Charissa was near death, the unconventional treatment that saved her life had the side effect of reversing the aging process of both my mother and father, leaving them both physically much younger than they actually are.”

“Sounds like the answer to the ‘Fountain of Youth’ that Captain Krena would always talk about wanting to find. Said if he did it would have been the answer to all his money problems. But in the end, I guess in the end the real answer was me.”

“Possibly not,” Raiajh remarked. “Humans have been fascinated by the possibility of a so-called ‘Fountain of Youth’ for centuries. Centuries even before they learned to leave their own solar system. Many cultures have a similar desire to find that magical wonder that would make them live forever and the desire to profit from such a venture.”

* * *

A few days later

In the multi-leveled engineering section of the *Pariah*, Topuc was working on one of the panels on the upper level, Ciaran directly below him at a similar panel on the lower level of the slip-stream drive engine. The engine was Topuc’s pride, having designed and built the drive separate from Starfleet’s efforts. The engineer already had the system working and integrated aboard the *Graceful Flyer*, an older Romulan designed vessel, in less than two and a half years. It was easier to integrate the drive aboard the *Flyer* because of the uniformity of the materials. Unfortunately it also made the ship a target for the Rihannsu government. As a result, Jarvok – the *Flyer*’s commander – kept to the space lanes of the official recognized Romulan government and Federation space within the AOR.

Now integrating the design aboard the *Pariah*, Topuc was working on replacing the bio-neural gel packs when the spanner slipped from his hand, hitting the grating under his feet before bouncing off the platform. Unfortunately, Ciaran’s head was positioned between the falling spanner and the deck below. After a string of swear-words, Ciaran clamped a hand to his right ear and felt the warm wetness in his hair. Pulling his hand away he noticed the blood. So did Topuc.

“We best get you to sickbay, Ciaran,” Topuc said, climbing down from the upper catwalk. “Doctor Ves will want to take a look at that.”

“I’m fine,” Ciaran assured. “I’m sure the bleeding will stop in a minute.”

“Fine isn’t enough. Ves will have my head if I don’t take you to be checked by her,” Topuc replied. “So let’s go.”

Ciaran shook his head, but since Topuc was in charge, the Vulcan had the last word and the pair were off to sickbay. Along the way they passed Raiajh’s father Tolek and his grandson Korin, who were on the way to the vessel’s small astrometrics lab for a lesson. The young boy did not say anything but Ciaran could see the worry in the young boy’s face. He did his best to assure the child. “Don’t worry, kiddo. I’m fine.”

“But you’re bleeding!” Korin countered.

“I know. It is just a little cut. It only looks bad.”

Korin nodded, but Ciaran was worried that the boy did not believe him. The last thing Ciaran wanted was to scare Raiajh’s son. However, without another word, both Ciaran and Topuc turned the nearby corner and entered a turbolift. Once Korin heard the door close he said to Tolek, “I need to tell Mommy.”

Without waiting, the young boy ran from Tolek and toward the holodeck at the end of the corridor. Reaching the door he yelled out, “Computer let me in! I need to talk to my Mommy!”

The doors parted and the boy disappeared into the holodeck, the doors closing again behind him. Realizing that it was pointless to proceed with the planned lesson due to the distraction, the Vulcan man simply returned to his quarters and waited for Korin to seek him out.

Inside the holodeck, Val’ri Raiajh was grateful for a few days off. She had decided to use one of the ship’s two small holodecks to run a program that was a favorite of hers for relaxing, an ocean-side setting. She had programmed a lounge chair on this occasion so she did not have to sit on either a blanket or the warm sand directly. Raiajh relaxed wearing a dark blue one piece tank style swimsuit and allowed the holographic sun to warm her.

After what seemed like an indeterminate amount of time, she felt a shadow hover over her. It struck her as ironic that whenever she attempted this form of quiet relaxation, whether on a real beach or in a holodeck, her ritual was eclipsed by a shadow. She opened her eyes and found her son Korin standing on the two-person lounge she was lying on, looking down at her.

“Hi, Mommy,” Korin said, although Raiajh could hear worry in his young voice.

“Sit down, please,” Raiajh told her son. “As I have told you many times before, it is not polite to stand on the furniture.”

“It isn’t real,” Korin replied, in defense of his position.

“I don’t care. Sit down or get off.”

The boy acquiesced and got off the lounge. He went around the chair and began pulling on his mother’s arm.

“Come quick! Ciaran got hurt! He is bleeding a whole lot!”

“Why am I needed?” Raiajh questioned her son. “I am sure Doctor Ves can take care of the situation.”

“Please come, Mommy.”

Raiajh looked at her son’s worried, pleading eyes and found she could not tell him no.

“Let’s go see,” she agreed. “Though I’m sure Doctor Ves has it all under control.”

As Raiajh got up and pulled a wrap around her waist, Korin said, “I don’t know, Mommy. His head was bleeding real bad as he was walking to sickbay.”

Raiajh now understood why her young son was concerned. Even minor head wounds could bleed profusely. She allowed the child to pull her along out of the holodeck and through the ship to sickbay. Once inside, she noticed the trail of blood on the deck leading right to the exam bed. Ves’Dell had already staunched the bleeding and was preparing to clean up her patient. Seeing Raiajh enter, she handed the Vulcan-Deltan woman the water-filled basin and sponge. Raiajh was not sure why Ves thought her better for the task, especially since Ciaran seemed to be doing his best to avoid her after their short mind-meld the a few evenings earlier, but as most quickly learn, if Ves asks you to do something, you do not tell her no.

Raiajh took the basin over to the exam bed and placed it down next to Ciaran. She squeezed the excess water from the sponge and began to gently clean the blood from around the Betazoid man’s ear and where it was matted in his hair.

As she worked, Raiajh looked into Ciaran’s black eyes. The eyes that looked back at her held no fondness. She could tell that he was amazed that he was worthy of this type of treatment from her, but he had come to the realization that his impulsiveness was only going to hurt Raiajh in the long run. Ciaran realized he could not be to her what everyone hoped he would be.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said telepathically, realizing she knew his thoughts and feelings.

‘It’s fine. I knew after our meld,’ she replied.

‘It is my impulsiveness. It has gotten me in trouble many times. This time it hurt someone; hurt you.’

‘No, Ciaran. You HELPED me. By sharing a part of yourself with me, it gave me time to heal. You also gave yourself something; the ability to keep your word to Commander Spaak. It was something that worked to our mutual advantage. You have earned a place here if you want it, but if you find a planet or station where you feel you would fit in... or at least feel comfortable... Hans will let you go, if that is your wish, and I will help dissolve our bond. Whatever happens, it will be your decision alone.’

Raiajh finished cleaning around Ciaran’s ear and set the sponge down. Unaware of any conversation between the two, Dr. Ves’Dell simply said, “You’re free to go Ciaran. Why don’t you both get some lunch.”

‘Could we?’ Ciaran asked telepathically. ‘I have a few questions I need to ask you.’

‘Sure,’ Raiajh replied to him telepathically, then added aloud for Ves’ sake, “Care to join me for lunch, Ciaran?”

“If you don’t mind,” he replied.

From behind they heard Korin ask to join them and Topuc protest that he still needed Ciaran’s help in engineering. Raiajh turned to the two, first addressing her son.

“Korin, you need to find your grandfather and apologize for running out on your astronomy lesson.” The young boy pouted and looked like he would protest for several seconds before wordlessly turning and leaving sickbay. “As for you, Topuc. I’ll have your helper back within the hour. Doctor Ves has prescribed a meal for her patient, and she knows I will make sure he eats that meal.”

Topuc nodded and finally said, “I’ll go see about some lunch myself. Perhaps Ash and T’Mera haven’t eaten yet?”

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Raiajh remarked. “Your family will appreciate that you took time out of your day to enjoy a meal with them.”

* * *

Crew Mess
IMV Pariah

Raiajh and Ciaran got meals from Cook and found a place in the corner where they could talk while they partook of the mid-shift meal. Once they got settled, Ciaran spoke.

"I'm sorry I've been avoiding you. I have been trying to process all the images and feelings we shared. It was a lot to process."

"I understand," said Raiajh. "For someone who hasn't experienced a mind meld before, it can be a little overwhelming. I take it you have been able to make some sense of it?"

"Some, but it raised some interesting questions I didn't realize I needed to work through; especially in relation to Yannari."

"It isn't surprising you have such strong feelings for her. When there is a physical aspect to any relationship it does change the dynamic and can add another layer of emotions that isn't normally experienced."

"I have hated the fact that all these years I don't know what had happened. If she actually died, or was forced to break the bond. She said her father was sending her off planet. Her brother came to visit me one night and the next thing I know is I'm waking up and I'm back at the auctions."

"I don't know what to say about that. I can ask Hans to see if he can find out what happened to Yannari if you wish. He will most likely have some more questions for you if I do."

"While it sounds temping, I'll pass. The Commander is too busy to get involved in such a trivial matter."

"It's not trivial to you Ciaran, but I'll respect your wishes. Perhaps you'll change your mind one day."

"Perhaps, but not now."

Raiajh let the subject dropped as Ciaran took an interest in his food. After they both completed their meals, Ciaran asked Raiajh a few more questions about some other topics and if she needed help with anything before he returned to engineering to work on Topuc's project.

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Two days later the *Pariah* finally rendezvoused with the *Flyer*, which had been delayed by a much-needed repair. Ciaran and Nalli were in one of the cargo bays aboard the *Pariah* setting up for the impending festivities. Ciaran was a bit surprised by what they were setting out; there were numerous chafing dishes for the buffet, but there were also plenty of pillows spread around the space and curtains enclosing small private areas where two or three could sneak away during the party for some private conversation.

"You don't need to be helping with this, Ciaran," Nalli told him. "Men are supposed to just show up and enjoy themselves."

"Even someone like me?" Ciaran asked with surprise. "Shouldn't I be doing what the other stewards are doing?"

"It isn't about our positions. This will be a party in the Orion tradition, thrown in accordance with Orion custom. The men lounge around and eat and the women dance for them. And some will pair off and go behind the curtained areas for a while to enjoy a bit of privacy before rejoining the party."

"Who will be dancing for the commander of the *Flyer*?" Ciaran asked.

"Doctor Ves'Dell, of course," Nalli replied. "She always spends time with Commander Jarvok when the two ships are in close proximity."

"Perhaps it would be better if I simply sat out this party?"

"Don't be silly, Ciaran. Come join the fun and enjoy yourself! Whatever happens, it will be because you want it to, not because it has to be done. Trust me, there is a difference."

"I know, Nalli. I'm just worried that I may do something inappropriate."

"Trust me, there is very little that is inappropriate at an Orion party," Nalli said with a chuckle. "Just be yourself. If you find you want to get to know one of the ladies better, either take them into one of the curtained areas, or back to your quarters."

"Are you going to be there?"

"Not this time," Nalli replied. "Ama, Sila, myself, and Chor'russ' Third-wife have been assigned to watch all the children with the help of Professor Tolek."

"Tolek isn't going to the party?"

“His wife is returning from Earth and will be joining us at Bel-Terra. He said the parties aren’t the same without her presence,” Nalli replied with a smile that said she knew something she wasn’t sharing.

In spite of being told he could leave, Ciaran continued to help Nalli for a little longer until Topuc called for him to return to engineering and attend to matters that required his attention.

* * *

Although Commander Jarvok was surprised by the arranged festivities, he finally agreed that his crew could also use some time relaxing following their emergent repairs. At the gathering, Ciaran was sitting to the right of Topuc, who was flanked on the opposite side by Jarvok. The half-Romulan ship commander was engaged in conversation with Commander Spaak, so Topuc turned to Ciaran.

“Before Ashari came into my life I used to avoid these get-togethers and hide in my lab.”

Ciaran shrugged and said, “I didn’t want to come. Nalli said I should come and enjoy myself. At least you have Ashari. I doubt anyone will dance for me.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Topuc admonished. “You never know what might happen at these gatherings. I’m sure someone will surprise you.”

Before Ciaran had a chance to reply, the music started playing and the women came in wearing the dancing outfits unique to the *Pariah*. What Ciaran had learned from Nalli during his time aboard was that until Lady Val’s arrival aboard the *Pariah* the outfits were sheer enough to see through. Lady Val had persuaded her husband to keep the same basic design and materials, simply adding layers of fabric to provide a bit more coverage to the garment. Like the merchant vessel’s uniforms, the dance attire also revealed the midriff area of the women.

As the women danced, Ciaran watched, intrigued by the dance until he noticed that it was Val’ri Raiajh, not her ‘sister’ Lady Val. He continued to watch the dance for a few more minutes before feeling he had enough of the festivities. And as he had no desire to hurt the Admiral who was dancing with the other women, he did the only thing that came to mind. He walked over to her and lifted her up and draped her over his shoulder and carried the woman out of the cargo bay.

Hans Spaak and all the other men present watched what Ciaran had done with stunned expressions. Once the cargo bay doors were completely closed, Spaak turned to Jarvok and said, “You know, I never thought of that! Not that I could do it if I wanted to, because it would be rude for the host to completely leave the party like that.”

Lady Val however, who had stopped dancing when Ciaran picked up her ‘sister,’ looked toward the closed door with dismay. She was not sure what had happened, but she seriously doubted that it was what the men were thinking.

Once the doors had closed behind them, Raiajh said, “Please put me down, Ciaran. I’m getting dizzy.”

Instead of complying, Ciaran repositioned the woman on his shoulder and told her to be quiet. Shocked by Ciaran’s rather forward action, Raiajh quieted down and waited to see where he was headed. When he arrived at his intended destination, he stepped inside, but instead of placing the woman down on her feet on the deck, he pushed her away from him. Instead of falling, Raiajh floated up and away. She used her zero-g training to gently reach for the bulkhead and arrest her ascent. As she steadied herself against the bulkhead, Ciaran floated past her. Raiajh tried to hide a snicker as she watched him float up and away from her.

“I see the children have showed you their favorite spot on the ship,” she remarked.

“I find it a good place to relax; when those same children aren’t here. I hope you don’t mind that we came here?”

“This is fine. Thank you for getting me out of there. While I miss dancing, tonight just felt different. It felt almost like I was dancing for my father.”

“Thanks. I know you don’t have feelings like that for me, but I think I would have preferred it if you didn’t tell the truth this time.”

She gave him a slight smile and replied, “I understand. I probably should have phrased it a bit different but if you had known my brother you would understand why I didn’t use him for comparison.” Even in their brief mind meld, Raiajh had shielded her thoughts about her brother Ja’al from Ciaran.

“That bad?” he asked.

“Worse,” she admitted. “Treason, gambling, money laundering... Not to mention the death of one of my daughters due to his inactions.” Tears began to fill her eyes as she continued. “Never during his life did he ever think about the consequences of his actions or who he would hurt. He even tried to appeal to my sense of family when he was finally convicted and managed to evade his punishment. Even then he wasn’t apologetic about what happened and how much he had hurt me. He was jealous because our grandmother was closer to me than to him and he clung to the belief that our mother should never have given birth to me because I was different.”

“Did he ever try to hurt you physically?” Ciaran asked, floating closer to where Raiajh hovered.

“He tried,” Raiajh admitted. “But for the first two years of my life on Earth – where I was born – my mother took me with her to the Embassy as often as her duties allowed, and when she could not she made sure I was either with my grandmother or at daycare. My brother’s hurtful actions were mostly limited to words, but he also tried pushing me down around tables when I was a toddler and he thought no one was looking, trying to injure me. He was caught a few times and punished for it, but it never helped.”

“Didn’t your mother teach him that he should always look out for and protect his sister?” Ciaran asked.

The question did not surprise Raiajh, considering that Betazoid society was matriarchal, and Ciaran had spent the first five years of his life on the planet.

“She did,” she replied. “But you need to understand that Deltans as a whole are a rather insular people. They don’t believe in getting into long-term relationships with off-worlders. Flirting with a non-Deltan or even an occasional fling is one thing, but what my parents had when they spent those two years together on Nisus was unheard of at the time and can still be frowned upon.”

“Did your brother know about the relationship between your parents?”

“I don’t believe so. My brother was at the Embassy on Earth with our grandmother since he had already begun his schooling. My father mentioned visiting once when I was about three months old. I suppose it is possible that he may have picked up on some non-verbal cues from my mother or Tolek, but I don’t think that was the case. He was only around five at the time.”

“You are probably right. I don’t recall much from that age either, though I wish I did. I barely remember my parents. I am thankful for the memories of them you shared with me through our meld, though.”

“I wish I had more of them,” Raiajh said apologetically. “Since your birth mother didn’t like me in the least, I hardly spent any time with them. I also would have loved to have known your older brother better. It was a shame he didn’t live to see his nieces and nephews.”

Ciaran’s face took on a clouded look, then finally said, “Let’s not talk about that and get back to your brother.”

“There isn’t much more to tell,” Raiajh said. “We kept our distance from one another for the most-part. As for what he knew about my mother’s relationship with Tolek before I was born... Unless he went digging for the truth, the ‘official story’ about how I was conceived was that the medical facility my mother used for artificial insemination implanted the wrong embryo and I was intended to merely be an experiment in genetic manipulation to help other mixed-race couples conceive children in the future. It was the story I was told for most of my life. I was not informed of the truth until just a few years ago myself.”

“You never thought to look for your father before then?”

“When I thought he was no more than a genetic donor, I felt he had his reasons to keep his distance and respected that. Since I wasn’t aware that the story of my conception was a fabrication I didn’t want to cause any trouble if my biological father had a family of his own. When I went to the Vulcan Science Academy I believed Tolek was just my teacher and a student advisor. I was only fourteen when I started, much younger than any of the other non-Vulcan students, so I didn’t think too much about Tolek checking up on me. As a student advisor, it would make sense that he took an interest in my studies.”

Ciaran shrugged. “I wouldn’t know,” he said. “I never had any formal schooling. I learned what I could here and there. Captain Krena didn’t care one way or the other so I would read what I could from the ship’s computer library, once I had it teach me how to read. When he sold me into the Orion Syndicate’s slave market, being able to read a little did help. Learning Klingon and Romulan was a bit harder, but you would be surprised as to how much older Federation equipment can be found on Orion ships.”

“I know,” Raiajh said. “Since Orion commanders equip their ships however they see fit, many are equipped with older Federation technology that was either sold legally and through proper channels, or illegally by pilfering from derelict ships stored in surplus depots or from nefarious Ferengi traders. Romulan technology is much rarer because the Romulans use a much different energy source than either the Federation or Klingons and their equipment isn’t as compatible.”

Ciaran pondered for a moment before saying, “I always found it interesting that the Romulans were able to do that. Power their ships with an artificial singularity, I mean. You would think that would be dangerous.”

“They found a way to make it work. Romulans can be resourceful at times. I personally am not well versed on their systems, Ciaran. I know you find the work you are doing with Topuc interesting. Unfortunately, engineering isn’t one of my interests. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I am still surprised that Commander Spaak and Topuc trust me with such an important job,” Ciaran admitted.

“They are good people, Ciaran. If you show that you can be trusted, they will give you that trust. But if you break that trust, even once, after you have earned it, then getting it back is nearly impossible. Regardless, you already know that. I’m sure Commander Spaak has told you the same himself.”

“He has.” Changing the subject, Ciaran then said, “I’ve been doing a bit of reading about this Bel-Terra that we’re going to be spending time at. It sounds like a nice place.”

“It is. Very much like Earth. ...And Betazed. Many of us will be going down to the planet’s surface. Do you want to go?” Raiajh asked. “Our first and main stop is going to be at Loneel Station. It is a cattle and horse ranch in the Bel-Terran equivalent of the Australian outback, and is owned by my sister in law Jill and a former Starfleet officer that used to be assigned to the starbase named Hadrian Lehnsheer. The pair started the ranch about a year ago.”

“I wouldn’t possibly be allowed to go,” Ciaran remarked with certainty. “Some things don’t change.”

Raiajh shook her head as she said, “You sound like my friend Cathryn. When she was first commissioned in Starfleet she was having difficulties. It was what kept her down on the lower decks for a while and also affected how others saw her for years to come. It wasn’t until she changed the way she saw herself that she was able to change her situation for the better. You need to begin to do that as well. You now hold your own keys to your future. Step up and use them! If you want to go down to the surface of Bel-Terra, ask Topuc. He won’t deny you the opportunity. Everyone knows on the ship that Jill is technically your sister. No one aboard the *Pariah* would deny you the chance to meet your family.”

“I am only family if I am accepted as such,” Ciaran said, his eyes downcast. “I don’t want to take anything away from your husband. I don’t want anyone to take away from anything he earned. I don’t care if I am going to be accepted or not; I just want to be respected as a person.”

“You’re right. Time will tell, but I want to believe that I know Jill well enough that she will give you a chance and get to know you before she makes up her mind. She may not accept you as family, but she will respect you as a person.”

“I hope so.”

* * *

The following day, the *Pariah* entered orbit over Bel-Terra. Lady Val and her ‘sister’ Val’ri Raiajh, along with Marie Quintero, Ashari Pel, and Katrina Xaran – the latter of whom had returned from Earth with her brother and grandmother as there were a few months before her next semester of classes would start – decided to do a bit of shopping before their scheduled visit to Loneel Station the next day. Raiajh made it rather clear that Jill told them that long-sleeved shirts, long pants and work boots were mandatory for the visit. It was a working horse and cattle ranch.

The group returned to the ship several hours later laden down with packages. They had purchased clothes for the children and the men aboard the ship. Once they cleared the pad, the transporter hummed to life again with the remainder of their purchases.

Though Raiajh was actually looking forward to seeing Jill once again, her sister-in-law had stated in a communiqué that she was going to be hosting a memorial service for Sylvan near the end of their visit. Raiajh did not feel that she was ready for the ritual yet. She was familiar with the Betazoid tradition from when Korin and Ellie – Sylvan and Jill Xaran’s older brother and his wife – had died, and from when the ritual was performed for her in-laws and daughter Elayne. It was a heart-warming way of remembering the good of a person, but for Raiajh it was going to be difficult because she was still grieving for the future she had been denied. Nine months had passed since the tragic shuttle accident and her life changed forever, and it was soon to be four months since the *Pariah* and those aboard her had left *Starbase 719*. It not only affected her life, but it impacted the lives of her children as well. Katrina was considering turning away from a career in Starfleet, but she still had not given up her appointment to the Academy. She knew what life in Starfleet entailed, but with her father gone, things just were not the same.

Raiajh knew her daughter needed to come to the decision on her own. There were times she wanted to tell her daughter not to go, but the reasons were selfish. At her age, Katrina was more than capable of deciding her own future.

As soon as the purchases were attended to and packed into the trunks to be beamed down to Loneel Station, Raiajh headed off to find the one place on the ship where she could be alone to meditate.

* * *

Two days later...
March 28, 2392 (Bel-Terran calendar)
Loneel Station, Australian Continent, Bel-Terra

Raiajh had just come back into the main house from horseback riding with her children. Ciaran had spent all of the previous day and the present morning helping the station-hands with some of the chores. The night they had first beamed down he stated that he wanted to talk to her this afternoon. Raiajh agreed to set aside all afternoon to give him plenty of time. There was a small creek on the property that was a quiet space where she suggested they go. He had cleaned up and was helping to get the mid-day meal onto the table so the family members and station-hands would be able to eat as soon as everyone wandered in.

Still having a few minutes before the meal would be served, Raiajh walked into the bath in her room and entered sonic shower fully clothed to freshen up and to help eliminate the smell of horse on her clothes. She was easily able to close off her mind from the horse's feelings while she rode, but after a time the smell of the animal became more than she could handle. She wished it did not affect her so badly, as she actually enjoyed the activity. She could use nasal numbing agents supplied by Dr. Ves'Dell, but the agents generally lasted for weeks and Raiajh had instead decided to simply bare the short-time discomfort.

Sufficiently cleansed, she stepped out of the shower and headed into the dining room to join everyone who was there. Following the hearty lunch, she and Ciaran headed off toward the creek so they could talk as promised.

As the pair neared the creek, Raiajh watched Ciaran as he looked at everything as though through the eyes of a child. She was not surprised, as he had not set foot on a planet's surface in this manner since he was five, almost fifty years before. He did not look overly nervous considering the last time he was planet bound he was abducted and taken from his family. He was cautious, yes, but not afraid. It was probably because of all the activity he saw in Bel-Terran orbit out of the ship's viewing ports. Besides the *Pariah*, there had been numerous traders and ships from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers in orbit. The Bel-Terrans also had a few defensive spaceships orbiting the planet as well, much to the chagrin of Starfleet.

Once the pair had arrived beside the creek, they found some boulders to sit on.

"What do you think about being planet-side?" Raiajh started by asking.

"It has been good," Ciaran replied. "I have spent these past two days with Mister Lehnsheer and the other workers. I don't know how to ride the horses, but I didn't mind assisting in the barn... mucking out their stalls, Mister Lehnsheer called it... and feeding them. I hate to say it, but I actually missed working that hard."

"It is not surprising," Raiajh remarked. "But this is supposed to be a relaxing time. I am sure Hadrian said you didn't need to help."

"He did say that, but at the same time he was thankful for my help."

"I am sure he was," Raiajh agreed. "It takes quite a few people to run a venture like this."

"Mister Lehnsheer mentioned that as well. He also said that he was impressed with how hard I worked and that he wished that more of his workers were motivated like me."

"There is nothing wrong with a good work ethic, Ciaran. In fact it is a good quality to have. Those who enjoy their work tend to perform their duties better."

"Mister Lehnsheer said he would be willing to hire me on if it is agreeable to Commander Spaak," Ciaran admitted, almost sheepishly.

"Have you asked Hans yet?" Raiajh inquired.

"Not yet," he replied. "I wanted to talk to you first. If I do stay here on Bel-Terra, I would like to dissolve the bond that has formed between us. It would not be fair to either of us to do otherwise."

Raiajh nodded and said, "I agree with you. It would be illogical not to break it considering we have no desire to pursue anything more than friendship at this point. And don't worry about Hans. He will be sad to see you go, yet at the same time he will be happy that you found a place where you can make a life for yourself as a free man. Although he might be envious of you a little for wanting to be a cowboy." Raiajh paused before adding, "No, wait, not cowboy. A jackaroo."

Ciaran snickered at the word, but simply asked, "Will he let me go?"

"Of course he will. The one thing he believes in more than anything is keeping his word. If this is what you want to do, then he will stand behind you; as will I. I will talk to my father when we return to the house and request his assistance to break our bond and assure him that it is a decision we came to together. Without his assistance, we risk performing the ritual incorrectly and may end up hurting either or both of us."

Ciaran nodded before the pair sat quietly for a while, enjoying the scenery and the sounds of the babbling brook before returning to the main house.

* * *

March 30, 2392 (Bel-Terran calendar)

Forty-eight hours later, the deed was done. Raijrh was sitting in the living room of the station house with her 'sister' Lady Val and her sister-in-law and former aide Marie when all of their combadges emitted a chirping tone. The tone was followed by a message from Dr. Ves'Dell requesting everyone meet in a central place and return to the *Pariah* as soon as possible.

To Be Continued...