

Turbulence

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/947) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/947>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead
Relationship:	Gregory Aspinall & Victoria Waltham
Character:	Ensemble Cast - FSA , Govan Harli , Andrus Otex , Victoria Waltham
Additional Tags:	Adult Language , Angst , Drama , Family
Language:	English
Series:	Part 9 of Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead
Stats:	Published: 2023-09-19 Words: 11,725 Chapters: 6/6

Turbulence

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Season One, Episode Nine of Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

Stardate 43505.33: A personal emergency calls Isira home to Betazed, where her younger brother, Govan, a teenager, has been Joined with the symbiont Harli and intends to remain Joined. While she deals with family fallout, including the appearance of big brother Andrus, Abbie teases Kincaid about missing Isira and Victoria realizes she's become very sympathetic to Greg.

Notes

This story was original posted at the classic Ad Astra on 18 June 2013, under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

Historian's Note: The events of this story take place just before The Next Generation's third season episode, "The High Ground."

Teaser

Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

by Lord McCovey Cove & A.J. Gertner

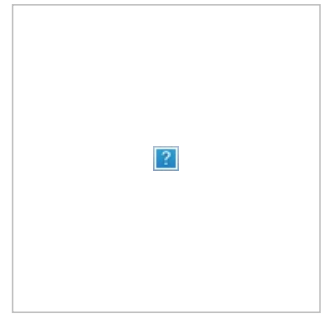
Episode Nine: Turbulence

NCC-60597 (USS *Farragut*)

En route to Starbase 47

Stardate 43505.33

Observation Lounge



"The most serious injury this month was the broken leg of Crewman Bensen. His femur broke after his fall when he missed a rung on a ladder in engineering," Doctor Sovera concluded her injury report. She, Captain Krystine Leone, Commander Jesse Kincaid and Lieutenant Isira Otex were discussing the medical reports from the last month. "The break has now completely healed and he has returned to regular duty."

"Thank you, Doctor," Leone replied with a nod of her head. She turned towards the counselor. "And you, Isira?"

"Naturally, I have no injuries to report, Captain," Isira began, a smile coming her face. Even Kincaid found that remark amusing, to judge from his own bemused expression. "There are twenty-three members of the crew in regular counseling at this time. We saw an additional fifty-seven for situational counseling sessions..."

The chime of the comm interrupted the report. "Excuse me, Captain," Lieutenant Wilson Nieves voice rang out. "We have a priority message for Lieutenant Otex from Betazed."

No one was more surprised to hear it than Isira herself. Before the captain could ask the question that formed in her mind, the counselor answered it. "It's all right, Captain. He can put it through the screen here." There were any number of colleagues, some of them in Starfleet themselves, who could have been calling, but she could not imagine for what reason.

Leone responded to the security chief, "Please send it through to the observation lounge. Leone, out." Each of them curiously turned their attention the image of a mature Betazoid woman which immediately appeared. She had chestnut brown hair and the trademark Betazoid eyes. Her face bore the mark of many smiles over the years, though she was not smiling at the moment. She appeared to be calling from a hospital, as they could make out an empty biobed behind her.

Isira identified her with a simple, "Mother. What's wrong?"

"Isira, you must come home immediately. There's been an accident with your younger brother. Govan is... gone."

Act One

Act One

Personal Log of Lieutenant Isira Otex

Stardate 43505.7

It's amazing how fast the usual bureaucracy of serving within Starfleet can move when someone has died. I did not need to ask for bereavement leave before the captain had granted it and forwarded the necessary authorization to Lieutenant Victoria Waltham in Personnel. Jesse had a shuttlecraft and pilot ready for me before I even managed to think of the logistics of getting home. He and Abbie saw me off at the shuttlebay. He was so terribly upset for me and he couldn't stop thinking how horrible it was that he should gain a little brother only for me to lose my own. Abbie told me to take as much time as I need, regardless of what the service said. She's spent so much of her time comforting others lately. I hated to add myself to her burden.

We're stopping by Starbase 211 to pick up my older brother, Andrus. It seems wrong to use the word fortunate at a time like this, but his being in the region is a comfort to me. With as hard as losing Govan is to me, dealing with our parents and their grief as well as my own at this time would be nearly impossible without Andrus there. I managed to hold my tears until the shuttle took off but I am doing my best to stop them before we arrive at the starbase. I don't want to make Andrus even more upset than I know he will be.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrus Otex, Starfleet Marine Corps, sat within the modest passenger compartment of the shuttlecraft *Pythagoras* and shook his head. "I honestly thought that if our parents ever had to outlive one of their children, it would be me. They thought as much too."

"Andrus..." Isira began only to be waved off by the taller man. He leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. She rarely saw his short-cropped dark brown hair anything but perfectly arranged, so it was disconcerting to see it jutting out from between his fingers. "I'm the one who serves in hazardous situations. I'm the one who does not have a problem with violence when necessary and killing when required. I've contemplated my own death many times and they have as well. Even you have. I never expected this."

Isira moved from her own seat and into the one beside him, reaching out an arm to rest on his back comfortingly. "How can you expect this for a sixteen year old boy who hasn't even left home yet? No one saw this coming. Of course we're all upset. You don't need to steel yourself this way."

"Don't I? You and I have spent our lives controlling our emotions to prevent projecting ourselves. Seeing Mother like that nearly upset me enough to lose control in front of my men. I can't imagine how being with her and Father will feel, how it will just heighten what we're already going through. If we weren't controlling ourselves now to some degree, the pilot would be bawling!" He suddenly sprang to his feet and began to pace. "And when she starts with the Four Deities, I know I'm just going to yell at her."

Isira took a moment, letting the roil of emotions go for a minute while Andrus tried to calm himself. "I know all of the techniques to dealing with grief in patients, but I am so close to this. I think maybe it's best if we call in another counselor. The pain of losing a child is..." Her voice cracked and she bowed her head. *I suppose we have both often felt he was more of a child to us and not a sibling. But it is so much stronger for you.* He was twenty-four years older than Govan, and thirteen older than Isira herself.

Andrus knelt in front of her, reaching out to push some of her hair out of her face. "Isira, please don't. I'm not strong enough to watch you cry right now," he all but whispered to her.

The smile she gave him in return was weak. "Yes, you are," she assured him. She felt his relief when the comm beeped for their attention.

"Yes, Lieutenant Greenley?" she inquired.

"Sirs, we're approaching Betazed now. Also, there's a transmission coming in from the surface, shall I patch it through?"

"Yes, thank you," Isira replied, wiping at her eyes as Andrus got his feet. "Please put it on screen here."

"Aye, sir." The comm channel closed just as the screen in the small room came to life and Isira received the second shock of the day. There was Govan, looking as healthy and alive as when she last saw him several months ago.

"Isira, Andrus, hello," he greeted them cheerfully. "I wanted to make sure you knew that I was at the El'Tar Hospital and not at home, so you should come here when your ship lands." He paused when he noticed their stunned faces. "What's wrong?"

Before Isira could formulate a reply, Andrus answered for her. "We were told you were dead!" he exclaimed, his anger already rising.

Govan's shoulders slumped and he sighed. "Mother," he began, looking to someone off-screen. "I've told you, I'm still me," he insisted then turned his attention back to his siblings. "She's just upset. I can explain it all more fully when you join us at the hospital. I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I will see you soon." With that, the transmission was cut off.

The stunned silence remained in the compartment for some time, but as usual, it was Andrus broke it. "The humans have a saying when they're very angry with someone. 'I'm going to kill him.' Now I know what they mean by it."

Andrus wasted little time when they were shown into the hospital room. It was a rather large one, with a lovely view of the hospital's well-maintained gardens. Naturally, the Marine paid very little attention to those details.

Karisa and Saben Otex were close to the window and each other, while Govan was seated on the biobed and regarding his parents with a half-

smile of tolerance. There was a great deal of trepidation and distrust coming from them.

Andrus waded in quickly. *Mother, what were you thinking in telling us that Govan was dead? How dare you put us through that?*

As usual, Karisa was affronted by the manner of her eldest but she defended herself quickly, even as her husband moved to stand in between the two. *THAT is not my son. That is someone who is wearing the body of my son!*

Andrus pulled up short, more troubled by his parents' worry that he might be violent than their words. Isira frowned and moved to stand in front of her older brother to show her support of him. She couldn't contain her outrage on his behalf. "I understand that you're upset about whatever has happened with Govan, but how can you think that about Andrus?"

Govan slid from his seat on the bed and waded into the fray with a confidence that Isira had never before seen from him. *Mother, it's very unkind of you to be so insulting to Andrus just because you don't understand what's going on with me.* He gave both his parents a censorious look then turned his attention to his siblings. *I'm very glad you're here. Even if Mother hadn't lied about my death, you would have been called because I have filed a petition to have you both declared my guardians in lieu of our parents.* He gestured for them both to sit, but was clearly unsurprised when they both declined.

As you can see, I am not injured. But there was an accident on the submersible vessel I was on in the ocean. We had a guest lecturer, an expert on marine biology, a Joined Trill named Tazor Harli. There was a sudden decompression in the compartment he was in and by the time it was repressurized, he was dead. His symbiont was still alive. The ship's doctor thought we could save him and asked for volunteers. He cautioned that he was not an expert in this and it was dangerous. But I volunteered and he performed the surgery.

Isira stared at him while Andrus was looking at his stomach as if the symbiont might just pop out of his little brother. *So you are now Joined temporarily with a symbiont until a Trill host can be found?* she asked.

No. Govan put his hands on his abdomen and smiled widely. *I've decided to remain Joined. We've decided, really, to be technical, but the correct grammar is I. To be honest, if I was Trill, there wouldn't even been a question of removing me at this point. Mother's hysterics notwithstanding.*

The adults had adjourned to a small conference room to discuss the matter without Govan present. They were soon joined by his doctor at the hospital, Piera Nacsi, and a Trill diplomat from the local consulate, a man by the name of Derin Rixx.

It was the Trill who spoke first. He was a tall, thin man with an incongruent shock of white at his right temple in his otherwise black hair. "I would like to remind everyone that the agreement between our peoples concerning the joined nature of some Trill and the existence of symbionts generally, which predates our membership in the Federation, is still in effect and we insist that all will abide by its terms."

"Is that why you're here? To make sure that we abide by a ridiculous treaty?" Andrus scoffed from his seat. "One which, if I'm reading you correctly, your people are already considering setting aside in favor of being honest? I'd rather discuss the safety of my brother and your symbiont, if you don't mind."

"I'm here to safeguard the life of the symbiont! I just don't want you to think you can use your Starfleet connections to force our hand!"

"Then let's focus on the health of those lives before we start making threats, shall we?" Isira noted with some wry amusement that her parents were always so proud of Andrus when he turned his imposing personality on others.

"First of all," Andrus continued with emphasis. "How did this happen? Why wasn't the Trill just transported out?"

If the doctor was surprised to be questioned by the brother and not the sister, she did not show it. "As I understand it, in speaking with the engineers, there was a dual problem with the depth of the ship underwater and with Joined Trills using transporters. There was a very high risk that the symbiont would not have survived the transport."

"That's correct," Derin spoke up once more, his tone assured that at least in this he could speak with full authority. "The symbiont Harli is one of the oldest on Trill. There was no way we could allow him to risk transport. When contacted by the doctor on the ship about this, we said the only way to save his life would be via a temporary host. We helped coach the doctor on the procedure. We also have a Trill from our program on her way now with a Guardian to oversee the transfer."

"Excuse me, what is a Guardian?" Isira asked while Andrus had a different concern. "How old is the symbiont exactly?"

Derin looked uncomfortable. "Harli is over five hundred years old," he admitted. "For an symbiont of that age, it can be difficult for a host to maintain their own personality. It's why our host initiates go through a rigorous screening process, usually when they are at least ten years older than Govan is now."

"Which is exactly why I know that that thing is one in control right now!" Karisa exclaimed. "Govan is just a little boy, he couldn't possibly hold out against such a mind." She clutched at her husband's hand, worry writ large upon his face. "He even lost the ability to speak telepathically!"

"For a time," Seban explained quickly. "After he woke up from the surgery, Govan couldn't communicate telepathically for several hours."

Andrus held up a hand to quiet the room. "Let's stop doing this piecemeal. I don't want to hear about what you think are the most important details. Isira and I need all the information if we're to help resolve this situation." He turned toward the Trill. "If you would answer my sister's question?"

You are being horribly rude to your mother, Saben thought at his son.

You have yet to see me begin to be rude to my mother, was Andrus reply. Isira believed she saw the doctor restrain a smile.

"The Guardians are experts in the care and well-being of symbionts, both joined and unjoined. Some are also telepaths, not to the extent of a Betazoid, but they can help ease a transition. We need to begin the procedure as soon as they arrive. As soon as Govan consents to the procedure, that is. I think his immaturity is what is causing the current impasse. I'm sure that having a symbiont of Harli's age and experience will make his future education much easier," Derin responded coolly.

"Trading thinly veiled insults won't work either," Isira interrupted. "How is he, medically?" she asked the doctor.

The doctor activated the screen, showing four brainwave patterns, two in blue and two in red. "Using the information provided by the Trill consulate, I think we can safely say that neither Govan nor Harli are controlling the other. As you can see here, they each have their own brain wave pattern. Furthermore, you can see here that Govan's brain wave pattern matches the one he had at a routine examination he had two months ago and Harli's matches one from his annual exam when he was in his previous host."

"He did feel like himself," Isira commented, ignoring the looks of her parents. "Just more confident."

"That is a common result of being Joined," Derin acknowledged.

"Now, normally, the health of the joining is evaluated by tracking the level of isoboramine in the Trill host's brain, which is a neurotransmitter specific to their species. Naturally, Govan doesn't have that. However, so far, his neurotransmitter levels are within normal ranges, excepting psilosynine, which of course is the main neurotransmitter of the paracortex, or the section of the brain dedicated to telepathy," the doctor continued. "For a time, immediately after the transfer, his psilosynine levels were extremely low but they have been rising steadily since then. Scans by the Trill also confirm the health of Harli." Another screen of information flashed up. "He's responding as if he was within a Trill host."

"Given this, we theorize that they have the same two to three day window any joined pair has before the Joining becomes permanent. On the outside of that window, we have seventy hours remaining."

"And if they are separated after that?" Andrus asked.

"They will both die, unless Govan receives a new symbiont and Harli receives a new host."

"We strongly feel that Govan cannot support Harli in the long term," Derin interrupted. "The symbionts aren't even able to join with every Trill. The few times they have been in other species, they weren't able to survive more than two days. If Govan does not agree to the surgery within the next day or so, he will die."

Act Two

Act Two

"Incoming transmission from Betazed, Captain," Wilson reported from the security station on *Farragut's* bridge.

Leone was seated in the captain's chair, with Kincaid seated to her right. "On screen," she ordered, looking at the viewscreen expectantly.

Isira's image appeared before them and she gave the bridge crew a smile. "Captain, I wanted to let you know right away, my brother is alive."

Leone started in her chair, leaning forward. "That's wonderful news, Isira," she began.

"Yes, it is. However, there is still a medical question and my brother has filed an emergency petition to have my older brother, Andrus, and I named his guardians because he wants a different course of treatment than my parents wish. As a result, I need to stay here until that petition is heard. I apologize for my mother's hyperbole, Captain, but obviously, I cannot leave immediately."

"Sounds like things got considerably more complicated for you," Leone noted. She cast a quick glance toward Kincaid before staring back at the main viewscreen. "Please take all the time you need to get your affairs in order, and Commander Kincaid will square your leave with Personnel."

"Thank you, Captain, Commander."

Kincaid gave Isira's image a quick nod and a reassuring smile. "I'll be happy to take care of it, Counselor. We'll see you when you get back."

Isira walked into her brother's hospital room once more, only to find that Andrus was already there. He was seated at the small table while Govan sat cross legged on the bed and grinned at his older brother.

I feel like I'm interrupting something, Isira began, a smile coming her face at the tableau before her.

I think Andrus is a little shaken that I'm now older than he is, Govan noted with a laugh.

Please. That has nothing to do with it. I'm shaken by the fact that you've apparently decided to risk death to remain joined with someone you basically just met, Andrus retorted.

"Well, that's ridiculous," Govan replied, sliding off the bed and walking over to his sister. He enveloped her in a hug, adding, "I know you meant to do this when you saw me alive, before Mother had another one of her moments." He rolled his eyes.

Isira accepted the hug, even as she chided him. "Govan, you really are being so nonchalant about all this. You know, neither Andrus nor I can support this decision. Right now, all we know is that you seem mostly like yourself. But the Trill are insistent that remaining joined will kill you. That your body will reject the symbiont and you'll suffer from an autoimmune shutdown of your major organs."

Govan withdrew from the hug to regard each of his siblings in turn. "Let's begin with the premise that the Trill are not entirely honest about symbionts in general and then go from there, shall we?"

Andrus snorted. "You're saying he lied?"

"Or grossly exaggerated. Much like Mother and her report of my untimely demise."

"So you're not going to die by remaining joined?" Isira asked. She knew that he was being honest with them, but still needed to hear the words said. She could not help but feel that he was dismissing the risks just to secure their approval of his actions.

"I rather doubt it. Obviously, a Betazoid has never been a symbiont host before, so I cannot say with 100% certainty that I will live, but this joining hasn't had a negative medical effect yet that hasn't corrected itself. It's proceeded as every other one has, so far."

"So far?!" Andrus surged to his feet. *How can you be so cavalier about this? This is your life we're talking about here.*

Govan waved that away. *I'm not being cavalier about anything, Andrus.* He held up a hand, asking for a moment's patience as he tried to marshal his words. Finally, he wandered over to the window, as if to admire the view.

You're the reason I volunteered to do this, Andrus. Tazor was dead and Harli was going to die and I thought, 'what would Andrus do?' I knew without hesitation that you would risk yourself to save another, even someone you had only known for a few days, because you have chosen to do that as a Starfleet Marine. You put yourself out there, in harms' way, and in situations in which you may have to take a life to defend another, because you know that you have the capability to do it without recrimination. I have always admired that. When others might look down upon you, I only saw the strength in your decisions and the courage. Govan turned around and nodded at his sister. "Isira too," he added. "You're why she chose to join Starfleet. She's an extremely powerful telepath. There were so many opportunities open to her here and within the diplomatic service. Instead, she chose to follow your example and serve."

"Well, that's true," Isira began only to be interrupted by Govan. *Well, you certainly are ruder than you used to be.*

"I'm actually not done, is all," he said, giving her a smile to soften his words. "Haven't we all spent enough time dancing around the issue? This is about me, today, but this is about our parents. I love our parents, as do the both of you, but we've all come to realize at an early age that they are very conventional people with conventional ideas for our lives."

"Andrus, you are about to turn forty and they still do not know that you yourself are a powerful telepath. Not only do they not know that, they think that having you when they were so young has ruined you.

"And you, Isira. All they can see is this powerful daughter, someone who could marry into one of the Houses and have a brilliant career here on Betazed, with many daughters to carry on the family name. They don't see who you are as a person, just what they wish for you.

"And me. It's been so hard to pretend that I wasn't the sweet little idiot they've always thought me to be. Even when I was accepted to university as a twelve year old, they thought I had somehow snuck in! We've all spent our lives pretending that they need to be mollified when they should have been spending their lives supporting us. Instead, Andrus raised himself, you relied on Andrus, and I have relied on both of you. When we have problems, we turn to each other. Don't you both see how wrong that is?"

"And to prove it, you would risk your life?" Andrus asked pointedly. When he would interrupt again, the colonel shut him down with a look. "Govan, sit down," he ordered, pointing to the bed. Almost despite himself, Govan followed the direction.

"You are right; our parents are not ideal. They have given us all their love and a considerable amount of their time, but they do not see us for ourselves. If you wish to be free of them, to emancipate yourself from them or to come live with one of us instead, that is something I would likely support. But to do it in this fashion, that I cannot support. I believe you are old enough, smart enough to have a choice in where you will live and with whom. But you are not old enough to make a choice that puts your life in danger. We have the age of maturity under the law for a reason."

"I don't think my life is in nearly the danger that they say it is. But it is still my life to risk and my life changed when I was joined. Who I am right now is still me, but it's a different me who will die if separated," Govan answered calmly. "But I see your point." He turned to Isira for her input.

I know you think that your life is not in danger in remaining joined. That could very well be true. I have seen the reports and the scans. It certainly appears as if the joining is perfectly fine, but we are also concerned about the age of the symbiont and the number of lives, the amount of memories, that are now swirling inside of you. I can feel you sifting through them, trying to find an experience to help you in this situation and I am worried that you will be overwhelmed by them. One of the things Derin said that was clearly true was that hosts are usually older than you are now, to insure that their sense of themselves was clear enough to not be overwhelmed. It seems so much to ask of someone who is only sixteen. Isira shook her head, her fear at his choice coming to the forefront.

Andrus too disagreed. *It is my role within this family to risk my life and I take on that role because I can deal with the consequences. It was a measured, thoughtful choice that I made as an adult. You are not an adult; you are practically my son. I cannot and will not allow you to risk your life like this. I made my choices so that you could have the freedom to make choices when you were of age. If you do this, you invalidate everything I have done. Your life does not seem so valuable to you right now but it is valuable to me and I will be damned before I allow you to sacrifice yourself. You have saved the life of the symbiont. Now save your own, or it will be saved for you.* Without another word, the Marine stormed out of the room, in search of a place in which he could calm himself.

"If I was the child he thinks I am, I would make a flippant remark about that," Govan mentioned quietly as Isira moved to sit beside him on the bed.

"You're still thinking about that flippant remark," Isira noted quietly, her mouth curving in a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"But I'm not saying it or projecting it." Govan sighed. "I really thought you two would understand. For a world that seems built on understanding..." He trailed off.

"He is right. You are practically his son. He has always treated you as he would his own children, if he had them. And for me, I suppose he was closer to my beloved uncle than a brother. He didn't want me to join Starfleet either; he isn't comfortable with the thought of either of us risking our lives. But he respected me enough to respect my choice. He doesn't know you as someone who can make a choice like this." Isira wrapped her arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. "And me, well, I'm just frightened. You're my little brother and I would be a mess if you died. When we thought you were dead, it was all we could do to hold it together to get here for your funeral. I don't want to lose you again."

"I do understand that, Isira. And I appreciate that you're not forcing this issue to resolve the way you would like it, like Mother and Father." Again, he looked to the window. "Do you think you could convince Andrus to speak to me some more? I want to show you both that I can make this decision."

Isira looked him over thoughtfully and then nodded. "Talking this out a bit more won't hurt," she agreed, then looked towards the doorway. A half minute later, a nurse appeared.

Excuse me, she said. *It's time to run some additional scans.*

More medical information can't hurt me, Govan answered as he rose from the bed. *I'll see you soon, Isira. Please tell Andrus what I said.*

I will, she promised.

Lieutenant Victoria Waltham tucked her hand into the crook of Greg's arm as they strode into *Farragut's* Ten-Forward together. Their customary table occupied, they drifted toward one of the corners for its solitude and low-light levels. She sat down on the long, padded bench and he slid in next to her. They waited no more than ten seconds before a waitperson took their order.

Greg placed his arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him; her head rested on his shoulder. She felt his left hand play against the side of her uniform tunic. Victoria wrapped her arms around his midsection and ignored the open gapes of those around them. They did not come to the lounge to hide from the crew.

However, once their orders arrived from the bar, both sat upright to enjoy their respective beverages. Now fully relaxed, she took the opportunity to ask him about his day.

"Nothing too exciting," he replied. "My day at the helm while flying in a straight line doesn't consist of much more than a few minor, minor course corrections. How about you? Anything new in the world of paper-pushing?"

Victoria pouted visibly. "Hey, if we did not push our paper, you wouldn't have any promotions or leave time. Maybe it's not as exciting as piloting shuttles or going to warp..."

"It's a thankless job," he noted solemnly.

"Don't you forget it," she said from behind her glass. After taking another sip, Victoria quickly swallowed. "Speaking of leave time... Counselor Otex' been moved from bereavement to administrative. Do you know if something happened to her while she's home?"

Greg nodded. "Something with her brother and a family situation. I didn't really catch the whole thing, but she was letting the captain know that he wasn't dead. Her mother overreacted, I think?"

"Overreacted to what, I wonder..."

He said nothing further on the subject, instead placing his drink on the small table in front of them and moving his hand over her thigh.

"I guess you don't really care about what's happening with your fellow senior staffer," she noted.

Greg leaned in and placed a light kiss on her neck. "Not right at this moment, no."

"I'll bet if it concerned your very close friend, Lieutenant Atherton, you'd be far more interested."

He snapped back and stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I only point out that the two of you tend to spend a lot of time together."

"She's a friend, nothing more."

Victoria turned her head away from him and folded her arms. "So you say," she muttered.

He sighed. "Am I not allowed friends anymore?"

"Of course you are," she said. "But think about this from my perspective. I've only joined less than a month, and she's known you for longer."

"A week at the most."

Victoria turned back to Greg and held his cheek in her hand. "We found something very special in less time, didn't we?"

He closed his eyes and leaned into her warm palm. "Yeah..."

"Is it far beyond all comprehension to jump to this conclusion?"

He shook his head to enjoy her affections further. "No..."

Victoria leaned in to kiss his lips tenderly. "You may think it foolish but can you see how I might be worried?"

"It's not foolish, and I'm sorry for not seeing it from where you're sitting," he said, with half-lidded eyes. "I've never really felt this way about anyone before. I may enjoy a lunch break with Abbie from time to time, but when my shift is done, all I want to do is be with you."

"Are you sure you're not just saying that because of our bedroom activities?"

Greg paused to consider that, and when she playfully slapped his shoulder, he chuckled softly. "I'm saying that because you're one of the few people on the ship... maybe even in the quadrant... that understands me. It makes me feel special. You make me feel special."

Victoria smiled though it did not reach her eyes. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"Why not?"

She gave him a startled look briefly and stammered, "B-Because you'll give me a giant ego."

Greg smiled widely. "Finish your drink, we'll go back to my quarters and I'll give you a giant something else."

"My, my..." Victoria said. "We are very *cocky* tonight, aren't we?"

He leaned in to kiss her neck once more and whispered, "You misunderstood. I only meant my heart."

She tried not to choke on her drink and set it down on the table quickly. Victoria laced her fingers tightly together until a dull ache formed to match the one inside her stomach. She closed her eyes and bit her lower lip as he continued to kiss down the line of her neck until she could take no more of his overt feelings.

Victoria grabbed his hand and rose from the padded bench suddenly. "I think we should adjourn to your quarters for dinner."

Greg pointed toward his half-finished drink. "I'm not done, yet."

Without saying another word to him, Victoria pulled Greg up to his feet and kissed him deeply. She almost tilted him back with the force of her conveyed passion. When they finally broke, he protested no further and the pair departed the lounge quickly.

Isira entered the hospital's garden, having been directed there by a friendly attendant. A noble lady from one of the Houses had originally commissioned the garden for the El'Tar Hospital several centuries ago and a statue of the generous woman was prominently displayed near the head of the path. Govan was looking up at the face of the memorial when his sister approached.

"I was just thinking of what I was doing when she donated this garden to the hospital," Govan mentioned. "If I'm remembering correctly, I was on assignment working with a team to reinvigorate the soil of a farming region which had experienced two seasons of blight. It was a particularly tricky problem." He smiled as he turned toward her. "I suppose I'm a bit charmed by the coincidence that we were both thinking of plants and healing at the same time."

Isira shook her head slightly. *It's so odd to hear something like that from my little brother. What was your name..or the name of the host at the time? I'm sorry, I'm not sure how to address you when you're referring to yourself at a time when you weren't even born.*

Indani. I think you would have liked her. She also didn't like to judge people. He gestured to the pathway to invite her with walk with him. *I needed to get out of the hospital for a moment. I have all this energy and sitting around has been grating to my nerves.*

Isira inclined her head to one side, picking up on something else in his mind as she began to move down the path. *That's not the only reason.*

Govan chuckled without humor. *Yes, that's not the only reason. I needed some air after talking to Chidesa. She does not intend to continue our relationship now that I've become joined.* Even though he could draw on hundreds of years of experience, the sting of a first break-up was still there.

I'm so sorry, Govan. I know you really liked her.

I did, he agreed. She is such a kind person. You can feel it through and through when you speak with her. But I understand her point of view. You have to be comfortable with whomever you decide to be emotionally or physically intimate. If she was no longer comfortable with me, with the thought that I will have known others and lived before, then it was the right decision. I'm not angry but I am sad. I will miss her.

Isira nodded. *But it has not changed your mind about remaining joined.*

Despite what has happened – Chidesa leaving me, Mother and Father being upset – I know this is the right course of action. I'm so excited to be joined, Isira. I have never been so young before, to have all of the choices of life in front of me. Just choosing a field or a profession will be a new experience. But to have those choices to make, it's very exciting!

You can see why everyone is so cautious, though. A Betazoid joined to a symbiont has never happened before. We just don't know if this is a sound medical decision. And you failed to mention that you lost your telepathic skills for a time too, she chided.

A couple of hours, he clarified pointedly. *Honestly, I was so caught up with the joining that I barely noticed.*

The stunning revelation aside that a Betazoid could lose his telepathy for any length of time without noticing, Isira plowed on diligently. *Your psilosynine levels were so low. When the neurotransmitter levels in a joined Trill drop to such levels, it indicates a rejection of the symbiont.*

And it doesn't self-correct the way it has been in me. My psilosynine levels have consistently risen since. At the last scan an hour ago, they were nearly normal. I'm sure it was a temporary reaction, Govan replied easily, pausing by a large muktok plant and smiling. *This must have been placed here when the garden was first planted. Look at its size.*

You don't know that. Isira changed the subject back to the problem at hand. *That's a supposition; don't pretend I can't tell the difference.* She physically turned him by his arm so that they were face to face.

Isira, please. You have to understand. You can feel that I am myself. I feel great, actually. You know or at least can feel that I'm not exaggerating.

Isira spent a moment regarding her little brother before nodding. *It's true. You feel like yourself, if somewhat ruder. You are more sure of yourself. Like the boundaries of your personality are more clearly defined. Your emotional state, however excited you are, isn't clouding your judgment either. I can see that you've thought about this decision and the consequences.*

I have. And I can be awfully rude sometimes. It's due to my age; I can get very ornery when people hide behind pretense. It's something I'm working on, I promise.

I'm sure you understand our concerns about your joint physical health, as well.

My biggest physical problem is that I'm starving all the time. I haven't eaten like this since I was pregnant!

Isira laughed at that. *You're still growing, much like a pregnancy is about growing a new person. I imagine they'd be quite similar.*

You're definitely right about, he acknowledged. *Has Andrus agreed to talk with me again?* As he asked, his cheeks seemed to redden.

Yes, he is going to join you for dinner. He just went for a run to calm himself down. Isira watched her brother carefully as his breathing grew a little faster. *Govan, are you all right?*

He nodded, replying, "Yes, I'm..." He exhaled and put a hand over his heart. "My heart's beating so fast," he admitted. As his knees began to buckle, he gave her a startled look. "Isira!"

She caught him before he could fall. "Someone, please help us!"

Act Three

Act Three

"I feel much better," Govan assured his parents. He was laying propped up on the biobed while they looked over him on one side. On the other was Andrus, who face mirrored their concern. Isira was standing by the foot of the bed but soon announced, "They're coming with the test results."

Doctor Nacsi and Derin entered the room a few moments later. "Feeling better, I see," she said. Although she gave Govan a comforting smile, the doctor got right to the point. "Good. I'm pleased to report that there is nothing wrong with you. You merely experienced a sympathetic reaction to a change in the symbiont – in Harli," she quickly corrected herself.

"A sympathetic reaction? Meaning Govan just felt ill because something Harli experienced?" Isira quickly asked. She could feel both her parents and her older brother relax significantly at these words.

Nacsi nodded, glancing at the Trill diplomat. "Exactly. It's related to why Govan temporarily lost his telepathic abilities earlier. In a joined Trill host, both the host and the symbiont produce the neurotransmitter isoboramine. That neurotransmitter is structurally and chemically similar to psilosynine. But where psilosynine is a dedicated chemical for telepathic ability, isoboramine is a more general neurotransmitter, particularly used in coordinating the function of internal organs and conscious motor control.

"When Govan and Harli were first joined, Harli's body recognized psilosynine as if it was isoboramine. But psilosynine is...stronger, for lack of a better word. His body immediately began to use psilosynine instead of isoboramine. Govan, on the other hand, was still producing the same amount at the time. As a result, his psilosynine was being redirected. However, Govan, being so young, immediately began to compensate by producing more psilosynine."

"Which is why I've been so hungry, especially for fruit," Govan interjected knowingly, his head falling back on his pillow.

Nacsi grinned. "Yes, exactly. Your body is naturally craving the metabolites necessary to produce more psilosynine. Your psilosynine levels are back to normal but your production level is quite high, nearly double the usual amount."

Andrus redirected the conversation. "So what was Harli experiencing that Govan reacted to?" he asked, to the obvious relief of the Trill diplomat.

"He was experiencing a change-over from primarily isoboramine to primarily psilosynine. Basically, his isoboramine levels are at less than 50% and dropping, but his psilosynine levels are rising in concert. They are inversely proportional," the doctor explained. With another look toward the Trill, she continued. "In fact, I believe that Harli is replacing one with the other completely and given his body's reaction to it, I believe that once the complete switch is made, it will be irreversible."

"Irreversible? As in a completed joining?" Derin asked in alarm.

"No." Although the Betazoids in the room had already understood her meaning, Nacsi clarified, "I'm saying that he will be unable to be hosted by a Trill ever again because he will have adapted to psilosynine permanently."

"It's so aggravating," Kincaid griped as he sat down to a dinner of beef tri-tips, potatoes and green beans at the table in his quarters. "We were just getting somewhere and then she has to go and leave me."

Abbie's chosen meal would have seemed a healthier alternative but for the size of the portion. She had a bowl of miso soup in front of her and no less than ten sushi rolls waiting to be eaten. "Leave you?" she emphasized with a grin. "Methinks you're not missing your counselor so much as you're missing your crush," she teased.

"Don't start with me, Abbie," Kincaid warned but not seriously.

"Are you kidding? And pass up a chance to needle you about liking someone? You've been celibate since Cynthia and you split up. Completely celibate. Just, utterly and completely..."

"All right, all right, I get it," Kincaid interrupted sourly.

Abbie gave him a triumphant grin and began to tuck into her meal in earnest. Once her mouth was full, Kincaid asked with an over-casual tone, "And just how are you getting along with Dorian these days? Has he proposed yet? Given you the career projections for your both, noting when it would most advantageous to have children?"

She continued to chew while he teased her, her eyes narrowing in consideration before taking a sip of tea and swallowing. "Really, lashing out at me with a guy in whom I have no romantic interest just because I'm happy you're looking at a woman with interest again is poor manners, Jess," she informed him haughtily. "If you can't take teasing from me, what are you going to do in a few years when Jacob's a teenager?"

"By the time he's a teenager, I'll be married with kids of my own," Kincaid predicted honestly.

"With Isira..." Abbie laughed when he threw his napkin at her. "All joking aside, I hope things are going okay with her. I don't know how someone gets misdiagnosed as dead, but I'm glad her brother is still alive. Must be a huge relief to her."

Kincaid pushed around some of the potatoes on his plate. "It was a relief to me, for her sake. I know they're pretty close. Same with her older brother. Have you ever heard of Lieutenant Colonel Andrus Otext?"

"I think so. Hank mentioned something about him once, a respected guy in the Marines," Abbie recalled briefly.

"I'm surprised you had a conversation with Hank," Kincard remarked with a snort.

Abbie rolled her eyes. "Listen, we never had a 'relationship' in the full sense of the word, but our arrangement was mutually agreeable and once in awhile, we managed to speak full sentences to each other. But you're right, conversation was not definitely not the point." She smirked, sitting back in her chair. "Anyway, you were saying about the colonel?"

Kincaid shook his head. "Anyway," he agreed. "So, obviously, the colonel is a Betazoid. But he goes into Tactical while at the Academy, not the usual major for a telepath. Then he goes into the Marines, racking up medals along the way. During the Tzenkethi War, his unit saw a lot of action but had lower casualty rates than average. He's got more than enough time and distinction to be a full Colonel but he's supposedly resisting the promotion to remain in the field long enough to train some more commanders. The man's going to be a General some day, and not too far in the future either, I think."

"Who...?"

"Estrada. He's a political animal. Also he ran into the colonel once, thinks well of him."

"Obviously. Isira never mentioned her brother is a war hero. But I'm not surprised. From what I gathered, he's just her brother to her, the guy she would turn to if she was upset or in trouble. The fact that he's a soldier has nothing to do with it."

"I'd love to ask her about him but it never seems appropriate to ask."

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind, but probably best to bring up your hero worship over drinks in Ten Forward rather than in session."

"Ha ha, Abbie."

With the remains of a meal, including a large serving a fruit for Govan, resting on the table in his room, he walked back over to the window and gazed out at the garden. *Mother, Father, thank you for allowing us all to have a meal as a family without discussing the situation. Now, I know you want to discuss my joining again, and as I promised, I'm ready to so once more.*

Karisa wasted little time. *Now that the doctor has confirmed that you're both in danger, won't you reconsider? This will mean the end of the symbiont's life, to tie it to yours.* Although her words seemed clear, everyone understood that she still believed her son's personality was being subsumed.

Isira shook her head. "Mother. Every scan, every conversation with the doctor confirms that neither Govan nor Harli is in control, that they are maintaining their own thoughts. And I will confirm it as well. Don't tell me you don't believe I can tell if I'm speaking Govan," she insisted.

Saben spoke up, after a long look at his wife. "Maybe that's true right now, but Govan is sixteen and the symbiont is over five hundred, having lead many lives. How long can he possibly hold out?"

"I would ask how you are so unaware of your own son, but I have lived with you too. The fact is that Goven is strong-minded, strong-willed and highly intelligent. Talking down to him, or worse, around him, isn't going to change his mind. Every time you say something, you only make it harder for the rest of us to talk to him," Andrus bit out.

The condemnation from their parents was striking, all but a physical blow. Before it could escalate further, Isira stepped in. *STOP.*

When she had all of their attention, Isira noted, "You've made your wishes well known, Mother and Father. I know you seem oblivious, because you disapprove of that way Andrus lives his life, but Govan thinks very highly of his opinion. When you insult him, Govan is less likely to respect your opinions." She turned to the sibling in question. "I know you've made a decision; would you care to share it with us?"

"I have been thinking about this since Doctor Nasci explained that Harli is in more danger than I am. But I have not changed my mind. Let me tell you why." Govan looked at Andrus. "Please, just hear me out."

The colonel motioned with his hand for the teen to get out with his explanation but he did not look happy about it.

Govan nodded his thanks. "I have had twelve previous hosts and this is one of the better joinings of my life. Perhaps it is because I already know what it is to converse and collaborate with another mind. Perhaps it is just because our personalities really are suited to each other.

"I'm quite old, as you've pointed out a few times," he continued wryly. "I've experienced a great many things and lived many tremendous lives. As long as it is my life that I am risking, I do not mind if this is my last lifetime. Most symbionts who choose to be joined die with a host anyway; the host dies suddenly and there is no way to save the symbiont in time. I could not ask for a finer host, or to die with someone, than this one.

"And before you say that I don't know what that is," Govan addressed these remarks to Andrus. "I now have a finer appreciation of what it means to die than you. I have felt what it is to die. I have died violently, and peacefully, and either way, death isn't something I would seek out. These risks are just the same part of living that every sentient creature must face."

"We don't know how dangerous this is in the long run, what complications may arise," Andrus pointed out.

"No one really know how long they have left, Andrus. Whatever time I have remaining, that will be enough for me. I know it's not what you want to hear, but this is the life I choose to lead."

Shima was a Guardian, a vaunted person on Trill with many years experience and a high opinion of her abilities, but Isira noted with some

surprise that she dressed plainly and arrived without fanfare. She was only accompanied by Derin and a young Trill woman with auburn hair and a sunny disposition.

The Guardian walked into the room without an announcement and immediately went over to where Govan was seated on the biobed. "I must be with Harli and his temporary host alone. I have received all of the medical information and will review it after I examine the joining," she declared. "You must all leave now."

"Absolutely not!" Karisa cried. "I'm not going to leave him here with someone else so that symbiont can get a sympathetic audience!"

"It's fine with me," Govan answered with a shrug. "As a joined pair, I'm going to have to interact with the Commission anyway. And sooner we get this over with, the better."

"Since the Trill aren't exactly excited to approve this joining, Mother, there's no way they're going to skew the results in favor of them remaining joined," Isira noted.

"Exactly. There's no harm to it and there may be a benefit. As long as Govan doesn't mind yet another person having access to his records, there's no point in standing in the way of this examination," Andrus pointed out.

"I'll be fine, Mother," Govan added reassuringly. "I've spoken with Guardians before."

Karisa reluctantly consented and swept from the room with her husband in tow. Andrus, Isira and the two Trill also followed them until they all stood uneasily in the corridor. After a half minute, Isira broke the silence.

"I think it's best if we all find somewhere more comfortable to wait. I'm going to the cafeteria myself. I could use a cup of tea," she announced.

"I need to check in with my regiment," Andrus replied. "I'll meet you down there when I'm done." He didn't wait for a reply before summarily leaving.

"I think I'll join you, if I may," the young woman answered. "I could use a snack."

"I will wait," Derin announced haughtily.

"So will we," Karisa immediately replied with a glare.

Isira shook her head and then gave the Trill woman a smile. "Shall we?"

Act Four

Act Four

During the walk to the cafeteria, Isira and the woman, who she found out was named Arazia Notan, exchanged general pleasantries. It was only when they sat down at the table that Isira turned to the conversation to why they were both at the hospital.

"So you are the person they have chosen to be joined with Harli?" Isira asked. "Please forgive me if my question is too blunt; I'm still not sure of all the protocols."

"That's all right," Arazia replied, again smiling. "It's not like you don't have an idea of what being joined is all about now." She took a sip of her own tea and then continued, "But to answer your question, yes. It's quite an honor to be chosen at all, but for a symbiont as old and accomplished as Harli, I can hardly believe my luck."

"Accomplished?"

"Oh yes. Harli has been a doctor, a soldier, a mathematician and environmental engineer...and those are just the lives of four of his hosts. He was with some of the first long-term exploratory missions for Trill. He's seen so much and to be a part of his history and future is really...." She shook her head and gave a little laugh. "I'm sorry, I can't quite put it into words."

"That's quite all right. I think I know what you meant," Isira replied with a smile of her own. "Were you chosen specifically for Harli or does it just happen to be you were next person in line to receive a symbiont? I'm not sure how it works."

"I was chosen out of those who had been approved to be joined. Harli's hosts are usually scientists of some kind. They are smart and curious, interested in finding out more about their world and the universe. I'm an astrophysicist and I'm hoping to join a scientific mission researching more about spatial phenomena."

"I almost hate to say it, but that sounds very like my brother. I know he's a bit young, but he's about to finish his degree in xenobiology. Before this all happened, he was looking at doing some post graduate work offworld."

"I don't think they would want to stay joined if they didn't like each other," Arazia allowed.

"What if they stay joined? What will happen to you?"

Arazia gave a half-shrug. "They'll match me with someone else. I can't say that I wouldn't be a little disappointed but it's the symbiont's choice to be joined as much as it's mine. I wouldn't be a very good candidate for joining if I didn't take their feelings into account."

"I suppose that's really what's hard for my parents. The only feelings that matter are their own because they think no one can know their child as they do."

"Well, having been with your brother for nearly two days now, I can say that Harli knows him better than they ever will."

"You don't know how true that is," Isira admitted.

Lieutenant Waltham checked to see if she was being followed as she entered the small access room near *Farragut's* secondary subspace transceiver. Her hands slipped over the side of the smooth console nearest the door and found the small panel that allowed her to reach into the various components that comprised of the control systems.

She reached into small side pocket of her uniform pants, near the belt-line. A small circular device appeared briefly before she placed it inside the console and accessed the controls.

The computer's familiar chirp sounded and the feminine voice announced, "Hardcode override in place. Alpha access granted. Code forty-seven transmission in progress; please stand by."

A portion of the console blinked and resolved again to show a five-inch transmission cover screen of the Starfleet arrowhead. A man with black hair and a large scar crossing from his forehead down to his right jaw appeared. His upper shoulders showed a matte black cloth shirt with no rank insignia or other identifying marks. "Report," he said in a husky and gravelly bass voice.

"Status unchanged," she replied in her accented voice. "I continue to maintain ready position here on *Farragut* until the arranged time."

"Good," said the man with a quick nod. "How is the crew treating you?"

"I'm managed to blend in with the crew fairly well and have executed standard operating procedure with one of the bridge crew." Even as she said it, her tone faltered slightly.

"Very good. I presume that he or she is very happy with that arrangement?"

Waltham said nothing and indicated positively with a quick nod.

He picked up on it. "Problem?"

"No problem."

He scrutinized her closely. "You're sure?"

She sighed. "I'm a little concerned about the participant."

"Your last report didn't indicate any concern."

"I wasn't expecting it to proceed this quickly, and I grow concerned that this may have political implications."

"Because he's the son of a vice admiral?" He scoffed. "We can take care of that."

"That won't be necessary," she said quickly. "I have the situation well in-hand, I'm just foreseeing some emotional fallout."

With a laugh, he leaned back. "Is that all? You're getting soft."

Waltham looked down at the deck. "This is different. I'm on a ship where three of Starfleet's top admirals are indirectly involved. If it should go south..."

"Are you saying that the mission will fail?" he asked pointedly.

"Negative. Mission outcome continues to be well inside the expected outcome."

He shook his head. "Then your concerns are invalidated. Proceed with your mission as indicated and report any anomalies to me immediately. If you find that you have been compromised in any way, execute escape protocol alpha-three and await further instructions."

Waltham stiffened at the tone he took with her. "Acknowledged." The screen blanked and restored the transceiver controls to normal. She reached inside the console and dislodged the device in order to return it to her person.

Just as she did when entering, she slipped out unnoticed into the corridor and eventually rejoined the other officers and enlisted walking the decks of *Farragut*.

When Isira, Andrus and Arazia returned to the corridor outside of Govan's room, they ran into another argument between Derin and the Otexes.

"The Guardian will only do what's best for the symbiont and whatever her decision is, we will abide by it!" Derin was shouting, as if that made his point more valid.

"Govan is a Betazoid citizen and we will not allow him to be bullied by Trill diplomats or Guardians or anyone else! You don't have any authority here!"

"Harli is a citizen of Trill and no Betazoid child of whatever age is going to prevent my government from seeing to his best interests!"

"Mother, Derin...please," Isira tried to interject while Arazia went to try and calm the diplomat.

"No, I've had enough! Govan is my child, our child and a minor. We, as his parents and legal guardians have total legal authority and we will use it! This joining farce is over and that thing will come out of his body," Karisa declared before storming away with her husband.

Act Five

Act Five

The Betazed courtroom was a formal affair, with the banners of the government prominently displayed on the wall behind a dias and a large desk. Seated just behind it was a middle-aged woman with blonde hair and a careworn face. She surveyed the parties in front of her, each seated at their own tables: the Otexes sat together at one, while the Trill diplomat had another and Govan, Isira and Andrus sat at a third.

"As a courtesy to the Trill diplomat and for the recording being made for our Trill allies, these proceedings will be conducted orally. There is to be no telepathic communication between the petitioner, the respondents and myself. Any violation of this will be met with the party being found in contempt of court," the magistrate announced preliminarily.

"I have read the petition, the response and the brief of the Trill government as intervenor in the matter of the custody of the minor child, Govan Otex, a male of sixteen years. I have also reviewed the report of Doctor Nasci and it has been entered into evidence in lieu of her testimony here today. I will call each of you in turn to speak and I expect to receive testimony from the Trill Guardian as well. It is my understanding that she will appear as soon as she has made a determination.

"Before I hear from the petitioner, I would first like to hear from the people he has identified as his new legal guardians, Isira and Andrus Otex." The magistrate looked at the Starfleet officers expectantly.

Andrus nodded to his sister, deferring to her and she stood after a moment. "My brother Andrus and I have discussed Govan's request at length. At first, we were very concerned about the effect on his health, to host an alien organism within his body. We worried about the effects of such an old personality on his own. We even argued of whether either of us was capable of seeing this situation clearly, because Govan is our brother and we care for him so much." She couldn't help but smile at her brother at this but soon turned her attention back to the judge. "In the end, though, we could not deny what scans and our own hearts were telling us; Govan is as he always was, a bright young man who only wants to learn more and satisfy his intellectual curiosity. If it is his wish to remain joined, and that of Harli as well, we agree that it is the right course. If this court awards us custody, we will make arrangements with Starfleet to serve in positions that allow us to have physical custody of a minor."

"I see. Thank you, Counselor," the magistrate replied, motioning for Isira to retake her seat and then making a note on the PADD in front of her. She opened her mouth to call the next witness when the door to the room opened and the Trill Guardian entered.

"Guardian," the judge acknowledged the woman's presence. "Are you ready to present your findings?"

Shima nodded and went to stand in front of Derin's table. Her anxiety was apparent to all and her voice trembled slightly as she spoke. "The joining of the symbiont Harli and the Betazoid Govan Otex is a good joining. I have seen no sign of undue influence of Harli on Govan, even though Govan is much younger than a typical hosting candidate. I see that if Govan had been older, somewhat more accomplished and of course, Trill, he would have likely made an excellent candidate for one such as Harli. Even though this joining is mentally healthy, I would still make the recommendation that Harli be removed and placed into a Trill host immediately. Unfortunately, it is already too late. Harli has adapted far too quickly to the neurotransmitter psilosynine and I think there is far too much risk in trying to remove him at this point even though 93 hours have not yet elapsed. He is no longer producing isoboramine and is completely dependent on Govan to survive. My opinion is that they remain joined and that Govan Harli be noted as a dual citizen of Betazed and Trill."

Shima turned to look at Derin meaningful and he quickly gave a short nod of his head. "If the surgery would be an undue risk to the symbiont Harli, the Trill government withdraws its objection to the petition as it is their wish and that of the Symbiosis Commission that the pair remain joined," he reluctantly announced. "We would also like to extend citizenship to Govan Harli," he affirmed the Guardian's words.

The magistrate raised a brow but said nothing as she made a note on the change in the stance of the Trill delegation. Turning to the Otexes, she inquired, "Now that both the Trill and your children are in favor of the pair remaining joined, and now that the life of the symbiont is likely to be endangered by a removal, would you care to amend your response?"

Karisa and Saben looked at each other and after a moment's silent conversation, also nodded. "We will," Saben announced for them both, as Karisa clearly too emotional to speak. "We never wished harm to the symbiont and we would not want anyone's death on our hands. Our son choose to save a life and we will honor that choice and not insist they be separated."

"If that is their stance, I withdraw my petition for a change of guardianship," Govan announced.

"With the petition withdrawn, this matter is discontinued and dismissed," the magistrate announced before fixing the teenager with a sympathetic look. "Be well, Govan Harli."

Isira sat in the garden of the family home on a small stone bench, Govan by her side while Andrus chose to lean against a nearby tree. Isira had Govan's hands in her own.

"Contact us if you need anything. I know Mother and Father are still having some trouble adjusting to all of this," she told him earnestly.

"We're already scheduled to see a counselor, Counselor," Govan assured her. "And a Trill doctor who arrived just to monitor me. We've also set up a testing schedule so we can try to determine the long term effects of the joining on both of us, so I'll be pretty well looked after, regardless. Besides, if our parents get to be too much, I can always run away to Trill, now that I have dual citizenship," he joked.

"All kidding aside," Andrus broke in. "What are you going to do now?"

"I thought I'd finish my degree here, first. Then probably go to Trill for a short while. I may apply to the Trill Science Ministry, but the

Commission is going to want to have a Guardian look over me in a year's time anyway. Long term, though, I was thinking about applying to Starfleet. It was something I was considering anyway, to try and join the exploratory fleet. I always wanted to explore and well, it's been a long time since I did that."

"Well, if you need a recommendation..." Andrus mock-grumbled as he straightened up and walked over to embrace his brother.

"I know who to call," Govan assured him before giving Isira a hug as well. "You two keep in touch, please."

"When have we ever not done so? Nothing will change now," Isira assured him. "You might have a lot more experience than us both now, but you're still our little brother. Harli could be a thousand years old, and it wouldn't change a thing."

"I know. I'll be in touch at some point in the future too for you to join me for a ritual called the *zhian'tara*. I won't go into the details now, but I'll want you both to be there whenever I get around to doing that." Govan gave them a hapless smile. "The Guardian told me before she left that it's required for joined pairs."

"Something to look forward to," Isira told him, even though Andrus looked doubtful.

"Either way, we'll speak soon," Govan acknowledged. He gave them each another quick hug then shooed them down the path. "Safe journeys."

When they were safely out the range of his hearing, Andrus asked, *Do you really think he's going to be okay with the memories of 500 years inside of him?*

I do, Isira replied. I'm more concerned with our parents than I am with Govan. So I'm going to make a request to Personnel that I might need to be transferred at some point to a posting that will enable me to have family members with me.

You will? Why not me?

Isira grinned up at her big brother. *Because if anyone is going to be able to deal with someone with 500 years worth of memories, it's a trained counselor.*

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