

## quantum variations on a love theme

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## quantum variations on a love theme

by [ussjellyfish](#)

### Summary

Michael Burnham and Laira Rillak are on a shuttle to a resource allocation negotiation when they pass through a quantum anomaly and shift realities.

Somehow they're in a strange, soft universe where they seem to be in vacation, together. Which is impossible, they're not even friends.

When they accidentally bring something unintentional home with them, everything shifts.

### Notes

originally posted on archive of our own in 2022. It's set after season 4 but season 4 hadn't finished airing when I started posting. It's canon compatible.

## Chapter Summary

Laira and Michael encounter an unusual phenomena while in a shuttle together.

*Laira*

Light envelops them, and the shuttle, crackling around her and seeping into her skin. It's not an ion storm, she knows that, not a cosmic string or anything she's ever run into. For a heartbeat, her skin's electric, then not hers, then is hers again, but now she's sitting next to Michael Burnham in the dark, in a shuttle as still as the stars.

"What happened?"

"Some kind of energy field." Michael's hands fly over the controls, but none of them respond. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She's a little dizzy, but energy just rushed over them both, of course it's disconcerting. It'll pass.

Michael's hand flies to a badge that isn't there. She frowns and Laira reaches for her own. It's also gone, and the fabric beneath her hand is much softer than the jacket she was wearing.

"What happened to our clothes?"

"I don't know." Michael's hair is different, pulled back, braids wrapped into another braid. It was down. "Your hair's down."

Laira didn't even feel it, but she reaches up, and her hair's loose on her shoulders. She hasn't had it down in public in such a long time. A shuttle really isn't public, but Michael's here and they're not friends. This wasn't a vacation— Her train of thought slips because her nose itches, and it's the strangest sensation, like it's crawling upwards into her skull.

"Why would an anomaly change our clothing?"

Michael leaves her chair, pulling panels off the console. "Could be temporal, maybe quantum? I've changed universes before, but we kept the same clothing."

Laira watches her, hands in her lap. Starfleet hates it when anyone touches their ships without being asked; she has to let Michael fix it. "We're in a new universe?"

"No, I don't think so, but without sensors there's no way to tell."

"Are we all right?"

"Yeah, shuttle just needs-" Michael pulls something, switches something else and the lights in her console flick back on. "Programmable matter interfaces depend on quantum states, so a quantum rift fries everything, we'll have to reset all of the interfaces, then we can restart the engines."

The shuttle's big enough that they should have plenty of air, though it might get a little cool. She'll hate that more than Michael, especially with the way her sweater slides off her shoulder.

"You look good in purple," Michael teases from the floor.

"Thank you." Laira stands, but catches the edge of the console when her head spins.

"You sure you're okay?"

"I'm a little lightheaded, I- It's fine."

Michael pauses, but doesn't argue with her yet.

"Do you know how to reverse a matter state control crystal?"

"Is that like a particle manipulation array?" She slips down to the floor beside Michael, and it's much better than standing. "I remember when we got programmable matter on my father's fleet and had to change all of them."

"The crystals are blue," Michael starts, hands deep in the console. "Which doesn't help in the dark, but their endothermic capabilities mean they always feel cool. You pull it out, rotate it 180 degrees and it should snap back in."

"That repolarizes them?"

"It literally trades one pole for another. It's one of this century's most practical designs." Michael tilts her head towards a panel. "If you start there, you should find three."

The panel clicks open, and Laura sets it aside, shifting on her knees to get a better angle. "So I just reach in?"

"I count junctions, they're raised so they're easy to feel, then you want the—"

"The coolest crystal."

"Exactly." Michael smiles at her. "It shouldn't take that long. We won't be late for negotiations."

"I can't be late, they start when I get there." Laura concentrates on her fingers, trying to find the crystal Michael's talking about. She tugs something cool and it slips free. Her sense of accomplishment is short lived, because she sneezes, nearly dropping the crystal.

Michael starts to ask if she's all right, and Laura sneezes again, then a third time. Burying her face in the elbow of her sweater, she tries to nod so Michael won't worry but sneezing takes her whole body.

"I know the shuttle's not dusty," Michael says, tilting her head. "Do you have allergies?"

"No, I—" She sneezes again, has time to catch her breath, and then sneezes again, eyes damp.

"Did you look at a bright light?"

"What?"

"Humans have a photic sneeze reflex, it's an autosomal dominant trait. I have it, and I remember my father explaining how dominant traits work because my mother doesn't have it."

"Genetics at the dinner table?"

"It was a picnic, actually, really bright on that beach."

Picturing Michael and her parents on a picnic, Laura can hear them talking about advanced genetics while tiny Michael devours all the information they can share with her. It suits Michael to have had a childhood full of so much learning.

"That sounds—" she sneezes again, tears clinging hot to her eyelashes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, ma'am."

She can't catch her breath enough to insist that she's fine, or do anything at all. Laura's lost count of how many times she's sneezed, and her head spins a little. Not being able to keep her eyes open is disconcerting, and when she stands, she touches the wall of the shuttle, bracing herself before she sneezes twice more.

Michael pulls her arm out of the console and tilts her head. "The med kit's behind that panel."

"I'm sure it's just a side effect of the anomaly."

Laura doesn't move towards the med kit and Michael doesn't stand up. For a moment they share the silence. Laura half-expects some kind of nasty headache to follow the sneezing fit, but she doesn't seem to be ill, not like that, anyway. She's tired, but that's almost a normal state for her. Taking a few hours in a shuttle, even with - savior of the galaxy - Michael Burnham, is the closest to down time she's had in quite a while.

"Sudden attacks of sneezing aren't a common side effect of inter-universal travel.

"Perhaps I'm uncommon."

Michael shakes her head. "You certainly are, madam president."

Trying to control her breathing stalls one sneeze in her throat, but two more follow as she sits down with Michael again.

"Ma'am—"

"Sneezing's hardly life threatening, Captain."

Holding up her free hand, Michael nods, surrendering. "Got it."

When Laura can force herself to concentrate, there's a pleasant rhythm in repolarizing the crystals to repair the shuttle's interface panels. It's calming to do something simple with her hands. Two more panels and they should have most of the systems back online, if she remembers her shuttle schematics properly. Shutting her eyes, Laura rests her head on her knees, centering herself is about as useful as trying to fly through a dark matter nebula with no sensors. Her sensors are scrambled, and she doesn't know how to fix it, if it even can be fixed.

Sneezing again into her knees, Laura sighs, then rubs her forehead. She can't narrow down what it is or why she feels out of sorts, but since the flash something's wrong, different, and it's not something that changed for Michael. Michael's wearing different clothes, but she seems to be the same.

Michael touches her hand, gently seeking her attention. When she looks up, Michael holds out one of the water rations. "Do you know

that sneezing has a physiological effect similar to orgasm?"

"Really?" Laura grins. That's unexpected. Michael must be trying to cheer her up, and it's appreciated. Who knew she was funny?

"Changes in blood pressure, diversion of blood flow; the building of pressure for an involuntary release." Michael sips her own water. "Maybe you're lucky you're not going through that."

"I think one of them is distinctly more pleasant."

Michael smirks, and nods. Her eyes still soft with sympathy. "I feel like me, my hair's a little different, and maybe I'm less tense, but I don't want to sneeze."

"How fortunate for you."

The med kit's waits beneath the panel next to this one, waiting for Laura to agree, but Michael isn't pushing. Laura could grab it, she could ask Michael to take it out, but that feels wrong, somehow. There's something in the back of her mind she doesn't want to shine light on.

"What could the rift have done to us?"

"Hard to tell without sensors, but—"

"Your best guess will do, Captain."

"The structure of the shuttle isn't damaged, so it's some kind of energy field, not ionic, not radiation, or both of us would be much worse off. The matter state control crystals have been depolarized, so it's quantum in nature. When we traveled to the Terran universe, it took much more energy, and the spore drive, so this might be a localized quantum event of some kind."

"Which would mean?"

"A much more minor change in timeline. You and I going on the mission to Caldos on a different day, or belonging to a Federation that doesn't have as much of a dress code." Michael tilts her head at Laura's sweater, then touches her own orange sweater. "I have a sweater similar to this one, I got it from the artisans square on Ni'Var. Traditional Romulan knitting has these intricate patterns, and I recognize the stitching."

"You have that sweater?"

"I have one very similar, but, and forgive me for saying it, Madam President, I wouldn't wear it on a trip with you."

"Too unprofessional."

"It wouldn't be appropriate."

Laura nods, closing her eyes tight to try and prevent herself from sneezing again. "This sweater is definitely something I would not wear on an official mission."

"So perhaps we're on a different trip together."

"We barely know each other."

"In this timeline, perhaps that's not the case."

Pulling her knees in, she tries to imagine a universe where she would go on a pleasure trip with Michael. Are they meeting someone? Laura can fly herself in a shuttle - though she often does not - being president requires a certain amount of redundancies at all times.

"It would not be protocol for me to take any kind of trip alone, assuming I'm still president in this universe."

"It's a Starfleet shuttle, so maybe I'm the president and you're the captain of a starship." Michael's smile is so sincere that she has to smile back. "Maybe you should call me ma'am, captain."

Laura shakes her head, waving that off. "We're out of uniform, the protocol isn't necessary for me." It takes her a moment to form the next thought, and saying it feels like opening something she's not quite ready to face. "You feel normal?"

"I feel like me."

It goes unsaid that Laura's existence is off. Her head's foggy, her sinuses tingle, her skin's somehow too tight around her chest, and when she pulls her knees closer, her breasts ache. Why would her breasts ache? Has she been in an accident, or hit herself against the console? The shuttle did buck, it's just—

Sneezing once, and again, Laura remembers one of her neighbors laughing as she sneezed in the garden. Orjale had been so happy that summer, sneezing her way through the harvest before her son was born. Bajoran women sneeze when they're pregnant. Laura's own mother had joked about how Laura had made her presence known like a bad cold. Could this timeline be that different? Not just the clothes and the idea of time off, but—

She put this thought aside. Shelved the very idea of even contemplating such a thing. She had the Federation to run, and that was her family, her legacy; the reason she woke up at night.

She couldn't have a baby, the presidency was far too important, too demanding, she'd made her choice when she decided to run. Laura had

set aside the idea of children, for now, for awhile, for the rest of her life — nothing was ever certain.

Had this her made another choice? Was that why she was on some kind of trip? How pregnant could she be? There are no signs of—

Her breasts itch. Her skin's not hers and she can't stop sneezing. She's - no - she can't be - that's not - she wouldn't —

But she's never felt like this, never had any kind of infection that made her sneeze this much, or been anywhere this dusty. This is wrong and new, and she has no idea how to handle it.

And Michael's fine.

Perfect Michael Burnham is absolutely fine in her orange sweater with her braids wrapped together down her back.

The elimination of all other possibilities takes moments, and the truth of it settles hard in her stomach.

Is it even possible?

"What else could be different from our timeline?"

"Hmm?" Michael replaces another panel and thinks for a moment. "Little things. Where you flew your shuttles, when we met. Perhaps in this timeline I crashed into your ship instead of Book's, or there was no DMA, so we met under other circumstances. If we're traveling together without badges, it's something outside of Starfleet, e're off duty, or it's something very classified." Michael pauses, runs her hands over the panels and the shuttle obediently starts to come to life again. "Maybe our badges are in the back of the shuttle."

Michael tilts her head at the shuttle. "The computers chronometrics are fried so it'll need awhile to complete autonomous repairs."

'So our flash of light was time?" In this timeline she- Laira can't even think about it without her chest getting tight.

"It looks that way." Michael sits down next to her. Not too close, but enough to be friendly. Are they friendly now?

"So we could have made different choices here."

"Or had different choices." Michael rests her hands on her knees and looks ahead, watching the lights on the programmable matter interface start to come on.

Laira's never seen a Starfleet shuttle come on so slowly. Maybe time's slowed down as much as her thoughts, because they're swirling around the black hole that she can't name. She wanted this so badly, just months ago she almost let herself have it. Explaining the Burn, finally, meant peace, having enough dilithium meant stability, she could—

"Did I ever tell you why I ran for president?"

"Maybe you did in this nice sweater timeline."

"Is that what you're calling it?"

"The sweater universe is much less intimidating than mirror."

Laira smiles, surprised. Michael meant to be funny. She's trying to make her smile, and it's the kindest thing anyone done in a long time. Her stomach keeps twisting and it's more than anxiety. It's as if knowing brought it on, and the more she thinks about it the worse it gets. Laira can hide much, she's very practiced, but her face can never hide an illness of any kind. Her skin's too delicate.

"I think I made a significant choice differently in the sweater universe.

"You're not president?"

"This sweater is the least presidential thing I have "

Michael touches her arm, feeling the lilac knit. "Not Romulan."

"Bajoran. Geometric designs have been culturally favored for centuries."

"Like your bracelet." Michael points to her wrist. "It's beautiful."

"This style is from my grandfather's province, the interconnected links represent the chain of lakes that the farms depend on."

"Agriculture has always been important there?"

"Bajor grows like no other planet."

Michael turns her head, meeting her eyes. "You grew up there?"

Laira starts to nod but moving her head makes her stomach churn, so she winces and holds very still. "Before the Burn growing food was a point of pride. Afterwards, it was a necessity. Cardassia had so little agriculture, so many people lived in starbases or on colonies that needed their replicators."

"And their anti-matter reactors."

"My grandfather grew food, my father's fleet sent it all over the sector."

"At sublight?"

"With solar sails and the right currents, you could get it down to three years. We tried to save the dilithium for emergencies."

Opening her eyes wide, Michael shakes her head. "I can't imagine."

"Your galaxy was full of dilithium." Their eyes meet and Michael's are so warm and concerned. They barely know each other, yet Michael's so caring.

"We warped everywhere."

"Then you got a spore drive."

"It didn't work, at first. Stamets really deserves the credit."

"For illegal genetic manipulation."

"Maybe you'd pardon him."

"It was 900 years ago, not my jurisdiction."

Michael chuckles. "Thanks."

"Any time." Laira lowers her head, but that makes her nausea worse, so she lifts it again. "I think I know a choice I made differently in this sweater timeline."

"Not just in outfit?"

"No, I—" Laira takes a breath, tries to focus on the motionless stars outside the shuttle. "I was an ambassador before I ran for president."

"Oh no," Michael lifts her hand, "I believe 'the Federation's top ambassador, one of the most effective in the last several centuries' have been said, multiple times, by multiple people. Vance says you *are* the Federation."

"As president—"

"You know, we watched the debates when you were running, my crew and I cheered for you."

"What?" Laira turns her head, regretting it immediately. Nausea rises hot in her throat.

"We put them on in the shuttlebay, watched you debate your opponent. I think all of us voted for you."

"Thanks."

"Compared to where we left, everyone was so closed off, worn down by the Burn, when you got up there, you talked about hope. We needed that."

"You don't hate politics."

"I do—"

Chuckling makes her nausea fade for a moment. "Sure."

"Do you think you're not president here?"

"Maybe not."

"You would have chosen not to run?"

"If President Aramin hadn't stepped down, I would have remained an ambassador, happily."

Michael's smile has a hint of reservation that Laira can't place.

"I wanted—" Laira begins, and stops, again. Thinking about it, trying to find words for it, makes her nausea surge upward like an unshielded reactor. "I'd been ambassador for twenty years, I'm good at it, it's an incredible job, but—"

"You wanted more."

"I could have done more."

Michael reaches over, taking her hand. Her fingers are so warm and sure that Laira misses what she says.

"Hmm?"

"I said that sense of duty is a lot, isn't it?"

"There's so much we have to do."

Michael nods, squeezing her fingers. "What else did you find to do in this universe?"

Heat rushes to her face. Laira's not sure if she's embarrassed, about to throw up, or both. "I think - here in this timeline - this body - I'm pregnant."

Michael swallows, and her grip on Laira's hand tightens. She turns, leaving Laira's side to kneel in front of her, looking at her face. Michael extends her other hand, offering support.

"The switch is likely temporary, hours, days at most. All the recorded instances of changing timelines were brief, without lasting changes."

"Don't fuck it up?"

"Don't panic."

"I'm not—"

Michael holds her hands, constant. "The sneezing is a sign?"

"Bajorans sneeze their way through their pregnancies."

"Beats nausea."

Laira shuts her eyes. Michael's right, sneezing is much better than nausea but suspecting seems to have brought out her human side.

"You have that too."

Humming her agreement, Laira presses her lips together. Think about something, anything but the churning of her stomach.. "I thought about - I wanted - before the election. It's lonely, traveling, always visiting the homes of others, asking them to join you, but I was never home, I—"

"You wanted someone."

"I wanted someone."

Leaning in, Michael touches her forehead to Laira's. "In this timeline, you found them."

"I think—"

"Breathe."

"I knew - I mean - I've heard, Ronia said she was sick when she was pregnant."

"Admiral Vance's wife?"

Laira swallows instead of nodding. Pulling her hand, and Michael's, to her mouth, she tries to keep herself still, but something's wrong. Her stomach's all wrong. "Michael—"

Meeting her eyes, Michael takes a moment. Releasing Laira's hands, she guides her up, walks her back.

"If you're going to throw up, might as well be in the right place."

The refresher is small, and the walls are close. It's almost a dance to get Laira kneeling in front of the toilet, Michael beside her.

"Slow breaths."

"I haven't been nauseated since--" Laira can barely remember. They lost gyroscopic stabilizers once, and the entire ship pitched and limped its way to port. She didn't vomit then, and now the back of her throat stings, but it's not as sharp as she remembers.

Is there something different about being pregnant? Does it--

Her stomach twists, forcing her chest up, and it's far worse than the sneezing. Michael's hand fly to her hair, keeping it out of the way. Her mother did that, when she was a child. Laira remembers vomiting in the dirt when she was small. One of those little bugs children get.

The shuttle refresher has a soft blue light and without the hum of the engines it's very quiet, just Michael's gentle whispers that's she's all right.

And Laira is, oddly. Does her body remember even if she does not? Is she happy to be pregnant? Relieved that she'll be leaving this behind? She wipes her mouth, but it starts again, shaking her whole body. Sweat beads up on her skin, even her soft sweater seems too constricting.

"It's all right," Michael whispers. Her hands are constant and steady.

Like the sneezing, this comes in waves, hot and overwhelming. Tears cling to her eyelashes, cooling on her cheek. Time softens, shifting like her vision. She wanted this, and this her has it. This Laira wears sweaters without her badge and flies across the galaxy with Michael Burnham.

Is she an escort?

A friend?

Laira's forgotten how it felt having friends this close. Michael's hands are on her neck, in her hair. Michael's breath is steady when hers is not. Michael holds her head in her lap when Laira's stomach is empty, but her body objects .

She should hate this. She ought to care that perfect Captain Burnham's rubbing her neck, and that the thigh beneath her head is hers.

No one's held her since—

That aches more than the heaving of her chest, and the burn in her throat.

"Guess that's why you have an escort."

Does this keep happening? Did Michael agree to travel with her because Laira can hardly run the autopilot from the refresher floor?

Michael's left hand rests on her shoulder while she strokes her hair with her right. The minute shift in the vibration of the deck is the engines returning to power.

It's calming.

Almost as nice as way Michael touches her cheek. Safety has been fleeting since her family died, following each other, one at a time until all Laira had was their memory, and all she could do was try to make things more stable.

Keep everyone else's family intact, even when hers is gone.

Shutting her eyes, Laira remembers her mother laughing, her father kissing her forehead; her grandparents holding her tight.

The warmth of them has been gone a very long time. She tries not to miss it. To be strong and capable and be the light for others.

She can bring warmth into the Federation; she remembers what it feels like.

The heat of Michael's hand on her forehead is sharp, slicing through the scar tissue over the memory.

This is safe.

This is what it felt like.

Laira cups her belly with her hand, not at her stomach, but lower, beneath her navel. This child is loved, like she was. This version of Laira must be glowing with affection; overcome with joy.

And nausea, and sneezing and--

"I think I know what of type of rift this is."

Laira waits, moving at all seems like tempting fate too strongly.

"It's a rift called a quantum fissure, very localized, short range. We must have opened it with the warp engines of the shuttle, but it'll close again. " Michael pauses for Laira's unasked question. "I can't know for sure without checking the sensors, but if it's like the others in the historical records, our quantum signatures will tug us back, like magnets."

"Back?"

"To our own timeline."

This will be gone: the baby she never let herself want - let alone have - goes back to being part of some other life.

Where she wears sweaters.

Where she goes on shuttle journeys with Michael Burnham.

Where she--

Coughing hides her shock, somewhat. Her body's a mess, lightheaded, nauseated, and just thinking about sneezing is almost enough to make her sneeze again.

But there's a baby. This her gets a baby - a future - a tiny selfish thing in a galaxy of duty and responsibility. Laira's eyes sting. She blinks, clears her throat, but lifting her head is a mistake followed by a wave of nausea.

There's nothing left to throw up, but moving is beyond her abilities.

"I'm going to get the med kit." Michael trades her lap for a towel, placing it under Laira's head with the same care as if she were moving dilithium. Michael strokes her forehead again. "Don't move."





Michael and Laira try to figure out what their lives are like in the alternate timeline they've found. Who is the baby's other parent? Why does Laira have a Bajoran betrothal earring?

### *Laira*

Shutting her eyes keeps the shuttle from spinning, but Laira would trade this, in an instant, for the meetings.

She can't.

She chose the Federation: stability, peace for everyone, not her own wants.

Laira didn't know it felt this way to be pregnant. She had no idea how much she could feel for a hypothetical being who isn't part of her life.

That she doesn't— She wants this, nausea and all, and that realization stings enough to keep her eyes closed.

Michael signals her return by touching her cheek. Water comes next, gently offered from another emergency ration pouch. Even Laira's sense of taste is scrambled and it's metallic and sweet, but she swallows.

The tricorder hums in Michael's hands and she offers it up. "Do you want to...?"

"If it's some kind of quantum-variance-phasing-matter-dark-forces-thing, I won't understand it." Opening her eyes will make the nausea return. Even reading a tricorder sounds like hell, but it's kind of Michael to worry about her privacy.

"I don't think dark forces are involved, ma'am." Michael's so committed to making her comfortable that a hint of humor makes Laira smile.

"At least there's that, Captain."

The tricorder finishes its cycle, going silent as Michael reads the information.

"The embryo's healthy, strong vital signs, about six weeks old."

"I was negotiating with Ni'Var six weeks ago."

"This you must have made some time, I think the procedure is quick." Michael's smile carries in her voice and her optimism is so bright Laira can hear it.

Laira sighs, tentatively opening her eyes. "I'm not president here."

Sitting back, Michael tilts her head. "Why do you think that?"

"How could I do this in office?"

Smirking, Michael hands over the rest of the water. "Your office must have a great bathroom."

"It's not—" Laira rolls her eyes, and drinks. She's met very few people as stubborn as Michael.

"If you want a baby, you should have a baby, it doesn't matter what your position is." Michael's so sincere that her eyes glow in the weak light. She grew up in another time, when the promise of the Federation meant stability. It hasn't been like that. She doesn't understand. She can't.

Laira lifts her head a little, testing her control. "I couldn't do this by myself, not as president."

"I wouldn't want to either, but maybe you're not by yourself." Michael runs another scan, setting the tricorder aside to help Laira sit up. Her hands are so warm.

"Then why am I in a shuttle with you?"

"Maybe we're meeting your partner wherever we're going." Michael touches her cheek, ever gentle.

"Your optimism about my personal life is astounding."

Michael waits for her to finish the water, then offers her hands again to get Laira to her feet. "There's a bed in the back. You can lie down while I try to get the computer to tell me what anti-nausea medication might work on you."

"None of them," Laira replies, taking Michael's hands. Standing up seems like a foolish prospect but Michael's strong and stable. "Perhaps one, badly."

"Mixed heritage does a number on medication, I know."

"Your brother?"

"When he had a sore throat, as a child, he could take one thing, and it didn't always work. Five different things worked on me."

"It's so easy being human."

"So boring, isn't it?"

"Yes, Michael, dull is how everyone describes you."

That gets a little chuckle, and Michael's feet are steady, as she guides Laira to sit on the bed.

"This isn't the normal configuration." Shuttles often have bunks. This one has a much larger bed.

Michael leaves the tricorder running on the shelf by the bed, searching the database for dosages and options. "It's not, they - the other us I mean - might be on a longer trip."

"Or they were planning for nauseated passengers." It's odd there's only one bed though, surely they'd want two? Laira's too tired to follow the logic of that thought.

"Yeah, that's possible." Michael's very gentle smile is too kind. "Maybe you were supposed to sleep and I'm meant to fly."

"I wonder if I - she - goes through this every day."

"Likely not every day. This evening was a shock, so it's probably worse than usual. You also don't know how to manage it and the other you probably does." More optimism; she really can't help herself. Michael touches her hair once more, then cleans her face with a soft cloth. "You have a beautiful earring here."

"Oh?" Laira's felt so awful she hadn't noticed it. Following Michael's hand up, she touches the metal in her left ear.

"Is it Bajoran?"

"I have several, I don't often wear them." Laira can't recognize this one by feel. The shapes are different, and she doesn't know the stones. "Maybe here I do."

"Vacation you does, anyway."

Michael crouches down to remove her shoes. Falling into bed is so welcoming that Laira's eyes close almost immediately.

"I'll be right back," Michael says, touching her shoulder.

Laira's thoughts drift, and she's not really asleep, at least she thought she wasn't until Michael's pulling a blanket over her. Michael hovers for a moment, standing over the bed.

"What time is it?"

"*Discovery* time? Just after oh three hundred. we should have been on Caldos many hours ago. They're probably looking for us now."

"You can join me." Laira pats the bed before Michael does something silly like offer to sleep on the floor.

"I didn't want to presume-"

"What happens in a quantum pocket reality stays there."

"Reality doesn't really have pockets." Michael takes off her boots and climbs into bed, lying on her side, facing Laira in the darkness. "Though its a little like an eddy in space. From the very limited sensors I was able to get back online, we passed through some kind of quantum event, potentially even a warp bubble, which I think means this is an alternate reality. Our quantum variances are off by a minuscule amount, so this reality isn't far off from what we know. You and I know each other, we'd take the same shuttle."

"Your shuttle or mine?"

"Yours, it's a Starfleet HQ registry."

"Diplomatic?"

"Official, Madam President, you're still the Federation here."

Opening her eyes, Laira slowly focuses on Michael's face. Even in the darkness, she's radiant. "Truly?" That's a surprise. She didn't think having a child was compatible with the highest office in the galaxy, but maybe this her is braver.

Michael's smile has a superior air, that's both charming, and cocky. "I asked the computer, you're nearly a year into your first term, and we've stopped the DMA here too."

"And you?"

"Still captain, still *Discovery*." Michael fidgets with something under her sweater, toying with a necklace of some kind.

Laira hums but doesn't speak. Michael doesn't seem to mind her silence. In fact, Michael's one of the most pleasant companions she's had in a long while.

"The other version of us was also going to Caldos. It'll be almost ten hours before we have warp again, but shuttle's automated systems can repair the damage to the nacelles."

Wincing at the thought of crawling on the shuttle's hull, she winces. "I hate space walks."

"If you're already nauseated—"

"Don't." If she doesn't move, it's not bad. If she doesn't think about it, it's tolerable. Laira can keep telling herself that.

The conference they were meant to attend sounds like a lifetime ago, before she knew about things like sneezing fits and tiny sparks of life.

"We should be able to apply a broad spectrum warp field and shift back to our reality, we might emerge a few days off, but we should be in the same part of space."

"What about...?" Laira doesn't have words for the baby, probably couldn't say it unless there was a phaser held to her head, but Michael knows what she means.

"If the baby is from an alternate reality, the baby seamlessly switches back to her mother."

"No more sneezing."

"Not for you, anyway." Michael touches her hand, gentle again. Time stretches out around them, heavy and still. Michael's smile softens, then blooms and whatever she is going to say will sting so much that Laira wants to shut her eyes. "You know, it's okay to want things for yourself."

"Thank you."

"I mean it, Vance has a family."

Laira sighs. "He's not elected." Vance earned his position through decades of hard work. Laira's is much more precarious.

Michael shakes her head, rubbing her fingers. "We're all seeking connection, we don't need our leaders to be islands."

"I'm so busy."

"I get overwhelmed with just a starship, I can't imagine keeping track of what you need to."

"I have aides."

"But you are the Federation."

Laira has to shut her eyes because they sting, and she can't blame sneezing or nausea this time if she starts crying. Vance insisting she's the Federation is one thing, Michael saying it has so much weight. "So is she."

"Maybe she has someone."

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

Laira's breath shudders, and Michael shifts a little closer.

"Anyone I was with would be second to the Federation, it would inevitably happen, multiple times a day, it's a terrible thing to ask someone to put up with." None of her previous relationships had managed to balance this, no matter how much anyone involved had tried.

"There are people who would understand that."

"Do you know many?" Laira opens her eyes again, curious.

"No." Michael sighs, and her eyes are very bright and very soft across from Laira's. "It wasn't working with Book and I, even before he went with Tarka. I had to pick Starfleet, more than a few times, and that wasn't what he wanted in a relationship."

"The Federation is bigger than Starfleet."

"I know, but, this version of you has found a way to have her life and the Federation. She's having a baby."

Laira sniffs, then sneezes. "I have no idea how." Another sneeze follows and then she's wrapped in Michael, sneezing into her shoulder, pressed against her chest.

"You choose a course, then follow it as bravely as you can."

Michael holds her close until the sneezing stops, then she doesn't let go. They lie there, wrapped in each other. "Are you going to throw up?"

Laura chuckles a little, shaking her head against Michael's chest. "No, not now at least."

"Good, I like this sweater."

"It's nice."

Michael toys with her hair, her fingers gently running over the chain in Laura's earring so it tickles her ear. "You know, the tricorder can tell you who the baby's other parent is."

"It'll be anonymous."

"What if it's not?" If you have someone here, maybe that means you're compatible."

"Genetically?"

Michael chuckles. "Someone gave you that earring."

"I thought you didn't know it was Bajoran."

"It's a betrothal earring, especially when worn on the left."

Laura smirks, impressed. "You didn't know that when you found it before. "

"You were asleep for awhile, I research." Shifting beside her, Michael reaches up and grabs the tricorder. "Someone proposed to you."

"It could have been years ago." Laura rolls to her back, staring up at the ceiling. The stars through the view port have seen everything, including how she made this baby, and who, if anyone, she made them with. "They could be dead."

"You wouldn't wear it on vacation if they were dead."

"Oh?"

"You don't carry your dead with you like that."

She's right, and it's almost annoying how well Michael's figured her out in the very short time they've known each other. The baby won't be her former partner's, she can't imagine a universe where he'd want children. This baby is most likely hers and hers alone, and that's still more than she'd ever dare in this universe. Who is this other her? What made her so brave?

Michael curls on her side, holding the tricorder close. "What if I look, and if it's no one, you're right, and I'll be even more impressed with you having a child on your own."

"I am very impressive."

Michael doesn't even hide her admiration, and it's terrifying to see on her face. She's Michael Burnham, the most heroic Starfleet captain across two centuries. She shouldn't be looking at Laura like that. "You are."

She's not going to drop it. Laura reaches up, caressing her earring while she tries to imagine anyone giving that to her. "Can you - ?"

With Michael's help they take it off and Laura studies it, stroking the stones and the Vulcan-like design. Did she marry a Vulcan? What stones are they?

"Whoever made that loves you." Michael pats her arm.

"Because they have good taste?"

"Yeah," Michael says, beaming. "I think the stones are agates. You can find them all over the beaches of the Pacific. Philippa had a dish of them in her ready room. Someone who proposed to you would know how much your mother loved the ocean. They could have even picked them up themselves."

"Are you helping them?"

Smirking, Michael reaches for the tricorder to read it. "I would, if they asked. Hopefully they did. I'd love to see you surprised like that."

Rolling her eyes, Laura folds her hands on her belly and waits for Michael to finish with the tricorder. It won't matter who this person is. They aren't someone. She just— But Laura doesn't have an explanation for the earring. She doesn't know why - how - any version of her got to this place. What could have happened to make her believe anything was possible?

At her side, Michael goes quiet, so does the tricorder. Shutting her eyes, Laura waits for Michael to explain that she has a dead lover, or some lovely person who died in their timeline decades ago, that she never met. She can't think of anyone who would possibly fit the person Michael's describing. No one is like that. No one she would date would ever spend that much time, she'd never let them; she couldn't.

Instead it's quiet, and remains quiet. Confused, Laira opens her eyes, and Michael's still staring at the tricorder. Her eyes are liquid, and she blinks, once, then again, and a tear runs down her cheek.

That doesn't make any sense at all, and Laira sits up, fighting through how her head spins. She reaches out, and Michael takes her hand, squeezing her fingers tight enough it stings.

"Who?"

Michael blinks again, but her tears are past that now and she turns the tricorder, tapping a flashing name.

Laira strokes one of Michael's tears away, then the other, ignoring the tricorder. "That bad?" What could possibly make Michael cry? Who?

"Fuck."

Laira laughing makes Michael smile, and finally Laira looks down in utter confusion.

*Michael Burnham.*

Laira's earring is wrapped in their fingers, leaving little red marks as they both squeeze too tightly. The little Vulcan symbols would be Michael's choice, Ni'Var was her home. Michael's careful enough to research the custom of betrothal earrings and thoughtful enough to design one herself. If the agates remind her of Philippa, of course they're part of the earring. Philippa lived on the ocean Laira's mother loved. They shared that with each other, centuries and light years apart. It's incredibly romantic, tying their pasts and futures together.

For a ridiculous instant, Laira imagines them both, watching; smiling. Her mother always talked so wistfully of Laira finding someone she'd love as much as her parents loved each other. Even as a child, Laira had been unconvinced she was as lucky.

"When I first met you, on *Discovery*, I knew you'd change things for me," Laira starts, cupping Michael's cheek. "I thought you'd be a pain in my ass, but it turns out you just make me nauseated."

Michael laughs, her nose crinkling. "I'm sorry—"

"Sorry?"

"We're not, I'm not—"

"No, of course, but the you who made this?" Laira holds up the earring and smiles wearily, trying to help Michael regain her equilibrium. "She's incredibly romantic." It's utterly ridiculous that Michael's romantic side is directed towards her, but there's no reason to feel embarrassed about it. This is just a detour out of reality, none of it matters.

"I didn't know."

"It's a very strange reality, after all, we're wearing sweaters."

Michael rubs her eyes with her sleeve and laughs. "Guess now we know why we're in the shuttle together."

"It's our vacation."

Michael glances down, staring at Laira's belly. She won't reach for the baby, she's too gentle, so Laira takes her hand. Michael resists for a moment, then relaxes, letting Laira bring her hand in against her belly.

"So the hitchhiker here is our baby." Michael starts to tear up again.

Laira chuckles. "Fuck, right?"

"I'm so sorry you're sick."

"It's just genetics and hormones not mixing well."

"I—"

"But, now I know where this me got her optimism."

"I probably did give you that."

"That you can apologize for."

Michael leans in, touching their foreheads, and it's so intimate Laira aches from the touch. "I don't think I will." She relaxes her fingers, getting comfortable against Laira's belly. "I told myself someday, for kids, I mean. I'd find someone, someday. We'd do it together."

"I don't know how you found me."

"We spend so much time together."

"We don't know each other."

Michael shakes her head. "There's mutual respect, we've been working together well." Her thumb rubs across Laira's belly, soft and

gentle. "It seems like it didn't take much to go further."

That optimism of Michael's applies to all situations, it seems. It's impossible to know how they met in this reality or how many dinner dates it took for them to become close. Did they take long walks on the observation decks of HQ? Is *Discovery* a second home now? How did Michael propose?

"Marriage came quick, I think, it's logical." Michael pauses, blinking too fast again. "And we made a baby."

Laira covers Michael's hand with hers, holding her tight. "You must have talked me into it."

Michael laughs, deep and warm, then she leans down. "Your mother is funny, isn't she?"

There is a child they can talk to. A being who doesn't have much for ears yet, but will, who is real to them already. The other them must be so happy. They have so much, and they're together. They have this shared experience. Laira wants to be jealous, even hate them, but she only longs for what they have. She can't say it, can't put words to it, but this other life has a beauty to it.

Her throat burns, and that has nothing to do with nausea. "You're their mother too."

"I'm clearly the logical one. You're funny." Michael says this so easily, as if parenting is divided into the logical and humorous sides and between the two of them Laira has to carry mirth.

She can barely breathe, let alone--

"You weren't going to do this with anyone." Michael's smile is so warm and delicate that it lingers like poetry.

"No."

Michael's slow realization softens her face even further. Michael rubs her damp eyes again with her sleeve, then leans across, touching their foreheads. "I never would have had a child alone. You're brave."

"Lonely, I think?"

Michael nods, her hand still firmly on Laira's belly in a way that seems to be recentering the galaxy around their hands. "Someone who grew into your life would be accustomed to it. They'll be ready for the travel and the meetings. Wouldn't miss a home planet."

"I told you, I'm terrible to date."

"Maybe you just needed someone to swing things around a little." Michael's lips brush her forehead, and it aches how much she enjoys that. "Seems like you wanted to be loved."

"I'm very accustomed to compromising what I want."

"Settling for a Starfleet Captain " Michael teases, scrunching up her nose into the most beautiful smile. "Luckily for you, I'm just that good."

"You are."

She wasn't supposed to agree. Michael was looking for a laugh, not a confession. They don't love each other, they're not married. The possibility of an intimate conversation was still in the distance, and now Laira sees it. She's acutely - painfully - aware of how easily she fell for Michael Burnham.

Is falling.

Will fall.

They're in a time rift, does tense matter?

Michael touches her chin, and her lips touch Laira's cheek before she pulls away, checking the tricorder that Laira's completely forgotten about.

Michael sighs, shaking her head at the readouts. "As the other half of this baby's DNA, I feel worse that I can't do anything for your symptoms."

"You might be able to alleviate one or two but the side effects will be frustrating."

"You've done this before."

"Some categories of medication work better than others," Laira pauses, shutting her eyes, trying to think. "I haven't taken anti-nausea medication before, so I doubt it's an easy one for the tricorder to work out."

Filling a hypospray, Michael lifts it to her neck, waiting for her to nod before it hisses. "Electrolytes, that's a start at least."

"Thank you."

"Hey, seems like it's my fault. Talked you into the whole thing." Michael's soft smile has a teasing side to it, as if she's recovered enough from the surprise to joke. She yawns, then settles back down, looking up at the ceiling. "What do you think it's like?"

"For them?"

Michael nods as Laira lies down beside her, not really touching, then their hands meet. Laira moves their hands back over her belly. They have so little time with the baby, why keep themselves from this? They can love them with the short time they have.

"You would have moved me into to *Discovery*, because it's more practical than HQ. You also would never leave your ship."

Michael chuckles up in the darkness. "*Discovery* is home. You'd love it. I bet your quarters on HQ are beautiful and empty, mine are lived in."

Laira hums and nods. It's both impressive and annoying how good Michael is at reading everything about her. "And she's your ship."

"She is. The crew's family. If we're married, they must be your family now too."

"Bet they lived getting a politician as a step-mother."

Michael laughs, squeezing her fingers again. "You earned their respect on the extra-galactic mission."

"You helped."

"That's what we do. We help each be our best selves."

Laira turns her head towards Michael, again trying to imagine what it's like to carry such optimism. "You do that well."

"People did it for me. Kept landing places where becoming a better me was almost unavoidable."

"Says one of the most extraordinary people in any century."

Michael fidgets with her necklace again, then pulls it out of her sweater. Holding it over towards Laira, she smiles again, this time almost shyly. "It seems I have a wedding ring, Earth traditional. It matches your earring, this is the same kind of agate."

These versions of them are almost painfully happy. It seems impossible, yet it's entirely possible. Too easy. They haven't had a hint of romantic feeling between them. Trust, eventually. Slow, almost painful mutual respect, but no romantic tension. Did she miss it? Read something wrong?

"I've been trying to determine why I don't wear it. We're on vacation. You have the earring—"

"You don't want to lose it." It's a guess, and Michael agrees.

"I'd want it safe."

"Aren't we romantic?"

Michael rolls to her side, facing Laira in the dark. She changes hands, resting the other on Laira's belly. "I can't access our logs, haven't even found our badges—"

Tilting her head towards Michael on the pillow, Laira shrugs. "I would have to leave mine or I'd never use my vacation."

"I was wondering about that."

"You might have left yours."

"Saru can run the ship, Caldos would have their own comm system. It's possible we could spend some time less reachable. The Vice President could run things for awhile again under less pressure, they might appreciate being in charge in a quieter time." Michael pauses, maybe Laira does, because she misses something else Michael says.

"Sleep," Michael says, touching her hair. "Maybe I can get more sensors back in the morning."

"Figure out where we are?"

"Make sure we get home all right." Michael snuggles in a little closer. "I'm speculating on the quantum fissure, we seem to be stable but not moving, but I don't have all the sensors back yet."

"Our sweater universe might not be as soft as it seems?"

"Logic follows one path, space can often demand another. Shuttle sensors aren't as accurate or detailed as *Discovery's*."

Even Michael's optimism stumbles a little in the middle of the night.

"Protocol says we've missed two check ins. *Discovery* or another capital ship should be on its way to find us, even if we are on vacation."

Michael says something intelligent, perhaps something else about quantum rifts, but Laira's so tired she misses it. Michael can tell her again in the morning.

Michael's arms find their way around her, and sleep arrives as a precious gift, fleeting as this moment.



### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira have some time to talk about what they want from life before they're rescued by Discovery and it turns out the anomaly was not what they thought.

In fact, they might have brought a few things with them back to the ship.

#### *Michael*

There isn't a standard protocol for you're trapped in a shuttle with mostly damaged instrumentation and the president of the Federation is suddenly carrying your child. As time - night - passes, Laira curls closer to her. When Michael wakes, Laira's curled into her chest.

Laira's body temperature is a few degrees cooler. Does she sense the heat of Michael's body? Is it pleasant for her? Is Michael feverishly warm to her touch?

Michael must feel good to her - she concludes - even in sleep, because Laira's arm is around her waist and they're wrapped together. Is she cold? Does pregnancy change her body temperature as well as everything else? She threw up her dinner, and Michael didn't get her to eat anything else. Maybe she's cold. Maybe she still feels slightly terrible.

The replicator should be back online by the time they get up. Michael always had to eat Vulcan food as a child when she was ill. Food from the high deserts of Vulcan is famously bland, so they can start with that. Plomeek soup is delicately spiced to some, entirely tasteless to others. Amanda feeding Michael toast was more human, but Laira's human too. That seems right.

It's just temporary, anyway. They have to get through the next several hours, then they go back the way they came. Laira's more likely to seek physical contact because she's been so unwell, and Michael has to admit it's pleasant enough she will miss it. They're not really married, no matter what their jewelry says, but the intimacy is pleasant.

Prior to the incident they'd been getting along. Even talked about art and cultural events Laira keeps getting invited to. She can rarely attend; they're all over the Federation and her schedule is brutally full. Travel time alone--

A spore drive on Laira's ship would change the way she governs. Tarka's prototype has potential, but he's disappeared now, not that anyone would have trusted him. Auriello and Stamets have been using technology from species 10C to perfect the next prototype, and they're close, perhaps they'll even be able to solve the navigator problem. Book's been making good use of the current one, last she heard.

He was well, when he wrote last. Grudge was happy to be back at work saving endangered species. He'd even found an uninhabited moon to terraform into a sanctuary. New Kwejian: home to the galaxy's displaced creatures.

*"You'll have to come see it someday."* He said at the end. No expectation, simply an invitation. Their relationship had been one of the many things not salvageable after meeting the 10C. No ill will lay between them, but the spark that had been so compelling between them had been lost with the DMA.

Friends, lovers, then acquaintances. Someone that she once was close to. When she was honest with herself, in moments like these, in the dark, always alone, Michael had worried it wouldn't work. She'd thrown herself in harder, loved fiercely, regretted nothing.

And it ended anyway.

Starfleet came first. Starfleet was still with her; duty reigns.

Ironic, really, while she tries to convince Laira she can have what she wants for her personal life, Michael has given up on her own.

Amanda had a saying: right feeling, wrong person. Michael wanted something domestic: a life with someone, not simply a life in parallel, but paths chosen together. She wanted to be interwoven with someone, entwined, sharing fate and hope.

Book had not been that person. Maybe if Kwejian, maybe if she, if-- Speculation has taken enough sleep from her. They are not partners, and she loves him still. She wishes him well, with everything, with his life as it runs divergent from hers.

Michael fidgets, first with the hem of Laira's sweater, then Laira's hair. What she knows about Laira's personal life could barely fill a stack of ancient pages. She had no idea Laira wanted a child, or had contemplated having one on her own. Laira holds things very tight, but she will share them, when asked, when she's safe.

Maybe it was the forced intimacy of the tiny space, or the intensity of Laira's symptoms. Perhaps it was just that *their* baby was causing everything. No, this isn't guilt. This is nice. Michael loves this part of a relationship: closeness, intimacy; sharing breath in the darkness.

Laira would not have been a partner she chose immediately, but the logic is there. If she were an option, it makes sense. They understand duty, leadership, and politics. They respect each other, try to do what the other needed, and genuinely care for the other's well being. It's a

good foundation, they could build on that.

Laira is a mystery, like Book, like Ash, and she's fragile. She's surrounded by so many people, and alone. Michael was like that on the *Shenzhou*, when she hadn't known how to connect.

With Laira it seems like a forgotten need. Something she denies herself so fiercely that she can't reach it or put words to it. The DMA rattled her hope. The 10C and the negotiations that followed put the weight of the galaxy on her shoulders, and yes, she carried it well, got them through, but what would that do to a person? How would she set that down?

Laira's relationship with the scientist hadn't survived. Michael had asked early on the shuttle trip. The last time he'd been mentioned, Laira had been looking forward to seeing him. Yet this time, Laira had been polite - even apologetic - almost as if it were her responsibility to maintain the relationship Michael had helped save.

"It was so different from anything we'd seen, or done. He had no context and I couldn't explain it to him." With that, Laira finished speaking, and then they'd sat in silence for almost a light year.

Relationships are deeply difficult for both of them. Loneliness speaks to why this is so easy between them, but there's something else that makes this fit. Makes this click. It's not duty that has them together, they're harmonious with it, they can make it work, but there's something else.

A fascination with the unknown. The hint of possibility. The way Laira's eyelashes lie dark on her cheek. How her breath softens with sleep. She's extraordinarily beautiful. Michael's known that from the beginning, but knowing and appreciating, knowing and wanting— They're very different things.

Wondering what it would be like to kiss her is harmless. So many steps would be between there and now, but it's a pleasant distraction. The scales that cover Laira's forehead are more delicate than Michael thought, the patterns are almost lacy in the darkness, shadowed and still.

There's a great delicacy to her: layers of vulnerability Laira has been so careful to tuck away. Michael had thought that Laira's politicians mask hid something insincere, but it protects all the softness Laira's unwilling - unable - to share with anyone.

The scientist must have seen parts of it, but something wasn't— The way Laira stopped being able to look at Michael when she tried to explain that happened, what changed. She thought they'd made progress, gotten close enough, but Laira doesn't know how to share this with her.

Putting words to it would help Laira again now, but she's so lost. Michael came on this shuttle trip to find her, help Laira find a way to talk about what carnage saving the galaxy leaves behind. After the Red Angel, Michael had time - lost time - courier time with Book; she nearly walked away from Starfleet.

Laira left Discovery, walked up to the railing at Starfleet HQ and just kept leading. Admiral Vance worried about her when the little things that weren't duty disappeared. She was fine, of course, confronting her would have only made her retreat further. But she might trust Michael. Making Michael her escort on an unimportant trade mission isn't a vacation, or therapy, but perhaps Laira only needs connection. Perhaps she would allow herself to trust. Michael has been where she is, staring at the wreckage of her own life, wondering what could possibly rise from that rubble.

Being trapped in a quantum warp anomaly and pregnant isn't taking a break from the weight of the galaxy, but it's found some hard truths.

Laira wants a baby, and she'll have to let this one go in less than eight hours. Michael is aware of the weight of that, but it's not something she wanted as much. It's not within her. She doesn't know how to soften losing something Laira wanted so much, especially when she barely admitted it to herself.

How does she give her hope? What can she say? Laira could try, on her own, but not as president, she wouldn't give herself the space. Michael glances down at the child they're not having, grateful they had these hours, even if that's all they have.

She could offer, of course. Laira might never take her up on it, yet maybe Michael has to face her own insights. A version of her loves Laira deeply, is radiant with joy about this child, and proposed to her with agates from Philippa's beach on Langkawi. That's a kind of connection Michael hasn't achieved with anyone in this universe.

That has potential. She could decide to ride those currents, see where this flight takes them. She could love Laira, easily, wholeheartedly, and that sends tingles up Michael's spine.

Do they risk it? Do they walk a path together? Make an echo of this child in their own universe? What does she dare offer Laira? What will Laira accept?

Michael fidgets with the wedding ring that's not hers. She's already decided. There's no uncertainty in the pit of her stomach. Laira may push her back, reinforce the distance between them, or she might agree. They could build something, weave something out of the strangeness of space and time. Even grow a life to add to the cosmos, raise them together, find harmony and balance as best they can.

They've done it once. Does that mean they do it again?

It means Michael offers. The rest is unwritten, but it could be beautiful.

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"I've read if you eat before you get up, it's not as bad."

"Eating to prevent nausea is like developing weapons to prevent developing weapons." Laura winces, head on her knees. Her hair falls gold and red, and the long line of her neck lies naked.

Sitting beside her on the bed, Michael sets her toast aside, then touches her skin. She runs her fingers gently over the muscles along Laura's spine. First upwards towards her hairline then down, slow and steady.

"There's only about three hours left until the rift closes," Michael says. "It's almost done."

Laura's little laugh is so bitter it cuts. Lifting her head, she looks at Michael, blue eyes huge and haunted. "I'd keep the nausea if I could \_\_\_"

"I'm sorry."

"I know she has to go back-" Laura pauses, fingers twisting in her sweater, "I- I know we can't--"

Michael leans in, touching their heads together. "I think she belongs to the other us."

Shutting her eyes, Laura swallows, growing more pale. "I wouldn't want to take her."

"I know."

"And I'm happy for them - us - I suppose."

Michael kisses her temple before she can remind herself that they don't kiss. Laura is not her wife, this is not their baby, yet it feels so right to touch her. Laura leans into her, taut until Michael's mouth pulls away.

Squeezing her hand, Michael takes a breath. "We could have our own."

"What?" Laura's dark eyelashes flutter.

Michael hands over a piece of toast. "I'd have a baby with you, if you wanted."

Laura pauses staring at her. She finally takes a bite, chewing like she's never had bread. "You would do that?"

"Of course."

Laura cups her cheek, meets her eyes and then looks down. "That's kind."

Co-parenting could be worked out, *Discovery* could become a place for a child. Anything is possible; the galaxy is calm. Laura wants this, Michael can imagine wanting it.

Maybe she does want it.

"If something happened, if the anomaly left the baby with us, we'd raise her."

"You don't, you didn't—"

Shaking her head, Michael smiles until Laura stops biting her lip. "She's my daughter too, we'd raise her together."

"Adapting to circumstances beyond our control is different than creating something we shouldn't."

"Not if both have the outcome you want."

Laura stares at her toast, suddenly fascinated. Sneezing makes her drop it and Michael picks it up off the bed, holding it until she stops.

"I can't want this."

"You do, even with the sneezing." Michael waits for her to lift her head again. "Eat your toast "

"It made me sneeze."

"Sneezing seems like the easier symptom."

Laura takes the toast back, and they sit there, staring at the stars together. "Why do you upend everything?"

"Right place, right time."

Laura hums, taking another bite of toast.

"Some things need to be upended."

"Like my life?"

"You're unhappy "

"I wasn't."

Michael reaches over, tucking Laira's hair aside so she can see her face. "Denying you want something takes the even the possibility away from you. We could have a child together, I think we'd be good at it."

Laira's left hand rests on her belly, unwilling to let go. "You don't—"

"I do, why is that so hard?"

"In my experience, people can't stay, even when they want to."

Laira's betrothal earring sits on the shelf next to Michael's wedding ring. Reaching for them both, Michael smooths Laira's hair back, then eases her earring back on.

"One version of us thought they could stay together."

"They're not us." Laira doesn't sound hopeful, but she takes the wedding ring from Michael's hand, turning it in her fingers. "They're braver, or the universe is softer, or--"

"I have this sweater, so do you."

"What does that matter?"

"We have everything we need to try, if we wanted, if we dared - we could."

Laira takes Michael's hand, studying her fingers. Laira's hand trembles, but she doesn't let go. "How can you offer that?"

"Whoever gave you this loves you," Michael reminds her, touching the earring. "I did, I could..." she doesn't add the last tense, it's too soon, but it's so close that they're both aware.

Laira slips Michael's ring onto her finger. "I never thought I wanted to get married. I didn't think it mattered to me."

"Yet it's a nice idea."

"Frightening, but nice." Laira strokes her fingers, then lifts the back of Michael's hand, kissing her knuckles. "A lot of your ideas are like that."

"Only frightening?"

"Terrifying really—"

Light fills the cabin, bright blue, pouring through every window.

Saru's voice cuts through the cabin on crackling comms that Michael wasn't entirely sure were working. "Captain Burnham, President Rillak, brace yourselves for transport and immediate jump."

The lightning flashes of the spore drive spinning up mix with the light of the transporter and it's all she can do to reach for Laira, pull her close before they vanish and rematerialize on the bridge.

Rattling the ship from bulkhead to bulkhead, the jump drags them through a maelstrom of light, familiar and not. Something's wrong; and they didn't know it in the shuttle, couldn't. *Discovery* pulls them through, but they haven't had a crossing this onerous since they left the Terran Empire. The deck rocks beneath them, Michael's shoulder his something sharp, and Laira goes stiff when she snaps against something. There's blood on her fingers, in her nose, but the deck is her ship.

They're home. Sparks crash all around them and there's smoke in the air. Fire suppression comes on and everyone's rushing. Laira's head's cradled against her chest, their bodies pressed together.

They didn't get to say goodbye. they're here, back, and that means—

Later.

Michael hauls herself up to sit, her back against the side of the command chair. Saru's long, thin legs stand, and he orders the repairs. They're all right, the stars are bright on the viewer, but Laira's still curled against her chest, head on her shoulder.

They had an hour, maybe two, and they didn't say goodbye, they got distracted. Laira takes a breath, and a single sob trembles through her into Michael's shoulder, before she stiffens, pulling herself in. Michael holds her close, sheltering her. Michael's ears are ringing like the air's just rushed back in. She has to blink a few times to force everything into focus.

"Captain?" Hugh kneels beside her, studying her eyes. He wipes blood from under her nose, checks the cartilage. "You were in a warp bubble, Paul can explain it. How do you feel? Anything hurt?"

Michael shakes her head. "Everything's a little scrambled, but I'm fine."

"It was a rough jump." Hugh asks about Laira with his eyes instead of reaching for her. Blood's seeping hot into Michael's sweater from a cut on Laira's forehead, but it seems superficial. Her hand's tight on Michael's, and her breathing's even again.

It's a lot to force down, again, on top of everything else.

Shaking her head, Michael wordlessly asks Hugh for a moment. Laira's not ready. Facing the baby being gone, in front of everyone, when

they didn't—

Hugh hands her a sterile square to press into Laira's forehead, and smiles. "Got a couple other injuries, I'll be back. Keep pressure on it."

Laira's blue eye are distant, but they focus on Michael for a quiet moment. They can't talk, can't start grieving in public, but she's not alone. She's safe with Michael and the crew. They'll get through this.

"This is bleeding a lot, but it doesn't seem bad."

For a moment, Laira meets her eyes, haunted and empty. She knows acutely that they're back, that their hitchhiker's gone, and reality's here for them, cold and lonely.

"It's all right," Michael murmurs. "It's all right."

Laira's eyes say it's not, can't be, but Laira will be all right. That's the most she can say. Maybe this will help her talk about all she's lost. The most recent grief opening the gates around the older ones.

Michael is vaguely aware of the look that goes from Keyla to Joann, and Nilsson and Saru's eyes on them, but it doesn't matter. Their clothes are wrong and they're wrapped in each other but that can wait. Grief is acute and heavy, rumbling through them both like shifting tides. Did the baby return to where she came from? Is she safe? Is she simply gone from existence in every reality?

Blood seeps hot through the bandage Hugh gave her and Michael pulls her hand down. It shouldn't be bleeding this much, Laira's blood pressure should be back to normal without the baby.

Paul hands her another one then steps back, curiosity bright in his eyes. "What did you see?"

Michael holds the new bandage onto Laira's forehead, pressing harder. "What do you mean?"

"You were in a static warp bubble. A rare, dangerous phenomenon only documented a few times. We think they could be a remnant of the isolytic explosion, something that rippled through subspace. We're trying to better calibrate our sensors to find them all over quadrant, they're incredible dangerous and nearly invisible."

"Our shuttle didn't detect anything, there was light then—"

"Everything was different." Paul nods, looking at the president, then back to Michael. "A Starfleet officer, a doctor, actually, encountered the first static warp bubble, many hundred years ago. It made a universe around one of her thoughts about losing everyone she loved. People in that bubble disappeared, until she was the only person in that universe. She was rescued by her ship before the bubble collapsed, but it took the intervention of a highly advanced lifeform from Tau Alpha C. Luckily for you two, we were able to jump in and out before your bubble disappeared."

"You crossed into our universe?"

"Much less messy than the Terran one." Paul mimes a bubble in his hands. "Your universe was like, a still place in the network, a pocket, so to speak. Inside of it, whatever the two of you were thinking when you entered would have shaped that reality."

Laira wanted a baby, Michael wanted stability; they both wanted a break. Is it really that simple? That bubble listened to their thoughts and gave them what they couldn't stop thinking about. Peace, love, a vacation where no one needed them, and a child.

"Sweaters, no badges, because we needed a break?"

"It could be that simple. There are a few other instances, no other survivors after the first encounter. Between multiple DMAs and the isolytic weapon Mr. Tarka deployed, subspace is in the worst ship it's ever been. It's been frothed, so to speak, and these bubbles are the result."

"Is there a way out of them without a spore drive?"

"Or the intervention of a being who can transcend normal space time?" Paul knows something happened that they're not saying, the whole bridge does, but they won't press. He shrugs, meeting Michael's eyes. "I don't know how anyone else could get out of it. We'll keep scanning, we already reported to Admiral Vance before we jumped in after you."

They would have had to, not for Michael, but for Laira.

"Thank you, Mr. Stamets," Laira says softly. Polite, presidential again, but her voice shivers. Then she winces, shutting her eyes and dropping her head to Michael's shoulder. Nausea? Is her head injury worse than Michael thought? Michael strokes her hair, holds her shoulder. She shouldn't have to deal with this here.

"I need to get her to sickbay."

"We overloaded the transporters getting you out, so you'll need to take the turbolift."

Good, that will give them time. Michael whispers into Laira's hair and gets the smallest nod in response. She can stand, they can go to sickbay together. After that, they'll have to deal with grief and loss, first the baby, then the DMA and everything else Laira's shoved into the dark corners of her mind. Perhaps now, Laira will trust her, let her in. Paul helps Michael up, and Laira accepts his hand as well as Michael's to get to her feet.

She wavers, unsteady, and Michael wraps her arm around her waist.

"Sickbay will get that taken care of."

Laira smiles, weary and soft. "It looks worse than it is." Something still feels off about her, more than the blood on her face or the inevitable headache, or how lightheaded she must be. They're nearly in the lift when she sneezes, burying her face in her arm.

The bridge is full of smoke, so it's logical, but the smoke burns Michael's throat, sneezing is—

It's not possible. They brought their sweaters with them, the earring, Michael's wedding ring, all of that can be made in a pocket universe. A child isn't like that. It can't be, they can't get their hopes up.

Yet hope is stubborn.

The lift shuts and Laira holds her for a moment, then leans on the wall.

"You okay?"

"It was bad enough before. If I'm not- if she's not—"

"Then you shouldn't have to feel it." Michael offers her hands. "Nausea?"

Laira doesn't reach for her, not at first, but she swallows, then shuts her eyes. "How can it be worse?"

"Your adrenaline's wearing off." Michael looks up at the ceiling. "Zora, halt turbolift." Reaching for Laira's hand, Michael almost expects her to pull away, but she clings to her, fingers cold and damp.

They sink back down to the deck together, Laira's head tilted back against the wall of the lift. "We made her?"

"We made all of it." Michael sits across from her, their hands entwined. Laira fidgets with Michael's wedding ring. The metal is similar to her bracelet on her left wrist, same luster. She would have planned it. Made sure the earring matched, chose the agates from the little collection she still has from Philippa's beaches, centuries ago. "I've had two serious relationships and they've collapsed, spectacularly. I have my family on *Discovery*, and that's my home, but I haven't been able to find a person to share that with me."

Tracing the bracelet with her thumb, Michael takes a breath, finding words. "I want someone I share my life with, not just a romantic relationship, but a partner, someone who cares how I feel at the end of the day, and has coffee with me in the morning. That sounds foolish, doesn't it?"

"It sounds wonderful," Laira says, tilting her head. "I've never had that either."

"It sounds nice though, doesn't it? In theory, at least." Michael strokes her hand, wishing she could make this easier. "I was also wishing I had a chance to wear this sweater. It's been sitting in a drawer since I got it."

Squeezing her fingers, Laira sighs. "Being able to take my badge off for a whole day sounds pretty incredible."

"So we did that together then."

Laira's little laugh aches. "I suppose we did." She sniffs, pulling her hands back before she sneezes again. Michael leans closer, putting pressure on her head wound when it starts to bleed again.

"Your blood pressure must still be off."

"Hmm?"

"This is still bleeding."

"Head wounds bleed."

"It's not clotting."

"It's nothing." Laira shuts her eyes, her lashes dark on her skin.

Michael brushes blood off her cheek with her free hand.

Laira trembles beneath her, her breath shuddering in her chest. "I made the baby, didn't I?"

"I'm not against one."

Starting to smile, Laira winces, squeezing her eyes shut.

"But it wasn't first in my mind."

"When the Burn was over, when we were safe, I was going to try. I told myself that for years, and I met my partner, and it was too late - I was too busy and he didn't, so we didn't and I was fine. I was president—"

"After we solved the DMA, it felt safe again."

Laira smiles that very small smile. "Space is safe, other than warp bubbles and quantum fissures and—"

Michael smooths her hair, then kisses her forehead on the side where it's not bleeding. "No one is ever perfectly safe."

"I was afraid."

"That's okay."

Moaning, Laura leans forward, falling into Michael as she tries not to throw up.

"Breathe."

"She didn't have anywhere to go back to."

Michael has no words, so strokes her hair, holding Laura against her chest.

"I made her, and she didn't have anywhere to go, she—"

"You couldn't have known."

"I shouldn't have wanted."

"No—"

"Wanting her killed her."

Michael leans down, trying to get through. "No, no, that's not it."

"She was, and wasn't, She was real, and isn't and I—" One of those silent sobs takes over her breathing, and her whole body shivers in Michael's arms. Laura forces it down, shuts down, but it's too much to fight.

Even if their baby only existed for the hours she was with then, she had a good life. She was adored for those moments. Laura's too hard on herself.

"She was real, for us, and that - that's not a bad thing."

Laura's breathing keeps catching, and she stiffens like she's about to throw up again, or she's fighting tears that she's pushed aside too long.

Michael should get her to sickbay, get her stabilized so she can grieve. They might find a way to let their hitchhiker go, together, but Michael can't imagine letting Laura go again. They're too close now.

"Captain Burnham, forgive the interruption of a private moment," Zora says, her holographic form appearing with them in the turbolift. "The biometrics of the president have become quite unstable, and I believe they are adding to the stress of the third life form I detect in the turbolift."

Michael's heart rushes in her ears. "Third life form?"

"They are new to *Discovery*. I only became aware of it when you arrived on board from the warp bubble."

"Are they in distress?"

"Mildly, Captain. The spike in the president's stress hormones has caused their bioreadings to become more erratic."

"What is she talking about?" Laura asks, sitting up again, unshed tears in her eyelashes.

"An extra life form."

"What?"

Michael rests her hand on Laura's stomach, blinking to stop her own tears. "I think we brought her with."

Laura starts to pull back, tugging Michael's hand. "No, that's impossible."

"Zora, is the new life form genetic similar to President Rillak and I?"

Zora takes a moment. "Yes, they appear to have genetic material from both of you."

"Are they currently residing in Laura?"

"Ye, that appears to be accurate. I believe the life form's presence is contributing to President Rillak's symptoms."

Michael smiles so wide that her face stings as much as her eyes, but she can't help it. "I'll get them to sickbay."

"I believe that is wise, Captain. Transporters have been repaired, would you like me to transport you?"

"In a minute, Zora."

Laura's tears shine very bright in her eyes. "How?"

"I don't know."

"She—"

"It's all right."

"We didn't—"

"That's all right too."

"Michael..." Laura shakes her head and that fragile little laugh tugs at Michael's heart.

"We brought her with."

"That can't—"

Michael lifts her chin, meeting her eyes. "Anything is possible."

The transport grabs them, enveloping them in light. In the half-second before they disappear, Michael leans in and covers Laura's mouth with hers. It's not much for a first kiss, more desperate connection than romantic moment, but it says what Michael can't.

Zora beams Laura onto the biobed in the back room, and Michael materializes standing beside her. Laura's eyes won't leave hers, and her smile's brighter than it's been all day. They kissed and there's no time to talk about it.

Hugh enters a moment later, tricorder in hand, his white uniform already marked with soot from the bridge. "Glad you made it down." He starts his initial scan, watching them both. "Madam President, do you have any symptoms? Dizziness, nausea?"

"Both."

Hugh frowns at his tricorder for a moment, then touches Laura's forehead. "This is superficial, it shouldn't be causing any symptoms."

Michael presses her lips together. He'll find it, Zora did. Laura meets her eyes and maybe it's the hysteria for the moment, or how much they've been through emotionally, or maybe it's just joy. Laura smiles, really smiles, and she's as vibrant as a star.

"I need to—" Hugh opens and closes his mouth and Michael looks down. Laura's flushed pink, and her tears run freely now.

Reaching up, Michael catches the tears on her cheeks. "I can take care of the wound with a dermal regenerator if you need to run a deeper scan."

Hugh's eyes don't move from his tricorder readout, and he points towards the dermal regenerator. "Genetic and quantum analysis, actually, just a minute. I'll be right back."

Michael picks it up, removes the sticky bandage from Laura's forehead and starts cleaning the wound. She can't stop smiling and neither can Laura, it's almost like being drunk, the way her emotions are utterly out of control. The regenerator hums, cleaning the wound and repairing the skin and blood vessels. A few more passes and there will be no sign Laura was ever hurt.

Looking into Laura's eyes while the wound closes is intoxicating. They're so blue and deep, and Michael forgot what it was like to be so smitten with a person.

Hugh returns with a more advanced scanner. His smile is undeterred but there's a puzzled furrow on his forehead. "Did time pass normally for you inside the bubble? You only experienced about eighteen hours of time?"

"Yes."

The scanner hovers over Laura, lighting up gold as it runs a quantum scan.

"Madam President, we have your medical records from the extra-galactic mission, and what I'm reading today is impossible, based on those records, however, Paul tells me the warp bubble could have caused almost anything to happen."

Michael touches his arm. "Zora told us, Hugh, it's all right."

He smiles, then chuckles. "All right then, Madam President, since you're already sitting down. You're pregnant. Captain—"

"She's mine, isn't she?"

"Genetically, yes, her quantum signature even matches this reality." Hugh calls up a readout. "Six weeks gestational age, healthy development, no genetic anomalies or signs of trauma." He leaves the readout up for them and walks to the side of the biobed to start filling hyposprays. "Your b and k vitamins are low, your calcium and iron reserves are nearly depleted, and you have a mild folic acid deficiency." He presses the hypospray into her neck once, then loads it again. "I'll send a list of vitamin supplements to your badge, but this should help for now."

Laura's left hand rests over the baby, and Michael takes her right, wrapping their fingers together, tight.

"Why are her levels so far off?"

"When the warp bubble made the baby, I assume it took nutrients and minerals from the same place an embryo normally would, just in this case all at once, instead of over the last six weeks. It'll take some time to regain equilibrium. Your hormone levels are all a little



erratic, and you have the added complication that your system is trying to balance several types of maternal hormones at once."

Hugh glances down at their clasped hands, his expression softening. "If this isn't what you want—"

Laira answers that with almost presidential efficiency. "It is."

He starts to smile again. "If it would be easier to move the embryo to another host, like Michael or an external gestation chamber, that would be a simple procedure."

Glancing down before she looks at Michael, Laira worries her lip, then shakes her head. "She can stay."

"I can—" Michael starts, but Laira smiles a little brighter.

"I know, I want her."

Michael leans in, touching their foreheads before she kisses her again, soft and warm. "Okay, then she should stay put where she is."

Hugh has so many things to say that they blend together. Hormones and development and circulation and Michael has to listen because there's no way Laira's getting any of this, why should she? She's wanted this for years, she can be happy.

He notices the joyful haze over both of them before he finishes a thought. "Go back to your quarters. Rest, eat. I'll write this up and save it for you to read later, and I'm here, if you have any questions or worries." He fills another hypo and injects Laira's beautiful neck. "That should help with the nausea for about twelve hours. Enjoy it. You're pregnant, congratulations."

He beams at Michael, kissing her cheek, and she hugs him tight. Hugh pats Laira's knee, and smiles at her. She slides off the biobed, noticeably steadier on her feet. She nods to him, then they trade cheek kisses.

"I'm not kidding about resting, you've been through it. Give yourself a few days."

"Yes, Doctor, thank you."

"Oh, call me Hugh, ma'am." He winks at Michael. "Tio Hugh has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

Laira and Michael work out what to do next, starting with kissing, and find a few new things about each other.

### *Laira*

Michael's hand holds hers like a tractor beam, as if she's an errant shuttle unable to dock on her own. She has no thrusters or sensors it seems as they stand in sickbay, hand in hand.

Dr. Culber is charming, and warm, carrying the same kind of smile as Michael. There's a gentleness to him that goes past professional; he's Michael's family.

The little hitchhiker's family. Laira's too, when she remembers how that feels.

Michael squeezes her hand, drawing her attention. "My quarters?"

Her home. Laira nods, speaking keeps eluding her.

"Zora, beam us to my quarters, please." And they pop from sickbay to Michael's quarters. The lines are antique, like the rest of her ancient ship, and it's familiar now, even homey. It's been years since she was on one ship enough to feel like home. Headquarters is an extension of her position, not home, but the reds and oranges of Michael's quarters, are her, and Michael tugs at her like an anchor, promising safe harbor. That feeling's been gone so much longer than home. Laira's eyes sting, and she sneezes, and again, and the third time Michael laughs, turning to her to wipe her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Disconcerting, surprising, wonderful, unreal — what words does she have?

"With what part?"

Michael smiles, brilliant but gentle. "Let's start with physically."

Her body's strangely distant, like she doesn't know how it works, but nothing hurts and she's not dizzy. Without a chorus of complaints, her body seems closer to her own.

"I might be hungry."

Michael chuckles, then kisses her cheek. "I am, so you must be. Sit, I'll get food."

When Michael releases her hand, Laira touches her cheek, as if she'll be able to feel where Michael's lips were.

President Rillak has been served by so many people, on so many planets. She'd be fine. Laira sits on Michael's red sofa and wraps her hands around her knee as Michael walks back and forth from the replicator to the table.

Michael's mind continues on, logical and organized. Eating is good and normal and expected and Dr. Culber said she wouldn't be nauseated again until tomorrow.

Will it feel real tomorrow? How is pregnant meant to feel? She could have asked Michael to carry the little hitchhiker, or let her grow externally, without all of the chaos but she doesn't want to let her go. Michael would keep her safe. Michael would probably have a much easier time of it, carrying a hybrid child as a human would be easier. Humans are so adaptable. Her mother had an easier time than her grandmother.

She's being selfish, yet she does not want to stop. Laira squeezes her fingers, resisting the urge to hold the baby with her hand. She's barely more than a blob of cells right now. She won't know. It doesn't matter, she's being sentimental. Michael's not going to judge her. She's already thrown up in Michael's lap. They're past little things like quiet self-recrimination.

"Hey."

"Sorry."

"Sorry?" Michael crouches down in front of her, hands on Laira's knees. She looks up, smiling and patient. "What's on your mind?"

"I can't hold a thought."

"That's why you're going to eat."

Laira shuts her eyes, take a breath, tries to guess what Michael put on the table. It doesn't smell familiar. She's eaten enough Vulcan food

that she should recognize that, but perhaps Michael's idea of Vulcan food would be more than nine hundred years old and she won't recognize it, but this isn't Vulcan. It smells sweet, rice and something. Some dishes from Earth remind Laura of her mother but they're so different depending on which replicator she uses or who programmed them.

When she opens her eyes again, Michael's still there, smiling. "It's all right."

"How can you say that?"

Michael waves the table over, giving up on the idea of eating sensible in chairs. She sits beside her, their legs touching, and the warmth of her is something to ground herself with. Michael picks up one of the rolled pancakes from a plate and passes it over.

"You wanted this."

Michael means the baby, of course, but Laura answers as if she were only talking about the pancake. "I don't know what this is."

Michael chuckles. "Take a bite."

It smells like nuts and something sweet. Not really eating while they were trapped has made her so much more hungry than she realized, and the first bite sends a shiver through her.

"It's good, right?"

This dinner has a story, and Michael will tell her, but for the moment, that slips aside as Michael shows her how the rice is eaten with their hands in this dish and explains the spices she doesn't recognize.

Laura wasn't hungry, she thought. She wouldn't have said she was, if anyone had asked. By herself in guest quarters, she might have sat a long time before she realized how much she wanted to eat.

Michael touches her cheek, wiping sauce away with her thumb. That smile is the one that crackles through her universe whenever it appears. "I'm glad you're hungry."

"I didn't think I was."

"Funny how that happens." Michael passes over another one of the rolled up pancakes and their fingers touch, lingering together.

She's only shaken Michael's hand once, maybe they touched in passing before the shuttle, but now her hands are intoxicating, like the warmth of her mouth. Laura should be able to have more coherent thoughts, find words to 'you kissed me and I—' but they're not in her head.

Part of Michael's growing within her and Laura has made words the center of her existence, yet she has no idea how to talk to her.

Michael shakes her hair back behind her shoulders and releases Laura's hand to reach for her tea. "The first time Philippa served me these I didn't like them."

"Oh?"

"I thought they were too sweet, Vulcan isn't known for desserts, and I wasn't very polite about it."

"You weren't diplomatic about her food?"

"I was so blunt when I came aboard the *Shenzhou*, all logic and science, and I never smiled."

Laura covers her mouth, smiling around her bite of the pancake. Michael still hasn't told her what they're called. "That's hard to believe."

"She was very patient with me when I needed it." Michael leans back, done with the food, her hands wrapped around her tea. "I got a lot of how to be human from her. How to lead, how to interact with peers. She was very diplomatic, when she chose to be. Funny, when she was supposed to be or not."

"I looked for Philippa's service record."

"You did?"

"You talk about her, I wanted to know her."

Michael reaches over, wrapping their fingers together. "Not much survived."

"Other than what you've told me, all we have is a list of commendations and a service record." Laura finishes the last of her pancake and tries to imagine again the woman who replicated these for Michael so many centuries ago. "She'd love to see you as captain."

There's only a hint of sorrow in Michael's dark eyes before her smile overtakes it. "She would. Took a little longer to get there than she thought." Michael runs her finger over Laura's knuckles and her smile softens. "She'd like you."

"She didn't share your dislike of politicians?"

"Philippa would get past it."

"Oh?"

"Knowing I was happy—"

"Are you?" Laura didn't mean to interrupt, but Michael keeps crashing through her control.

"Yes." Michael leans closer, her lips shining in the light. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Laura's voice catches in her throat, heavy and tight. "A subspace bubble made us parents. "

"Warp," Michael corrects her, again touching her chin. "A warp bubble gave us a choice, we chose to share this." Her eyes fall to Laura's belly, then rise to meet Laura's own. "We'll figure it out."

"Such confidence."

"Comes with the chair."

"That's the trick, reach the captain's chair and find confidence?"

Winking at her, Michael lifts her mouth. They're so close again, lips too close not to connect, but they aren't— they don't—

"Captains never tell their secrets."

Laura's so out of practice with the art of kissing that it feels as foreign as deciphering math equations and hydrocarbon molecules, but Michael leads, bringing their mouths together. She's careful: entreating, not insisting. Kissing her back is easy, instinctual even, and Laura shivers.

"What are we doing?"

"Figuring it out." Michael's hand trails warmth down her neck, and they're closer, kissing again, reaching—

It's foolish.

They're confused. Clearly misguided.

Deceiving each other.

Misleading themselves.

Michael tastes like home. Not familiar at all, like tea and pancakes Laura can't remember the name of; coconut rice that another captain loved on an island Laura's never seen. Nothing about Michael is nostalgic or safe, but she can't stop reaching for her.

Laura sighs against her lips, inhales, and this time she leads, searching Michael's mouth. Exploring's always been something she's left to others, diplomacy follows traditional routes after they've been plotted. This is a much a negotiation as an unknown, leading and following in turn until Michael's mouth's on her neck and she surrenders. Her sigh catches, turns into a weary little laugh.

Michael's hand rests on her shoulder, her thumb on her chest. "Is this all right?"

Nodding is all she can manage, Laura can't trust her voice. When she flew, she had to trust her instincts, avoid second guessing that would turn her into space dust. She's lived with that, kept herself alive, kept the galaxy together, and then Michael makes all of it churn, from the stars to her toes.

She sighs, melting against her. Michael nibbles her neck way up behind her ear and Laura pulls her closer. Her head's been spinning since the bubble, but this is unique. This is wanting, and she remembers how pleasant it is. Michael's hands are as careful as her mouth. Fingers run along her collarbone, along her bare shoulder and she pulls Michael closer, hands on her back.

Michael's braids tickle her shoulder and Laura sinks her hand into her sweater. Her little gasp echoes Laura's and whatever Michael's doing to her neck is destroying her, breath by breath.

Her lips return to Laura's when she's aching, and Michael shifts on the sofa, half into her lap and stops. "Still okay?"

"Just okay?"

Chuckling, Michael eases into her lap, thighs over Laura's. "You've been sick."

"I'd forgotten."

Michael's eyes shine, that deep brown endless-- "Good."

Kissing resumes, heavier now, and Michael's chest presses against hers. When did her breasts get so sore? The warmth of Michael engulfs her and Michael's teeth against her lip send electricity along her skin.

One of Michael's hands runs down her side, brushing her stomach and even now their hitchhiker's in their thoughts. Pausing, their foreheads touch as and fingers find each other over the baby.

Really she's a blob right now, but she's shifting the universe around her already. Is this about their tiny being? Connection tugging them closer because it's already forged? Everything between them pulls, and Laura doesn't have the strength to resist.

Why should she? Why would--

Michael holds her cheek in her hand. "You're worried."

"Aren't you?"

"Some, new things are intimidating by nature, but that's the journey, isn't it?"

Michael's journeys end in hope and happiness, connection and wonder. Laura's journeys have been much lonelier, to the point where she can only have this because it's an accident, because she wouldn't dare. Couldn't. It's irresponsible.

Michael is beyond duty and responsibility. Michael took her beyond the galaxy and brought them home. Maybe this is something they can handle together.

"Journeys are lonely things."

"They don't have to be." Michael's hand toys with the hem of her sweater and they kiss again, tentative and sure, shy and enamored. Releasing her mouth, Michael slips from her lap, holding out her hand. "Come to bed."

Barriers contain, then fall. She could decline, retreat; protect herself, but it's too late for that. She wants, not just Michael, but the domesticity, the comfort and partnership. Her relationships have always been so fleeting, a handful of nights together before returning to reality until the next time. Michael won't be her escape, she'll be her universe.

Laura takes her hand and stands, following her towards the bed room. There's no denying how much she wants her, not merely the physical moment together, but Michael, and all the wonderful that comes with her, but it's selfish, profoundly so. She pauses, nearly in Michael's bedroom. "I can't do this casually."

Turning back to her, Michael reaches up, smiling. "And you think I can?"

Laura kisses her fingertips, touching the wedding ring that belongs to them, and doesn't. "I don't think I can do this without falling in love with you."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Michael—"

"Why wouldn't I want you to love me?"

"I'm not good at it."

"Being loved isn't a skill."

"My past relationships would disagree."

Standing on her tiptoes, Michael kisses her. "Then pick it up as we go." Resting her hands on her shoulders, Michael winks. "Maybe I can teach you a bridge language."

Walking into the bedroom, mouth on Michael's, she lets go of caution. When she and Michael have argued in the past she's been wrong, needed to shift her perspective, and she's better for it.

The quietest part of her worries that this will be over too soon, because no one she loves can stay with her, but that hasn't stopped her from loving. Grief she carries so much easier than love.

Michael eases her sweater up and off over her hair, exposing the smooth skin of her arms and a simple black tank top underneath. She takes a step towards the bed, guiding Laura closer as together they remove her oversized sweater. Her own camisole is silky, pale blue, not Starfleet and uniform like Michael's. Michael's fingers run over it, up along sore breasts and down to rest on their new little passenger.

"What makes you think I need sex to fall in love with you?"

Laura has no retort for that, and Michael's mouth finds her neck in a way that derails her breath. She shivers, reaching, tugging, and then Michael's tank is off and Laura has most of her beautiful brown skin beneath her fingers. Chasing up Michael's spine, she slips the clasp of her bra open, eases that off of her shoulders, trading kisses as she waits to cup Michael's breasts with her hands. They're heavy enough to fill her hands. Running her hands over her nipples makes Michael sighs into her neck. Heat runs down, settling in her belly, coiling as Michael eases up her camisole.

Michael's much more careful with her bra, but even her gentle fingers ache on Laura's heavy breasts.

"Sore?"

Laura laughs, holding Michael's hands against her chest. "I had no idea."

"Come here." Michael eases them down to the bed, slipping off her trousers. She toys with Laura's thighs, running her hands over her skin. Her leg slips between Laura's thighs as she crawls up to kiss her. They fall into each other, exploring as they kiss. Michael's so distracted by her neck that Laura slides her hand down her firm stomach, searching her way down. She teases, slipping between Michael's thighs and breaking her concentration.

"You're in a hurry."

"You're going to make it impossible for me to think."

"I am?" Michael kisses down her chest, lingering over her belly. "Why do you think that?"

"You're you."

Michael rolls to her side, returning to kiss her mouth. "And that means I'm good at this?"

Parting Michael's thighs, she runs her fingers lower, deeper, and Michael's gasp of pleasure has so much promise.

"I never thought of sex as quantifiable." Michael moans into her neck, fighting to find words. "It was an unknown but not—"

"Is that all right?"

"Yes, fuck, your hands—"

That's a good sign, and watching, listening, to Michael fall to pieces with her fingers inside of her is far sweeter and so much more meaningful than her work. She forgets about the vulnerability of sex, how much she loses herself in it, falls head over heels for her partners. Laura tries so hard to keep her focus on duty and the Federation that she loses little things, like heat and the pleasure of someone panting into her neck.

Michael. The most exquisitely complex, competent, empathetic person. Their minds were so happy to make them partners and parents and the tiny details - the way her eyes go incredible dark and how she laughs before she orgasms - sink deep into her memory. When she loses Michael, Laura will remember this.

If Michael leaves her any capability of thought. Her smile has that explorer's hunger, and Michael starts kissing her way down Laura's stomach again and when she pauses between her thighs that smug grin speaks volumes.

Of course she'll break her. Laura knew that the moment they kissed, but she - Prophets help her - Michael's mouth is on her thigh and she shouldn't squirm, but Michael grabs her hips.

Her file mentioned Vulcan-like determination and focus and Laura's seen it, admired it, hated it but between her thighs it's consuming.

Michael's absolute dedication to bringing Laura to orgasm whites out her thoughts, silencing the worry she can never force away. It's just Michael, and the braids against her skin and the rising heat in the back of her mind.

She balls her hands into Michael's sheets, gasping in release as Michael's mouth destroys her senses. Her eyes sting, and climax leaves tears on her eyelashes. Catching her breath takes a long time and Michael traces her skin on the way up, like she's building a map.

Michael pauses, then kisses her ribs. "You have a tattoo."

"It's home."

Michael reaches up, resting her hand on Laura's chest. "That's Bajor?"

Of course she knows it. "Where I did most of my flying."

Michael rests on her elbow, studying the tattoo "This is a Starfleet ship."

"What?"

"Your tattoo has a Starfleet ship. Almost looks Crossfield class."

"There's no ship on my tattoo." Could that have changed too?

"Zora, can you project her tattoo?"

"Of course, Captain."

Michael flops on the pillow beside her, then kisses her shoulder. "Don't worry, Zora doesn't watch intimate acts."

"We have had extensive discussions in regards to privacy, Madam President."

Laura's known many AIs, none as complex as Zora, of course, but it's nice to know she doesn't watch. That could be—

The stylized stars of the Bajoran system appear overhead, just as they're supposed to be, but the silhouette of a ship nestles into them.

Michael rests on her shoulder then smirks. "I didn't know you were so fond of my ship."

"I didn't--" Laura starts but it seems she married *Discovery* as surely as she married Michael in that warp-thought bubble. "I did."

"It's beautiful."

Laura states at it then sits up, studying Michael's naked skin until she finds Michael's tattoo on her ribs. "You have one too."

"I do?" Michael's smug smile turns into a chuckle. "I've never had a tattoo before, you certainly had an impact."

"Zora, can you project Michael's tattoo as well?"

Another glowing star system joins Laura's, hovering overhead. Laura doesn't recognize it until Michael turns it and grins. "That's Ni'Var, and Earth."

It's the same style as Laura's, clearly meant to match, and a little silhouette of *Discovery* is part of Michael's tattoo as well.

"Our ships match."

"Looks like it's home." Michael turns to kiss Laura's tattoo again, smiling. "No one's tattooed my ship on them before."

Blushing hot, Laura traces the identical ship on Michael's soft skin. How badly did they both want to love to build so much together without even being conscious of it? Could *Discovery* become home? Could she belong here? Not just in Michael's bed, but with her crew, traveling through space?

Space is calming. Listening to warp, feeling the deck: all of being on a ship feels right. This is Michael's ship, and it's under Laura's skin already.

Michael smiles up at her, lovestruck in a way Laura can't even process. No one looks at her like that.

"Your subconscious must be very persuasive."

"I'm diplomatic."

"Very." Michael pulls her back down, kissing her firmly.

This is just as much of a dream as the shuttle, but it's too pleasant to wish away. She adores this too much already, and it'll leave such scars when Laura loses this. She should pull back, protect her fragile heart, but she's in love.

She's hopelessly, foolishly, entwined, and the dream runs deep through her heart. This is why she tries to hard not to want, not to let herself be consumed by feeling. It'll destroy her when it falls apart, but it's already too late.

---

Admiral Vance is her fourth meeting, after the Vice President, her science advisors and a long subspace call with the ambassador who took her place at the trade conference she never made it to. Discovering a dangerous spatial anomaly is a good excuse to miss something important, but warp bubbles frothing the fabric of space is a whole new problem.

Her science advisors are excellent, but she misses the way Michael and her crew explain things. Headquarters is home, for now, but the deck doesn't have that funny antique hum beneath her boots. Rubbing her forehead, Laura tries to ignore the foggy sensation between her eyes. She slept well in Michael's bed - in her arms - better than she has in weeks, but she's tired. Dr. Culber warned her, amongst his many warnings, that she'd tire easily, but this is worse than she imagined.

Months of this sensation of being drained, followed by months of other little ailments, exhaustion, sneezing, nausea, and the inevitable itching as her skin changes. She wants the tiny blob of life within her, that's absolute, but facing the endless meetings and hypos and late nights Laura wonders again how she'll manage it.

Dr. Culber's solution to her sneezing works, and she hasn't since she left *Discovery*, but the dizziness is stubborn, and he said it would increase her nausea, but there's no danger for the hitchhiker, that's what matters. She'll be fine. She'll make do.

Vance knows when he walks in, Michael's told him when she briefed the senior Starfleet officers about the warp bubbles scattered through the galaxy, but she has to put words to it as well. He stands in front of her desk, hiding a smile she's only seen a few times.

His happiness shouldn't surprise her. He's so close to his family, so thrilled to have his wife and daughter back at headquarters with him.

"Admiral."

"Don't get up, please." Sitting down across from her, his smile could power a small shuttle. He sets a box on the desk, sliding it across. "From my wife."

"Thank you."

Nodding, he rests his hands in his lap. "Here we were, trying to find a quiet mission for you."

Chuckling, she looks down at her desk before meeting his eyes. "It's not all—"

"Allow me to offer my congratulations, Laura. It's a hell of a journey, but worth every moment."

That smile of his is as nearly as bright as Michael's, and she envies them both their optimism. Michael will be with her when she can, of course, she'd never ignore the responsibility of a child, but Michael has her ship, and duties, and the new warp bubble problem needs *Discovery*.

"I feel like the Vice President's barely had time to get over the last time I left her in charge."

"This is for a better reason, a child is a gift."

"I didn't know anomalies brought gifts."

"Space is a place of wonders, it's about time you got something good out of it."

Laira allows her hand to rest on the baby. As difficult as she'll be, she is a gift, and Laira's grateful. Beneath the exhaustion and the strange, hot sensation on the back of her neck, she might even be happy, but she misses Michael and already hates herself for the selfishness of that.

"I'm assigning *Discovery* to lead the warp bubble task force."

Nodding, she lowers her eyes back to her desk, calling up the next thing she needs to finish. "They can handle it." Michael will hold the galaxy together, as always, and the fame of *Discovery* will go far towards settling nerves while they deal with the latest problem.

"Indeed they can." Vance stands, smoothing his jacket. "I'll reschedule the security briefing for tomorrow."

"The one at fourteen hundred? That's not necessary."

"We'll do it tomorrow, ma'am." He doesn't patronize her by insisting that she needs a break, or that it's not important. Not fussing is his kindness, and she smiles in thanks.

"Did you see Captain Burnham?"

"Yes, ma'am. She's still debriefing."

She's not gone yet. She'll come say goodbye before she leaves with *Discovery*. Laira will have that at least.

"Tomorrow then, Admiral."

He nods again, his smile lingering as he leaves. "Madam President."

Laira opens the box from Ronia. She's always so thoughtful. Some kind of candy fills the box, spicy smelling, and she pops one in her mouth. She usually has ginger mixed with other things, not alone, and it's intense. She nearly spits it out into her hand, but it's pleasant after a moment. Maybe it even helps. Dr. Culber wrote a list of things that could help with nausea and sneezing, drawing from as many cultural backgrounds that he and Zora could reference. It's an extensive list and she looked at it briefly without reading it.

She was fine this morning. Sneezing over breakfast with Michael was funny, not frustrating, and she ate without worrying about the creeping tightness resting uncomfortably in her stomach now. Is there a time aspect to this? Does it wait for afternoon and evening? Is it because she's finished more of her work and the meetings she's trying to schedule across the quadrant are more tedious than demanding.

Maybe it was the company she enjoyed, or the mess of hormones coursing through her body gave her a break because it'll be weeks before she sees Michael again. *Discovery* needs her captain, and the galaxy needs *Discovery* and any foolish thoughts Laira had otherwise were selfish, and must be set aside. She wanted this, and she'll have to deal with it alone until Michael comes back. Last night, wonderful as it was, isn't the norm. That's not her life.

The door opens silently.

"I'll wait for lunch, Ms. Vriga, thank you." Her youngest aide only arrived from Bajor last month, and though she's years older than Laira was when she flew cargo ships, she seems so young.

Vriga smiles nervously through the holographic schedule. "I'm sorry, Madam President, your lunch meeting is here."

"I don't have a lunch meeting."

"You do, ma'am." Vriga's smile loses some of the tension, and there's a light in her eyes Laira's never seen before. "Captain Burnham is here."

Of course, Michael's stardom would reach to her aides. Laira's going to have to find a way to get used to it.

Sighing, Laira rests her hands on her lap. She's been dreading this goodbye all morning. "Send her in."

Vriga disappears, and Michael walks in, smiling, confident, gorgeous Michael. Headquarters is far from a star, but it's like Michael brings the sun with her, wherever she goes.

Michael waits for Vriga to leave, sets down the bag she's carrying and walks to the desk. "I think I was interrogated less when I was on trial for mutiny."

"Oh?" Laira looks at her hands, fidgeting with a piece of lint on her jacket. "That's unfortunate."

"The warp bubble was easy enough to explain, after the tenth time I think I could walk security through the theory of it in my sleep, but dating you is a little more difficult."

"So I've heard."

"And perhaps if we were just talking about a few dinner dates I wouldn't have had all of Federation intelligence on the other side of the table, but explaining our little hitchhiker wasn't a coup d'état attempt on my part took awhile." Michael circles the desk, leaning on it by Laira's chair. "How was your morning?"

"Fine."



"I see." Michael rests her hands on the desk, already at ease. "Nothing but meetings."

"At least the last one was Admiral Vance."

"I saw him earlier."

"You did?"

"He handles transfers."

"Transfers?"

Puzzled, Michael tilts her head. "I told you."

"I know I—" Laura meets her eyes. "Go on."

"Saru and I needed to work out who he should promote as first officer, and Vance suggested—"

"First officer?"

"Of *Discovery*."

"Is Saru leaving?"

Michael leans down, kissing her forehead. "No."

None of that makes sense, so Laura stares at her, helpless until Michael finishes her thought.

"We decided Nilsson was the best choice, for the moment, and that lets him bring in a new bridge officer, shake things up a little."

Why is Saru choosing officers for Michael's ship?

"They're heading out in a moment." Michael tilts her head towards the viewport behind them. "I thought we could watch them jump and then get lunch."

"*Discovery* is your ship."

Michael offers her hand to help her up. "She's Saru's for the next few months."

"What?"

"I've been reassigned."

Standing in the middle of this conversation was a terrible idea, and her head swims. The stars outside the view port turn into bright little lines and Michael's hands grab her arms.

"Hey."

"It's all right."

"You're the color of a DOT." Michael touches her cheek, then stands on her toes to kiss her. "Come sit."

Laura rarely uses the sofa by the view port. Her desk is fine for work, and it's rare that people remain in her office long enough to need to sit somewhere other than the chairs in front of her desk. Michael walks them back and they sit, which is more of a relief than Laura would like to admit.

"How's your stomach?"

"It's fine."

Michael touches her cheek, then kisses her gently. "That great, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Outside the viewer, blue lightning crackles outward from *Discovery*, and she spins before vanishing into the light.

"They're going to Ni'Var first, picking up some scientists to help understand the warp bubbles left behind by the isolytic explosion and the DMA."

"You're not with your crew."

"That's what I came to tell you." Michael taps her badge and her orders appear in front of them, floating in golden light. "I've been transferred. Scientific and technical aide to the Federation's office of the executive, highest security clearance, effective immediately."

"That's my office."

"It is."

"You did that?"

"Admiral Vance agreed."

"Of course he did."

"Unless you want to explain to the Federation member worlds how a static subspace warp bubble can be safely dissipated through the dynamic subspace inversion possible with a displacement hub spore drive."

"I'd rather not."

Michael raises her eyebrows. "Thought so." She strokes Laura's cheek, then kisses her forehead. "Lie down."

"What?"

"You feel terrible."

"I don't—"

"Uh-huh."

Vruga and Vance didn't say anything, but they wouldn't, they're both far too polite. Laura hasn't throw up yet, but even lying down, it seems like a more frustrating possibility.

"I was fine."

"And now you're not."

She won't reply to that, but Michael shifts the display with her hand. "The circadian rhythms of hormones are different for everyone. Maybe yours are worse in the afternoons."

"How quaint." Shutting her eyes helps a little, though it might be the warmth of Michael's presence.

"We'll work it out."

"Says the person who isn't nauseated."

"What's why I'm here."

"I thought it was for warp bubbles."

"Anything you need."

"You can't just—"

Michael strokes her forehead. "I did. Also, there's a shortage of available living quarters, so I'm moving in."

"A shortage?"

"An allocation problem, I'm sure."

"Of course." That would be Vance meddling, or Kovich. She wouldn't put it past either of them. Laura opens her eyes again and Michael's soft smile hovers over her.

"This is what you want? No starship, no crew, endless meetings—" Laura pauses, wincing. Her stomach roils hard, like she's pushed her old ship past the limits of its ancient inertial dampeners. "You hate politics."

"Maybe I care about a politician."

Laura would argue with her, but it's becoming more likely that she'll vomit with every passing moment. Leaving the sofa, she heads for the bathroom, with Michael half a step behind.

Michael kneels beside her on the floor, all calm. "I knew you had a fancy bathroom."

"That doesn't—" Laura stops, and Michael rests a cool hand on her forehead.

"I'm sorry it's like this."

"Not—" Swallowing holds her stomach down for now, but it feels inevitable.

"I told you I could transfer to headquarters."

They had that conversation a lifetime ago this morning, but it wasn't going to lead to this. This is illogical and nonsensical and there's no reason for Michael to be here, on the shining deck of her bathroom floor. Why would she chose this? Duty would have been enough. They committed to the child, not each other. This is idiotic.

"At least your hair's up."

Laira's weak little laugh makes Michael smile, but her stomach's worse. There must be somewhere Michael's meant to be, something she's supposed to be doing, but she stays. Michael's hand finds hers, slipping into her fingers.

"We're doing this together."

"I think I can throw up on my own."

Michael kisses her cheek. "But you don't have to."

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Tilly catch up on everything that's new, and Tilly stays for dinner.

#### *Michael*

"You hate politics." Tilly passes over another espresso and raises her eyebrows over her croissant. "Remember? You think it's all opaque maneuvering."

"Not entirely."

"Uh-huh." Tilly takes a bite, looking up and down Michael's new jacket. "You're out of uniform."

"Dress uniform for special occasions, jacket for every day." Michael wriggles a little, trying to get used to the feel of it. It's less practical than her Captain's uniform, more structured somehow. She hasn't worn anything other than a Starfleet uniform or her courier leathers for her work before, and jackets like Laira's are very different. "It's not bad."

"That color blue is the President's blue."

"Oh?" Michael smiles a little, letting Tilly unravel the mystery. "She gets a color?"

"She does and her aides do, so really it's like her whole office has a shade of blue to themselves." Tilly pokes Michael's arm. "This one."

"I am assigned to her office."

"So you said: the president's office." Tilly raises her eyebrows. "Well that's a change from when you wanted her off the ship to never bother you again."

"I didn't."

"You did."

Michael laughs and nods. "Fine, I did."

"So now you work for her?"

"The president's office needed an advisor who understood the damage to subspace caused by the DMA and the isolytic explosion, someone who could explain a warp bubble to planetary governments."

"I read the general report on the your shuttle incident." Tilly sets down her coffee. "Static warp bubbles are dangerous."

"We were very lucky." Nodding, Michael raises her eyebrows. They were incredibly lucky.

"And you had *Discovery*, and the spore drive. Most people don't."

"We're trying to ensure everyone's ability to detect them."

"And that means you have to work with the president?" Tilly's smile has a playful hint to it. So she suspects something.

"I can explain the spore drive."

"So can Stamets."

"He can't be diplomatic."

Tilly laughs, taking another bite of her croissant. "Okay, that is true."

"Saru needs a chance to be a captain, I need—"

"A break?"

Michael fidgets with her coffee, then takes a sip. "Yeah, I think I do."

"Being on the same station as me will certainly help your mood."

Michael smiles back at her, so grateful to have this time with her. "That it should."

"Not that you need it. I haven't seen you this happy since you made captain." Tilly's eyes shine, and there's something there. She's fishing.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you're glowing."

"I am not." Michael's not the one that glowing should be for, but so far their little hitchhiker makes Laira incredibly pale. Hopefully today's easier. Hugh said the her hormones might stabilize, but even in this century, pregnancy's different for everyone. Forcing down her sneezing might be causing more side effects than Laira realizes, because she's been so much worse after that wears off. It's still all so new that it could be this is what pregnancy looks like for her, or her hormones are still stabilizing. Michael's instincts suggest caution, while Laira pushes ahead.

"You might think so..." Tilly lets that trail off as she stands up, picking up her dishes for the replicator. "Come on, show me your new fancy quarters that need decorating."

"How do you know they need decorating?"

Tilly puts her dishes into the replicator and brushes her hands clean. "You are good at so many things, decorated captain, Hero of the Federation, but decorating is not one of them, and I have a free afternoon."

Placing her own dishes in the replicator, Michael nods. "You have a point."

"I have so many good ones."

Michael tilts her head towards the lift, down the corridor. "And I've missed all of them."

They talk together, laughing about nothing and stories of Tilly's cadets. When the lift closes them in, Tilly puts her hands behind her back, standing at rest.

"It was the president, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"The report about your shuttle mission and the warp bubble. It says you were trapped with a 'Federation official', that was her."

Michael looks up at the ceiling of the lift, hiding her smile. "Yes."

"And then she seduced you?"

Michael turns, eyes wide. "She seduced me?"

"Brought you over to the diplomatic corp with jackets and meetings meetings meetings."

"She needs help with this."

"And you volunteered immediately."

"I did."

Tilly makes a little noise in the back of her throat, a lot like Laira, if Michael thinks about it. "So you're taking a break from commanding your starship, that you love more than anything, and helping the President, who used to drive you crazy, and you voluntarily agreed to do politics for work, do I have all that right?"

Michael rolls her eyes. "It's not as weird as it sounds."

"Ah, well, do explain it to me."

"It's complicated."

Tilly bounces on her feet, looks down, then dives in. "Uh-huh, so is this because you're having a baby?"

"What?" Michael turns to her, staring as the lift opens and the door goes ignored by both of them.

"You're happy, like, really happy, and you're making huge changes in your life, taking yourself out of the field. The report said you experienced pieces of another timeline, like the bubble read your minds and altered reality. I know you've thought about having children —"

Stepping forward into the empty, highly secure corridor that leads to Laira's quarters, Michael reaches back, guiding Tilly out. For a moment they stand there, lit by the starlight, hands entwined.

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

Michael smiles, slowly letting go of all the worries she held back. "I am."

Tilly reaches for her belly, starting to laugh. "I knew it, it had to be that you wouldn't just--"

Tilly's hand lands in her belly and Michael covers it with hers. "She's not here, Tilly, she's in a meeting."

"What?"

"My baby, she's in a meeting for at least another hour."

"What? How? What are you talking about?"

Michael holds Tilly's hand in both of hers. "I- we- are having a baby, but I'm not carrying her."

"We? You and I? We'd have a great looking baby."

"And so intelligent too."

Tilly hugs her, wrapping her up tight in her arms. "I'd have a baby with you in a moment, but where's yours? Who's carrying her, someone here?"

Michael laughs, then releases Tilly. "Come on, you'll get it when you see our quarters."

"You moved in already?"

"It made sense."

"Oh you're in love."

"I--" Michael pauses, hand above the controls for Laira's - their - quarters. If she's not there already, she's very close. Laira's precious to her enough that she's always in the back of her mind, and living with her is a logical extension of their relationship.

And she wants to see her. Not just for the baby and the support Laira needs, but her, and the way she can't resist any word puzzle Michael puts in front of her, or how she touches Michael's back when she walks by.

Love snuck up on her with Book, surprised her when they were suddenly in deeply, no longer friends, but something else wonderful.

This time, Michael's caring comes like the sunrise, hinting on the horizon, as if falling in love with Laira will be the dawn. She sees it in the back of her mind, reaching across everything.

"I might be in love."

"Because of the baby?"

"Because of her. The baby helps, she's definitely a catalyst." Michael opens the door and leads Tilly in to the President's palatial quarters. The rooms are huge, the view of ships passing is exquisite, and the walls are empty. Laira's presidential suite is like a wonderful hotel room: beautiful and soulless. She's been traveling, of course, and just having enough to fill the drawers in the bedroom would be so much.

But she's been president almost a year, and the rooms are still bare.

Tilly whistles, wandering from room to room. "I thought your *Discovery* quarters were big. These are--"

"I know."

"And your baby, that meeting she's in, it's pretty important, isn't it?"

"Resource allocation."

"For the entire Federation."

"You could say that."

Tilly throws a pillow at her. "What the fuck, Michael, Madam Federation is having your baby? She has her in the meeting and you, fuck, Michael really?"

"It happened very fast."

"After you saved the galaxy together, of course, after you became her go-to ship, her favorite captain."

"I'm not--" Maybe that's true, now that Michael thinks about it. "The anomaly changed things."

"It made a baby."

Michael taps her badge, then sends Tilly the full report. "You'll need to be--"

"Got it." Tilly picks up one of the cushions with the Federation seal from the couch and hugs it. "Your baby's going to be so cute."

"Almost as good as you and me."

"Close, but Michael, she's so tall."

"Shut up."

"Seriously, your baby's going to be like ten and she'll be taller than you."

"That's not true."

"It's true."

Arguing ends in laughter and replicating sparkling wine and while the bubbles dance in her mouth, Michael tells the story, all of it now, not just the safe parts, but how Laira couldn't stop sneezing on the shuttle, how afraid she was to voice any of it, how they thought the baby would just go back to another timeline, and how destroyed they were when they thought she was gone.

Tilly understands faster than anyone, elaborating with warp theory Michael doesn't fully understand herself.

"These static warp bubbles are so dangerous, Michael. You could have thought up another DMA or made a new Terran Empire."

Pulling the ring out from under her shirt, Michael removes her necklace to show Tilly. "Luckily, all I came up with was getting married."

"You didn't. You did, obviously you did. Michael--" Tilly grabs the ring and studies it. "This is beautiful."

"I must have been thinking about--"

"The stability you wanted but never got in your last relationship--"

"I didn't want to marry Book--"

"Sure, sure." Tilly pulls up the report, reading it over her glass. "And she didn't want your baby."

"We both did."

"Of course you did. The idea is one thing, having it right there--" Tilly pauses, finishes her wine and heads back to the replicator. "Is she okay?"

"The baby?"

"The president, your- well - at least your girlfriend, your maybe more than a girlfriend."

"She's exhausted."

Tilly touches her shoulder, hands back the ring and smiles, all gentle. "It'll get better. Give it time. Making a person is hard."

"Right now she's a blob."

"Still hard to make."

They laugh, Michael gets more wine, and they beam over Michael's things from storage. It's a start, but Laira's quarters are huge, and they'll need more of everything. Laira must have things that aren't here, pieces of art from Federation member worlds, or something. Tilly has the idea that Michael can cover a wall with old holos, pictures she took years ago, centuries past, and put them up. One of the walls of the living space turns into a shifting holographic ode to Langkawi, because Philippa was right, there are few places as beautiful. Michael covers another wall in Ni'Var, old and new, and with Tilly's help they collect holos of Bajor, Cardassia, and space lines from all over the galaxy so at least the shiny white walls are no longer bare.

They strip the bed together, Tilly laughing that it's the softest, bounciest bed she's ever sat on and Michael tossing the sheets into the recycler.

"I didn't know sheets could end up feeling that stiff."

"Run them through the auto-laundry enough times and the fabric starts to change texture." Tilly pulls pillowcases off and folds the fancy blue blankets off to the side. "The Burn really changed things for them. If I tear my uniform, I replicate a new one. I always have. Here, they might mend it over and over until the seams don't hold because it's less energy. I have cadets who come to the Academy with one crate of things, and everything in the crate is worn beyond repair but it's their whole life."

The war touched all of them, changed a generation back home, but this went on, and on. They had the technology to make new sheets, new blankets, but not the power. So they made do.

"Laira puts a vitamin supplement in her coffee, every morning. We have one of the best replicators in the galaxy, and the database is huge, but she grew up drinking bad coffee from a somewhat faulty replicator that didn't always make b-vitamins and d-vitamins the right way so she hates the taste of coffee without it."

Tilly takes half of the new red sheets from Michael's hands and nods. "It's the little things I didn't realize were trauma, but you see them everywhere. Even the instructors I work with, officers who grew up on Starfleet ships where they had enough. They're careful, almost skittish."

They make the bed together, tucking in the sheets Michael's accustomed to, soft and welcoming. Hopefully Laira doesn't mind the color. She looks good in everything, and nothing, anyway, and Tilly picks up on Michael's distraction like a homing beacon.

"So the sex is good then?"

"We're not talking about that."

"Really good."

Michael tosses a pillow Tilly's way and sighs. "It is good."

"Even with—"

"She's best in the morning, so we—"

"Have a little fun before meetings? Send her off happy for the good of the Federation? You do your duty?"

"Anything else?"

"Call her ma'am right before—"

"I beam you into space, you terrible, awful, person."

Laughing, Tilly drops to the bed and closes her eyes. "It's pretty comfortable, bet you could have a great time."

Michael lies down beside her, folding her hands. "It's still very new."

"And?"

"And she's incredible."

Tilly reaches over to pat her shoulder. "That's what I wanted you to say."

"You know it's hard for me to talk about."

"You Vulcan."

"I'll talk about sex every seven years."

"Well, let me know when that happens."

Michael rolls to her side, her face flushing warm. "It's different."

"Usually is with someone new."

"I like it."

"And?"

Michael shuts her eyes. "She definitely likes it."

"Good, that's the whole Federation you're going down on before breakfast."

"I hate you."

Tilly leans close, then sits up. "Oh you love me, so much, and you missed me."

Michael hugs her knees for a moment, then leaves the bed, following Tilly to the next task. There's still a lot to do.

Later, when they're nearly done finding places for the crate of Michael's belongings from Discovery, they stand next to Philippa's telescope, studying the rooms.

"Does she get home late often?"

"My baby?"

"Your baby's - what - entourage?"

Michael laughs and hands Tilly a Vulcan carving to hang. "Laura's schedule is brutal; she'll be home soon though. Dr. Kovich ends meetings when she looks green."

"Remind me not to be the one who gets pregnant in the warp bubble."

Michael laughs, sharing her head. "We could switch, Hugh said he could do it, but she wants to carry the baby."

"Some people do."

"I wouldn't mind, I don't think it would make me as happy."

"You might be less sick."

Resting her head on Tilly's shoulder a moment, Michael sighs. "I absolutely would be."

"That's not what it's about though, is it?"

"There's technology to gestate the baby externally, but—"



"She wants the baby to be safe." Tilly gets it in a way Michael doesn't.

"She fell in love with her so quickly."

"Does she have family?"

"Laura?" Michael snuggles closer and shakes her head. "Her mother's family is on Earth, but she had never met them. Her parents are gone, grandparents too."

Tilly hugs her close. "Let me guess. No siblings. No one she's mentioned, just work, maybe a friend or two, and she doesn't talk about her exes."

"Yeah."

"They're so isolated."

"She has us now."

"Assuming your crew will adopt your pregnant girlfriend?" Tilly pretends to tease, but that's not even a question.

"Are you saying you won't?"

"Oh no, I love her already I'm just slightly terrified because she's the president of like...everything and the only thing that makes me feel even remotely qualified to talk to her is thinking about you making terrible jokes in bed."

"I don't make terrible jokes in bed."

"Too busy with your mouth?"

Michael's face burns and she releases Tilly to glare at her just as the transporter pops in the other room, filling Laura's ornate living room with light.

Tilly's eyes widen, and she nearly drops the piece of Vulcan wood carving she was supposed to be hanging on the wall near the viewport. "Did she hear that?"

"Michael? Are you here?" Laura's voice is soft, tired, and it would almost be more fun if she.

"I'm here, Tilly's with me."

"Do you want me to-" Tilly whispers, miming beaming out.

"Of course not." Michael shakes her head. "I want you to meet each other, you stay for dinner." She pats Tilly's shoulder and leaves her behind. "How was your meeting?"

Laura sneezes once, then again and that swallows her reply. That good then.

Michael rounds the corner into the living room. Tilly follows a few steps behind. Laura's the president, after all, her quarters might be Michael's when she's not home, but now they're hers. Even if they look like a well decorated hotel room.

"I see you got-" Laura pauses, then sneezes again into her elbow. She sinks into the sofa like her legs are shaky, and Michael aches for her.

"My things from *Discovery*."

Laura nods, shutting her eyes. Michael wanted to go to the last meeting, but it was only Laura, Kovich, and some Federation intelligence; she insisted she'd be fine.

"I did."

"And it's good, because there's really a lot of space for things in your quarters. You should get some more things." Tilly touches Michael's shoulder, then silently asks if she should do something.

Michael shakes her head for the moment, reaching for the sleeve of Laura's jacket. Their fingers touch, then their hands and Laura's cool fingers slip into hers.

"Long day?"

"I'm fine."

Tilly makes a little sound that might be disagreement, but she's too polite to comment on how pale Laura is. "I'll get tea."

Tugging Laura's sleeve, Michael starts easing off her jacket, guiding it off of her arm, then her shoulder. "Should I even ask if you're hungry?"

Laura's little hum is closer to a moan.

"Okay, we'll wait."

"No, no—"

Michael touches her knees, crouching down. "It's all right. We're not in a hurry."

"You shouldn't—" Laura opens her eyes reluctantly, blinking before she focuses on Michael. "It's worse when I sit down."

"You pay attention to it when you sit down, that doesn't mean it's worse."

Tilly returns, holding a mug of tea. She trades Michael for Laura's jacket. "I always had this kind of ginger tea before exams, because I'd drink so much espresso I couldn't have anything else."

Laura's half-smiles are somehow all the more precious, and Michael wants to hold all of them in her thoughts. "Is this something you tell your students?"

"Making it through finals without destroying your stomach lining is a skill."

That earns another smile, a brighter one. "No wonder they wanted you for the Academy," Laura says.

Michael kisses her forehead. Laura's skin's cool, slightly damp with sweat. She's pushing too hard. Hugh's still trying to help her find a balance between her symptoms and suppressing medications, and Laura's own hormones are still trying to find some kind of equilibrium. Their little hitchhiker is safe, and perfectly healthy, but Laura's body isn't hers alone, and it's a rough transition. Rougher than she admits, probably even to herself.

"At least tomorrow's schedule is empty."

Laura squeezes her hand, nods once, then stops moving, her eyes closing again.

"You're dizzy."

That hum at least is affirmative, almost apologetic. Laura leans into her, relaxing a little against Michael's shoulder. "When the hypo wears off I start sneezing again and everything is so--"

"Confusing because it's like your inner ear's been tossed into one of Keyla's donuts?"

Laura chuckles, wincing a little. "I could handle that better."

"Bet you could."

Tilly's eyes are wide and bright, and her smile has all the energy Laura's lacks. Raising her eyebrows, she teases with a look.

Michael rolls her eyes in return. Tilly finding them cute is a discussion for later.

"What can I do?" Tilly asks, sitting down across from them. "Does anything help?"

"Not so far, but thank you," Laura says lightly, like it's simply a dense word puzzle, not a mess of frustrating symptoms that make her already complicated job even more difficult to manage.

"I- we were hoping that taking tomorrow off might help us find some solutions."

"You get days off? Because I didn't know your office, you I guess, did that."

"I haven't been good at it."

"Laura—" Michael starts to chide her, but Laura smiles, beams really, in a way that makes Tilly's eyebrows shoot upward. "What?"

She lifts her head wearily from Michael's shoulder, but her eyes meet Michael's. "You know, you're the only one here who says my name right."

"She studies," Tilly says, winking. "A lot, Michael studies a lot."

"Names are important." Michael kisses her forehead again. "Laura is the Cardassian pronunciation, your name is Cardassian."

Tilly shrugs. "You know, all of headquarters says Laura, the way Admiral Vance does, when we say your name, which we don't because you're the president and we are so not a first name basis, but that's how he says it, so that's how I thought it was."

Laura chuckles, finding Tilly's arm with her fingers. Tilly jumps, nearly flying backwards. "I might throw up in front of you, so we're probably closer than you think."

"So we're really jumping to that stage with like, Spore Drive friendship?"

"I'm sorry to rush you."

"Michael hasn't even thrown up in front of me yet."

"Well then—"

Tilly takes Laura's hand that startled her so badly before and squeezes it. "Do crackers help? I'd get so sick to my stomach before big

exams, I'd live on these crackers from Risa."

Michael tilts her head towards the dining area. "Replicator's over there. Hugh said eating might help."

Swallowing, Laura stares down, her free hand on her chest. "Right now, I never want to eat again."

Michael taps her comm, sending Hugh's list to Tilly at the replicator. "Hugh put together a list of things to try, some of them might not be bad."

Laura hums again, acknowledging that the list exists but without much optimism. Michael can't blame her. Yesterday afternoon, and evening, they tried to navigate her nausea. Whether its purely hormonal or if its exacerbated by the medication she took to suppress her sneezing neither of them know. It's still so new, and Laura's had so little time to prepare. The medication to hold back her sneezing makes a mess of her inner ear, which in turn spirals into nausea.

Beginning a serious relationship curled up in bed is one thing, sharing that with bathroom floors and holding Laura's head in her lap on the sofa is sweetly different. There's plenty of time to talk: even if some of it is just Michael telling stories of the galaxy before the Burn, or her adventures as a courier. When the sudden changes stop hitting her like an asteroid belt, Laura can reciprocate.

Tilly returns with a tray of food, different crackers, plates of melon and fruit from planets Michael hasn't visited yet. "I've heard mint can help, and Commander Khan at the Academy really likes Deka tea, then there's Phyrellean ginger, and Earth ginger, so I'll be back." She waves up a programmable matter table from the floor and sets the tray down. "Just a minute."

Picking up a cracker, Michael hands it over. "Hugh's list is thorough."

Laura holds the cracker like it has a chance of exploding in her hand. "So is Tilly."

"She likes you."

"I can see why you're friends."

Laughing, Michael nuzzles her head. "It's good to have Tilly so close. I've missed her since she left *Discovery*."

"I'm glad you get her back."

"Being here is good for me," Michael starts, picking up one of the crackers. "It'll let me slow things down a little."

"Tell the walls to stop shifting, while you're slowing things down."

"That bad?"

"I've been less dizzy standing on the hull of a barrel-rolling freighter."

"I'm sorry."

Laura finds her hand, tugging it towards her belly. It's still hard for her to put words to how much she adores their new life form, but the way her eyes shine says so much. "I'm not."

She'll push through, of course, Laura's been through injuries that make Michael wince and outbreaks of diseases Michael's never seen, but there's a fine line between necessary strength and creating more misery by not slowing down. Michael can't rush her.

It's a strange dinner, but a charming one. Michael and Tilly eat crackers and fruit, then cheese and hummus and all the things Tilly's found in the replicator that go with crackers. Laura picks at it, eating half of one, trying something. Phyrellean ginger seems to help a little, and she lets Tilly replicate more of that. Their picnic sprawls over the sofa and onto the floor, and by the time Tilly and Michael have moved on to chocolate, they're curled up on the cushions, Laura's head in Michael's lap.

Laura insists on sitting up when Tilly leaves, and watching them hug, no matter how quick or tentative, makes Michael's heart soar. They'll work, Laura and her *Discovery* family. Hugh's ready to be an uncle, Tilly will be a constant presence, and Laura doesn't have to bring her family, Michael's knows what it's like to have lost everyone. Laura will fit.

She sends Laura to bed before cleaning up, half-hoping Laura will fall asleep, but she's awake when Michael enters the bedroom, curled into the pillows.

"You changed the sheets."

"I like these, and I knew you wouldn't mind."

"Replicating new ones seems so indulgent."

"We can afford a little indulgence."

"A whole picnic's worth." Michael changes into her pajamas, pulling on her red 23rd century issue shirt. This century has its own uniform pajamas, but she likes these ones.

"I never would have replicated all those things."

Michael leans down and kisses her forehead, but now we know you hate melon and you can keep down uttberry pudding."

"Were you taking notes?"

Michael chuckles, grabbing her tooth cleaner. "Don't have to."

Laira chuckles, curling tighter around a pillow. "Vulcan mind."

"You don't mind my Vulcan discipline when it suits you."

"It's certainly an asset."

Michael sets her tooth cleaner down on the table and kneels by Laira's side of the bed. "So you did hear Tilly."

Laira smiles, blushing faintly pink. "I don't mind if you talk about our sex life."

"I do."

"You don't really."

Michael takes a breath, trying to stop the rush of embarrassment that comes from thinking about explaining what having sex with Laira is like. "Tilly will talk about it, probably with you if you give her half a chance."

"That might be fun."

"Fun?" Michael leaves the side of the bed and crawls in beside her, letting Laira settle herself onto Michael's chest.

"I haven't had friends like that for a long time."

"What about the President of United Earth?"

Laira chuckles, then yawns. "You don't want her and Tilly together."

"We don't?"

"She'll drink Tilly under the table and find out all our secrets."

"That kind of friend."

"She's exceptional, just—"

"You can't even drink right now."

"And I'm grateful. Otherwise she'd want to know everything."

"She'll still want to know."

"I can deflect."

"How diplomatic."

Laira yawns one more time, then rubs Michael's stomach with her thumb. "She likes you."

"Good."

"Good?"

"I prefer being a charming wrecking ball."

Laira reaches sleepily for her hand. "You're so much more than that."

"I know."

Toying with her fingers, Laira sighs once more. "You made it look like home. I've had a year and I haven't, but you— thank you. I still can't believe you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"Saving the galaxy."

Michael shifts down, making room to kiss her forehead. "You're the center of my galaxy right now, both of you."

### Chapter Summary

Laira and Michael have a couple days off. Laira meets Michael's Discovery family again, this time as her partner.

*Laira*

Michael's fingers slide up her back, toying with her neck and the wet tendrils of hair sticking to her skin. The bathtub itself is fairly ridiculous. No one needs a tub this extravagant and it takes a whole field's worth of water to fill it. Laira has never used it, even though it's been in her quarters the whole time she's been president.

But they have enough water. Headquarters is well supplied, the water can be recycled, the heat will be used, they're not taking anything that won't be reused and reallocated, and it still feels wrong. Like she's taking something from everyone else.

It's all right. It has to be. They have enough power and resources and everything is all right.

They can take a bath. Michael's exquisite naked anyway.

"Feels weird, doesn't it?"

"It feels wonderful." Shutting her eyes, Laira lowers her head to rest on her knees just about the surface of the water. "Too indulgent by so many degrees."

"Have you ever used this?"

"Of course not."

"Then you owe yourself a bath or two." Michael kisses her shoulder and stretches out behind her, legs slipping around her waist. "Did I ever tell you about the bath on the ISS *Shenzhou*?"

"The Terrans like baths?"

"The Terrans like excess, and power, comfort, if you're in a position to demand it." She nuzzles the back of Laira's neck, somehow Michael's touch is warmer than the bath. "I had Saru as a slave, and it was terrible, but the bath was nice."

"I hope this one's better."

"The company's better." Michael's hand touches her belly, holding her close. "The light over there was wrong, somehow, like you could feel the uneasiness, their brutality."

Laira covers Michael's hand with hers. "I'm glad we didn't go back there."

"Me too. Little pocket universe of sweaters wasn't bad."

"How was the light?"

Michael toys with her hair, pulling it to the side to kiss her neck. "You looked beautiful."

Laughing, Laira shakes her head. "That can't be true I don't even know how long I threw up on that shuttle. It's a blur."

Michael chuckles. "Oh that was a while."

"I'm so sorry."

Michael hugs her shoulders. "For what?"

"How sore you must get sitting on the floor."

"Vulcans mediate on stone for days, sitting in the bathroom's nothing."

Laira turns towards her face, wishing she could kiss her. "It's something to me."

"It'll pass, it'll be worth it. Really, holding your hair back isn't hard, especially while it's up. If you went to work with it down, that would be one thing, but—"

"It's so chaotic down."

"And that's not you."

"It can't be, not while I'm president."

Michael hums in agreement, but the way she's nibbling her way up Laira's neck suggests there's not much time left to talk before they find other things to distract themselves with naked, and she has to say this. They wouldn't have been in that shuttle together if Laira hadn't—

She takes a breath, letting her muscles tense before she forces them to release again. "It was my idea to break it off with my former partner." Saying it makes it real, but reality is less heavy than she feared.

Michael's hands find her shoulders, warm and firm. "It wasn't mutual?"

"He needed more than I had to give him."

"That's a good reason to end something." Michael makes it sound so easy, logical even.

"He didn't think so." Laira leans back, looking upwards.

Michael toys with her hair, running her fingers over her wet scalp. "He lost you, that's difficult."

Laira swallows a nervous laugh, and it catches in her throat. "He didn't- I made it hard for him."

"By coming home?"

"He lost his lab, and everything they'd done setting up their work. He was evacuated, not knowing if they'd make it. I- I couldn't—"

Michael nuzzles her hair. "Being with someone doesn't mean you're everything for them."

Perhaps that was true in Michael's time, when they had plenty, and people traveled easily. Who else would he have had to talk to? His research team was like family, but he didn't love them. He loved her and she couldn't, she didn't—

"Perhaps that's how it was in your time. He doesn't have anyone else."

"Is he what you wanted?" The question's soft, not at all demanding, and it shouldn't cut through as much as it does. Michael gets straight through her defenses, even when she doesn't know they're up.

"I thought so, once." Laira pulls in her knees, turning in the bath to face Michael. The water sloshes around them and the bubbles float on the surface by their legs. Looking at her is the most foolish thing, but she has to see Michael's face. There's something- she needs something - Laira doesn't even have words for it, but it's there, in Michael's endless brown eyes.

"It seemed right," she continues, trailing her hands over the water. Michael's little smile takes the chill out of her chest, but it's too intense, and Laira watches the bubbles dance away from her fingers. "We were happy together until we weren't."

"What changed?"

Laira takes a breath, letting her hands sink. "I did."

"It's a hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"I've been through the end of the Burn, the end of the Emerald Chain, that was just a negotiation. First contact happens all the time. Going to talk to the 10C should have been fine. "

"First contact with billions of lives depending on it is one of the most intense things I've been through." Michael rests her hands on Laira's knees, stroking her skin. "Being the Red Angel, coming to the future, that was almost worse, but that was so fast. We built the suit so quickly that we were finishing it while we ran and then we left. It wasn't days of knowing what was coming, getting down to hours of time before Earth and Ni'Var—" She shakes her head and laughs, weary and brave. "This was one of the most significant first contacts in all of Federation history, that's intense. That changes you."

"We came back fine. We didn't lose anyone on your ship, not Book, or Ndoye. Earth's defenses kept casualties low, Ni'Var fared even better."

"Success doesn't mean it wasn't brutal."

"But we're fine."

"Are we?" Michael touches her chin, then kisses her forehead. "Are you?"

"I should be."

"Of course."

"It wasn't—"

"Billions of lives depended on what we discovered, how we chose to talk to them. What math equations we sent: at any point, that could have gone wrong, and everyone would have been doomed. You carried that."

Laira makes an incredulous noise - that was not her - that was them and Michael starts to smile.

"We carried that. Taking on that much stays with you. I still feel it. Why shouldn't that be with you?"

Shaking her head isn't an answer, it's not even an argument. "How do we set that down?"

Michael touches her cheek, searching for her eyes because she's going to look right through her, like she always does. "I don't think we do. Coming to the future changed the whole crew of *Discovery*. That loss is with us, so is what we nearly lost to the DMA, what we risked to save our home; that'll be with us. It gets lighter, maybe we get stronger as we carry it, but I don't know if we ever set it down."

"How did you get so wise?"

Laughing, Michael leans close enough to touch their noses together. "Therapy, trauma, a tremendous loss in my formative years."

Laura laughs, guilt rising hot in her chest. "You're not alone in that."

"Wish I was." Michael leans in, kissing her gently, then again, lingering. "I would like to have met your mother."

"You'd be trouble together, I think. I don't know if it would be good for me."

"Oh?"

"You'd be friends."

"And that's bad?"

Chuckling, Laura kisses her cheek, then touches Michael's lip with her finger. "You both believe so much."

"That would be hard for you."

"My father believed, everyone around me did."

Michael grabs her hands, holding them close in the water. "You believe."

"Not the way you do." Laura kisses her, falling into the warmth of her mouth. No one kisses like Michael. "You are singular "

"Good." Michael laughs, crinkling her nose. One of her hands brushes against Laura's thigh, trailing downward, and their eyes meet. There's this way Michael says come to bed with her eyes that does something molten to Laura's stomach.

Michael stands, then offers her hands to Laura. "Computer, please deactivate the bath and recycle."

Programmable matter runs into the floor with the water, vanishing beneath their feet. They stand in the bathroom, in front of the windows, and Michael hands her a towel, huge and entirely too soft. Michael smiles so brightly that maybe it's not bad.

Maybe she could like this.

"How's your head?"

For once, absolutely fine. Laura's not dizzy, not even nauseated. She's nearly forgotten what it's like to feel at ease in her own skin, but this afternoon has that calm. Smiling at Michael, coy and amused, she nods. "You were right."

"Oh?" Michael drops her towels raising her arms around her neck. "I mean, I usually am."

"I haven't sneezed in over an hour."

"Hugh said humidity could help."

"Humidity on the station is perfectly controlled."

Michael guides her towards the bed, steering her like a shuttle. "Set at the agreed upon level designed to cause the least discomfort in the most species."

Rolling her eyes, Laura pauses in the doorway, backing Michael against the frame. "It's the most fair."

"I think it's too dry for you."

"A few percentage points of water won't make me stop sneezing."

Nodding before she kisses her neck, Michael sighs. "I know it's worse for you-

"I'm fine today."

"Today."

"Live in the moment, Captain."

Laughing, Michael slips her knee between Laura's thighs, opening her legs. "Have I ever mentioned how sexy that sounds when you say it?"

"Might have come up."

"Good."

The more they kiss against the doorframe, the higher Michael's knee rises and the water isn't even gone from between her thighs, but now she's slicker than wet. Michael's teasing fingers follow, caressing her until Laura has to break the kiss, panting.

"In a hurry?"

"I wasn't, but now--" They tumble into the bed, legs sliding together, hands searching. Laura's breasts are still too sore and too sensitive and Michael enjoys making her gasp a little too much. She presses Michael to the bed, kissing her roughly, lips against teeth.

Nibbling down Michael's chest, she toys with her breasts, sucking and teasing until Michael laughs and pants and wriggles up trying to get Laura's mouth down.

Laughing, Laura kisses her stomach then looks up. "I'm sorry, Captain, did you want something?"

Michael sighs up at the ceiling, then runs her fingers through Laura's wet hair. "You're such a tease."

"Negotiation is all about anticipation, making sure the other party really wants what you have to offer them." Laura trails her hand down Michael's thigh, taunting her with her fingers. "Needing is even better than wanting."

"You don't think I need you?"

"Oh, I have an idea," Laura starts to tease, but Michael's hands catch her shoulders, toying with her neck. "A good idea."

Making Michael orgasm is a pleasure, something she could easily spend the rest of her life doing, if she's that fortunate. It's fun; reminds her of her foolish youth, and the many, many times she fell in love. Pilot Laura didn't worry about how her heart would break at the end. Didn't have to worry about the optics of who she dated and what that meant for the Federation. Chose badly and her crew would mock her then buy her a drink. Nothing lost.

They would have adored Michael. The whole galaxy should.

She lowers her mouth to Michael's body, slips her fingers within, dedicates herself to seeking the beauty of that release. Michael's thighs shudder, then buck beneath her mouth, and the way Michael turns her name into something between a prayer and an expletive is gorgeous.

Resting her head on Michael's heart, she listens to Michael's heartbeat slow. By the end of Laura's relationship with her last partner, sex was an afterthought: a way they concluded dinner, how they said goodbye. She was happy, in theory, the relationship worked. When they had time they went on dates, if they had enough time, they had sex. They talked.

She didn't- it wasn't - they didn't— This is different. Not just because of the blob taking all her iron, but the connection - the vulnerability - how deep she let Michael get under her skin.

Michael sits up, guiding her up, holding her face in that way that makes her feel worshiped. Monks are as gentle with the sacred orbs as Michael is with her. Kissing her eye ridge, then her cheek, Michael sighs happily.

"I like your ideas."

"I thought you might."

"I should try them out."

"Oh?"

"Study your negotiating techniques."

Laughing, Laura sits back against the headboard, pulling Michael in to kiss her. "And here I thought you hated politics."

"This kind I could get into." Michael parts Laura's thighs, arranges the pillows, and then guides Laura's hands back, placing them on the headboard so she can hold on. "Some political maneuvers draw you in, make you want to find the center."

"What the other side really wants?"

"Oh, I think I know."

There's no winning this game with Michael. An orgasm implies the need for another, spiraling upwards until they're both panting, exhausted. This is still new, and practice only makes Michael more careful with her lips, more deliberate with her tongue. Trying to make Laura cry out - surrender - is a challenge, studying her nerves is an art, and Michael is destructive to her control.

This time Michael drives her easily to the place where she could stop, pull back, return to being held, but her hands are tight on the headboard. Michael's within and without; hot, demanding, and if she trusts her, if she lets go—

Release tingles all over her skin, tears burn her face, and a pulsing between her thighs vibrates, as if her heartbeat is that much closer to the surface. Falling to the pillows beside Laura, her hands go limp. Laura takes a breath, shuts her eyes and waits for the room to stop spinning like the spore drive's inside her head.

Eventually she slides down, lying on the bed again, still catching her breath. Michael curls against her, pulling her in close.



"I told you, days off are great."

Laura chuckles, trying to remember how to speak. "They were much more dull before."

"Days off with me are great, I'll amend that."

Laura holds her close, tracing patterns on her skin, adding Michael to her life has made so much of it better. "They are."

Michael eases the sheets over them, drawing her in closer. "Ready for dinner tomorrow?"

"My most delicate negotiation yet." Michael's family is coming to dinner, they're telling them about the baby, and their relationship.

"You know my crew."

Laura hums, settling in against Michael's chest in her favorite position. "I wasn't yours before."

"Now you're theirs too." Michael toys her hair, running her fingers through as it dries.

"I haven't had that much family in many years."

"We've had each other, and it's made us incredibly close." Her fingers find Laura's shoulder. "Families grow."

Bringing a baby in is different than teenagers, and partners. Their hitchhiker is going to change everything like a real wrecking ball, but Dr. Culber was happy. Tilly was so happy she hugged them both. Their hitchhiker is a joy.

A wonder.

Laura takes a breath, then lifts her head. "It's so fast."

"They know you."

"They know the president."

"They've seen you, she's you."

"Thank you."

"President you is pretty damn hot you know."

"Oh?"

"There's just something about 'Madam President'."

"Says the captain."

Michael chuckles. "It sounds good when you say it."

"It does, doesn't it?" Laura crawls up to kiss her. "I like saying it."

"I like your mouth."

"Oh you do?"

"I do." Michael's gaze lingers. "I like you."

Like isn't strong enough, love is there, right there, unspoken, unremarked, not yet spoken into being. It's intense, promising, terrifying, and Michael lets it float between them like the bubbles. The idea of love whispers like Michael's heartbeat, comforting and familiar. It's too soon to voice it, too soon to think it, but she can't help herself.

---

Taking a nap before dinner was Michael's idea, and a good one. Meeting Michael's family without wanting to fall asleep is important, but Laura's barely closed her eyes before Michael touches her shoulder.

"Hey."

"Already?"

Michael laughs, leaning down to kiss her in the dark bedroom. "Hugh and Paul are a little early. Hugh wants to check you out, if that's all right."

"So it's a working visit?"

"If that's all right?"

Laura would agree with almost anything that came with that look in Michael's eyes. Sitting up, she waits for the room to spin, but it's calm again today. Not feeling terrible is different enough that she pauses, even smiles. "That's all right."

Michael kisses her gently, hand on her shoulder. Laura's chest aches from the domesticity of it. She didn't have this when she's been dating for years.

She's never had this.

Dr. Culber - Hugh - passes Michael with a pat on the shoulder. That turns into a hug and that too stings in the best way. Love vibrates between Michael and her crew, suffusing every interaction. She meets Laura's eyes again, making sure she's all right before she leaves her with Hugh.

Hugh meets Laura's eyes, moves his hand towards the bed for permission, then sits on the bed beside her. No tricorder yet, just his hands in his lap.

"How's it going?"

Laughter comes first, nervous and not. She could lie, or insist she's fine. She could send him away because she has other doctors. So many doctors are available to the president, all dedicated. This one's Michael's family.

"Today was good."

"And you're still tired."

"Exhausted."

He nods. Hugh's hand hovers for a moment, then finds hers, covering her nervous fingers with the warmth of his palm. "That comes from all sides."

"Of course it does."

"Dizzy?"

"Not today."

Hugh nods, knowingly. "Comes with the inhibitor I gave you?"

"Yes."

"First few hours or after it wears off?"

"When it wears off."

"Well, that's gotta be hell." He squeezes her hand again, smiling that charming smile. "The same hormones that lead to sneezing help signal the intense vascular growth necessary in Bajoran pregnancies, so I can't suppress those. Sneezing itself is one of those reflexes that keeps--"

She sneezes, twice, turning to her shoulder. His soft smile when she turns back reminds her of her father, gone all these years.

"Sneezing keeps you alive."

"Great."

"Trying to turn that off wrecks havoc with your inner ear."

Now she nods. "It's like putting Tellarite stabilizers in a Cardassian ship."

His laughter is as charming as his smile. "I'd ask Paul what that's like, but unless mushrooms are involved, he'll just shake his head at me."

Laura sighs, looking down then shakes her head. "It was one of the more unpleasant things I've ever experienced."

"The stabilizers or this?"

"This when the hypo wears off."

"Yeah, that's some bullshit, I will keep working on it."

"But--"

"How is it you politicians like to say? It's a delicate balance." No wonder the *Discovery* crew loves him, he's one of the more empathetic doctors she's ever had. The kindness never leaves his eyes.

"Ah."

"You know you're the first person of your particular genetic heritage to have a baby with a human?"

Laura nods, then sneezes again instead of answering.

Hugh waits for her to stop, which is some time, then pats her hand. "I've studied Cardassian-Bajoran pregnancies, and they're tolerable one way, brutal another-" he pauses, starting his scan. "And Bajoran-human pregnancies aren't bad at all, just fast, and the vascular

demands are high. Those cases actually reported less nausea than the human baseline."

"How fortunate for them."

He winks. "Not you?"

"Not me."

"Good to know." Hugh waves at his tricorder and the holo display of their little hitchhiker hangs between them and the wall, golden and strange.

That dark curve is her body, the blob the hitchhiker, and the golden lines of light that start to form between them must be-- She turns to Hugh, waiting for his explanation.

"This is the Bajoran vascularization I was talking about. In Cardassians, a nutrient sac feeds the fetus, much like a yolk. It's slower, and their pregnancies can last almost two standard years, 610 days or so. In humans, the placenta is more efficient, and human pregnancies are about 280 days. Bajoran pregnancies can be as short as 150 days, due to the intense level of vascularization and nutrient transfer."

"So pick one of those?"

"Yeah, just make an executive decision." He indicates the lines on the holo, pulling the image closer. "These are all going to be blood vessels, demanding ones. Your blood volume's already increased since your first scan right days ago, and it'll keep increasing to meet demand."

"However--" Laira waits, there's always a however.

"Your system is unique, this is pulling in three very different directions. It'll have some bumps."

"Expect spatial turbulence?"

"It's not too late to move her--"

She can't imagine letting the hitchhiker go, even if this remains difficult. "No."

His smile grows even brighter. "Okay."

"Just, tell me what--" she pause again, losing her nerve. "Is she okay?"

"She is incredibly healthy. Genetically, cellularly, on the quantum level; she's perfect. You're doing great."

"I didn't--"

"You did." He squeezes her hand again. "I can't tell you how many days it'll take for her to gestate, or predict what horribly inconvenient, uncomfortable thing will happen next, but I know you're doing great. She's incredible because you are." Hugh leans in closer. "And Michael, of course. Couldn't have chosen a better parent than Michael."

Her grip on his hand is clumsy, and her eyes sting, and it takes half a moment for him to ask permission, then hug her instead, holding her tight and warm, and she's not crying.

She is.

"Take it easy on yourself. This is huge, and exhausting, and you're allowed to feel like shit."

He wants her to laugh, and she does, because no one talks to her like that, hasn't for years. Decades ago, the healers in her father's fleet would repair a broken bone and tease her about breaking it better next time. *Find an interesting way to hit that hard head of yours, princess. Snapped wrists are so dull, Lar-Lar. How'd you break ribs on both sides crashing your ship on the port?*

What ridiculous nickname is this baby going to have? Will she run laughing through *Discovery*, and headquarters, and Ni'Var - Earth - she'll see Earth, run on the beach, through the woods—

Her tears must be in his neck, because he hugs a little tighter.

"We've got you," Hugh says, with the same calm certainty. "You don't know it yet, but you're ours now."

Then Hugh's crying and she's sneezing and they're both laughing before she's collected herself enough to go join Paul and Michael. In the living room, Michael must have just told him about the baby because Paul's misty eyed and Michael's wiping away tears and they're struggling to open some fancy bottle when Michael's other engineer, Reno, arrives and solves the problem for them with a knock of the bottle against the wall.

"Guess we're celebrating then?" Reno says, grabbing one of the glasses from the table.

"We are." Paul hands a glass to Hugh, then to Michael, then finally the softness with how Paul looks at Laira makes her chest tight. "We definitely are."

Hugh touches Paul's back then they wrap arms around each other, clinking glasses. It must be easier for Hugh that Paul knows. Reno can obviously read the room, because her eyes move from Hugh to Paul, then Michael.

Laira should say something, really it's her news to share, but her words fail before she starts and instead she sneezes, catching herself with her elbow. Sneezing three times before she stops, she doesn't have to answer, or even say anything. The silence hovers, Michael, Paul and Hugh share a smile.

Finally, Reno looks at Laira, a heartbeat passes, then another. Reno lifts her glass towards Michael's walk or holos from Ni'Var. "I hear the new holos can carry allergens, they're so realistic."

Laira opens her mouth, trying to fight the urge to say something diplomatic, something funny. If this was a negotiation, it would be easy. She'd know what to say. She'd have researched Reno's entire life and know how to approach the entire conversation. Instead, Laira can't find the words to explain the hitchhiker.

"That must be it."

"Must be difficult for you. All these far too realistic dusty space holos making you sneeze." Reno tilts her head at the other wall. "Space ones making you nauseated." She takes a sip of her drink. "Did you know that a static warp bubble produces a temporary universe so malleable that thought can alter it? Make people and whole solar systems disappear, or make new ones."

"Hopefully neither of us thought up a new planet."

Michael touches Laira's arm then her back. Laira fidgets with Michael's jacket, then Michael's hand is in hers and it's warm and grounding the way nothing else really is. Michael's family loves her. Laira will love them. This will be wonderful, she just has to let it. Trust them, trust herself.

Reno takes a step towards her, holding up one of the glasses everyone else is drinking. Kandora whisky - Laira's Kandoran whisky actually - that bottle was a gift from the Kandoran ambassador. Probably the finest in her collection of unopened gifts. They chose well.

"What can I get you?" Reno asks, ignoring the open bottle everyone else is drinking. Does she suspect? Is she just being polite?

"I can go to the replicator--" Michael starts, reaching for the glass.

"No, I have a guess, I think." Reno meets Laira's eyes, calm, almost unnervingly. She smiles, her expression softening. "Besides, you must have the best replicator in the fleet. I'll be back."

"She uh- likes to tend bar--" Hugh starts to explain.

Paul finishes him. "She has a flair for cocktails."

Laira chews her lip, then forces herself to relax. This is Michael's family, this is good. Michael will tell them. She can trust that.

Michael leans in, whispering; "Sometimes Reno just knows things. She has an interesting knowledge base."

Tilly and Michael's two bridge officers, Detmer and Owosekun, arrive together before Reno returns from the replicator.

"So I found these two arguing about if the lift would even bring them up here." Tilly accepts a drink from Hugh and rolls her eyes at the two women, who arrived holding hands.

"We don't have security clearance-" Owosekun starts, shrugging a little.

Detmer raises her eyebrows. "We were invited."

Tilly lifts her glass to Paul for more, then asks. "Does the computer know that? Do invitations get logged formally so the computer can sort them out and decide who can access this deck?"

"They do," Michael answers, touching Laira's shoulder with her head. "And you have clearance."

"Just for tonight though," Laira says with her most serious tone. "Your badges will beam you back when it expires."

"So it's Cinderella dinner party then?" Detmer asks, downing all of her drink in gulp.

"Cinderella?" Laira repeats, confused. What an odd word. "Is that something you eat?"

Owosekun grins, shaking her head. "No, no, it's an old--"

"Very old-" Tilly adds.

"-Earth story," Owosekun finishes. "Cinderella is the hero of the story. She has to leave a party before the magic runs out."

"Magic?"

"She has a magic ball gown, and in some versions there are mice." Owosekun smiles, warm in a way that's absolutely charming. "Someday we'll have to tell it to you."

Laira must be making a face because Tilly laughs.

"It's a fairy tale for children, so it'll be relevant pretty quickly, not that I--" Tilly stares at her glass and then finishes the contents quickly. "Is Reno making cocktails? I'll need another drink."

Detmer and Owosekun share a puzzled glance, and Detmer shrugs. So they don't know, even though everyone else in the room does. Is Michael going to tell them now? During dinner? Later? How does she say it? How did she tell Tilly?

Laira should be listening to the conversation, and it's happening all around her, but the only thing she's sure of is Michael, and the way she's warm and steady.

"Is it all right if we look around?" Owosekun asks, looking at the viewport behind Michael's telescope. "I've been wanting to see what the inside of the spires looks like."

Detmer rolls her eyes a little, then smiles wickedly. "Flying it would be better."

Laira tilts her head, surprised. "You want to fly headquarters?" Pilots usually want the fastest, most ridiculous craft, not flying cities full of diplomats and cadets.

"Have you seen the specs?"

Before Laira can reply, Reno returns and hands her a beautiful drink, red and gold, crowned with a bright, showy flower Laira's never seen before.

"Flowering ginger," Reno says, pointing at the flower in the drink. "You can eat it, if you want. Little spicy but it might help if it feels like the deck's vibrating a little too fast."

"Thank you."

"Seems only fair if we're drinking all your Kandoran whisky. In our century, it was prized, and considering how much rarer it must be now, fancy juice is the least I can do for you both." Reno looks at Laira, then Michael, but her gaze flits down Laira's body for a moment and that *both* carries a double meaning. Did she know other Bajorans? Is it because she's an engineer who understands warp bubbles?

"You're welcome to it." Laira tilts her head, trying to ease the ache in the back of her neck. She's not sure where this headache's come from in particular, but it's hard to keep track. Michael touches her shoulder, reading far too much into the way Laira tries to tilt her head away from her headache. Sipping her drink, she releases Michael's hand to touch the back of her neck.

Michael makes a sympathetic noise, and tilts her head towards the sofas. "Come sit."

Owosekun and Detmer share the kind of look that would hit her career like a torpedo if they were somewhere in public. They're worried about her. She looks weak, and her quarters it's fine. She'll be fine, but outside the door... Best not to worry about it. Michael's family is safe. No one's going to decide she can't lead the Federation if she has a headache.

Detmer and Owosekun sit across from them, their thighs touching in a way that suggests closeness. Is this new? Is it something they have just begun? Michael sits her drink on the table, and takes Laira's before she risks spilling it by sneezing. Jolting her head does nothing for her headache, and she keeps her eyes shut for a moment, trying to catch her equilibrium. Michael touches her neck, fingers gentle against her spine, and then hands her drink back.

"Might help."

Laira closes her eyes for moment, trying to recenter herself, looking down at brilliant red flower in her drink. She takes a sip, then presses her lips together. When she looks up, Owosekun's eyes are on her, concerned and warm. Detmer looks at Michael, then back to Laira, more tentative, but no less caring. Of course, Michael's entire crew cares, and can't stop themselves from caring. Her father's crew was the same way, gruff as they were.

"Is everything all right?" Owosekun asks.

Michael nods before Laira does, and Michael's smile has that light that outshines the stars again. "We need to tell you something that's new."

Owosekun takes Detmer's hand, pulling it down to their laps. She looks from Laira to Michael, her smile lingering. "If it's just that you're dating, you're not hiding that well."

"We're really not, are we?" Chuckling, Michael takes a breath. "Laira and I are having a baby."

Mouth falling open, Owosekun tightens her grip on Detmer's hand. Her dark eyes shine and she leans forward. "You're pregnant?"

Michael laughs, then smiles, brightening the whole room. "Laira is. Warp bubbles are a hell of a thing."

Detmer frowns, not about the warp bubble, but about Laira's first name, as if she hasn't placed who that is. She tilts her head, confused. Owosekun nudges her, then she whispers into Detmer's red hair. Detmer startles, stares at Laira, drops her eyes and then starts to blush bright red.

"Congratulations," Owosekun begins, "Assuming that's—"

"It was a surprise," Michael pauses, looking to Laira. She kisses her cheek, making it a little easier. "A good one."

Releasing Detmer's hand, Owosekun leaves the sofa, crosses to Michael and leans down, touching their foreheads together. "A baby is a marvelous thing."

Michael stands, hugging her tight as they both laugh. "Thank you."

Detmer doesn't move from the sofa. She smiles, tentatively, and Laura's chest aches.

"Seems like my first name is madam, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I would have gotten that faster."

"I'm sorry." Laura touches her chest. "I'm Laura."

"Keyla," Detmer offers in return. "When she's done hugging, that's Joann, but the hugging's going to take awhile." Detmer - Keyla - finishes her whisky and sets down her glass.

Laura points at the cabinet behind the bar. "Bottom shelf has the good stuff."

"Good or actually drinkable?"

"The kind no one should drink."

Keyla finally smiles easily, and relaxes enough that her shoulders let go. "Oh thank god." She leaves the sofa in search of truly terrible rot-gut. She'd fit in with the scruffy spacers of Laura's father's fleet. Their back patting and teasing might be easier for Keyla than the hugging and crying.

Laura pulls the flower to the side and sips the drink Reno brought her. She can only place a few flavors in it, and it's delicious. She couldn't explain what's in it, or how Reno made it. She takes another sip, watching Keyla open the unlabeled bottled of spacer liquor across the room. Michael's crew takes turn sniffing it and laughing. Keyla drinks it straight and Reno starts grabbing things to mix with it while Paul, Hugh and Tilly laugh.

They're so comfortable with each other. How long has it been since Laura was that close to anyone? Stacey will laugh and drink two shots for Laura when she tells her. T'Rina will likely figure it out for herself in ten minutes or less, and she'll be pleased in that most gentle Vulcan way.

Her father would laugh if she could tell him. People try for years to get pregnant, especially with hybrid genetics involved, but she flew into it. *Starfleet's so stuck up, Lar-Lar. All rules and regulations and perfect uniforms.*

He would have liked Michael. She's spacer enough, broke enough rules that he'd understand her. *Most rules are meant to be broken, even if they're your rules, Madam President.* Not that he saw an election of hers, but he'd understand. He'd see the love in this crew immediately and know she was home again. Laura can imagine her father laughing as they try to make cocktails out of deck polish. Keyla would understand him as they mocked Michael's fancy crew and drank rot-gut straight.

Laura can smile thinking of her father; rest her hand in her lap and think of him with a smile. Her mother is a more painful memory, and part of her hopes it'll just pass, that her mind won't dwell on her, not today. She has so much less of a concept of her mother. She didn't know her mother as an adult. Never talked to her the way she talked to her father. She can't imagine her mother talking to Michael's crew because she has so much less to remember.

Laura's mother would be happy, even thrilled to meet so many people from Earth and listen to their stories. They've swam in the Pacific and walked on the beaches her mother always wanted to see. She'd want to take the hitchhiker to see Malaysia, and lay in the sand. Laura can almost remember her mother laughing when they swam on Bajor.

When she looks down, her fingers look like her mother's, resting on her belly. Laura's older than either of her parents ever had a chance to be. Her life is so stable, from the replicator that always works, to *Discovery's* spore drive that can take her from Cardassia to Earth in moments. When - if - she and Michael get married, her family can come from every planet, Michael's too.

Their hitchhiker's going to see everything, know everyone. Grow up knowing what all the oceans smell like and the sand from dozens of planets beneath her feet. Laura's mother would be so proud of that, of Michael, of Laura, and yet she can't hear her. Can't imagine what she'd say. Laura's sinuses sting, and instead of the now familiar sneezing, she has to blink because she's suddenly about to cry.

"Is it all right if I hug you?" Joann startles her out of her thoughts.

Laura nods, pressing her lips together because she can't manage to form words. She stands into Joann's arms, hiding her face against her shoulder.

"My grandmother always said that our children find us when they are ready, and sometimes that's not when we would say it's the right time, and we have to trust that they know, and we're ready."

Trust in everything comes so easily to Michael's crew, as if they've never been betrayed, or failed. Their arms are open. Laura's mother wanted her to see the universe that way, and she tried. She tried, but her universe was full of loss.

Joann holds her tight, arms around her back. Warm against Laura's chest, she holds her steady, sharing her breath and her heartbeats. When she releases her, Joann holds her arms, then touches her face, smiling in that easy way Laura's grandmother used to smile, nothing held back.

"You know, *Discovery* is your home now too."

It's been a very long time since a place was her home. She's had people, some closer, some more like making do, but having a place that was home is so far in her past that she's forgotten it like her mother's voice. She nods, wiping her eyes, and Joann touches her face, brushing away tears.

"It's all right."

"I know." Laura takes a breath. "It's still nice to hear."

Joann beams, then leans down, whispering to the baby something Laura can't hear.

Michael touches her back, saving her from more tears. "Let's eat."

"My mom used to throw fancy dinner parties at our house for visiting ambassadors," Tilly says, pulling out the chair next to Laura's and sitting down while Paul and Hugh set out plates in front of everyone. "All the good forks and fancy plates and I had to be so good all the time. I hated it, even when the good was delicious, because it's not polite to like it. Unless you're Tellarite, that at least was fun."

Squeezing Laura's hand under the table. Michael chuckles with Tilly. "Not loudly enjoying the food would be the height of bad manners on Tellar Prime."

Everyone has stories about dinners with their family, with friends, with people dead hundreds of years and people they met here. They laugh so easily, share their food, make each other drinks and pass things around and she remembers what this was like. She had this before. This was dinner with her grandparents and her father's fleet and her mother used to make drinks with whatever they had around and her father would laugh when he tried them. This is what family sounds like, how they love, and it feeds her more than dinner ever could.

---

Michael's tipsy enough after dinner to kiss her cheek and waver a little. There is something absolutely charming about how joyful she is in her slightly intoxicated haze. Reno wants to try mixing sparkling wine and Romulan whisky and some fruit and Michael holds her liquor the worst of her crew, but she wants to try it.

Laura lingers at the table, finishes her water.

Hugh sits against the table after Michael leaves, tricorder in hand. "Do you want to tell me about your headache?"

She laughs wearily, because compared to the last few days, or how she usually feels by this time... "It's nothing."

"You can keep ignoring it or let me figure out what it is." He holds up the tricorder, waiting for her to nod. "My guess is blood volume, or a hormonal migraine."

Handing her plate to Keyla, Laura shakes her head. "It's not that bad."

"Think of it as research for the award winning paper I'm going to write about interspecies pregnancy."

"Anything for your research, Doctor."

"That's the spirit." His tricorder hums, collecting data while he watches the crew drink some terrible concoction and laugh. "Reno usually does a good job, but I think you're lucky to be safe from this latest one."

"Romulan whisky doesn't blend, brings out all the wrong notes."

"And here I thought you were a terrible space deck polish hooch kind of person."

"That at least goes with everything."

Hugh chuckles, holding up a hypo. "Changes in vascular structure leading to low blood pressure and painful dilation." After she nods and lets him inject her, he tucks his hypo away. "I wouldn't get up quickly."

"Thank you."

"Oh thank you." He offers a hand getting to her feet. "I'd been curious if the reworking of your blood vessels would spread to the brain or if it was a local overhaul. Turns out it's everywhere."

"How lovely."

Rubbing her shoulder, he walks with her to the sofa. "Neuroblocker three-six in the replicator, start with one dose, you can take two if it doesn't go away within an hour."

"No lecture about drinking more water?"

"No lectures," Hugh promises. "You're going through enough. Feel free to lecture me if I get annoying." He pats her shoulder and returns to the table. Paul brings her a full water glass with a smile, then leaves her to watch Tilly and Michael laugh over the second try at a cocktail involve Romulan whisky, by the shade of blue.

That one, again, is terrible, and they dump their glasses, teasing Reno mercilessly for her error.

The neuroblocker rubs the sharp edges off her headache, softening it to a foggy sensation that's tolerable. Hugh was right, and it's much more pleasant to sit without her head pounding. Laura thought she hid it better during dinner, but it is his place to notice, and he's good at

it. She wouldn't even have tried neuroblocker thirty-six because it's not in the headache category.

Michael joins her on the sofa with water, not another drink, still shaking her head. "I don't think it can be done."

"Oh?"

"They're trying to mix your Romulan whisky." Michael tilts her head towards Reno and Paul.

"It doesn't go with anything." Laura leans into her shoulder.

"It's good on it's own-" Michael starts.

"It's not-"

"I like it."

Laura wrinkles her nose in disgust. "Good, you drink it."

Michael laughs, curling close. She slips an arm around Laura's shoulders and clumsily pulls her in. "Not tonight."

"That seems wise."

"Planning on drinking me under the table later?"

Laura sets down her empty water glass. "Oh yes, easily."

"Your tolerance will be gone."

"I used to be a pilot, dear."

Michael watches Keyla lead a round of shots and laughs, nuzzling Laura's ear. "Pilots are a special category, but I don't know...months without drinking."

Months without feeling like her own person, but that's worth it, isn't it? There's a baby at the end. Michael's wandering hand rests on her belly, connecting them. Laura covers Michael's hand with her own, smiling before she realizes how happy she is.

Michael kisses her forehead, bringing her back. "I think you survived."

"Trial by fire." Laura has to keep her tone light or she'll cry again.

"They love you," Michael whispers into her hair. "I knew they would."

The best parts of her life were like this: family laughing and teasing each other. Being wrapped in warmth and safety, humor and affection. Their child gets this, not for the fleeting years that Laura did, but in a lasting way. Decades of family dinners, hugs, teasing and laughter. This is life after the Burn and the DMA, when the Federation has its founding worlds once again and they reach out for more peace and stability. This is the galaxy they're going to rebuild. Laura's dreamt about it all her life. Their hitchhiker will grow up reaching out fearlessly like her mother and the galaxy will welcome her. She's never felt the promise of the Federation as vividly, as if it's pulsing in her chest.

"I love them," Laura replies, after a moment, when the thought has passed. *I love you, Michael Burnham, foolishly and blissfully and more than I could ever—*

Michael will say it first, someday. Laura squeezes her hand. Someday soon.



## Michael - 7

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira go on a double date with Saru and T'Rina. Some important things are said.

### Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Whimsicalli and Sanctuaria for workshoping with me.

(vague descriptions of vomiting)

#### *Michael*

Laira's hair lies in a mess of waves across the red pillowcase. Michael should have braided it again before she fell asleep, but she faded so quickly after lunch that it didn't seem worth the hassle. Slipping off her boots, Michael unbuttons her jacket, then hangs that on a hook on the wall. Rubbing her forehead, she replicates tea and brings the mugs to the bedroom. They have just over an hour before they're supposed to meet Saru and T'Rina for dinner at the RomuloVulcan fusion restaurant. It's T'Rina's favorite at headquarters, and Michael's only ever tried a handful of Romulan things. Laira's been there - multiple times - T'Rina's one of the closest people she has to a friend.

Michael sighs, sitting down on the bed and opening her communique. (Laira's really). She spent every hour since lunch trying to sort them into what Laira actually needs to reply to personally, and what she could just sign off on, but they're all so dense and full of politician double speak, hinting and negotiating, that she can't just skim them: she has to listen to the whole thing and study the nuance of their voices and repeat the strings of words.

"Remind me to never, ever win an election." Michael mutters to Laira's side of the bed. Laira's still asleep enough that she doesn't move when Michael runs her fingers through her hair.

Even her years of study into xenanthropology, and her years in Starfleet have not prepared her for the carefully cloaked rudeness and veiled threats. They hide fear of abandonment and scarcity, scant resources, and a lack of talent, that Michael's only experienced for a brief year. Life after the Burn was their reality, and it's hard to let go of, even with starships flitting all over the galaxy and a wealth of dilithium.

Michael sorts, and adds notes, shunting several messages off to the vice president who seems to enjoy a difficult conversation.

When Laira finally stirs, Michael strokes her head. "Your job is brutal."

Laira's sleepy laugh is worth all the sentences Michael took apart multiple times in her head. She hums in agreement instead of lifting her head, but her eyelashes flutter.

Laira sighs and rolls over slowly, rubbing her forehead as she smiles up at the ceiling. "What brought on this revelation?"

"When someone's rude to a Starfleet captain, they're up front about it. You're the President of the Federation. Sixty member worlds, one of the strongest interstellar alliances in the galaxy, and so many of the messages you get find ways to dig at that and be subtly annoyed, or they bury their meaning in metaphor and double speak so I can't tell they actually mean to say 'fuck you we don't want any dilithium' until I've read it four times."

Chuckling, Laira starts to sit up, but that stops when she lifts her head.

Michael sets down her tea, forgetting her holo. "Rough afternoon?"

"It's fine." Laira makes that little noise when it's not fine, but she'll insist it's nothing until the very last moment.

"That bad?"

It takes a breath or two for Laira to smile again. "I got hopeful after the last few days."

"The days where you didn't try to work your punishing job while you adjust to a huge physical change?"

Laira drags herself up, resting her head on her knees. "That's far too logical."

"Sorry, force of habit." Michael runs her hand along Laira's arm then takes her hand. Her skin's cool, not damp. Maybe today hasn't been that bad. "Are you all right for dinner?"

Laira nods, sneezes twice into her knees and sighs. "I will be."

"If you're not okay-"

Laira waves her off, patting her hand. "I'm all right enough for dinner with friends. Maybe not any of the restaurants where you can watch the stars spin."

"Pilot eyes failing you?"

Wincing again, Laira rubs her temples, then brushes tears away from her eyelashes. "Not flying through any asteroid belts today."

"Is it spinning or foggy?"

"Hmmm?"

Michael reaches over, moving her hair out of her face. "If the room's spinning, it's probably an inner ear problem, and Hugh says there's not much we can do for that. But if it's just foggy, dark around the edges, you're lightheaded?"

Laira hums an affirmative noise.

"That's likely low blood pressure and that we can mitigate a little."

"That's fortunate."

Michael kisses her forehead and leaves the bed for the replicator. "Hugh says your Bajoran side is trying to build new blood vessels but your human side can't keep up with the increase in blood volume."

"And Cardassia hasn't figured out the hitchhiker is there yet?"

"I don't think their intelligence is up to the task."

"Funny, famously in the past they were much quicker on the uptake. Must be me."

Calling up the hypospray Hugh suggested from the list, Michael replicates it and returns to the bed. Laira tilts her head to the left, exposing her neck and waiting for the look, or the lecture.

Michael kisses her instead and retrieves her tea. "That should help, but—"

"Be gentle?"

"Please."

Swinging her feet experimentally over the edge of the bed, Laira squeezes her hand and dismisses her. "Go get dressed, I'll drink my tea."

Michael reminds herself not to worry, which usually has the opposite effect. "Do you know what you want to wear?"

"I hadn't thought about it." Laira sips her tea, then stands, reaching for her robe where it hangs on the wall. She's more steady on her feet than Michael worried, so maybe it won't be as difficult as she feared.

"Mind if I choose something?"

"It would save me the trouble." Laira takes her tea to the vanity, sitting down to put on her makeup and do her hair. Michael lingers in the closet doorway, watching her shake her hair out against the green silk of her robe. Laira has so much more hair than Michael thought before she ever saw it down, and it falls almost all the way down her back when loose. It's beautiful.

"We don't have to eat at a restaurant, you know."

Laira finds her in the mirror and mock glares at her, head tilted. "We talked about this."

"We have plenty of time to--"

Laira sneezes once, then twice, burying her face in her elbow. When she can breathe again, Laira shakes her head. "TRina and I often have dinner in public. The next step in my relationship with you would be us spending time together."

Michael starts to protest again but Laira shakes her head.

"We have to be seen in public, together. Start--"

"Creating a logical timeline," Michael finishes. "We could start that on days when you feel better."

Laira's little smile is that coy one Michael used to hate; the one full of secrets. "I don't know how many of those we will have to work with."

"Not helping."

Laira finds her gaze in the mirror, staring into her with those damn blue eyes. "I will be all right, Michael."

Michael stares into her, and nods. They'll make it work. She takes a breath, changes the subject. This will be fine. "I never used to wear anything other than my uniform. Philippa would tease me. Tilly too, when I joined *Discovery*." Michael forces herself away from the door

into the closet to choose clothing. Removing her shirt, she drops that into the laundry.

"What changed?" Laura calls from the bedroom. "You brought enough to start filling that giant closet."

"I had time, I got a lot from Philippa when she left."

"All that black leather?"

"I think she had one shirt that's another color." Michael chooses a deep red top for herself and pulls it on over her bra. Stepping into civilian boots is still strange, but she's getting better at it. Captain Michael Burnham is another creature and whenever she's in uniform, she sends a different message. Staring at Laura's very spartan side of the closet, Michael shakes her head and turns to the replicator. She'll need to replicate something again, because Laura rorates through her suits like they're her uniform, but this is fun.

"Was it that shirt?" Laura asks over her shoulder when Michael emerges from the closet, holding clothes for her.

Glancing down, Michael smiles at her shirt, trying to imagine Philippa rolling her eyes. "No, she'd want this to be tighter."

Smiling into the mirror, Laura adds sparkles to her eyelids.

Laying the blue sweater dress she just replicated onto the bed, Michael sits beside it and watches Laura finish her makeup.

"What?" Laura asks as she picks up her lipstick.

"You're good at that."

"It's like armor, put it on before battle." She expertly colors her lips and smiles into the mirror again. "Also, I like sparkles."

"They look good on you, I-" Michael pauses, looking away, then back sheepishly. "I like watching you."

Smiling more brightly, Laura searches for words. Turning towards Michael, she starts to blush. "I don't recognize the dress."

"It's new, I'm trying to work my way through the patterns in your clothing replicator."

Laura tilts her head, chuckling. "That will take you awhile."

"Guess we better make this last," Michael teases, reaching up to her shoulders to help remove Laura's robe.

"It's a huge database."

Glancing down at Laura's belly, Michael eases her robe off her shoulders. "We have years."

Touching her belly then pulling her hand away quickly, Laura looks up at Michael, her eyes huge and bright. "I haven't thought of a relationship in terms of years before."

"I haven't either," Michael admits, her hands resting on Laura's bare shoulders. "But we'll be sharing a person for the rest of our lives."

Nuzzling Michael's hand, Laura raises her eyeridges. "I can't imagine that at all."

"I bet it gets easier." Michael strokes her cheek. "Maybe when she feels like something more than a terrible case of the Crestian flu."

"Oh I've had that."

"Yeah?"

"This is worse."

Michael kisses her forehead, first one ridge, then the other, holding her face. "I'm so sorry."

Laura rests her hands on Michael's arms, then shuts her eyes. "I don't think I am."

"Well, make it through dinner first."

Stepping out of her nightgown, Laura walks to the bed, caressing the dress before she pulls it over her head. "You have quite an eye."

"Thanks." Pulling Laura's hair free from the dress, Michael caresses it for a moment, trying to decide how to braid it. "Something simple?"

"That would be nice." Laura pulls on her leggings and boots, then sits on the corner of the bed so Michael can braid her hair. "Vance's daughter didn't recognize me the first time she saw me with my hair down. She said it made me look like a different person."

"It's a lot of hair." Michael works on the braid and Laura reaches up to pat her hand. "I like getting to see all the sides of you. Madam President, Laura the space pilot, Laura who hates getting up—"

"My dad called me princess."

"Mine used to call me Michael the second. Michael Burnham-A when he was in the right mood."

"You had the same name?" Laura asks, getting to her feet and smoothing her dress. "Does that mean we'll just call our hitchhiker Michael-B?"

"Well, that does have a ring to it."

Chuckling softly together, they reach for their badges.

Laira nods again, leaning closer. "You worry so loudly I can hear you vibrate."

"Must be your Cardassian hearing."

"Must be."

Michael touches her head to Laira's shoulder, just for a moment, and they beam to dinner.

---

They did not choose one of the restaurants with a view of space, fortunately. It's a quiet, intimate space, with Vulcan and Romulan art on the walls. The host leads them to a compartment made of warm wood walls, with a low table on the floor, surrounded by cushions. Once they're sitting, Laira's hand in hers, she relaxes.

The replicator within the table creates glasses of water, and Laira lazily scrolls through the menu for tea.

The walls are covered with tasteful pieces of art from Ni'Var artists. The older pieces Michael recognizes, at least the early styles, but the newer ones, especially the ones where they intersect: blending styles and colors are unknown to her. Some only seem to be vaguely Vulcan, but Michael can see the roots. Romulan art has broader strokes, brighter colors, but the logic suffuses all of it in neat patterns.

Sitting up from where she's gotten comfortable on Michael's shoulder, Laira nudges her when Saru and T'Rina arrive. Setting down her tea, Michael wraps their hands together, and Laira grabs her hand a little tighter. It's instinctual - the quiet search for support - and Michael's chest warms.

After pleasantries and greetings, T'Rina and Saru sit with them at the table for the traditional Vulcan meal. They went to several of the botanical reserves on Ni'Var and could excitedly carry the entire conversation. Which is charming, and funny; Saru's so animated when he's pleased, and the trip's brought him great joy. So has T'Rina, from the way they look at each other.

Living with Sarek and Amanda taught her much about the Vulcan expression of love, and how subtle it can be. It's early for either of them to call it love, Vulcan courtships can last for decades, but the warmth between them hangs in the air like the mists of Kaminar.

T'Rina sits across from them, perfectly poised. Saru has to fold his long limbs to get comfortable but he must be getting used to how often Vulcans use cushions.

Laira shifts positions on the cushions on the floor next to their low table, pulling in her knees, then leaning closer to Michael. She ignores the first course, and picks at her bread. It might help if she eats more of it, but it's a struggle on the hard days. Nothing tastes right.

The second course arrives and Saru tells a lovely story about some exquisite cactus blossoms opening in the dead of night, demonstrating the flowers with his long fingers. That grove is known as one of the most romantic on Vulcan, and if that's where T'Rina brought him, this is a serious relationship. Saru won't know the significance of it, so she'll have to save that for a good day.

Michael and T'Rina share a look over the soup, one of those silent glances that's full of things unsaid. For all the moments T'Rina reminds her of Sarek, she's more open, more comfortable with her own feelings. Maybe it's the Romulan influence. Michael can see why Saru's so smitten: T'Rina's an astonishing woman, and clearly very fond of him. In all the years she knew him on *Shenzhou*, Saru didn't date. Didn't show any interest, but now—

Laira smirks at her behind her tea. Michael still doesn't know how close she is with T'Rina or how much they talk. Laira's been so sick since the warp bubble that even living with her is full of mysteries. Michael doesn't know who she calls after a hard day or who makes her laugh.

Would it be better to be where Saru and T'Rina are? Sharing little parts of themselves in a carefully titrated fashion, walking through flower gardens and taking slow steps instead of jumping in all at once?

"I look forward to showing you Kaminar, T'Rina. Though we will have to discuss suitable breathing apparatus so you may see it properly."

T'Rina tilts her head and Michael knows intrigued. "I have not yet had the opportunity to experience an aquatic world. Some on Ni'Var enjoy the exploration of underwater caves. I have not made an attempt."

"Bet you'll love it," Michael teases, making Saru click his tongue and look down before he and T'Rina discuss the advanced in underwater breathing technology.

Michael's listening. Then she's not, because Laira's hand finds hers and it's colder than it should be, even damp with sweat. She swallows, looking down, and Michael passes her water glass. Laira takes a sip, swallowing again, hard, and nearly spills it setting it down. She's holding her composure together as a feat of iron will, but biology can't be reasoned with or overcome.

They should go. Finish the courses in their quarters, give up on whatever political need this fulfills. It's too much. They can wait.

"Laira?" T'Rina begins, reaching out. Her hand hovers over Laira's for a moment, and something shifts in T'Rina's eyes. They widen, lose focus for a moment, and then her entire concentration is on Laira. Eyes locked, they stare at each other, still not touching because sharing contact with a touch telepath of T'Rina's skill is profoundly intimate.

Allowing T'Rina's hand to touch hers is confessing everything - the baby, the depth of her discomfort, her feelings for Michael - all of it is just beneath Laura's skin.

Laura looks at Michael, asking without asking.

Michael smiles, wishing she could make any of this easier. Laura can tell her.

Turning her hand in the table, Laura offers her palm to T'Rina and nods.

T'Rina lowers her hand to Laura's, all control and patience. They touch, and both of them shiver, Laura exhales, then breathes again when T'Rina does. A mind meld would be more orderly, faster, more intimate, this is a connection. T'Rina's features soften, and she nearly smiles, almost. She blinks too fast and Laura starts to blush and then they stand, hands linked.

T'Rina must be sharing her control, because Laura's steady again. That's a temporary fix. If it gives her some time without the nausea, Michael's grateful.

"Laura and I will return shortly, please continue to socialize in our absence."

Saru's confusion flits across his eyes and Michael chuckles.

"There's often part of a double date where where you split into different sets of two. It gives you time to discuss your romantic partner with your friends."

Nodding as he understands, Saru picks up his tea. "You have a moment to approve of my relationship with T'Rina, and in turn, I approve of your relationship with Laura."

"Exactly." Michael tears a piece of bread, trying to find a still place in her emotions. Saru will be thrilled about the baby, of course, but it's not something she can rush into. "You two are adorable together."

Sipping his salt tea, Saru finds Michael's eyes. "Forgive me if the inquiry is unwelcome, may I ask to her health?"

There it is. "She's been ill."

"Since the warp bubble?"

Michael nods, looking down at her plate. "We created things, in there. We shifted reality."

"They're a very dangerous phenomenon. You're both fortunate we were able to get you out before it collapsed."

She looks up again, reaching for him. "We brought something back that's making her sick."

"Something?"

"Someone-" Michael starts to smile and had to stop, taking a breath. "A hitchhiker."

"An entity?"

She squeezes his hand within hers. "A baby."

"I haven't heard anything about a baby." Saru fusses with his napkin.

She needs to be more direct, but she's stumbling. "We wanted- I had to make sure Laura was all right, because it's our baby, hers and mine."

His tone shifts from incredulous to gentle like a pop of the spore drive. "Your baby? You are having a baby?"

Laughter bubbles in her chest and her eyes sting. "We are - Laura is - she's our baby - it's- it's why she's been so sick."

"I assume this is not something you intended."

"The bubble—"

"So it is a gift."

"It is."

Michael shakes her head, wiping tears out of her eyes. "It's not ideal. Laura wasn't prepared and her position is so demanding."

"She is our leader, that is a position that takes much, to be sure, but Michael--" His eyes glow with happiness

"I know."

"This is happy news." Saru hugs her over the table, his long arms holding her tight. "I am so pleased for you both."

Closing her eyes, she relaxes into him. It will be all right. This is a happy thing. It is, they're thrilled.

"You will be the most wonderful mother, Michael."

"Thank you, I—"

Their comms chirp, interrupting that thought.

T'Rina's calm voice wouldn't sound concerned to anyone else, but the urgency flashes to Michael. "Captain Burnham, Captain Saru, your presence is requested."

They stand together, Saru's hand in her shoulder. "I hope Laira is all right."

"Thanks."

The warmth of his hand remains on her shoulder and they beam away together.

Laira's - their - quarters are dark, aside from the light of the ships in the viewports, a single light from the bathroom. That kind of night then.

Saru tilts his head, confused.

"She gets nauseated, hormones interact badly, it's been hard."

"We could have made alternative arrangements for dinner."

Michael sighs, leading Saru towards the sound of voices in the bathroom. "It's another one of those politically delicate situations. The warp bubbles have to stay under wraps, dating the president is complicated, being pregnant in office is more complicated still."

"Surely the Federation has experienced such a thing before."

"Not since before the Burn." Michael pauses, shaking her head. "I don't know the whole of it, not yet. United Earth's rejoining is controversial for a minority who fears change, and their progressive government has some strong opposition. Distractions might be perceived poorly."

Saru's expression turns stern. "A child is gift."

She pays his arm, grateful. "I know."

"I cannot speak for the rest of the Federation, however, Kaminar will be thrilled to celebrate this with you and Laira."

"And us with you."

Laira's voice shifts, and even though Michael can't make out the words, concern makes a vice out of her chest.

T'Rina's calm voice follows

Michael's about to head in and Saru grabs her arm.

"Wait." There's a softness in his eyes.

"What?"

"Let them finish their conversation."

Of course he can hear them, his hearing is so much better than hers "Is she all right?"

"She seems to be fine. I believe there is something she needs to say."

Michael tilts her head. "To T'Rina?"

"Give them a moment." Saru tilts his head, then takes a breath, so full of affection that his smile radiates. He looks at Michael with such tenderness that she's warm. He's listening so intently he doesn't seem to realize he's speaking. "She loves you."

"What?" For a moment Michael can't breathe, and her heart rushes in her ears.

"She has been struggling with finding an opportune moment to tell you. She worries it is too soon or that she will make you uncomfortable." He pauses, touching his face and beaming. "She loves you, Michael. Is that a feeling you reciprocate?"

Michael's cheeks burn and she looks down, then away anywhere but at Saru, but he knows her too well. "Sarek told me to never regret loving someone. I've tried not to, even when—"

"Love has been difficult."

"Difficult and rewarding." Michael takes a breath, calming her emotions, not shoving them away as he thought she had to, but acknowledging them, giving them space. "I do love her, and I know it's soon."

"Are there time constraints on the development of love that I have not been made aware of?"

"No—"

"Then—" Saru pauses, and shrugs. "I believe she would benefit from hearing how you feel."

Michael squeezes his arm, grateful again for his love. "Give us a moment?"

He tilts his head towards the elegant dining room. "T'Rina and I will replicate the next course of dinner. When you're ready, you can join us."

"Beat a shuttle bathroom, doesn't it?" Michael teases, walking in slowly.

T'Rina sits with perfect posture on the floor, as if she's about to lead mediation. She tilts her head, placing the joke. "They are rather small in comparison."

Laira sits against the wall, eyes closed, head back, and not even her flawless makeup can make her look a comfortable color. "I'm sorry, Michael."

"We're spending time together," Michael says, making careful eye contact with T'Rina. "That was the whole point."

Laira makes a disgusted sound instead of answering, keeping her eyes closed.

"We'll be out in a moment. Saru's setting the table to continue dinner." Michael conveys her thanks with a nod, and T'Rina rises.

"I will assist him."

Michael sits down next to Laira and the toilet, folding her hands in her lap.

"They may as well eat without us."

"I'm sure they'd be fine with that."

Opening her eyes purely to glare at Michael, Laira wipes her nose on the back of her hand. "What a spectacular evening."

Michael shrugs, slide the glass of water closer on the immaculate floor. "Saru and I had a wonderful conversation."

"The first time we met T'Rina had to explain that no, I could not fly through an ion storm with a concussion. She even helped me clean blood off the console."

"See, what's a little vomiting after that?"

Laira ignores the water, both hands on her stomach. "This is not how I used to spend my evenings."

"Wrecked your life, didn't I?"

Her little laugh stings, and Michael adores it anyway. "This is mostly my own doing," Laira insists, shutting her eyes tight. "Not being able to control myself is more challenging than I thought."

"It's just another ion storm, maybe it's all right to wait and try flying through it tomorrow." Michael rises on her knees, then touches their foreheads together. She holds Laira's face in her hands. "I'm going to say this because I want to, not because you need to hear it or I feel obligated or anything like that."

Laira makes a little sound, but it's more cheerful now.

Michael kisses her nose. "I love you."

Laira's eyes snap open, huge and blue and bright with feeling. "Now?"

"I was planning on it being a lifelong thing."

Taking a breath, Laira sits up into her, holding her shoulders. "How can we—"

"Logically, we take one day at a time."

"We barely made it through dinner."

Michael shrugs, drying Laira's eyes with her thumbs. "We made it."

"That's an incredibly low standard." Laira's hands find hers and squeeze.

"We can save high standards for easier things."

Resting her forehead against Michael's, Laira sniffs, then starts to relax. It takes a breath, and a moment, then she sighs. "I don't have a family to introduce you to."

"Your mother's family on Earth-" Michael doesn't get to finish her thought. Laira rocks forward and retches. It happens so fast that Michael's almost slow to catch her air. They spend much more time with the threat of her vomiting than the reality of it and Michael's surprised - and shouldn't be - by how fast the conversation is gone.

There's nothing else to say after that. She mutters nonsense, keeps Laira's braid behind her shoulder out of the way, and waits. No one's fallen out of a wormhole through time and space this time, but this is almost as life changing. Michael thought she'd have children, someday. When she had time, when she had stability. Now she has to make that happen. Create it out of what they have. Make a safe

space to land, so this crash landing into a family keeps them all safe.

"You know, Tilly used to tease me that I hadn't had the full Starfleet academy experience. Never got really drunk after a final. Never locked myself out of my dorm. Never held my roommate's hair back."

Laura spits, wipes the back of her hand against her mouth and finally sits back. She accepts the water glass and studies Michael. "Do you want me to look you out of our quarters some night, for the experience?"

"You can't tell me, then it's not a surprise."

"Right." Laura sips some of the water and spits it out. "I'll have to let you forget you mentioned it."

"That would work." Michael settles against the wall next to her, hands folded. Her thoughts drift, through tomorrow, and next week, and how much she misses her ship. The stars are home, always have been, but if she needs the ground for awhile. These quiet stars around headquarters will have to do. Home is here. It has to be.

"Are you ready to go back to dinner?" Laura surprises her, getting to her feet.

"You're all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm getting good at this."

"I'm sorry."

Laura wrinkles her nose and her little smile does something to Michael's heart. "I'm still not."

They stand, facing each other, hands finding each other's.

"If you're sure-" Michael starts.

"I love you," Laura interrupts.

Michael smiles, then chuckles, and her heart could power the whole damn station. "You didn't have to say it."

"I did, and thank you."

"For what?"

Laura touches her face, her fingers cool on Michael's skin. Her eyes are eternity. "For you."

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### Chapter Summary

Laira and Tilly have lunch, Michael and the Ni'Var scientists make a break through.

#### *Laira*

At 13:00, Michael does not appear for lunch, as she expected. That means the spore drive meeting with the Ni'Var scientists is running over, potentially involving other scientists from all over the Federation, and there's a chance it'll take all day. Hopefully she'll eat there, but that means Laira's eating alone.

She's gotten so accustomed to having Michael at meals, seeing her multiple times a day, and it's funny - and ridiculous - how much she wants her to walk through the door.

Tilly stands in the doorway to her office instead at 13:07. "Hi! I mean, Hello Madam President, can I—"

"Come in, Lieutenant." Laira waves at the chair in front of her desk. "No one's here, you can drop the formalities."

Tilly laughs a little, and sits, shaking off her nerves. "Silly getting used to that, feel like I have to say ma'am constantly or I'm not being a good citizen."

Pausing to cover her face with her arm, Laira sneezes twice before she can retort. "You should try it on this side of the desk."

"Oh no thank you - I'd never - my mother was on the security council when I was growing up and that much power isn't something I'd ever want." Tilly rests her hands in her lap. "You're good at it though."

"Thank you." They sit in comfortable silence, waiting for Michael, while Laira works through her communiques. She sneezes three times, which makes Tilly start to smirk, but Tilly resists making fun of her, and just smiles, which is a kindness Laira appreciates.

Regrettably, a message from Michael appears a moment later, apologizing that she can't make lunch. "Dammit."

Tilly mouths the word, as if pleased Laira can swear, and grins. "Oh?"

"Michael's stuck in the meeting with the Ni'Var scientists and Auriello."

"That big spore drive meeting?" Tilly waits for her to nod. "Michael said they had some promising ideas. One of the Romulans had a prototype for a telepathic interface."

Laira allows herself to smile for an instant. It's good breakthrough, useful, they need it. She also wants Michael, which is needy and ridiculous, but she was looking forward to having lunch with her. Funny how little time it took to get attached and want Michael's as often as she can. "They do it's just—"

"Going through lunch."

"I'm sorry, Tilly. We'll have to reschedule" Laira looks down at her work, then back up, fully expecting Tilly to take her leave. She doesn't get to see Tilly's expression, because she has to sneeze, again, and again, and maybe she should just take the damn hypo that makes this stop—

Tilly does not get up to leave. "What are you doing?"

"Now? Trying to catch up on communiques."

"Which is not time sensitive, and you still have to eat."

Laira tilts her head, surprised. "With you?"

"I can promise you I am much more fun than eating alone at your desk. I'll even resist calling you ma'am and take you to the Academy cafeteria where no one will recognize you." Tilly picks up the little square of cloth Michael left neatly folded on her desk that morning. A handkerchief truly an ancient thing, but enhanced with programmable matter, and marked with her initials, it's almost a tolerable accessory.

Tilly points at the initials. "This is cute."

"That was Michael."

"Michael is smitten." There's something knowing in Tilly's smile.

Laira looks down, because meeting Tilly's eyes will give away more than she dares. "Michael likes gestures, it's not really anything."

"Oh she likes *you*," Tilly corrects.

Taking a breath, Laira avoids talking about how in love Michael is - or she is with her - by returning to the thought of them in the Academy cafeteria. "Should I be concerned that the cadets don't know the president by sight?"

Tilly chuckles. "Oh it's contextual, of course. There's no reason the President of the Federation would be in the Academy cafeteria, you must be someone else. Also you're very nondescript when you want to be."

"Is that a compliment?" Laira's not sure how to take that, but Tilly's smile suggests it is meant with love.

"You're gorgeous and intimidating enough they won't talk to you. Come, eat lunch with me. It'll be fun." Tilly waits, then leans in a little. "Also, if I'm allowed to say, you do look better. Much better than the last time I saw you."

"Thanks." Reaching for the pins that hold her hair in the coiled bun at the base of her neck, Laira lets that much of her hair down, and it tumbles heavy on her shoulders. She never wears her hair down in her capacity as president, so that should help. Standing slowly, cautious of the way foggy turns to dark if she gets up too quickly, Laira waits until she's steady, then opens her jacket.

"Totally undercover." Tilly waits by the door, then reaches for her commbadge. "Besides, we don't usually let non-Starfleet in. You should be honored."

"I am."

"You're not going to remind me that as Commander-in-Chief—"

"No, not, then I'd be less honored and that's less fun."

Tilly winks and taps her badge. "Let's go have fun."

====

Fun, apparently, is choosing one of the color coded replicators: brighter colors are have more spice, darker colors have less.

"We rotate," Tilly explains as they join the pale green line. "Most of the cadets who come to the Academy didn't have a full replicator where they grew up, or they haven't had one at all before. Too many choices was confusing, so each line only makes one thing, each replicator gets a color, Commander Lablav came up with an algorithm to pick colors based on what's in the meal, so no one has to think too much."

"Do you know what it is?" Laira asks, looking over the busy cafeteria while cadets and instructors line up, get their food and sit, talking and studying. The laughter is very different from the commissary where the flag officers and upper level diplomats eat.

"The algorithm?" Tilly shakes her head. "Shades of green mean Gamma Quadrant, so..." She shrugs. "It'll be good, whatever it is. I've been working on my star charts but that was a blur in my time so it's slow going. It's kind of fun not knowing. That green's very pale so, it'll be bland, if you are still careful about what you eat, for some reason."

"You can say it."

"Oh?" Tilly leads her right up to the replicator, taps a few controls to chose her utensils and what she wants to drink from a short list. "I didn't know we were saying it."

"I-" Laira looks away, studying the replicator, then back at Tilly. "I'm going to have to learn to say it."

"You don't have to. You can wait, let everyone tiptoe around it, tell them when she's here."

Laira makes a sound in the back of her throat. "There's an idea." Just wait, see how long it takes anyone to mention it at all.

Once Tilly has her tray, it's Laira's turn and she chooses the iced tea and allows the replicator pick her utensils. She doesn't know where on Earth a hibiscus is from, but it sounds interesting. Hopefully not too interesting.

"Admiral Vance took it well, right?"

"I think he was surprised, I wasn't in that meeting, but he's always loved children."

Tilly leads her to a table on the raised section, near the huge viewports that look out over the fleet. The other tables there have instructors in black and Starfleet officers in the red, blue and gold of standard uniforms. One or two look up and acknowledge Tilly, and no one pays any attention to her. That's so rare since the election that Laira almost feels slighted that there are no double takes.

"Well, that's one hurdle down. When do you have to tell the Senate?"

Sitting down next to Tilly instead of across from her, Laira takes a breath, wishing she could settle the twisting in her chest. She chews the inside of her lip, stopping herself before it hurts. "I don't know what the protocol is, or should be. Nothing similar has happened after the Burn, and things before the Burn were so different."

"But it did happen before?" Tilly unfolds her napkin, setting it in her lap. "It must have."

"Several times, I think."

"You think?" Tilly smiles over her plate. "Historical records didn't think it was worth mentioning?"

"No, I—" Laira pauses. Does she wish this was more dull? Somehow less noteworthy so no one cared what her personal life was like, and having a baby with Michael was simply a footnote? Would that make this easier? Is it important that they're doing this now, after the Burn and the DMA because everyone needs a chance to live in peace and prosperity, whatever it looks like for them?

She can't say these things yet, not to Tilly, not even to Michael. Her thoughts are half-formed and Laira never speaks before she's sure. She must answer Tilly's question. She bites her lip again, suddenly intrigued by her tea.

"I'm sure you're aware how much history has been lost, between when you and *Discovery* left and the Burn. The older records are harder to access, the way we store data has changed and we were so shorthanded before—"

"So many things we can't even open until we change the databases from isolinear rods to crystalline data cores, and somehow account for the forty-seven different kinds of storage we used in between. Would be easier if the records were paper, those you can always open. Except they'd take up a whole planet or something." Tilly smiles, laughing a little. "Planet Library, has that ever been a thing?"

"No, I haven't herd of a library planet. Your sphere, the one that became part of *Discovery's* that's close—"

"And that turned our ship into a person, so, maybe not the best way to store data." Tilly stes down her fork, picks up her drink and meets Laira's eyes, her confidence is so calm that Laira wants to sink into it. "Still, maybe it helps that you're not the first person to have a baby in office?"

"Children are a lot." Laira toys with her rice rather than eating it. "Babies are more than a lot. How do I know I'm balancing it well? How do I—"

"Still be one of the most important people in the galaxy?"

"I'm not—" Laira's face starts to warm. She hates blushing.

Tilly gestures with her hand, pretending to gossip. "The leader who stopped the DMA, the reuniter of the Federation. You know, I hear you got both Earth and Ni'Var back into the Federation, that's historic, because you just have Andoria left and you'll have a full set."

"I didn't—"

"You could have done all of it pregnant, or as a mom, you're still you. Besides, even though my mother isn't an ideal role model, but she accomplished so many important things when I was little. Even finished some important security agreement with the Grazerites right before I was born. My grandmother said she had to talk fast for once because she was in labor."

"Remind me to avoid that."

"The treaty was sound, maybe save something you really need the boost for."

"Because I'll be able to plan it exactly."

"This is Michael's child too, she used to be Vulcan, I bet your kid is exactly on time and makes a hell of an entrance."

At some point in the future, between three and eight months from now, because Hugh can't give them anything more exactly than that.

"Are you starting the betting pool early?"

"Gotta get the right date." Tilly picks up her dessert, smirking. "Play my cards right and who knows what I could win."

Laira chuckles into her napkin and shakes her head. Taking a bite saves her from having to speak with she chews, ignoring her food. It's edible: vegetables, sauce and protein over rice, mildly savory, very lightly spiced. Almost too bland, and that's probably a good thing.

One of Tilly's cadets, a human woman with red hair, approaches with a polite nod to Laira, then ignores her entirely to ask Tilly a complicated question regarding shield harmonics. They discuss it for a moment, then she leaves, again without really acknowledging Laira as more than a lunch companion. It's perfectly polite, but Laira's so rarely just present without having to lead the conversation that she has to remind herself what to do.

She has to eat, smile, watch Tilly guide her cadets through their work: it's pleasant enough, warm in a way she can't always find going from one tense planetary leader to the next on comms.

"Sorry, their exam on shielding is this afternoon."

"It's all right. It's nice, actually."

"Thought it might be. My dad told me that my mom always had the best time at parties when no one knew who she was. When they were dating, she'd come with him to geology mixers and just be ordinary all night. As ordinary as she could be, of course. She was kind of like you that way."

"How so?" Laira braces for the comparison that must be coming.

"She was fucking gorgeous, yes, she was all put together and important and elegant, but whenever she had her hair down, some dress that wasn't perfect, when she'd laugh talking to my father? He kept these holos of when they were young, and they were so happy. I used to look at them and know why they got together."

"So I'm an unreachable bitch until my hair's down?"

Tilly's nose crinkles when she laughs, and she has to set her glass down to keep laughing because she's gone too far to drink. It takes her a moment to collect herself. "Michael did want to punch you in the head." After she says that, she's gone in laughter.

While they're both wiping tears from their eyes, Tilly explains how annoyed Michael was at the beginning, when she introduced her at the Academy, then when she came on board. Michael hadn't hid her feelings much, yet she had been polite. Diplomatic, even, though she'd hate admitting it.

Well, would have hated to say it, now she'd probably embellish the story with how much she wanted to punch Laira for being a politician.

Maybe just box a little.

They finish lunch, teasing each other and joking and by the time Laira sets down her tray in the recycler, she is aware why Tilly is Michael's best friend. There's something so easy about her. Laira so rarely has interactions that leave her so content.

In the lift back to her office, Laira sighs and lets herself rub her forehead where it aches between her eyes.

"How's your head?"

"Truthfully?"

"Yeah." Reaching across the lift, Tilly has her hand before Laira realizes they're even that close of friends. "You can tell me, I promise to only use it to tease Michael later."

Laira hums her agreement, trying to find words. She can't say she has a headache, it's not painful, really, just fuzzy, like the signals of her brain are caught in a weak subspace buffer and scrambled like a bad holocomm. "It's foggy."

Tilly's thoughts run much faster, and her smile has such a warmth. "Have you ever seen the fog rise off the ocean in San Francisco, on Earth? When the water's warm, it's like it's steaming up into the air. It's beautiful."

"I haven't been." She must sound too wistful because Tilly squeezes her hand.

"Not during negotiations?"

Sighing again Laira looks directly ahead at the turbolift door. "They were busy."

"And you couldn't take a day off?"

Laira looks down at how the doors meet the deck. She should have, and found time to see her family. Made time, but she was so tired.

Tilly ponders for a moment. "I haven't been to Fereginar yet but I hear the fog there is intense."

Chuckling, Laira nods, immediately grateful for the reprieve. "It's like soup."

"Must be hell for your hair."

"It is." Laira squeezes her hand. "Better than Andoria."

"You haven't-"

"Oh no, we've been at war since-"

"Osyraa, right. I- Andoria was part of the Federation. My Federation, we visited." Tilly shakes her head. "I forget how old I am, sometimes "

Laira can't imagine having memories of a place almost a thousand years old. It must be such a strange experience.

Silence holds them as the lift hums. When it stops, Laira doesn't step forward. She holds Tilly's hand and they stand together, waiting.

Maybe it's better if she says it out loud. "I stayed on the ship, when we were in orbit of Earth. I went to the conference halls, the restaurants--"

Tilly waits, hand in hers, quiet and patient.

"My mother loved Earth. Her family's there, I have a great-grandmother, and I meant to see them."

"You're very busy."

"I made myself busy."

Tilly tugs her hand, just a little, so their eyes meet. "You've never talked to them."

"Earth was closed off." It wasn't her fault. Earth wouldn't even accept communiques. She's never spoken to her great grandmother; doesn't know her great-aunts and uncles, or the dozens of cousins she must have.

The lift opens when Laira takes a step, but this deck only contains her office and a conference room, and they're alone. It's still, almost too

quiet.

Tilly starts to release her hand, but Laura keeps hers. "I didn't know what to say."

"Now at least you can start with telling them that you're having Michael's baby." Tilly reaches out, adds her other hand on top of Laura's. "She's pretty famous."

"I know."

"A little celebrity can't hurt." Tilly winks, then tugs her close, hugging her tight. It's sudden, and welcome, and she melts into her. It's been a long time since she saw friends close enough to hug her. "They will love you, and of course they'll adore Michael. She's Captain fucking Burnham, she's a rock star."

Laura sighs into her shoulder, holding Tilly just as tightly. "Bring a rock star, and they have to like me?"

"Can't hurt your chances."

---

Michael's meeting with the Ni'Var scientists drags on through the afternoon, even through the evening. Admiral Vance deploys his most convincing argument that she come to dinner: sending his daughter to her office to invite her. It has yet to fail, because she's precocious and polite. Sinner with Vance's family is always sustaining, in ways more than the food. Last time she visited, Laura brought Michael, which sent the whole evening into stories of the 23rd century and Michael answering every question Adezie came up with about xenanthropology. The two of them could have had their own dinner and talked the whole time, which made the whole evening amusing.

Dr. Hirai sent her Dr. Kovich's three dimension word puzzle from Earth after she got home, and she's been so busy she's only tried it a few times, but tonight, alone in their quarters, Laura's halfway through her third puzzle when Michael arrives home.

Michael kisses the back of her head, hands on her shoulders as she stares over at the puzzle. "Putting words in a grid wasn't enough for you?"

Laura reaches up, patting her hand. "I beat that one."

"So it gave you this horrible monstrosity?" Michael circles the sofa, removing her jacket as she walks. "That's a hyperbolic curve."

"No, hyperbolic is ten letters, I need twelve."

Chuckling, Michael settles in around her, pulling Laura into her arms. "Navigational is twelve."

"Did you crack it?"

Michael kisses her neck. "One of the Romulan scientists has a prototype interface based on the 10C's complex hydrocarbons. The interface generates a hydrocarbon map of the universe and then uses electrical signals to send it to the mycelial network it."

"And the mycelial network can understand that?"

"*Prototaxites stellaviatori* seems to get it. Stamets, Reno, Auriello and one of the Romulan Scientists, Doctor Veddra think they're ready for a shuttle experiment. Detmer volunteered but this would all be open to presidential approval, of course."

"Of course."

"It looks promising. We were able to ask the mycelial network where we were and they replied."

"Replied?"

Michael nods into her shoulder. "Sent back electric signals. I think if we asked through a spore drive interface, it might work. We have to try."

Laura takes Michael's hands in hers, wrapping their fingers together. "And they will. Imagining a spore drive in every Starfleet ship, that changes things."

"Wouldn't it?" Michael nuzzles into her neck. "I'm sorry I missed lunch."

"Tilly came anyway."

"I thought she might." Michael taps the back of her hand with her fingers. "She's incredible."

"She's not intimidated."

"No," Michael says, chuckling. "She really wouldn't be."

"I appreciate that."

"Good."

They talk about the Ni'Var scientists and endless meetings, about Tilly's cadets and how much everything would change if ever ship in the

fleet had a spore drive.

When they're both half-asleep on the sofa together they untangle themselves and Michael offers her a hand up.

"How was today?"

"I missed you."

Michael reaches up, brushing her cheek. Her smile's soft. "I missed you too."

Laira kisses her cheek. "We had a calm day, our hitchhiker and I."

"You didn't take it."

Sighing zaira shakes her head. "I didn't. Sneezed through all my meetings, lunch and dinner."

Michael holds her cheek. "You have turned green by now when you take it."

"I know." Turning into Michael's hand, Laira kisses her palm. "I know. I--"

"It's yours or tell, or not, I'm just glad it was a good day."

"My aide knows. She's Bajoran, she has to know. It's not subtle."

"That's okay." Michael takes both her hands and squeezes them, smiling so bright it turns into a laugh. "She's probably thrilled for you."

"Us."

"Us." Michael takes a step closer, and their foreheads touch. Touching her seems to make everything possible. "The whole damn galaxy is going to be thrilled."

Her face warms. Michael makes her blush like no one else, and she knows it.

"Our baby is not a state event."

"She's a beginning. Birth follows rebirth." Michael touches her belly, her hand resting against Laira's shirt. "Her galaxy's going to be the best it's ever been."

Hope burns, catching in her throat. Michael kisses her before she has to speak, and they melt into each other, losing themselves to the moment. Hope is so easy with her. Laira had to fight for it, search her soul to inspire others, and then this ancient ship arrives with her brilliant captain and hope wells inside her, unstoppable. Irresponsible, reckless - Starfleet Captain bullshit - but she loves it, and Michael and what they are together.

Maybe this can get Michael back on the bridge of a starship, perhaps there's some hopeful future where they're out there together.

Together is all she wants to think about tonight.

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira have dinner with Admiral Vance's family. The Federation Council decides they want to ask the 10-C for help and send Laira to ask. Michael hates that idea, but there's not much she can do about it.

### Chapter Notes

We didn't have a name for the President of United Earth when I wrote this, so I'm using Stacey Abrams' pen name, Selena Montgomery, so I don't have to come up with a name.

I made up the names for Vance's family. Hopefully they'll get names in season 5.

Many thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicali for helping me plot.

### *Michael*

"Mom and dad usually don't let me come to work dinners." Adezie Vance sets the table, neatly arranging the forks by the plates.

"We were trying to not make it a work dinner." Michael finishes her coffee and sighs. "We did try, we meant to stop talking about work."

Adezie nods to her. "I know you'll try to not make it work."

Michael chuckles, and hands her cloth napkins. "It's somehow always work isn't it?"

"They're busy. Mom works all the time too."

"My birth parents used talk about engineering and science over the table before I understood what they were saying, and once I was old enough to get it, I was too far invested. I wanted to be an engineer too."

Adezie smiles at that. "Mom's work is very different from dad's. Being a chef sounds more fun than being an admiral. I think Dad liked being a captain better, but I was really little when he had his own ship."

"Did you get to see him much when he had a ship?"

Shaking her head, Adezie folds a napkin into a neat triangle. "Oh no. It was just mom and I on a starbase for a long time. We'd see him a few times, but the Emerald Chain—"

Michael touches her shoulder. "It was the Klingons when I was younger, and we were allies with the Andorians."

"That's so different."

"Isn't it?" Michael folds the last napkin and hands it over. "Bet you learned a lot about how replicators work from your mom."

"A replicator is only as good as the original recipe, and the molecular arranger. Both are important." Adezie sets the napkins on the plates and glances over at the living room, where Laira and Admiral Vance have been discussing negotiations with Andoria in soft voices over glowing holos for the last hour or so. "Don't worry, they'll stop when mom gets here. Mom and dad have a deal."

"Good, Laira and I haven't worked it out quite as well."

Laira sneezes three, four, eventually six times, in the living room and Vance's serious expression breaks into a smile.

"Maybe it'll be different when you have a baby."

"It'll have to be."

Adezie nods, tapping through the replicator menu. "You know, Laira has the fancy replicator."

"Fancy?"

"Mom says some of the most difficult cuisine to replicate is Bolian, because some much of it is so acidic, and it's molecularly complex. If you see this one-" she points and pauses, letting Michael read it.

"Gondas oranatazydes?" Some kind of Bolian stew, Michael thinks, but she's never had it



"Then you have the fanciest replicator database the Federation makes. Only one version has it." Adezie leans closer to Michael. "We can't eat it though."

"Too acidic?"

"It would melt your tongue."

Michael chuckles with her. "That doesn't sound good."

"Do you like hasparat?"

"I hadn't had it until we got here. Bajor wasn't in the Federation yet."

"Hasparat's really good, it's kind of spicy though and maybe—" she pauses, because she's one of the most thoughtful kids Michael has ever met.

"Laura likes decapus salad, and makapa bread. I've heard foraiiga is good, but I haven't had it." Michael glances down, then looks back up at Adezie. "Sometimes, lately, she just eats the bread."

"Dad worries about her."

Michael pats her shoulder. "It's just for a little while." It's sweet that Vance worries, and charming that Adezie knows about it. They both look over towards Laura's desk, but Vance and Laura aren't working anymore. They sat down while Michael wasn't looking, and Laura's head in her hands, leaning forward. Dammit.

Michael watches for a moment, trying to guess what she needs. Laura might just be dizzy, and Vance rubs her shoulder. Grabbing a cold glass of water from the replicator, she looks to Adezie, ready to apologize for neglecting her replicator duties.

"I got it. I'm good at setting it all up." She waves Michael away as if she were much older. Something in her expression says she does this often.

"Thanks."

Kneeling down in front of Laura, Michael hands the water to Vance, then touches Laura's knees. "What happened?"

Laura's her eyes remain closed, her eyeshadow glinting in the weak light. "I got dizzy."

Vance chuckles. "I'm sure it's my fault for asking about building another spacedock."

"Entirely." Michael rubs Laura's knees, then touches her cheek. "Dark around the edges?"

Laura's tone cracks with annoyance. "It was all dark."

"Did you stand up too fast?"

"I was standing." Laura opens her eyes slowly, and it takes her a moment to focus on Michael's face. "Then I couldn't."

Vance hands over the water, careful to cradle Laura's hands around it. "We do need another space dock."

Laura's soft little laugh aches in Michael's chest. She takes a sip of her water, and her hands seem steady.

"Is it getting better?"

"The sparkles are gone."

"White or gold?" Vance asks, with a smirk.

"Does the color matter?"

"I always see gold when I hit my very hard head on anything."

"Silver," Michael says, taking the half-empty water glass when Laura shakes her head. "but it's more like ribbons, falling sparks. Been awhile since I hit my head that hard."

"If I'd hit my head, this would make sense." Laura glares down at her, then shuts her eyes, frustration tinges her voice. "I didn't take anything. Today was an easy day."

Vance raises his eyebrows, as if easy is a very relative term for the embodiment of the Federation. "Only eight hours of meetings, less than usual."

"You're not helping."

He smirks at Michael, pats Laura's hands and stands. "I'll go help with dinner then."

Laura glares at him for a moment, then shuts her eyes. That little wince is about as much as she'll allow herself to complain, so Michael touches the back of her neck, running her fingers over the tight muscles where Laura's head meets her neck.

"Drink your water."

Her first breath is fast, but the second is slower, calmer. "It's the same water, but it—"

"Tastes funny." Michael finishes for her. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not—"

"You're allowed to be annoyed about it. You didn't ask for it."

Laira looks at the water glass, but she wrinkles her nose and ignores it.

"Even if you did," Michael says, half-teasing, but there's a truth to that. She drops her hand to Laira's, wrapping their fingers together. "It must be so frustrating."

"It's fine." Laira sighs, again, then drinks her water as if it's from the bitter salt seas of Ni'Var. "I did this to myself, after all."

Michael kisses her forehead. "You can't blame yourself for an anomaly that rare."

Laira shrugs, fidgeting with the glass in her hands. "Maybe my first thought during a spatial anomaly shouldn't have been 'I want to have a child with you.'"

"Was that the real reason you came onto *Discovery* to vet me? That whole Voyager-captaincy thing was just a ruse?"

Finally Laira smiles, coy and amused, but she looks a little less pale. "It was, it really was. I didn't care about Starfleet at all, just whether or not you'd be a good parent."

"Luckily for me, I passed?" Michael chuckles, setting down the glass and reaching for Laira's hands to help her up.

Laira's fingers grab hers, tight, and she pauses, looking directly into Michael's eyes, deeply serious. Her eyes are so damn blue. "You're the only person I can imagine doing this with; you are the best choice." Laira kisses her cheek when Michael can't speak, and then slips past her.

There's no time to chase her and ask her to clarify, or insist that there are hundreds of better potential parents than her, so Michael stares at Laira's back, smiles, tries not to blush and fails utterly.

Ronia Vance beams in from work and everyone's distracted welcoming her, so Michael takes a moment, retrieves Laira's glass and stares at it, smiles at it, holds it like an idiot because Laira held it and Laira loves her and Laira wanted to have a baby with her—

When Michael looks up again, dragging herself back to the present Adezie smiles at her over the table, arms folded. She tilts her head towards the chair beside Laira then winks.

"Going to come eat, Captain?"

---

The agreement happens so quickly during the debate than Michael barely has time to glare across at Laira how much she hates this idea before it has been proposed, voted on, and settled. Laira, and *Discovery*, are going back to the 10C to ask for help with the static warp bubbles.

It's the worst idea. It's objectively a terrible, awful idea and so unnecessary because they're so close to being able to add a spore drive to all ships that want one - except their prototype doesn't install on every ship in an instant like Tarka's and their prototype means every ship in Starfleet will need a refit and spore bay but—

They're going. Laira's face is set and Michael's not going to be to argue with the fucking president, but that doesn't mean she hates it any less.

The Vice President even has the gall to suggest Michael go to Ni'Var and keep working with the propulsion engineers there, but she could have strangled her with her bare hands and that carries really well to a Betazoid, so that idea dies early.

The Romulan scientist, Dr. Veddra, will just have to come to the edge of the galaxy. It must be perfectly safe if they're sending Laira - now - Michael has to remind herself that they don't know. Maybe they would have voted differently, maybe she could—

Laira doesn't want it to be public. She's not ready and she's the one pregnant. Michael respects that, she has to, but she also hasn't had a knot in her stomach this stubborn since Leland. She tries to chase it away by looking at their mission, plotting a course, analyzing the galactic barrier transit and pondering ways to strengthen the shields, but it's useless.

They nearly died. Billions of lives were at stake, and death caressed them, multiple times, but they succeeded.

Narrowly.

Laira takes a moment, touches her hand, then her cheek, and they linger, almost kissing, almost embracing. 'I love you' drifts over her lips, but she doesn't say it, not here.

Michael hates this.

Laira knows.

They're going anyway.

Kovich, Laira, Vance and the vice president disappear into Laira's office to plan the handover and what she'll have to deal with in Laira's absence. Michael doesn't actually have anything to do. She's going nowhere, so she leaves, heads for the lounge, because she needs a drink if she has to go back to the 10-C. Tilly's still in class, *Discovery's* jumping to Ni'Var and Earth, so she only has herself to drink with.

She finishes one shot quickly, letting it numb her tongue. The cocktail she broods over, letting her mind wrap itself around the logic of this while her heart flames.

"Rough day, Captain?" President Montgomery takes a seat beside her, drink in hand.

Michael lifts her drink, nods to the president of United Earth and then takes a long sip. She'll need it if she's going to talk. "I hate this mission, ma'am."

Montgomery nods, tapping her glass with a finger. "Too dark out there past the edge of the galaxy?"

"I've been in a toxic subspace void, and a collapsing universe. Both of those were pretty dark, and no, I didn't like either of them."

"You had company in your collapsing universe." Montgomery lifts her glass to Michael, and finishes her drink. "Laira's a riot if you manage to keep her from hustling you out of your starship."

Michael winces, shaking her head while Montgomery laughs. "Laira needed some help."

Montgomery nods, waving down the server for another round. She orders something Michael's never heard of and the server disappears to fetch them. "She does look tired."

Of course she does, Laira's carrying the Federation and a baby, that's a lot. "She is tired. She didn't stop, not after the DMA, or the 10-C, even when—"

Montgomery waits, head tilted, smiling in interest. "When what?"

Toying with the rim of her empty glass, Michael shrugs. "You've read the classified report."

"The astrophysics went right past me, but it got really interesting in the last part." Montgomery's eyes twinkle. "Odd side effects for an anomaly, don't you think?"

"It's thought based."

"And her thoughts were fairly flattering towards you, Captain." Montgomery accepts the drinks from the server and winks at Michael. "I've known Laira a long time, and she doesn't fall—"

"Like a two-year-old into a well?"

Lifting her glass, Montgomery chuckles. "Historically not." She lifts the cherry from her drink and takes a sip. "Seems you're extraordinary."

Toying with her own cherry stem, Michael sniffs her drink and tries to determine what it is. "I'm a wrecking ball."

That gets a laugh, head back, eyes shining. "She didn't call you that."

"Oh she did."

"And you still—"

Instead of falling like a child, Michael fell like a meteor, changing everything in her life. Michael nods. "She grew on me."

"That can be good." Montgomery looks at her glass with an innocent expression. "Since you're growing in her."

Michael has to swallow hard not to spit out her drink. The hitchhiker's in the unredacted report, and Laira might have mentioned it, but she's still not prepared for the very wicked smile on the president's face.

"Congratulations for that, by the way. You really must be someone extraordinary, Captain Michael Burnham." Montgomery's smile cracks her face and she starts to laugh. "I never thought Lar-Lar would actually do it."

---

Michael's had enough real liquor that by the time she returns to their quarters her lips are pleasantly numb and her awareness is a little off. Laira's not back yet, so she peels off her suit jacket and slumps on the sofa in her tank top, water in hand.

Take the ship to the edge of the galaxy, cross the galactic barrier (that they barely survived the first time), ask the giant floating jellyfish monsters for help before the warp bubbles destabilize subspace and warp travel, hold the galaxy together just long enough to make the spore drive's new prototype interface work—

Totally easy, they can do all of this. No problem. It'll be fine, the 10-C don't have similar enough digestive systems to be offended if Laira

throws up in front of the anyway.

President Montgomery's laugh rings in her ears, but it's the softness of what she said that clings to Michael's thoughts. *"I think she's wanted this for a long time. You just weren't here yet."*

Michael doesn't believe in fate, or predestination, and the paths that led her here have a thousand on discovered branches. This journey hurt, and she lost so many people. Is that what scares her, losing Laura, losing the future that barely exists yet? She wants this, and it's logical to fear losing it, but she can't logic herself out of being afraid. Being angry. Hasn't she done enough for the galaxy? Why does it need Laura?

Why now?

She finishes her water, replicates some more, then paces instead of sitting. The warp bubbles are a subspace problem. The 10-C understand subspace better than any species they've ever encountered. They have empathy, they might be amenable to assisting them again, but that might take weeks of negotiating, digging through linguistics, figuring out how to ask about a phenomena they barely understand of a species that only just stopped killing them. Though, they were apologetic. It's not terrible, not nearly as dangerous as their first trip, and yet...

Michael runs a hand over Philippa's ancient telescope. The metal's cool under her fingers, worn by centuries of hands. If Philippa was with her, what would she say? How would Philippa help her hate this less? *"We don't chose our missions, Michael. We control how we approach them. We decide what to do with what we're handed, even if we hate what's in our hands."*

She hates this. Laura and the baby are the most precious - vulnerable - parts of her life, and sending them beyond the galactic barrier makes her want to punch someone. She hasn't been this mad since Laura— Michael pauses, chuckling to herself. Of course, it was her. It had to be.

Touching the telescope again, Michael thanks it for being part of Philippa, for bringing her to her mind, with all of Philippa's calm. She'd be so amused by Michael being involved with someone like Laura. An ambassador like Sarek, a politician, which is worse still, and yet, Philippa would be proud of them. She'd be enamored with the baby, demand holos every chance they could send them.

Taking a breath, Michael lets her thoughts drift to Gabrielle, still on P'Jhar. The monastery doesn't have direct communications, but messages can be left, and Gabrielle writes back to Michael when she can. It's not the right way to find out about a grandchild. Michael will need to wait until she can see her in person, but...telling her they were dating might be all right.

Michael starts and stops, gets some tea and tries again, happy with her message on the third try. It's to the point enough that Gabrielle should be pleased with it. Absolute candor can be difficult to get right.

Michael plays it back, listening for little mistakes. Did she say too much? Did she ask for too much? Gabrielle's free to come and go from P'Jhar

Laura's hands wind around her waist and then she's wrapped up in Laura's arms. Michael didn't hear her come in while she was fussing with the message to Gabrielle. Laura leans down, kissing her neck and Michael's warm.

"Will your mother be able to see you?"

Michael wraps her hands around Laura's. "I'd like her to see us."

Laura kisses her neck again, humming a response in the affirmative.

"I want her to meet you. Really meet you, I know you met, but—"

"It's different." Laura squeezes her again, then slips away, pulling her hair out of its updo so it falls heavy onto her shoulders. "President of the Federation sending you on a life-threatening mission to bring in someone dear to you is very different from I'm dating your daughter. The latter's so much more intimidating."

Michael chuckles, watching Laura take off her jacket and sit, hair falling loose down her back like a princess from one of Amanda's books. "I've never talked to my mother about dating anyone."

Pausing while she removes her makeup, Laura smiles as she processes that thought. "She was gone for that part of your life."

"She watched me."

"She saw it, that doesn't mean you knew she was watching." Laura wipes the makeup from her face and removes her blouse, sitting in front of the mirror in her delicate tank top. "I never talked to my mother about dating either. My father's crew gave me a hard time, but spacers have their own rules."

"Couriers did too." Michael walks towards her, running her fingers across Laura's bare shoulders. "Tilly and Stamets helped me with one of my first dates. Sort of, just dancing with someone at a party was so--"

Laura raises her eye ridges, smirking. "Terrifying?"

"Awkwardly yes."

Turning, Laura stands, and takes Michael's hand as if they're about to dance. "Should I avoid asking you to formal functions?"

"Do we dance in this century?" Michael slips into her arms, swaying in the bedroom without music. "I might have gotten better at it."

"Good." Laura leans close to her forehead, pressing their faces together. "I have to attend many formal occasions, and I'd hate to go without you."

"I nearly strangled the vice president because I didn't want to go on a mission without you."

Laughing, Laura pulls back and nods. "I haven't seen her make that face in awhile."

"I hate this mission."

Laura kisses her forehead, then her cheek and then they're kissing, wrapped in each other and everything is right with the galaxy. "I know."

"I don't like putting you in danger."

"I'll be on the best ship in the fleet, with the best crew." Laura pauses, then touches Michael's lower lip. "Unfortunately, the best captain isn't available right now."

"Saru is a good captain."

Laura lifts Michael's hands and kisses them. "My favorite captain took a break."

"Wonder why she did that?"

"I hear she got pulled into politics."

"How dreadful for her."

Standing on her tiptoes, Michael rises up to kiss her firmly. "It's been horrible, every moment of it."

---

Later, when Laura's wrapped around her, Michael plays with her hair. Trailing her fingers down Laura's bare back, she tries to make sense of her feelings. It's enough, isn't it? She came ahead in time, her crew left everything, and then they saved the galaxy again, lost her relationship, gained one - grained everything - but she's tired. Not tired like Laura, who could easily take several naps a day, tired in her soul.

Maybe the galaxy could stay saved for awhile. A few months, so Laura feels better, maybe a year, so the baby's here and someone else can deal with whatever the next problem is.

There are other ships, other captains, this doesn't have to be them, doesn't have to be her crew, but Laura's the best negotiator. Discovery has the best crew and this should be Michael's mission. Saru can handle it. She'll have to let him; she can't take the ship back. She can't even be his first officer right now because she stepped back.

For Laura.

For the hitchhiker.

Because Michael doesn't know how to be captain and partner and mother. She doesn't know how to balance the galaxy and her life. She can save lives, fight to the last, but a handful of lives, a tiny family, is something she hasn't had since she was a child. Amanda, Sarek and Spock loved her, but they were different from her parents. That quiet safety she had as a child hasn't been with her since they died. Does she want that back? Do they build that together? Does it start at the end of the galaxy, where the stars are few?

Laura sighs, shifting against Michael's chest. Is that where they started? Michael loved Book, and sometimes love is letting go.

Sometimes love must be holding on.

Her badge is on the nightstand and she can't read it. She'd have to get out of bed to work, and lying here it's just Laura's breathing and her heartbeat.

Philippa used to tell her to let things happen. Trust the crew, let them do their work. Trust her family. Trust herself. The other Philippa wanted her to love, in her own prickly way. They'd both be proud of her now, wouldn't they?

They would both want her to be happy.

Is she?

Laura sighs and Michael finds her hand. She whispers, nuzzles her hair, and Laura quiets. This could be what happy and content feels like; where it starts.

---

They board *Discovery* at 0800. It's not that early, but Laura's half awake, and Michael can't help thinking fondly of the coffee in the mess hall. She's not the captain, so they don't have to be on the bridge, but it's one of the strangest experiences she's had lately to sit in lounge and let everyone else move around her. Black Alert sounds through the ship. She doesn't need to be on the bridge. This is Saru's mission.

Laira reaches across the table, and her fingers find Michael's. "It's strange being here, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

They jump and they pass through the mycelial network, stretching and twisting before they pop back into space. It's more disorienting here than on the bridge. (She's supposed to be captain, after all.)

When they're back, Laira smiles at her over coffee, then squeezes her fingers. "When you're ready, there's some treaty language I need to get through before we get out of communications range entirely."

"Andoria?" That's what she was working on before they left, wasn't it?

"Nothing that complicated. Tellar Prime and United Earth, technical and scientific exchange." Laira rubs her forehead and Michael's stomach knots. They can't have an easy day, can they?

Laira rolls her eyes when she catches Michael's. "I'm fine."

"I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to say anything, Michael, you have the loudest eyes."

"I do not." Michael releases her hand to grab her coffee. "How can eyes be loud?"

Laira leans back, both hands on her cup. "You worry so much it vibrates like a bad plasma conduit."

"It does not."

"Hmmm." Laira opens her work, letting the glow of the holopadd fill the air between them.

"It'll be a long day if you have a headache already."

"I don't have a headache."

"Hmmm," Michael echoes from her side of the holo.

Laira starts to laugh. "I also don't sound like that."

She absolutely does, and Michael's right, but this is as close as Laira will get to agreeing. "I'm getting more coffee. Can I bring you a hypo?"

"Is it for you?" Laira avoids meeting Michael's eyes.

"Yes, it is for me, so I don't worry. Your head doesn't hurt at all." Folding her arms, Michael waits.

Laira studies the ceiling as if *Discovery* herself can somehow help her. "Then fine, painkiller thirty-six, for you, and more coffee."

### Chapter Summary

Laira spends some time on the bridge in the middle of the night with Joann and Keyla. Michael misses being captain.

#### *Laira*

She turns to her side, trying to convince herself she can just go back to sleep. She's too warm to keep lying on Michael's chest, but moving to lie on the bed instead doesn't cool her.

Dammit.

Laira takes a breath, opening her eyes reluctantly in the darkness of Michael's quarters. Somehow here feels more like home than her own rooms at headquarters. Even though she's only spent a handful of nights on Discovery in Michael's quarters, there's a peace here she wants to wrap herself up in, like it's the sheets on Michael's bed. Sitting up, she smiles down at Michael, asleep on her back, braids on the pillow.

She'd be awake in an instant if Michael asks. All she has to do is touch her, or whisper her name, and Michael will be awake.

She should sleep. This is nothing.

Rubbing her eyes, Laira swings her feet over the side of the bed. Her toes find the cool deck and out of the blankets, she shivers. Stars fly past in blue lines. This time the mycelial network only got them within twenty-three light years of the barrier. Something Stamets can't explain, something they just have to work with. A day and a half to reach the barrier, an uncounted part of time to pass through, then the Ten-C.

Leaving the bed, she grabs her robe from the chair and pulls it on, though sweat makes the silk stick to her skin. Laira stops, taking another breath to try and still her stomach, but it's a lost cause. Stripping the robe off, she leaves it on the counter by the sink, and waits, hands on the sink.

She should really be better at this. Repetition is supposed to improve her skills, however, this is like that brutal sharp turn between R'Xylis and Zhouwen, no matter how many times she does it, it goes wrong.

With the bathroom door closed, Michael shouldn't hear her throwing up.

Let her sleep.

Their demanding little hitchhiker can keep her company as she washes her mouth out. Water's so sweet that she has to force herself to swallow it. Wiping tears from her eyes, Laira leans over the sink, not trusting her body to be done. She's nearly ruined a few meetings that way, but this is over for the moment. It's rare that this hits in the middle of the night, but everything about this is strange.

She should go back to sleep, but her adrenaline's up. Lying there will just wake up Michael, who has been so worried. Now that she's thrown up, her skin's less sweaty, and her robe slips on.

The vice president has exquisite taste in clothing, and the robe's incredibly beautiful. Not something she ever would have replicated, but her taste tends towards old sweaters and flightsuits. Starfleet uniforms aren't bad either, really, but that's not—

Laira didn't intend to end up on the bridge, but it's so late that the rest of the ship seems asleep. She's not sure how long she's been wandering, it's so rare to not need to be anywhere that she allows herself to walk without purpose. Then the turbolift opens on the bridge. It's even dim, as if reminding her she should be asleep, but Commander Owosekun turns in the captain's chair and smiles in welcome.

"Madam President—"

"Please, it's oh-three-hundred." Laira smiles, shaking her head. "This is hardly an official visit."

"Well then," Owosekun stands, waving her hand across the nearly empty bridge. "What can we do for you?"

Glancing down at her feet, Laira sighs. "I couldn't sleep."

Owosekun smiles, then taps the back of the captain's chair. "Come, sit."

"Sit?"

"Joann hates being up there." Detmer says from the conn. "You'd be rescuing her from it really."

"Protocol says someone has to sit there, not that it really matters at oh-three-hundred when the president's—" Detmer stops, then turns in

her chair, starting to flush pink. "Sit, the view's nice."

The viewscreen's bright with starlines as they warp to the galactic barrier, and it's hardly going to be different in the chair, but it is Michael's chair.

Not at the moment, of course, but the ship is Michael's home.

"Michael won't mind, neither will Captain Saru." Owosekun returns to her familiar place at OPS. "You can say it's a historical experience."

"We've had two captains from another universe, only one who was really lying about it." Detmer taps a control and turns again to grin at Laura. "Captain Pike, who really should have made history enough that you know about him. Admiral Cornwell—"

Laura strokes the back of the chair. "I've heard of Pike, he captained the second *Enterprise*, and Cornwell had a few ships named after her."

"Good." Owosekun taps her console. "Then Saru, then Michael, now Saru again—"

"Michael will be back." Laura sits, sinking into Michael's chair, on Michael's bridge. The leather creaks a little, antique, like the metal of the armrests. She can't help looking for the little burr Michael's told her about in the dark. Her thumb rubs across it, rough and almost sharp. "You're right about the view."

"It's better in front." Detmer teases, pilots are all alike, no matter what century they're from.

Laura laughs. "Of course it is." She drags her hair through her hair, playing with it lazily.

Owosekun checks a few more things on her console, taps the programmable matter, then turns. "Why can't you sleep?"

"Truly?"

Detmer turns as well, not all the way, curious but cautious, like a *draka* looking at a new toy who hasn't decided if she'll hate it or not. "If you're just trying to find something to look at, the view from Michael's quarters is also pretty spectacular."

"I had to throw up." No point in hiding that. She doesn't need their political capital, and they won't make her life more difficult.

Owosekun's face softens - all sympathy and warmth - while Detmer stiffens.

"I'm sorry—"

Laura holds up a hand before they can be too nice. "It's not bad."

"Not bad now," Detmer corrects, innocently moving her hand through the programmable matter on her console. "It has been bad."

Laura laughs, and forces her shoulders to relax. "It's been wretched."

Detmer casts her eyes to Owosekun and shakes her head.

Owosekun reaches over, patting Detmer's arm. "It's not like that for everyone."

"Something living inside of you is—" Detmer shudders. "Sorry."

Laura waves her apology away, fidgeting with her sleeve. "Doctor Culber will often mention parts of it that are coming later and they don't seem real, so I understand your revulsion."

Owosekun chuckles a little. "That's very diplomatic of you to say."

Detmer rolls her eyes, turning back towards the viewscreen. "She is a diplomat."

Studying Detmer, Owosekun beams at her with the kind of naked affection that tingles to look at. "Laura used to be a pilot, so there's hope for you, Keyla. Maybe there's some diplomat in there somewhere. A next evolution for your macho side."

Detmer scoffs and they laugh together, teasing each other.

Owosekun - Joann - used her first name, without blushing or hesitation. Laura leans back a little, settling into the Michael's chair as she toys with her hair. Before Michael, other than a handful of the very highest ranked Starfleet officers and planetary leaders, Laura's first name was becoming a footnote in her official biography.

Detmer - Keyla - stands, waves her console into autopilot. "Do you want to try it?"

"What?"

Even Joann tilts her head at that idea.

"We're at warp, and space out here is pretty empty. You'd have to try to fly it into a star if you wanted to." Keyla takes another step back, freeing up her chair. "It might help you not want to throw up."

Laura slips from the captain's chair and takes the few steps towards the pilot's console. Sitting down, she runs her fingers over the



programmable matter, letting the ship get to know her. "Or I throw up on your controls."

Keyla's little scoff makes Joann laugh, and they both stand behind her, explaining how the old controls are different from what she grew up with, how the programmable matter works with the 900 year old ship underneath.

This is much more familiar than the captain's chair. The stars are so close she can touch them and the ship races away beneath her fingertips. Laira sighs then starts to smile." This is like home: the hum of the ship, the changing pressure of the programmable matter controls on her hand, cool and gentle, and the viewscreen bringing the stars to right in front of her.

"I've never flown anything like this. Cargo vessels are big, especially the sublight ones, but those turn like a drunk gormagander. *Discovery* turns on a nanite, I've seen what you can do with her."

"Still not over that six seconds?" Joann says, touching her shoulder.

"Six seconds is an eternity," Keyla retorts, crossing her arms. "We had plenty of time."

"I spend so much time thinking about the bigger things, interplanetary trade, multilateral protection agreements, I forgot what it was like to have an EPS control explode behind me."

Keyla touches the panel, guiding her hand over to the wrap readouts. "I'm glad we could remind you. Feel that? That's the distance to the galactic barrier, and just beneath that is our matter-antimatter efficiency, and the power output. The twisty thing under your palm is the spore drive, but that's not piloting."

Joann's smiling rebuke hints at that being an old problem between Keyla and engineering.

"When we get back, you can bring us in to headquarters. You've done that a few times, haven't you?"

"Only the first time." Laira blinks a little, her eyes stinging. "Never got to pilot myself after I was elected president. First time I was just a sector representative and we got there anywhere we could."

"When there wasn't enough dilithium."

"I don't think I can explain that to you."

Fingers touch her arm, and those are Joann's. "We ran out of other things, and our ships were fragile, but space was always open to us. It's different here, I know, but we can bring it back."

That optimism again. Just like Michael.

"Even if it is with mushrooms." Keyla leans on the side of the console, arms folded. "Stamets can't move the ship at all if it's not jumping, and it's like throwing ourselves across the universe, someone has to fly us in."

"What's the longest you've ever flown at sublight?"

Keyla has to think about that for quite some time. The 23rd century didn't know how good they had it, in some ways. The galaxy's always been messy, striving more than it succeeds, but not having to worry about how much dilithium they had would help. The spore drive might help that. Crossing universes is a terrifying side effect but, it didn't kill billions.

"Sixteen days," Keyla replies. "Warp coils went and we had to get back to a space lane. Starfleet picked us up. First time I saw a Walker-class ship."

"The *Tianwen*," Joann says. She must have heard this story hundreds of times. "Keyla knew she wanted to join Starfleet the moment she heard that warp drive purr."

"Shut up, Walker-class doesn't purr. It humms. There's a difference."

"It's a noise."

"They're distinctly different. Ask Stamets, or Reno, they'll explain it."

Joann smiles, nudging Keyla playfully. "Of course, Keyla tried to sneak onto the bridge."

"I didn't sneak—" Keyla pauses. "Fine, I did, but they let me."

"She was fourteen, already had her shuttle pilot rating, and Captain zh'Edem let her sit in the pilot's seat."

"It's more fun."

It's been more than a hundred years since they had Andorians in Starfleet, and Laira tries to picture that, or a Orion. At first she imagines the red, but the *Discovery* uniforms were that blue, and weren't they gold later?

"We used to make the Bajor-Cardassia run, my dad's fleet and I. When we had dilithium it was quick, couple days there and back, but when we didn't, it was years. I had three birthdays on that trip."

Keyla whistles, low and impressed. "That's a whole other kind of spacing. We lived on our ship but—"

"You went places." Laira stretches, rolling her shoulders a little. She can't love this too much, she is not *Discovery*'s pilot and she has a

whole interplanetary alliance to hold together.

"I didn't," Joann says, smiling at them both as she shakes her head. "I didn't even leave Earth until my first trip to Earth's moon, and I was at the Academy for that."

Laira finds that as hard to imagine as Joann does having three birthdays on a sublight cargo ship. They teach her Joann's console as well, explain what the indicators and sounds mean as *Discovery* warps through the night to the edge of the galaxy. Laira's forgotten how nauseated she was and she's finally starting to be tired, and then there are hands on her shoulders.

"Michael."

Michael kisses her hair before she turns. "Planning to join Starfleet after all?"

"The job I want is taken."

"Someday they'll promote Keyla."

Keyla's scoff makes them all laugh. "I can take these off you know. There's no position in Starfleet better than the one I have."

"Test pilot on the *Voyager-J*?" Laira teases, letting Michael help her up. "I can make it happen."

"I don't doubt it."

Joann and Keyla stand, beaming at Michael for a moment before they hug her.

"We miss you."

"I know." Michael pauses next to the captain's chair, and her longing is as palpable as a tractor beam. "I'll be back."

Laira has to make that happen, somehow. She doesn't quite know how yet, but there must be a way. There's always a way. Michael finds ways.

Joann and Keyla wish them a good night, and Michael's hand rests on the back of the chair. Laira squeezes the hand in hers, in gratitude and apology. The turbolift takes forever, yet it's here they found out their hitchhiker was still with them - here Michael kissed her - and just looking at Michael makes her flush.

"What?"

"You kissed me here."

"I did."

Michael turns, meeting her eyes. "I wanted to keep you with me."

"I couldn't focus." As sharp as that moment is, it's blurry. She remembers the grief, but that's foggy. Michael's kiss is sharp in her memory. Her life shifted there, falling into Michael as if she has her own gravity.

"I know."

Michael kisses her cheekbone, then her lips and Laira sighs into her.

"A whole galaxy of stars, and then there's you." She leans into her, resting her forehead against Michael's. "I couldn't sleep."

"I heard you not sleeping in the bathroom." Michael holds her face, brushing her fingers against Laira's cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Once is fine, even if it is in the middle of the night."

"Do you feel better?" Michael's hands slip down to her belly, holding her gently. "Is it just—"

"Sitting at the helm made me forget all about it, don't worry."

Michael's little chuckle makes her warm all over. "Pilots are all the same, retired or not."

The lift stops while Michael's staring into her eyes. "This is your home."

"It is."

"We have to get you back to it."

"I'm here." Michael leads her out of the lift. "We're here, leaving the galaxy again."

"Hopefully it'll be calmer."

"Whenever it's less than the fate of the whole planets, it's calmer." Hands together, they walk back to Michael's quarters.

Michael hands her a cup of tea, then they sit on the bed, the sheets soft and cool beneath her legs. "You don't have to hide being sick."

"I wanted you to sleep."

"I'll sleep."

"It's just—"

"This is a lot."

"You're supposed to be captain."

"And I will be."

"You should be captain now."

"Saru's got it." Michael gulps her tea, then sets it down. Resting her hand on Laira's belly, she sighs. "I miss it, of course I miss it, but you can't stay on the ship and I can't—"

Laira covers her hand with hers. "I can't understand what you gave up, but I love you."

"I gave it up because I love you. That makes it easy." Michael kisses her gently, lingering. "Easier, at least."

Curled around Michael, eventually she's too tired and comfortable to worry, and sleep takes her. Even if this is only temporary, and they're racing to the edge of the galaxy and how can she - how can they? Love has to be enough. They solved the Burn, stopped the DMA, finding a way to live together has to be possible. Selfish and indulgent and ridiculous as it is, because Laira has responsibilities and the galaxy needs Michael Burnham, captain of *Discovery*.

This once, she wants everything. Laira wants the folktale where she curls up against Michael at night and they raise their baby together. They can be a story, can't they? Michael's heroic enough to be one of the Bajoran heroes of the grand tales.

---

The galactic barrier stretches out in front of them, crackling with energy. Laira's stomach dives sharply towards her boots, but for once, it's not the baby. They nearly died here. Six seconds was all that was left between them and the negative energy devouring the ship. Keyla's an amazing pilot, she and Michael's crew got them through, once. Being here again is more than daunting, and those obnoxious little sparkles are already creeping into the edges of her vision. Michael's not in command this time, and Laira isn't sure who hates that more, her or Michael.

*Discovery's* science office leaves her chair, offering it to Michael with a nod of her head. Laira stood beside Michael last time, but this time, she sits, Michael behind her, as they watch Saru direct them through the barrier.

No speeches this time. The extraordinary is a bit more predictable when it's the second outing, still Laira wraps her fingers around themselves in her lap. Don't fidget, it's not presidential.

Michael touches her shoulder when she stiffens. Then she leans down, her mouth just behind Laira's ear. "You all right?"

There's not a good way to explain that the dizziness is normal, that she's almost good at it, and her rising nausea is nerves, it has to be. Reaching up, Laira takes Michael's hand as *Discovery* punches through into one of the spatial cells. The colors rush back, bringing the warm brown into Michael's concerned eyes.

Nodding to her, Laira turns her eyes to Saru, then she watches Keyla, just waiting. The sparks don't fly behind them and they stop.

"This spatial cell is stable, big enough to hold the ship, and headed out of the barrier, but it's slow moving. Two days, maybe three, sir," Keyla reports.

Saru sighs, congratulates the crew and then turns, finding their eyes. "Madam President? How much urgency do we need in our journey?"

Two days is more than they planned, but this is safe. The ship is stable. There have been far worse things.

"This will do, thank you, Captain. Thanks to all of you."

"I'm not doing much, ma'am," Keyla mutters at her console.

"Just stay in the bubble, Commander."

"Yes ma'am."

Inclining his head towards her, Saru nods. "We will wait it out."

Two more days, maybe three...

Laira thanks the bridge crew, taking the time to let all of them tell her about what they're doing. Listening to how they're part of the symphony keeping them in place, she fidgets with her hands while Michael follows behind her. Michael could tell her everything, of course, and they're much happier to see Michael than her.

This is Michael's element, after all, talking to the crew, listening to them, providing encouragement and support while they confront the next crises, save the galaxy from bubbles and and whatever else follows.

It's almost a kind of politics, but closer, intimate in a way Laira's office can never be. Starfleet's its own community, another kind of

family, like the spacers she grew up with. She can hover on the fringes, talk about piloting, but she'll never be part of this.

Slipping her hand into Michael's, she connects them as they leave the bridge. It's not a good trade: Laira for the *Discovery*, politics for Michael's crew. She didn't need to give this up. Michael has to know that.

Michael drops her hand to hug her, slipping in as if seeking solace together is a habit of years, not weeks.

Laira takes a deep breath, lost in the scent of her. "Show me your ship."

"It's not—"

Nuzzling Michael quiet, she shakes her head. "It is, and you never gave me the tour."

"Is that a rule?"

"I've toured many starships, but not this historic beauty."

Michael looks at the deck, then chuckles. "I didn't give you a tour."

"You did not."

"I was really not keen on you coming aboard."

Laira kisses her eyebrow. "I know."

"And I thought you were just—"

"Ticking a box?"

Michael presses her lips together, and her eyes are bright. "You weren't."

"All of my missions with you turn out to be something grander than I thought." Laira smirks down at her belly. "Must be something about you."

"Maybe it's the ship."

That sounds like a captain. Laira slips her hand into Michael's. "Then introduce me to her, Captain."

"As you wish, Madam President."

### Chapter Summary

After a slow transit through the galactic barrier, they reach the Ten-C. Speaking to them again helps Michael realize what she wants.

Maybe she can even allow herself to have it.

### Chapter Notes

Thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicalli for being my ones for this story.

The colors are over saturated. Michael wasn't sure; the contrast between the negative energy cells and the cells at equilibrium is intense, and leaving the grayscale of the negative energy makes everything seem so bright, but the colors remain bright. *Discovery* has been inside the same bubble for the last five days, waiting for it to drift to the edge of the barrier. Earth and Ni'Var aren't in danger, so they're drifting.

It's uncanny.

It's not her choice. Michael would have asked Keyla to push them, had Paul give them everything to the shields. She would have made it a fight. Riskier. Messier. That's not how Saru captains, and it's not a bad thing.

A few more days here won't endanger planets, it'll slow down trade, make sensors more important, and they need a solution to the warp bubbles, but it's not urgent. They have time. They'll get through much more intact than last time, shields in better shape and the crew well rested. There's logic to Saru's choice.

If Michael's honest with herself. It's not that Saru is asking them to wait, or the time it's taking them to get there, it's that she's entirely outside of the chain of command making this choice.

Michael helped Laira with the trade treaties they need to finish, showed her the ship, took her on another tour of the places she loves on *Discovery*, not the official ones, but the silly little junctions of Jefferies tubes and the DOT bay.

The detour where they made out in the science lab was nice, and luckily Zora kept it locked, even when Lt. Ractru tried to finish her analysis.

Laira might not have been recognized with her hair down; face flushed. She's not exactly presidential when Michael's been toying with her neck, but Michael is Michael, and the captain should really remember the privacy lock.

The captain hasn't been struck dumb in love for awhile.

There's no on duty when she's out of uniform anyway.

By the second day in the doldrums of the spatial cell, they've slipped into the gamma shift. Laira's sleeping rhythms are off, she's cold then hot, and giving up trying to fit a schedule - they don't have any meetings anyway - is the fastest way to hang onto their sanity.

Keyla and Joann have been on gamma shift as well, which gives Keyla time to teach Laira how to fly a starship while Joann and Michael work on crew rotations. Nilsson's tour as first officer is going well. Joann thinks she might go after the first officer's place on the *Armstrong* that headquarters keeps talking about.

Someone has to captain the *Voyager-J*. Laira still likes to tease Michael that she's stuck with her second choice, but Imahara is a great captain, she'll do well on *Voyager*. That leaves *Armstrong* without a captain, and Commander Emor's ready for her own ship, but maybe not the *Armstrong*, so everyone shuffles around and...there's a place for a first officer on the *Armstrong*. Maybe even a new captain, and perhaps Michael has to admit that Saru will leave her too.

Bryce left to work with Dr. Kovich.

Now Nilsson.

Maybe even Saru.

She can't keep her crew together forever.

Philippa always used to complain that as soon as she made someone into a great officer, they'd leave. Michael can hear her joking over the dinner table in her quarters when her first officer left, then Michael moved up, and whether or not she was becoming too good of an officer was always a point of contention.

She won't tease her crew the same way as they move on, but she will miss them.

People drift in and out of assignments, transfer from ship to ship. This is how Starfleet has always been. Nilsson's warmth and optimism will do wonders for the *Armstrong*. Michael's not her captain right now, but Imahara would listen to her recommendation. Laira must know Imahara. She has such careful notes on all her captains.

Michael's thoughts float as Laira and Keyla laugh at the conn. The little flashes beneath Laira's fingers mean the panel is in training mode, like she's a brand new cadet, but her hands move through the programmable matter with the almost as much surety as Keyla.

She misses flying, she has to.

Better to be learning to fly the ancient starship than lying in bed, trying not to throw up. Michael wants to say that they've found stability.

Still...there's something else.

Michael can't put her finger on it. Sneezing's a constant, unpredictable companion, but they're as accustomed to that as they can be. Laira has her sweater on over her pajamas tonight, covering the Federation insignia. Yesterday she was so warm that she didn't close her robe, and tonight she's freezing.

Maybe her blood pressure's off again? They'll have to ask Hugh tomorrow.

Joann brings her back to reality with a nudge. "Are you listening to them? She's right."

Michael smirks at Keyla and Laira at the helm. "Which one?"

"Yours." Joann tilts her head towards them. "Mine can't be told she's right, it goes to her head."

"Still goes to Laira's, she just hides it better."

"Well, then don't tell her."

"I guess I won't." Michael leans on the back of the captain's chair, grinning at Joann. "What's she right about?"

"Everything, of course."

"Of course."

Joann laughs, leaning beside her. "Keyla's a good teacher."

"Laira's entirely right about that."

"Can't tell Keyla though, she'll get nervous. She's not teaching the President of the Federation how to fly an antique starship, no no, this is just a favor for your girlfriend."

"No teaching of any kind."

Joann rests her head on Michael's shoulder. "She's good with Adira too."

"Yeah she is."

Resting her hand on the cool leather of the chair, Michael can almost hear Philippa's boots walking from the lift to relieve her. "When you've been through a lot, you get patient."

"Is that what happened to us?"

"Perhaps." Michael listens to Keyla and Laira talk about how to spin the ship on her ventral axis. "Tilly has been looking for field experience for some of her cadets."

"We're an excellent field. Turn off the programmable matter and the cadets won't know what to do. We could give them a real challenge." Joann's half-teasing, but it's a good idea. If they can integrate spore drive technology into other Starfleet ships, *Discovery* is a funny antique with a living computer system. Zora might enjoy helping to train cadets; she's certainly creative enough.

It's a thought, not a theory yet, but it's something. They had training ships in the 23rd century. They haven't had enough ships here for anything like that. Laira doesn't have her own ship either, even though historically the president has had a ship.

Headquarters does have warp drive, but—

Could they do both? Take cadets on diplomatic missions and run training exercises while Laira negotiated and the hitchhiker grew up in space?

That's too much, isn't it? They can't—

The viewscreen flashes blue for a moment, then enters training mode, responding to Laira at the helm as if it's real.

The deck won't move with the stars and it's nauseating at first, then Michael's eyes adjust. Laira's not really taking them out of the bubble and flying hard for the edge of the barrier. They're not screaming through a punishing set of turns and loops. They're drifting. The deck is still.

Red digits in the lower right corner count down towards zero shield strength and Michael bits her lip. She can't break Laira's concentration. That's not fair, but they are about to die.

Sort of.

She's not Keyla, yet. *Discovery's* probably a strange beast to fly after the freighters she's used to.

Still, they're only a few seconds from surviving when *Discovery* mock explodes.

Keyla groans, then laughs with Laira, patting her shoulder. "Almost."

"Almost doesn't keep the starship in the sky."

"Sure it does." Keyla taps the console, resetting it so Laira can try again.

"No, no, you should me how it's done." Laira slips from the chair, making space for Keyla. "I need to see how you pull out of that dive."

"You were close."

"You are too kind." Laira starts to yawn, then has to sneeze into the sleeve of her sweater. "I would like to see you do it."

"There are several ways through." Keyla settles into the chair like a queen returning to her throne.

Laira tries to speak but gets caught in another sneeze. After a moment, she's fine, but she rolls her eyes anyway. "Show me the best one."

Keyla smiles a little at the challenge, takes a moment to think, then smiles in that wicked way as she stretches her fingers. "How about the best two."

Michael and Joann share a look and shake their heads.

"You're never getting to bed," Joann whispers. Michael drops her head and sighs.

Laira gets comfortable in Joann's chair so she can watch. "Perfect."

---

It's the middle of alpha shift when Michael mentions sickbay. Laira's curled against her, blanket on her lap even though *Discovery's* a comfortable temperature.

"You're cold."

"I am." Laira doesn't look up from her holopadd, her eyes flicking through star charts and trade routes. "You're worried about it."

Michael shuts down her own padd and turns, snuggling into Laira's shoulder. "I am."

Kissing her forehead, Laira whisks her padd away. "You need to do something."

"I do."

Laira's hand cups her cheek and her fingers are warm against Michael's. Usually her hands are cool. "You don't feel warm."

"I don't."

Lowering her forehead to Michael's, Laira sighs. "You usually feel warm to me."

Michael widens her eyes, because she's right and Laira definitely has a fever, but admitting it takes all this. "It's mild, I'm sure it's fine."

"Its all been fine, dear."

"Totally fine," Michael repeats, kissing the inside of Laira's wrist.

---

"Her body temperature is elevated." Saru leans down to Michael, whispering around his tea. "By several degrees. Is she well?"

Michael tightens her hands around her coffee.

Across the lounge, Laira talks to Hugh and Paul in front of the bar as they page through the drink menu. Her sweater's in the booth with Michael because her body temperature's up to 38 degrees, which her Cardassian side considers a fever, but Bajor and Earth agree is only mildly elevated.

Hugh tried to settle her temperature by stimulating her human hormones, nudging her body to consider a human baseline as more acceptable. So far that just makes her oscillate between feverish and a little warm.

"Cardassian body temperatures rise as much as five degrees to increase the rate of fetal nerve development in early pregnancy. Laira's already warm enough - by Cardassian standards - so it's not a helpful addition."

Saru makes a soft, sympathetic sound, shaking his head. "A trilateral genetic negotiation would be a difficult one."

"Bajor brought sneezing, Earth brought nausea and Cardassia turned up late with a fever." Michael sighs, resting her face in her hands.

Saru pats her shoulder, his hand warm. "You're doing this well. I don't think you let yourself acknowledge that."

"How do I do this well? What am I doing?"

Lifting his mug, Saru takes a sip of his tea, tilting his head. "You're building a family, which is something you've wanted for a very long time. You've done it with your crew, and your crew is incredible, but you want this too."

"Saru, I—"

"One thing that I have learned is when we are missing something for most of our lives, we find a way to make it for ourselves." He leans in, smiling. "Of course, you must do that in the most spectacular way possible."

Her face burns, and she stares into her coffee. A child needs somewhere to start, somewhere safe. Michael has to do that.

"Your parents were not able to give you the life they wished, no one, perhaps, feels that as keenly as you do, Michael."

"I have my mother, she's here."

Saru nods, meeting her eyes. He fidgets with his mug. "She is here, in this time, but she is not what you expected. I believe it is also safe to say she is not who you will be as a mother."

"None of us are our parents."

"And few of us know what it is like to have that unconditional support. My parents were lost to me, as were yours, and Laira's."

"And Keyla's, Joann's- all our families are lost to us." Michael takes a breath, trying to relax her chest. "We let them go."

"And we rebuild." Saru tilts his head at Hugh and Adira, as they play that Trill game Gray is so fond of. "Of course, you had to be first. First in the chair, first to have a child, still so competitive."

Chuckling, she reaches across the table, wrapping his fingers in hers. "Sorry."

"It is all right, I am quite used to it, serving with you."

Michael moves closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Across the lounge, Laira removes the thin shirt she had on over her tank top and jokes with Joann about playing strip poker instead of the very sensible game of tongo they're currently playing. Keyla blushes bright red, which is the correct response, because Laira's cleavage in that tank top is exquisite.

"So you're not sweating because you fear our incredible tongo skills?" Reno jokes and they all laugh.

That's Laira's real laugh, where her eyes crinkle.

By the time they're at the last hand, it's just Reno and Laira left, everyone else has gone bankrupt. Laira keeps yawning into her arm, and no one's naked, but a stray drop of sweat runs down from behind Laira's ear, down her neck and then across her collarbone into her cleavage.

At least that's not a fever? Michael isn't sure what they're hoping for, what might be good. Laira ignores the drop, but Joann's eyes are just as lost as Michael's, and Keyla's turning as red as her hair, judging by the her ear.

Michael stands behind Keyla, watching Laira look at her cards, and then smile coyly at Reno. That's not a good smile to have pointed at you, and Reno might know that. She's inscrutable to Michael, still, but Laira reads people in ways Michael doesn't.

Saru tilts his head towards Hugh, and some kind of waver is exchanged in whispers.

Hugh would bet on Laira.

"Are you going to make me confront, ma'am?"

"Only if you have the cards, Commander."

"Commander?" Reno raises her eyebrows. "We are getting fancy."

Laira presses her lips together. "I told you not to call me ma'am."

"I'm trying to throw you off."

"You should be trying to acquire the pot."

"Not if you have the minor monopoly that you're trying to convince me you don't have." Reno leans back, cards flat on the table.

"Minor monopoly?" That's the same tone Laira used with T'Rina, when Vulcan was trying to leave negotiations, and Reno is dead, if she knew it.

"If you had major you'd confront."

"Maybe I'm waiting for you."



Reno clucks her tongue, then lifts up her drink. "Letting me be the lady of the hour?"

"Feeding your ego."

"My ego? Madam, you wound me."

"Engineers have the kind of ego that can start a warp drive, don't madam me."

"And presidents don't?"

Sneezing into her elbow, Laira has to wait, take a breath and sneeze again before she can retort. "President is my job, it's not me."

"Uh-huh." Tapping the back of her cards, Reno glances at the pot, then sighs. "Fine, if you force me."

Laira shrugs, feigns sneezing again, then smiles, all wicked and bright. "Confront."

"Dammit, dammit, damn you, and the wormhole that brought us here." Dropping her colorful cards to the table, Reno shakes her head. "Ma'am."

Keyla leans back, whispering to Michael that the set of cards in front of Laira are a blind hegemony, one of the more rare hands in the game. "A major monopoly would beat it, or a full consortium, but Reno only had a minor monopoly and the beginning of an oligarchy, so the blind hegemony means the economy's too unpredictable for profit."

Joann picks up her drink, finishing the bottom of it. "She means Laira wins."

"I got that part."

"Oh captain, you'd love this. It's anthropological." Reno collects the cards and tucks them away. "You should try it next time."

"Oh no, thank you."

Laira pulls her hair out of the braid and shakes it out, ignoring the huge pile of latinum in front of her while she fidgets with her hair. "Michael finds capitalism dull."

"There's no logic in this game."

Joann chuckles. "That means you like the peace in your quarters too much."

"Maybe I'll try tomorrow, if we're still in the barrier."

Saru catches her in that. "We should be out tomorrow morning."

Lowering her hands to Laira's shoulders, Michael takes over braiding her hair, fingers replacing fingers. "Guess I'm out of luck."

"Terribly," Keyla mutters, eyes on Laira's cleavage before she heads to the bar with Rhys.

Saru starts ordering a round of drinks for lounge, and Hugh and Paul follow him, laughing. Dr. Veddra, the Romulan propulsion scientist, arrives from engineering just as Reno starts to really sulk and there's something, a way she laughs with her that Michael has to watch for awhile.

How close are they getting down in the spore bay? What is Reno like when she flirts? How do Romulans date?

Michael drags herself back to the moment, breathing in the scent of Laira's hair. "I would always bet on you," she whispers, leaning down to kiss Laira's ear. "You're a menace."

Laira's little shiver has nothing to do with her unpredictable biology, for once it's just a moment of appreciation.

Getting to her feet, she stacks the latinum with Michael, leaning close to no one else can hear. "You were trying to distract me."

"I was?" Michael chuckles. "Sorry."

"Unless you want me to ignore how irresistible you seem to find my cleavage."

Taking a strip of latinum from Laira's hands, Michael toys with it, then runs it along Laira's hand towards her wrist. "It's the real reason I can't play."

Laira starts laughing, losing concentration as she stacks the latinum. It's late, and she must be tired enough that Michael's distraction is very, very funny. When she can speak again, she wipes tears from her eyes. "You see them all the time."

"Some things never get old."

---

Back in their quarters, when tongo's been cleared away and the inevitable rematch has been promised for the way home, Michael changes out of her civilian clothes, tries to not to linger too much in the closet, staring at her uniforms. She misses the red, the chair, the way she talks to her crew as the captain. Saru's an excellent captain and this is good, but—

Laira hums to herself, pulling a nearly transparent, silky nightgown over her head. "It was easier to wear my warmest pajamas."

"You're never hot?"

"Not on starships, they're climate controlled. Planets, sure," Laira pauses, removing her earrings and setting them next to the bed. "Everything's just—"

Michael opens up the blankets, pulling them closer to her side. Even if Laira's too hot, they'll end up wrapped together because Laira always drifts into her. "Chaotic?"

"This kind of too warm is better." Laira sits on the bed, pulling her knees up close. "I don't feel sick just-" she waves her hands, "-chaotic."

"Maybe Hugh—"

Laira makes a sound and shakes her head. Reaching for Michael, she tugs her close with both arms around her neck. "Stop worrying."

"Worry is the mycelial network I run on."

Laira's lips on hers are almost enough to forget about that, for the moment at least. Laira curls into her chest and they stare at the stars. Laira's breathing slows and Michael could believe she's asleep, but Laira's fingers toy with Michael's shirt.

"Putting your uniform back on isn't going to turn you into your mother."

"What?" A phaser stun would have surprised her less.

"I know you miss it."

"Of course--"

Laira runs her fingers down Michael's chest. "You can be captain and mom, I'm sure you'll work it out."

"Where's this coming from?"

"Your message to your mother, Saru, the way you can't wait to put back on your uniform—"

Michael thought she was being much more subtle about that. "Hey."

"You look good in your uniform."

"Oh I do?"

"Yeah, you really do." Laira sits up on her elbow, looking for Michael's eyes. "The ancient blue was nice, but red really brings out this gravitas in you."

"Gravitas?"

Giggling, Laira takes her hand, bringing it to her belly. "You and that uniform are at least sixty percent at fault for this. Maybe seventy."

"Is that so?" Kissing her cheek, Michael shakes her head. "You just picked the most attractive Starfleet captain and went with it?"

"Yeah, I'd already vetted you."

"For *Voyager*, not to mother a child with you."

"It's a remarkably similar process."

"Oh? Remarkably similar? It's the same thing, apparently." Michael laughs up at the ceiling as Laira cuddles into her arms. "I did wonder why Vance kept asking me questions about how much I liked children, and the psych screening about parenting was a little odd, but it's just like captaining, isn't it?"

"Might be more like trying not to blow up the ship as we dance through colored spatial cells."

"It's negative energy."

"It's-" Laira pauses, yawning into Michael's chest like an exhausted sehlat, "-kind of beige. Though, I suppose I've never found beige very positive."

Michael chuckles with her, shakes her head and then sighs, her chest warm and full, so full her throat's tight. "This must be remarkably similar to what it feels like to be utterly in love with you."

"I hear that's the same thing." Reaching up, Laira pats her chin. "Either way, I've made my choice, and I'm sticking with it."

"To the ends of the galaxy."

"Beyond it." Crawling up to kiss her, Laira wrinkles her nose. "I love you too, and I talked to Discovery and she's willing to share, so, when we get back, we'll work this out."

"This?"

Laira waves at Michael's quarters, and the rest of the ship, her eyes shining. Michael's sting, and she'll cry if they keep talking.

"You can be mom and captain. It's been done before."

Blinking against her tears, Michael shakes her head. "It hadn't."

Laira kisses her, lingering on her mouth. "It's something we managed to improve on. Before the Burn, people live their whole lives on starships. There were family ships full of children. *Discovery* can jump away in a crisis, that's a pretty good safe guard to keep children safe"

Her words tremble, as if they're an unfamiliar language. "You want to make *Discovery* a generational ship?"

"We need one." Laira rests her cheek against Michael's, then kisses her again. "You're the right captain for that, and I hope, by the time she gets here, we'll both be ready."

Will Laira live here with them? Will they jump back and forth? If the ship has children, will they also be using it as a training ship? For diplomacy? Is that the tone Laira wants to encourage for her term? Children and peace, prosperity and calm on an ancient starship.

When Laira starts kissing her way down Michael's neck, she can't think at all.

---

They bring all their engineers - Reno, Paul, Veddra - and they're ready to explain the problems of the static warp bubbles. It ends up being a fairly easy series of math equations. Easy according to three of the most intelligent people Michael's ever met, and the calculus of it makes Laira's eyes glaze over a little.

She's tired.

Michael takes her hand, whispering. "See, the Ten-C really don't care if you wear a sweater to negotiations."

"Thank you."

Saru's ability to keep up with the Ten-C and their engineers is impressive. Michael's not sure she could follow all of that, but he's always had an incredible ability to process multiple things at once.

"Remember your coefficients," Veddra says, nudging Reno with the kind of look that usually comes with something more fun than warp theory."

"I had them."

"But did you have them in the right place."

Laira rests her head on Michael's shoulder, sitting on one of the rock formations is hardly presidential, but she's a figurehead of this conversation. Michael and Laira were here for introductions and the delighted greetings of the huge floating beings. Perhaps their entire civilization? It's hard to keep track.

Saru sends the latest equation and the lead being turns, conversing in lights and molecules with the being to its left.

"Zora, can you catch any of that?"

"Affirmative, captain." Zora lowers her voice as well, as if whispering. Even though the Ten-C might not even see their vibrations as communication, if they can sense them at all. Still, it seems polite to whisper. "They have questions of a more personal nature. It seems some of them are more curious about us than the static warp bubble equations."

"Who wouldn't like equations?" Reno quips.

Veddra laughs, and Michael's still getting used to Romulans, who look so Vulcan but laugh so easily. "As if you don't enjoy gossip equally."

"If you're arguing an equivalence in my enjoyment, then it's an equation, and it's math, not gossip."

Veddra's eyes flash, and the hint of green seems to be a flush.

"How much is the bet on them dating?"

Laira chuckles. "Fifty to evade the question, one-twenty to confront."

The lead creature returns, sending a light map to accompany a new set of molecules. Zora and Saru begin decoding, and Saru blushes, bright red.

He covers his mouth, swallowing hard.

"Saru?"

"My apologies, Captain. Madam President." He takes a moment, tilting his head to organize his thoughts. "The Ten-C remain quite happy to help us with the static warp bubble problem, however, they are a group consciousness, and their empathy is quite advanced."

"They have other questions," Laira says, and her calm softens Saru's discomfort a little. "Go ahead, Captain."

"They are curious about you, ma'am."

Michael starts to smile.

"They do not procreate in the same fashion," Saru continues. "They wish to know about the aquatic creature inside of you. I believe they mean —"

Lifting her hand, Laira hushes him. "I understand." She looks down, taking a moment. Raising her eyebrows ridges, she looks at Michael. "How does a xenanthropologist explain internal gestation?"

"You want me to take this one?"

Laira's nod is very gentle, so is her smile. "Please."

Michael takes a moment. Where does she begin? "Saru, tell them that we saw the structures where they raise their children on their former world. Ours begin too fragile to survive outside. So we grow them internally, in an aquatic environment, until they're large enough to survive on their own."

Saru's fingers fly as he translates, and Zora sends the lights to explain it.

The Ten-C takes barely a moment to ask more questions, apparently from several beings at once because the lights move quickly. The one directly in front of them seems to be their ambassador, and they collect the questions before they address Saru again.

"They would like to know if this is your child, or if you share this one with others."

"We share her," Michael says, slipping her fingers into Laira's. "She's ours."

Saru nods, his embarrassment still tinging his face. "They would like to communicate their joy on your behalf. Children are an valuable part of their society and they are pleased that you have found this one."

"She found us, didn't she?"

Michael smirks, kissing Laira's cheek. "You went looking for her."

"I needed her." The trace of apology in Laira's voice makes Michael's chest ache.

"We both did."

Laira opens and closes her mouth, looking down again. When she lifts her eyes, they're liquid and bright. "We did?"

"I love surprises."

Laughing frees the tears on her eyelashes and they run down Laira's face. Michael climbs onto the rock beside her.

Reno and Veddra give Saru more equations to send to the Ten-C and they trade math back and forth.

Laira's tears dry slowly, and she curls into Michael, an arm around her back. "Are they working it out?"

Michael nods, then rests her chin on Laira's shoulder. "They're firmly in the realm of metaphysics. Some of the same thought processes that Paul uses to steer the ship through the network can be used to pop a static warp bubble, they're just trying to work out the safest way to explain that to other ships."

Saru nods to Michael. "The Ten-C have explained that static warp bubbles can be thought out of existence. We're trying to determine what procedure would be easiest to replicate on a large scale. A ship as small as a shuttle could safely eliminate a static warp bubble if the crew was focused."

Laira clears her throat, her voice still thick from crying. "If they believe it's vanishing, it will vanish?"

Michael toys with her wedding ring beneath her shirt, then pulls it out. Removing the chain from her neck, she slips the ring on her finger. "Symbols and rituals are powerful."

Stroking the ring, Laira has to blink several times to avoid her tears returning. "If you wear a ring on Earth, you're married."

"If you believe what you're doing will pop the bubble. It pops." Reno double checks her calculations on the holo then Veddra nods.

"We'll have to be very convincing in the procedure," Paul warns. "Demonstrate with *Discovery*, show it working, get it in their heads that it's efficient and effective."

"That sounds like theater," Saru says.

"So much of politics is." Laura squeezes Michael's fingers, then stands up from the rock. "We can record a message, send it back before we head for the barrier. If they get it early, Admiral Vance can disseminate it before we even return."

The engineers start talking almost in unison about anti-proton beams and the types of discharge that can be achieved with the the average warp core.

Saru coughs, drawing her attention. "Before we leave them, the Ten-C wish to acknowledge your joy, and they are happy you have this new

one." He pauses, gesturing at Laura's belly. "Zora, is that about right?"

"The hydrocarbon mix the Ten-C are using to discuss your child is composed of love, hope and peacefulness. A good deal of their conversation has been about the child."

"Yes, they are-" Saru has to blink a few times, "-focused on our community. We came to them without children."

"We were on a dangerous mission." Laura's hand hovers over her belly but she doesn't hold the baby with her palm.

Smiling a little, Michael finishes the gesture for her, cupping the baby through Laura's sweater. "They don't travel. They're an incredibly communal species. Their children are always with them. Being without any children, even very small ones, must have been strange for them."

Laura's hand covers hers, warm and trembling.

Michael spends a moment choosing the right words. "Saru, tell them we found each other coming to see them, and express our gratitude."

"If it hadn't been for the mission," Laura starts, shaking her head.

"Galactic events often have unpredictable consequences on the personal level." She had Book, then lost him, then had to let him go. If it wasn't for the DMA and the tragedy of Kwejian, would she still be with Book? Would Laura's relationship with her partner have continued if she hadn't come with *Discovery*?

"They did make her possible."

A long, strange line of events led to their Hitchhiker's creation, led to this, and selfishly, inately, Michael wouldn't change it.

this is where she's meant to be. Her life has followed such strange paths to this point, swirling and flashing through time and universes, even leaving the galaxy to talk to giant floating beings about their daughter.

"We are grateful, Saru." Laura says, for her and Michael. "This new one is part of our whole because they saved our home. When their device stopped, our lives were peaceful enough to have her."

Saru and Zora send that across with light and hydrocarbons and Laura's grip on Michael's hand is tight and fond.

The Ten-C's answer makes Saru so happy that he touches Michael's shoulder, then pulls her in to hug her. "Their reply is difficult to parse, but I believe it is fully affectionate. It is difficult to explain how the joy of an entire species can rest on a tiny member of ours, however, a child is a gift, and us sharing her with them has brought them great joy."

"Ten-C plus baby equals contentment," Reno teases. "Good to know. Just a few more questions about anti-protons and we can leave them to do, whatever it is that they do."

Wrapping her arms around Michael's shoulders from behind, Laura holds her. "I used to avoid talking about my personal life during negotiations."

"They have a collective consciousness. Their children are shared. We came with no children, severed from that part of our collective."

"As much of the galaxy has been, until you arrived. Vance went years without seeing his family."

"We gotta fix that," Michael says, shaking her head. Too many people have sacrificed what they have, being together, raising a child- this shouldn't be incompatible with exploration, even a life in Starfleet.

"We can. Starfleet is usually very accommodating to my proposals."

"You are the Federation, ma'am."

"The Federation could learn much from the Ten-C." Laura takes a breath, and maybe it's hitting her that their child will be a communal child. Planet after planet will celebrate her existence, as soon as it's known. It's not just the Burn, and the DMA, and distance from family, this time, this present has been waiting. Waiting for calm, waiting for stability, not just Laura, but billions of people must have been trying to decide how to build their families while cut off from so many people they love.

When they solve the spore drive, they'll be closer to each other in a way the galaxy has never known. Warp drive lets them touch each other; a whole galaxy that travels the network is a community, bound by invisible threads. Billions of ones.

Within that are families, within that is her family.

She wants that on *Discovery*. That's her home. It can be Laura's too. Michael wanted, but she wasn't sure, she hadn't asked.

Laura's breathing slows against her. Saru bids their goodbyes to the 10-C, and then they're back on *Discovery*, returned to the bridge.

Home.

### Chapter Summary

Laira, Michael and Discovery celebrate solving the static warp bubble problem, and stumble into planning a wedding.

### Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Whimsicalli and Sanctuaria, who help me plot.

This one's very soft, because Laira has fallen like a two year old into a well.

Michael presses her fingers into the back of Laira's neck, then moves to the center of her forehead, pressing outward and up, into her eye sockets. She traces Laira's eye ridges, and the gentle pressure of her fingers lifts the ache in Laira's head for a moment or two.

Kissing the middle of her forehead, Michael cups her face. "How many headaches did you have before?"

"Before?"

Michael laughs, running her fingers through her hair. "Before, with your oh so not stressful job, or before that, when you were campaigning."

"That's not stressful at all."

"Oh no." Michael circles the table, studying her hair. "I can put it up, but that'll probably make your headache worse."

"Probably?" Laira winces, shutting her eyes. "It's fine."

"I'll pull it halfway, that might be all right."

"It's fine, dear."

"The message if just for HQ, Vance and and the captains will see it. It doesn't matter if your hair's not up."

Nodding a little, Laira hums. "And I don't need to look presidential for them?"

"Vance knew you when you were just a sector rep, and I bet, sometimes you had your hair down."

"Maybe once."

Michael hums, rolling her eyes, then braids Laira's hair, far more careful than she needs to be. For a moment, she rests her chin on Laira's shoulder, then circles back. She's back in her uniform today, that bright Starfleet red, and she's home in it.

Saru agreed that Michael should be the one in the center seat, because the Federation's already seen her save them, over and over.

Michael said it wasn't permanent when she put her uniform back on, but this is her place, and that's all right. Starfleet serves the Federation, and the Federation needs hope. Unity. This strange kind of fearlessness that *Discovery* carried with them from the past.

That Michael brought with her.

Thousands, even millions of people died during the Burn, and dilithium was so scare that starships had to be first responders, had to be ready at a moment's notice. Admiral Vance spent years without his family, but they're back now. They can't be the only ones who want to raise their child on a starship. Their hitchhiker will be one of many children in this time of peace. No more Emerald Chain, no DMA, no unpredictable static warp bubbles—

Just a whole galaxy that needs her attention.

Michael slips between her thighs, arms around her waist. Laira rests her arms on her shoulders and smiles.

"You know, this one feels like a before headache."

"Oh?"

"I might be able to blame this one on stress, not our Hitchhiker or my swamp of hormones."

"Seems like the before headaches should be on pause in the now, doesn't it?"

Laira laughs, kissing Michael's cheek. "Any headache being on hiatus would be nice."

"And yet—" Michael sighs again, toying with Laira's jacket. "This looks good open."

Glancing down, Laura laughs wearily. "It won't close."

"Oh?"

"Oh," Laura repeats, slipping off the table to show Michael the jacket problem. "The suit fit when we left." Her blue suit's one of her favorites. She wore it when they embarked, which was barely two weeks ago, and now it won't close over her breasts or her waist and it would be practically indecent except for her blouse.

"We can fix it."

"There's no time, we have to send the buoy, the buoy needs a message."

Michael toys with her jacket a little, reaching in to pull the edges of Laura's vest. "It might close, but—"

"It'll be a corset, not a vest."

Michael's fingers are gentle against her hips, warm through the thin fabric of her blouse. "You look fine like this."

Laura reaches up to straighten Michael's epaulets. "No one's going to be looking at me, Captain."

"Oh?"

"You in the chair, it's a thing."

"I thought it was just a you thing."

"Oh no, no, everyone in the Federation has a thing for heroic Starfleet captains." Laura finishes Michael's uniform, brushes an invisible speck off her chest, and devours her with her eyes. "I love you, Captain Burnham."

Michael soft eyes are even brighter, and she clasps Laura's hands together in hers, then kisses her. "I love you too, Madam President."

Their foreheads rests against each other, and they could just stay here, peaceful, serene and calm, like they're drifting through the doldrums of the barrier. No meetings, no demands, just the two of them.

And their one.

The one who is going to make her suits not fit at all.

"Do you know how hard it is to replace my suits?"

"Better tell your tailor about the hitchhiker now, before she gets really mad at you." Michael brushes her hand against her belly, then touches Laura's ear. "You wore your earring."

"You're wearing your ring."

Michael strokes the Bajoran betrothal earring. "Symbols matter. Marriage is a promise, one I keep making, over and over. It feels right to wear it."

Her eyes sting and her throat's too tight. "Dammit."

"I'll take that as yes."

Laura shakes her head, then blinks, trying to stop her tears because they have a recording to make for headquarters and she can't be teary, but if Michael's going to be Michael— "Full disclosure? My most steadfast belief was in the Federation, in how we work together. I built my life on that." She meets Michael's eyes and takes a breath. "Now it's you, and that's a little terrifying."

Taking that in, Michael kisses her, slow and sweet. "I'll try to live up to it."

"You do, oh you do."

"Well, you're my president." Michael takes her hand, beaming. "Come on, be presidential while my crew does what they do best."

They walk hand in hand onto the bridge. Michael fusses with Laura's collar for a moment, then kisses her cheek.

Michael sits in the center seat, Laura stands beside her, and they make it look good. They use the warp core to generate an anti-proton beam. Simple: something even one of her father's old freighters could do.

The beam doesn't matter, it's that they think the bubble closed closed, and they do. The intrepid crew of *Discovery*, all watch the static warp bubble on the viewer fade until it vanishes, leaving smooth subspace behind it like a pond.

That's it.

Laura touches her shoulder, and Michael reaches up, squeezing her hand. It's quick, and safe. Michael explains to the viewscreen what they need to do. They will save the message, put it on a buoy and the Ten-C send the buoy to headquarters. That tiny wormhole only takes a few atoms of boronite, much less power than sending *Discovery* home.

It'll be a day to get back to the barrier, and a few hours to a week to get through. Paul thinks slipping back into their galaxy might be easier,

because more of the currents run in, but it'll be the third time. Laira could probably fly it if she had to, but she'd be tense as a forcefield.

*Discovery* has Keyla.

Keyla's truly one of the best pilots she's ever seen and Laira's been on more ships than anyone else on the bridge.

The recording must have stopped because Michael's out of the chair, leaning in, and she kisses Laira's cheek, quick and gentle, but supernovas have been started with less.

"That was wonderful."

"I'm good at what I do," Michael teases, beaming.

She is, of course, they all are, and for half a moment, Laira's just giddy with sensation, like she'll pop like the damn bubble. They're all so competent, kind, and caring and—

She must have looked pale because Michael makes her sit in the chair, and that unasked "are you all right" floats on Michael's lips.

Michael takes them to warp without taking the chair back, and the nearly starless extra galactic space fades into the rush of blue and warp.

Michael checks on her crew, talks to them, jokes. She's in her element, radiant with joy and Laira just watches her be.

She gets a moment, then several, just to watch, then Hugh's on the bridge, handing her a flask of water and murmuring about her blood pressure and temperature. One's up and the other's down, or they're both up: she can't even keep it straight sometimes. She didn't even realize she was dizzy. Maybe she's getting used to it.

The water's very cold.

"I like the earring," Hugh says, running one more scan as he watches his tricorder. "It suits you."

"I wasn't sure—"

"And you are now." He pats her hand. "I saw Michael's ring too. Don't think quietly eloping in the ready room gets you out of a party."

"Oh?" They didn't elope, he's teasing, he has to be.

What if he's not?

"I'd throw one on the way home but I think Tilly will kill me if she's not invited so it might need to wait for headquarters." Hugh holds her chin, drawing her eyes. "If you're worried about the crew, I promise we adore you."

"Thank you."

"However—"

There's always a however. She tilts her head, waiting for him to explain that concern hovering in his eyes.

"Your core temperature is up three degrees and your blood pressure's down ten points. If the latter gets much lower, that headache's going to be a lot worse."

"What headache?"

He tuts, pats her hand and reaches up to her neck with his hypo. "Don't get up for awhile. We might need to do gene therapy, try to activate more of your human hormones because they'll handle a mostly human fetus with the least complaint. It'll be temporary."

She tilts her head, trying to smile. "Don't take the ridges."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Hugh taps his badge and shakes his head. "I would like your systolic blood pressure to find a way to stay above 100. Just so you don't need the ridges to protect you from the floor."

"They do that very well."

"I'm sure they do, but, let's not test it." He stands, pats her shoulder and smiles. "Just enjoy the view for awhile, get up slowly, then eat."

"Yes, doctor," she says, finding more of a smile.

Michael turns from behind Joann, catching her eyes, then Hugh's, making sure everything all right before she gets back to work. Vance is right, she's a virtuoso, and a starship is her stage. Laira has to keep her here, so the galaxy can benefit from all that Michael can do.

It's selfish to want Michael, but maybe a little is all right. They're rebuilding, and people need hope. Hope can be a family starship.

Hope must be theirs; it lives in Michael's smile and shines in her eyes.

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After dinner with the crew, while Michael talks to Hugh and the crew swirls around her, Paul stands by the bar beside Laira.



He leans closer while they wait for their drinks. Leading her to Reno and Dr. Veddra with his eyes, Paul whispers, "I think they're celebrating a little bit more than just a spore drive navigation breakthrough."

Laira shrugs, accepting her tea from the bartender. The lounge is cold, maybe she's cold. How Michael can want anything with ice in it is beyond her, but none of this makes sense. "Luckily for them, we've solved the static warp bubble problem."

"Not being trapped in a thought-based universe does make dating go a little slower." He orders two drinks, presumably for himself and Hugh. Laira knows most drinks, but these are old, something from Earth she doesn't recognize. "You and Michael seem to have worked out."

Another bartender arrives with Michael's drink. "We're incredibly lucky."

"Maybe you would have ended up together eventually." Paul takes a sip of his drink and shakes his head. "The first time I met Hugh I was infuriated."

"Michael might have been that annoyed with me."

Paul chuckles, then eats one of the fruits from the garnish on his drink. "That's what I hear."

Taking a sip of her tea, she watches Michael laugh. She's stunning; extraordinary in every way. Paul must know that, the whole crew must. "How could I not fall for her? Her compassion, her intelligence, her bravery-" she pauses as her face warms. "Her eyes."

"Got a little lost in them?"

"Woke up in a totally different universe."

Paul clinks his glass against her mug. "Should have warned you about how many universes this ship tends to cross."

Touching his hand, she pats his wrist. "I'm grateful to have stumbled into this one."

"This seems like a good one," he agrees, smiling once more before he leaves her to her thoughts.

Grabbing Michael's drink, Laira slips through Michael's crew - her family - and reaches her just as Veddra finishes telling one of the most uncouth Romulan jokes Laira knows.

"Don't stop on my account."

Reno winks, her hand on Veddra's elbow. "I'm sure you've got a few to share."

"Only a few?" Michael raises her eyebrows.

Feigning insult, Laira withholds Michael's drink. "I can't believe you'd think such a thing."

Laughing harder, Michael leans in and kissing her cheek. "No one's going to repeat them."

"You can have a joke, or your drink."

"She picks a joke," Veddra says.

"Michael definitely wants to hear a joke, give us your worst."

Reno reaches for the cocktail. "And her drink."

Sighing, Laira glances up at the ceiling. "One, I will tell one."

---

"We didn't have to leave for me."

Michael walks her to the sofa, then sinks into it. "It was time."

"Tired?" Laira turns her head, smiling towards Michael's twist of braids. Her hair's so beautiful, and in the soft lighting of her quarters, it's gorgeous.

"Not really," Michael turns to meet her eyes, then sighs. "Okay, maybe a little, but it's nice to celebrate." She drops her hand to Laira's, fidgeting with her fingers. "We've been through the galactic barrier three times. No one else has done that."

Laira finds her wedding ring, stroking it with her thumb. "That's worth a little party."

Michael slips closer, then wraps her arms around Laira's shoulders. She kisses her temple, and this is home. "I want to show you something. I've been toying with it, but I think I have it right now."

The warmth of Michael's body leaves with her and Laira reaches for one of the blankets while Michael retrieves something small and glass that fits in her hands.

Sneezing into her arm, she waits for Michael to explain, but Michael smirks.

"I'll wait."

“It’s—“ Not done, because she sneezes again, and Michael waits.

Sneezing again, Laura glares, because Michael could not be more smug.

When Laura’s finally done sneezing, Michael hands her the orb. It takes a moment for Laura to recognize what’s in her palms.

“You have a lalogi orb.”

“I do.” Michael nudges it on with her fingers. A tree of silver-blue light fills the center of the room, covered in faces: laughing, smiling. Michael’s crew’s all here. That’s the famous Ambassador Sarek, so perhaps the woman with him is Amanda, who was Michael’s mother. The man with Gabrielle in the center must be Michael’s father, and his smile is so warm. So much like Michael, the way he glows with affection.

One Georgiou wears a Starfleet uniform, and the other wears black leather in the falling snow. Michael’s tree is full of so much love, radiating from her - towards her - Laura starts to say something about her father, but she’s there.

Laura is there, closest to the center trunk. The holo cycles through Laura as president, smiling over the podium, then Laura with her hair half down, laughing in the lounge on *Discovery*, cards in hand. The last holo doesn’t make sense for a moment, her face is pale, thin and bloody, and she’s been crying. Michael leans in, kissing for her a moment before the holo shifts and that’s—

“The first time we kissed.”

Michael nods, wrapping her arms around Laura’s waist. “When we knew she was with us.”

“Our third life form.”

The holo keeps shifting, and Laura studies her own face. “I didn’t realize I was so thin then.”

“You’d been through it, even before you cracked your head on the deck, before the shuttle bathroom.”

She hasn’t said it. Michael knows, she knew before they left on that mission together, she had too. “I wasn’t sleeping much.”

“I had so many nightmares where we failed.”

Leaning back into the sofa brings Michael with her, tangled with the blanket. “Even you, Captain Burnham?”

“Even me.” Michael nuzzles her cheek and Laura takes a breath, then another. “Getting a little lost is a very understandable response to carrying an entire galaxy worth of responsibility.”

“Breaking things off with the person I’d loved for years?” She swallows that strange sound in her throat. “I wouldn’t have done this with him.”

“Had a child?”

Shaking her head, Laura toys with Michael’s ring. “Changed the rules. Asked Starfleet to give me not just a ship, but their favorite antique—“

That makes Michael laugh, shaking her head. “She’s a beautiful antique, clearly the best ship in the fleet.”

“I could barely find a way to see my former partner more than every other week. We fought more than I wanted to admit. I—“

“You held the Federation together.”

“I held him at arm’s length.”

Michael strokes her wrist, then playfully trails her hand over Laura’s arm. “And you have such long arms.”

“Hush.”

“I’m just saying, arm’s length is kind of far.” Michael kiss her hair, then her cheek. “T’Rina and Vance were worried about you, before our shuttle mission. We thought if you and I were together, on a shuttle alone for hours, you might get a chance to talk you’d been denying yourself.”

Shivering for a moment, Laura pulls the blanket up over her shoulders. Michael starts to get that look and she waves her hand. “I’m fine.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t ‘of course’, I really am fine.”

“Hmmm,” Michael teases, tucking the blanket closer before she gets up for the replicator. “Being with a captain is legendarily difficult.”

“Luckily you’re extraordinary.”

Michael returns with a bowl of something and spoons. Whatever it is smells sweet and warm. Michael sits on the coffee table across from Laura, underneath her own holographic tree.

“It’s not just me.”

“I wouldn’t - I could not even imagine, doing any of this without you.”

Michael takes a bite. "We do it together. We ask Starfleet to come up with a new model of serving on a starship, we'll have children running around while we jump from negotiation to negotiation."

"And the Federation will need to agree."

"Can't you just tell them what to do?"

"Yes, that's how democracy works, dear." Laura hums over a bite. "This is delicious."

"Your Vice President recommended it. Apparently Betazed is known for their desserts." Michael smirks for a moment then does an impression of the Vice President's deep, distinctive voice. "You have to try the xhoja berry, dear, it's to die for."

Laura has to laugh, because that's a decent impression of her Vice President. "She doesn't sound like that."

"Oh she does."

Still chuckling, Laura rolls her eyes. "The food on Betazed is incredible, especially the desserts." Laura takes another bite and it makes sense, that's a Betazoid spice. She knows this. "You haven't been, have you?"

"We visited Betazed long enough to drop off dilithium. We got one meal."

Laura has to swallow before she can talk. "We should go."

"To Betazed?" Michael lifts her spoon, teasing. "We do need more food."

"No, I mean yes, but, we should see Betazed. I should, I've only seen one city. Some planets I've barely set foot on, and I represent them."

"You had to save resources."

Laura smiles coyly at Michael. "I hear the mycelial network is self-sustaining."

Scraping the bowl, Michael takes one of the last bites before leaving the rest for Laura. "We can jump as much as we need to. Paul says they're close to a solution for other ships. Closer than we've ever been to an interface that anyone can use. Veddra and Reno got some good ideas from the Ten-C. If they figure that out in the next few weeks—"

"Then every starship in the fleet could have a spore drive, which means we could see the Federation, really see it."

"Do a grand tour?"

Laura almost flushes, but no, this is a good idea. They should see all of the Federation. "That sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"No, no it's a beautiful idea. They'll appreciate you even more when they see you."

Laura's blush stings. "That's not what I meant."

Kissing her flaming cheek, Michael smirks. "I know, but they should appreciate you as I do."

"I don't know if I want everyone to appreciate me as much as you do." Laura touches her face, cradling her cheek. "I like you being unique."

Michael laughs and her nose wrinkles: she's the most beautiful person Laura's ever known, especially like that. "I am extraordinary." She pauses. "Might even be ready for this part."

Laura pulls Michael's hands in, cradling her fingers. "What part is that?"

"Something more difficult than a *Voyager* captaincy." Michael pauses, looking out at the stars as they slip past. "Marriage and a family is what I wanted, I wanted it when I was a little kid because of my dad, and my mom, they were so- they just got each other -I wanted that. Didn't think I'd get it, but here we are."

"Didn't exactly get here in a sensible way."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Laura kisses her, deep and slow. "It might be fun - hypothetically - maybe next time - to make a baby together."

"Without the whole imagining them into the universe simply with the power of wanting?"

Kissing Michael again, Laura holds her close, then whispers. "I do like wanting."

"Oh?"

"Wanting you especially."

"Hmmmm," Michael teases, imitating her in that most infuriating way. "Maybe I can do something about that."

---

She spends enough time with Charles that she shouldn't be surprised that he's in her dreams. It took weeks of time with him for her to

understand the workings of Starfleet and her new responsibilities when she was elected. Laira had heard about his family, catching the beginning and ends of calls as they moved back to headquarters.

Headquarters was safe now. Earth, Ni'Var, the whole galaxy. No more bubbles.

Go back to sleep.

Her head's in Michael's lap, and Michael's fingers rest on her shoulder. Laira curls closer, listening to Michael and Charles talk.

He's laughing.

She's heard that before, more lately, but—

Laira opens her eyes, blinking and starting to stretch.

Michael stops her, keeping the sheet over her. "We have company."

"Company?" Sitting up, Laira holds the sheets to her chest. Her hair falls wild over her shoulders and she has no idea where her clothes are, but Michael has a shirt.

Just a shirt.

That emergency shirt she keeps by the bed because she's a captain.

Vance is in uniform, standing in front of the bed with a brilliant smile. He's not here, he's a hologram but—

"I apologize for the interruption, Madam President."

"Charles-" she corrects herself, "Admiral-"

He stands unphased. How many times has he called a naked officer? "I was just congratulating Michael."

"Congratulating?" Her mind won't work. Her thoughts drag like a freighter with one thruster. "Why?"

Michael touches her shoulder, ever gentle. "We got married."

"We did?" Laira turns to look at Michael. "We discussed it, but we didn't file anything."

"Admiral Vance was telling me that we have given the Federation the appearance of being married, and under the circumstances—"

"Which are?"

Michael clears her throat. "We sent a recording of us repairing a warp bubble, to all of Starfleet. You're wearing your earring, I had my ring."

Vance's tone is very even. "You appeared very domestic."

They were ordinary on the bridge, weren't they?

Michael strokes her hand. "Admiral Vance showed me one of the news holos. We kissed in the background, we held hands. It's rather apparent."

He nods. "I can give you a week for a ceremony. I'm sorry I can't offer more—"

Laira waves his apology away. "A week is fine." Her thoughts fly like *Discovery* when Keyla throws them into a spiral. She has to go to Bajor. Her parents - her grandparents - they got married on Bajor. "I need to go to Bajor."

"Bajor?" Michael's soft smile lights her eyes. "That sounds fun."

"I still have some family there, I grew up there." Laira stops herself; she's rambling. Her thoughts were slow but now they're rushing like starlines at warp. "We have to go to the Temple of Resuna Idum."

Vance only smiles like that when he's very amused. "The Temple of Resuna Idum would be wise."

"What's that?"

Laira touches Michael's hand, squeezing her fingers. She'll explain. "If you can give us a week on Bajor, we can deal with the press."

"The press would very much appreciate a full interview circuit."

Like when she was elected, except this time all of them are coming from planets with dilithium, who are connected again, who are looking for something positive to write about.

They made hope, for each other, for the Federation, for anyone who can see the holos. Laira's too warm, and too cold. Then the hair on the back of her neck stands up.

Michael meets her eyes, curious, neither impatient nor frustrated, but content. They're getting married.

They're traveling to the sacred Temple of Resuna Idum, home of the Orb of Union. Not that they need to pray for fertility but it's perfect.

They exchange pleasantries and Vance disappears.

The embarrassment she kept down while they were talking rushes over her like a wave of heat. "How bad was it?"

Michael chuckles, then presses her lips together. "We're obvious, especially when it's been slowed down and zoomed in, all those tricks they do. It's great, in a way. The static warp bubbles are being cleaned up. Subspace is returning to normal. The galaxy needed something happy to focus on."

"Us."

"You're very popular."

"As are you, Captain."

Michael finally flushes a little. "We are, and a wedding is something celebrated across cultures."

"Our wedding is a little different." Laira sighs, looking down at Michael's hands in her own. "The Temple of Resuna Idum is a sacred site. It's said the Prophets will grant the gift of children to those who visit to bless their union. It's known for miracles in fertility. My parents prayed there, and my father's parents, it would mean a lot—"

"I'm honored to go."

"We can—" Laira starts but Michael shakes her head.

"*Discovery* is home, most of my family is here." Michael touches her belly, smiling down at their little hitchhiker. "I haven't heard from my mother yet, but she'll be happy for us. She won't mind if we are joined without her."

Something stings in Laira's chest, but it's not the time. This is a happy moment.

Michael kisses her, lingering a little. "You know, the holos must have looked good. We have a few hundred congratulatory messages."

"Only a few hundred?"

Zora answers. "Currently you have four hundred seventeen congratulatory messages, Starfleet headquarters reports an additional two hundred eighty-one gifts sent to the replicator queue for your return. Mostly flowers, however your office reported fruit baskets, bread, traditional celebratory cakes and multiple kinds of intoxicating liquor."

Wincing, Laira looks down. "The vice president's going to take the liquor."

Michael chuckles, opening her arms so Laira can settle back in against her chest. "We got back into comm range and Admiral Vance just came though. I had to have Zora kill the lights so I could put my shirt on."

"No—"

"Oh yes." Michael kisses her hair. "I don't know who was more embarrassed."

"You, I'm sure."

"I don't know, most captains he talks to probably aren't naked."

"Vance and I both attended the Vice President's daughter's wedding."

"And it was traditional."

"Very."

Michael sighs, then shudders. "I respect the tradition, but naked?"

"So very naked."

Wriggling out of her shirt, Michael slides back under the sheets, her skin against Liara's. "Thank you for not wanting a Betazoid wedding."

"Is that an option?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. You chose Bajor, I think that means clothing."

Snuggling into Michael's chest, Laira doesn't mention that temple has a sacred cave, where the water was once touched by the Prophets. Michael doesn't need to know that involves being naked.

Michael loves surprises.

## Michael - 13

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira visit Bajor and participate in a traditional journey to the temple of the Bajoran Orb of Union.

### Chapter Notes

took longer than I wanted and got way longer than I thought but...there were things to say.

And visitors! So many fun out of time visitors, thanks the Prophets.

Many many thanks to Sancturia and Whimsicalli.

<p><br />quantum variations on a love theme - Chapter 13 - Oparu (USSJellyfish) - Star Trek: Discovery [Archive of Our Own]<br /></p>

## Michael

The sun sets in the middle of their meal. First Minister Reze insisted on having everyone on the ship for dinner, and so *Discovery* has a skeleton crew in orbit (there are a handful of crew members who don't like parties) and everyone else is in the vast garden of the capitol compound, eating and talking as they wander through flowers. The ceiling trellis is covered with heavy purple flowers and there's more in between the tables and near the benches and the sheer volume of colors and scents is incredible. The air's humid, soft with moisture, but not too heavy.

Saru's in his element, identifying all the flowers while Nilsson holds both of their plates. Everyone else mingles, looking at the sculptures and the fountains, getting pulled into games and conversations.

Michael hasn't seen musicians in months, but they're tucked into the flowers.

Laira keeps the First Minister laughing with some story that might have something to do with them. That little smile means it is about them. They worked together, years ago. Rough around the edges cargo pilot Laira learned politics from a very unimportant minister.

Back when her hair was teal and she never kept her boots on the deck.

Michael studies one of the flowers, touching the velvet petals before she breathes in.

Reno sits on the bench beside her, holding her plate. "You know, I was never sure when this was."

"This party?"

Reno nods, passing Michael a piece of something, dipped in red sauce. "Spent a non-insignificant amount of time locked in with a time crystal, saw much more than I needed to, but mostly it's jumbled, more than I can understand. Not a problem."

"But you get glimpses."

"Some of them are pretty distinct, but it's weird stuff. That flower in your hand. Your wife winning every round of cards."

"My wife?" Michael swallows hard and Reno passes her drink. "You saw that?"

"Wasn't sure." Reno sets her plate on the bench beside her. "Like I said, it's pretty scrambled, like I tried to fit gigaquads of data into one little old isolinear chip."

"You're not that old."

"Approaching a millennia, thank you."

Chuckling, Michael takes a sip. "Aren't we all."

"So, weirdly enough, that flower I remember. I've seen it before. And you, her" - she pauses, gesturing towards Laira, - "you have a hell of a party."

"We do?"

"Tilly, Hugh, bunch of programmable matter and yeah, open bar."

"Ah."

Reno leans back, then brushes crumbs from her uniform. "Weddings are a lot, and I didn't think I'd ever, but here we are on the timeline with your wedding, which means I'm having one."

"You are?" Michael searches the crowd for Veddra, wondering if Reno's future wife is her. "Now?"

"Oh no, your kid's walking and talking by the time I have a shindig. Cute kid."

Michael's smile warms her whole body. "She is?"

"Adorable little potato, then the chubbiest little ragamuffin toddler, but by the time I get married again, she's adorable."

"A potato?"

"The cutest potato."

Michael chuckles, looking up at the stars through the trellis. "I can't picture her."

"Imagine a potato, add dimples, big brown eyes." Reno pauses to take another sip. "Gets your wife's hair."

Finding Laira in the crowd, Michael tries to imagine a baby with her hair. Maybe a little darker, maybe redder. "Thank you for telling me."

"It's a good thing you have going. I haven't seen much it, just a horde of kids on the ship and a galaxy full of spore drives. You do our wedding, by the way."

"I haven't done a wedding."

"Well, you're going to." Reno shakes her head. "And it's pretty fucking great. I try not to think about too much, don't want to screw it up, but it's there and we keep going that way."

"Is this your version of a go get her speech?"

"Oh no, you've clearly got her, be happy. Enjoy it, love that potato."

Michael brushes tears out of her eyes, and her head's tight, like she's too happy for it to fit. "My dad said I was a pumpkin. I'd never seen one when I was a kid, so it made no sense to me, but I like potato."

"He'd be proud of you."

"Thanks."

Reno winks. "Any time."

Chuckling, Michael watches the crowd. Her family drifts through the Bajorans, telling stories, dancing, and Laira's at the center.

Her center.

The galaxy spirals outward with all it's wonders from here, from them.

Her father said she'd know, when she was ready to be married, when she'd found that person, she'd know. She'd wondered, had a couple moments, but this, oddly enough, is a truth.

---

"Let's get raktijinos," Laira says, beaming at her in the market. Coffee is good, of course, but this is distraction coffee. *'Don't freak out because we're about to hike more than twenty kilometers into jungle on ancient stone paths'* and *'it'll be fine'* Klingon coffee.

Michael isn't sure when Klingon coffee became a delicacy. Maybe she doesn't want to know. Klingon culture still makes her neck prickle.

Hugh gave them a fairly full set of medications, and they won't be out of transporter range, it's simply traditional to walk to the temple. It's a sacred pilgrimage, and Michael understands that, she does, just hiking across unknown terrain is not her idea of a good time.

Laira's in good spirits, and she's so happy to be on Bajor that she nearly glows in the sun. Of course, she's excited.

*Stay hydrated, take breaks. Don't hike during the hottest part of the day, make sure to be warm enough at night. Watch her electrolytes.* Hugh's list rolls through her head like a line from a book, but coffee will fix it.

"Raktajino's came to Bajor from *Deep Space Nine*, which was the first Starfleet station in orbit, way back in the 24th century."

Michael smiles and falls in step beside Laira as they walk through the market. "That's after my time."

"After the Cardassian Occupation, Starfleet came to help rebuild. A Starfleet captain discovered the Bajoran wormhole, the home of the Prophets. There was war, The Dominion, Cardassians, even Klingons for awhile, but it eventually led to Bajor joining the Federation."

"All ancient history?"

"Mostly, the captain was special." Laira stops at a corner of the market and points to a statue of a human in what must be a Starfleet uniform. "The Prophets made him their emissary."

"A human?"

"He was a very special human." Laira smiles up at the statue. "Starfleet captains just have that effect sometimes."

"Sisko?" Michael's read some of this, there was a great deal of history to get through. She remembers the name.

"Benjamin Sisko." Laira leads them to a little line of people waiting for coffee from a street vendor. "It was so long ago that the history is full of myth, but I remember learning about him in school. How he changed the planet for good, brought the Prophets to more than



Bajorans."

"And that was important to you."

"Me and all the other little hybrid children." Laura orders two raktijinos and they wait.

Michael tries to picture Laura as a child, sitting in school, learning about the human who spoke to the Prophets.

"Meant a lot that he was human."

"Like your mom."

"She was happy here. Always wanted to see Earth, especially the ocean she'd heard so much about, the oceans here aren't like Earth's at all, but she had a good life." Laura's little smile is very brave and practiced, but her eyes are soft.

Michael kisses her cheek. "Growing up on Vulcan was hard. Sometimes it felt like my brother, Amanda and I were the only humans on the planet. Sometimes I think we were."

"So you had to out Vulcan the Vulcans?"

"I've always been an overachiever." Michael shakes her head and takes her coffee. There's a line of things to put into it: spices and sweeteners. The little silver bottle is that nutrient supplement Laura reaches for - and laughs about - at every meal.

Michael picks it up, sniffing it. She's tried it, and it doesn't taste like much. A little savory; disappears mostly in coffee and anything strong.

The woman making the coffee notices her. "We have good replicators again. The parts are easy to get now that we have Federation supplies. No one needs it any more, but we grew up with it. Coffee tastes funny without it."

"I didn't see a replicator in good working order until I traveled on a Federation starship." Laura reaches for the supplement and pours it in. She adds cream too, and two of the spices, then takes a sip. "I could try going without, I might not miss it."

"But you're used to it."

Laura waits for Michael to finish flavoring her own raktijino, then leads her back into the street market. Children run through it, laughing and playing some game while all the adults seem to watch them collectively. There are plenty of Cardassians, a few Tellarites, several Ferengi, but Michael hasn't seen another human. Many hybrids, with different levels of the Cardassian grey and forehead ridges along with the Bajoran nose.

The children especially make Laura smile, and they stop, watching them play.

"They're so much livelier than we were."

Michael waits for her to explain, sipping her coffee.

"We could never keep up on vaccines, or treat everything. So many medications are difficult to replicate, impossible to manufacture. Our replicators were always a little off, maybe this part was missing, or it folded this protein wrong. We ran through the market near my house, just like this, but we were always sick."

"Infrastructure was your first mandate when we had dilithium again."

"People were starving, some quickly, some slowly over years, and the Federation needs to be better than that. It was, and it seems like it finally is again." Her eyes are too bright, again, and Michael pats her arm.

"The logistics reports look good. We have enough dilithium, every planet in the Federation has a way to have their infrastructure needs met: from clinics to replicators." Michael slides her hand down to squeeze Laura's. "It'll take time, of course, but we did that."

"Well, you solved the Burn, Captain."

"Oh no, I've seen your job. Yours is much harder." Laughing ruefully, Michael drinks more of her coffee and turns towards the archway over the path into the jungle. It's lined with lanterns and rock carvings. Flowers float in ancient bowls of water so old that they might be older than Michael.

Part of her wants to scan everything, ask questions, collect a qualitative history of the Temple of Resuna Idum, but she's not here to be a scholar, or report back to the Starfleet. Experience this, be a pilgrim, even if they don't need to ask for the blessing of fertility.

Michael evens out the straps of the pack on her back, sets her empty coffee cup into the recycler and waits while Laura looks through the clothing in one of the stalls. She's adorable in one of the old 'DISCO' t-shirts that stores had to go with standard issue warm weather gear. Starfleet expedition clothes are not what Laura's used to, but she didn't bring things to hike in.

Michael hasn't seen many translators. Few people can probably read the human lettering anyway.

Laura trades credits for one of the long cardigans and tucks it into her pack before putting the pack back on her shoulders.

"Now I'm ready."

"You needed a sweater?" Michael mimes wiping sweat from her forehead. "It's gotta be thirty degrees at least, and humid."

"It's the tropics."

Rolling her eyes a little, Michael sighs. "Did I tell you how I grew up on Ni'Var, desert planet? A relatively cold part of a desert planet?"

"It's been mentioned." Laura points towards the winding trail in the thick woods. "After you, dear."

"You're excited about this."

"I am thrilled about this."

Michael pauses, taking a few steps into the jungle. "Hiking in a rainforest?"

It takes two steps for Laura to catch up with her, and she looks forward at the flowers, vines and heavy vegetation, before she looks down at her feet. "Being with you."

"You could be with me on a starship."

"I intend to." Laura reaches over and takes her hand, fidgeting with Michael's fingers in that way she does. "First, we survive hiking."

"Survive is not the right word." Michael sighs and turns, watching the market and the city vanish behind the thick trees as they walk. The noise of the market - of people - disappears into living sounds of the jungle around them.

"Endure?" Laura takes a step, she kisses Michael's hand. "Enjoy. We enjoy hiking."

"We" - Michael pauses, trying to find anything she can use that's a middle ground. "I enjoy the company."

"Why, Captain, that's one of the most romantic things you've ever said."

---

Laura takes Michael's bowl, waving the cleaning device over it with a wash of light.

Watching with a smirk, Michael sits back with her tea. "You don't want to wash them with water for the full effect?"

"Oh no, this is fun. We had one, sometimes, for a couple years it was this Cardassian one that glowed orange instead of blue."

"Then it broke?"

Laura sets the clean dishes in a neat pile and sits down beside Michael on the mossy stone. "Oh, I broke it. I was twelve, and mad, and then we had to wash dishes with water."

"You must have been very mad."

"I had a temper."

Michael picks up Laura's tea and passes it over. "Beat up some old deck plating?"

"Daily." Laura sighs, fingers tight around her tea. "I had a lot of anger after losing my mother. All she wanted was to see Earth, and we couldn't. We'd try to save the dilithium, but something would happen. There'd be a blight and we'd need to go get pesticides, or a ship would be in danger and we'd—" she sighs instead of finishing. "I still haven't been to see her family."

"We'll go together." Michael slips her arm around Laura's waist. "I've been to Earth many times."

Laura rests her head on Michael's shoulder. "Paris and Langkawi and San Francisco."

"You say them like they're fairy tales."

"They are!" Laura points up at a tiny piece of starry sky among the trees. "They're way up there, thousands of light years away. Earth was this magical place, like going beyond the galaxy."

"Now you've seen beyond the galaxy."

"Puts it in perspective, doesn't it? Our stars are full of life, and there's life beyond the galaxy, and in other galaxies and—" Laura pauses, sighing dramatically. "You're going to be very busy with all those first contacts."

"Me?" Michael laughs, then shakes her head. "You know I just turn up and say hello, we're the Federation, nice to meet you. All the paperwork is on your side."

"Dammit."

When their tea is gone and the jungle's gone soft and quiet around them, they crawl into the tent. Unlike the temporary shelters Michael grew up with, this one is made of programmable matter, and it's one motion to turn it transparent, so they can see all the stars above them through the canopy. They live in the stars - bright and rich - so the gentle, twinkling lights of stars through the atmosphere are strange.

But pleasant.

Perhaps the nice part is the way Laura's curled up into her, and they could be the only sentient beings for kilometers.

Laira's hands trail down Michael's stomach, not fidgeting, but exploring - teasing.

"You're not tired from all that hiking?"

"I find it quite invigorating don't you?" Laira pushes herself up on her elbow, finding Michael's ear and nibbling her way towards her neck.

"Oh you're in a mood."

Laira hums her enthusiasm, tugging Michael's shirt up towards her breasts. "I am, how fantastic for you."

Michael reminds herself that the matter can be soundproofed, that it's opaque from the outside, that there is no one to hear but the insects and birds and- she can't think at all when Laira does that to her neck.

---

In the morning, beams of sunlight shine yellow green through the trees down on their camp. Michael sits on a fallen log that's a little damp with dew, but her clothes will dry: wonders of Starfleet's finest technical fabrics. She stares absently at the little heating element beneath hot water. The little blue flames will heat the water to boiling, then she can make coffee. It's what she started.

Breakfast is hasparat and something starchy. Potatoes and potato-like roots seem to be on every planet, and Laira can tell her again what they're called. There's something very sweet about how she pronounces Bajoran names, and a light in her eyes when she talks about home.

Michael's childhood was spent in so many places that she can't claim one. Her father had a way with the replicator, and he'd cook when he wanted too, but she can't call those tastes to mind.

*Discovery* is her home.

Her mother hasn't written back. Michael sent her message and P'Jahr allows them. She asked the Ni'Var comm station if it went through, and it did.

No reply.

Would her mother have seen the comm traffic? If them being married is as much of a talking point for the Federation as it seems, wouldn't she have heard?

What will she say?

Book only had kind words in his message. A little teasing about how marrying the president will make that eleven in her forehead permanent, and he wished her well. Grudge even looked a little less aloof, as if she was finally pleased not to have to share him.

Michael was still sorting her way through all the personal notes of congratulations, from Lieutenant Sahil to Haz Mazaro. The latter couldn't help being amused at how legit Right Hook had become.

He was going to start calling her first lady.

Laira's hands touch hers and there's coffee. Michael forgot about the water, forgot about everything she was doing and it probably would have boiled away, but Laira made coffee.

"Thanks."

"You were light years away."

Michael chuckles, and nods. "One of my old contacts is going to start calling me First Lady."

"As opposed to?"

"Right Hook."

"Well" -Laira pauses, grinning- "I'm more pleased in hindsight that you didn't punch me in the head then."

"I thought you had a very hard head."

"I do, I do, but I'd rather not risk it." Laira takes a sip of her coffee. "I've been dizzy quite enough lately."

Michael stares down at her own coffee, then looks up and their eyes meet long enough for Laira to smirk, and laugh.

"Why do you wince if I say it?"

"Because it's true."

"So it's guilt?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Hmmm." Laira thinks for a moment, then she starts to smile - that smile - the one that never ever ends well for Michael. "Maybe I can balance your guilt with a good thing."

Michael starts to take another sip of coffee, but stops. Not a good moment. Empty mouth is logical.

"You wince loudly too."

"I didn't say anything."

"It's the way your shoulders are all tense."

"They are not."

"I told you it was a good thing."

"I'm sure it is!" Michael shakes out her shoulders and takes a breath. "Okay."

"I think I can feel the hitchhiker when I orgasm."

Having an empty mouth was definitely the right choice. Michael's cheeks burn, so does her neck. "You can?"

"They're different, and I thought it was you-"

"Thanks."

"In a good way." Laira laughs, really laughs, even has to set her coffee down. "Captain Burnham has to be exceptional at everything she does."

"What if someone can hear you?"

"The Prophets?"

"Aren't they omnipotent beings?"

"They have no concept of sex."

"Oh, okay then, it's fine if they hear all about our sex life." Michael sulks as much as she can with the way Laira's smiling at her.

Laira sets breakfast aside, and kneels on the ground between Michael's legs, hands on her thighs. "Think of it as a new xenanthropological experience."

"A case study in what non-sexual beings think about sex?"

"Qualitative research." Laira starts kissing her neck and Michael can barely form thoughts.

"I think technically-"

"Oh technically—" Laira interrupts her, kissing her hard. "I start kissing you and you worry about technicalities?"

Michael runs her fingers over her shoulders, down her back. Is this what a honeymoon is like? Full of sex and laughter? "I like to be exact."

"I know something that requires your very exact attention."

"I look forward to your direction then, ma'am."

"You'd better follow orders precisely, captain." Laira lowers her hands to Michael's thighs, slipping upwards. She kisses her once more and then drags her off the log towards the blanket. The tent is there, but Laira guides her away from it, just them and the blankets and the softness of the morning light.

---

Michael's not sure who spilled the coffee, but a corner of the blanket's wet, there's coffee in Laira's hair and they're going to have to make more. Pulling on her shirt again over her sweat-dampened skin, she pours water and starts heating it.

Laira wrings coffee from the ends of her hair and giggles when Michael looks at her. "Worth it, but sorry about the coffee."

"I'd drink yours-"

"-but I finished mine."

"You did." Michael tugs on her trousers and sits down, this time wrapped in Laira's arms. She takes a breath, tries to soften the rush of embarrassment, but asks anyway. "How is it different?"

"What?"

"You said you can feel the hitchhiker."

Laira nuzzles closer, her chin on Michael's shoulder. "I think so, I'm not, I haven't done this before."

"We've never had sex without her being there."

Rubbing Michael's fingers with her own, Laira hums into her neck. "They're softer, bigger, I don't have the right words, but it's like- like she's in the middle of it."

"Is it strange?"

"It's wonderful."

Michael doesn't have to turn to see the tears on her cheek; Laira's voice is thick from them. Guiding their hands in, Michael hugs them to her chest. Laira's fingers won't settle, but the fabric of Michael's shirt on her shoulder keeps her busy.

"She's going to keep getting bigger. Might even feel like a being, someday."

"Our own being." Laira squeezes her closer. "Much more difficult than a blob."

"The is blob stage is all right. She's ours too."

"Ours has a special weight to it, doesn't it?"

"It does." Michael finds her chin, stroking it with her thumb. "This is a good start for a lot of ours. Our ship, our crew—"

"Our endless negotiations."

"Our tropical hike."

"Our spilled coffee." Laira sighs, freeing herself from Michael to mix more coffee into the hot water. "I don't know how I'm going to get it out of my hair."

"You jumped."

"You" -Laira pauses, pressing her lips together- "that's on you."

---

It could have taken them two days, but due to their endless ability to distract each other, it's nearly sunset on the third day when they reach the temple. It's carved into the living rock of the mountain, covered in moss and vines.

Michael tucks a little purple flower into Laira's braid. Laira's hand finds hers and they approach the temple on stones so old they were laid before Earth touched the stars.

They stand hand in hand into the dark antechamber, waiting for their eyes to adjust. It's cool out of the sun, and the scent in the air has a new backbone of wet stone beneath the sweetness of the flowers.

Laira leads her in, and the chamber widens into into a much larger room lined with lanterns and candles. "Traditionally, you approach the central altar, sometimes there's a gong or an offering."

They release their hands, taking it in together. They wander apart, looking at lanterns and ancient carvings. Michael can't read old Bajoran, and the translator seems crude almost.

The central altar is ornate, piled with flowers and gifts. That's not it. That's for the Prophets, the monks, they're looking for—

A bowl, small and unremarkable, ceramic, sits under a trickle of water. It's not lit with a lantern, but a shaft of sunlight falls onto the water. It's faint, almost an afterthought, not the brilliant glow that would indicate how important it is. Michael studies it, watches the water fill the brim and trickle onward. The basin drains into the floor, a tiny rivulet running through stone and moss.

The river around the temple, the one running through the trees: this is its start.

Michael lifts it up. It's ceramic, cool from the water and smooth. Someone made it, centuries - millennia - ago, she can feel marks from their fingers.

"That's it." Laira touches her shoulder, then rests her head on against Michael's. "Bajoran weddings involve drinking from a bowl together. This must be how we—" she stops, sneezing into her hand, and Michael's shoulder. "Sorry."

Michael pats her hand, then fills the bowl. "Do we drink together? One after the other?"

Laira sneezes again, losing her ability to speak until she can stop, but it's long enough for Michael to chuckle.

A voice joins hers. Male, warm and pleasant. Speaking English, somehow.

"I don't know if the two of you need what that bowl can do." He is behind them, though no one was and there's nowhere he could have come from where they wouldn't have seen him.

Assuming he walked.

They turn, Michael half a step ahead of Laira, just in case.

He holds up his hands, as if reading her mind. Perhaps he can. He's not human, though he appears that way.

"Sorry, I forget how jarring it can be to be corporeal." He holds up his hands, showing they're empty. "Captain Michael Burnham, of Starfleet, and Rillak Laira, of Bajor, the Prophets welcome you to the Temple of Union." He stands before the pile of gifts, and reaches down, picking up a ball. He trades it, hand to hand, and grins. "Though, you've already achieved so much."

"That's her," Laira mutters. She meets his eyes, surprise washes over her. "Emissary?"

"You know me?"

"You're the Emissary of the Prophets, you're—"

"Call me Ben."

Michael's missing something.

Ben winks at her, his smile bright and warm. "It's been a long time since I had a fellow captain, but we share that, you and I." He sets the ball down and walks to them, holding his hands out for the bowl. "Though, mine is a little less long than your long time, if we want to be technical."

"You're from after Earth made contact with Bajor, after we left."

"Which was many, many lifetimes ago, and yet, here you are." He holds the bowl reverently, keeping his brown hands still until the ripples fade and the water's as smooth as crystal. "You drink, you present the Prophets with your tokens, and you enter the cave. The Orb of Union lies within, and usually that's where visitors ask for what you already have."

Laira glances down, pink rising in her face. "We're not—"

"A child is a gift, and you brought yours here."

"It's complicated."

"Like all beings of great power, the Prophets have been given credit for many things they have not done." He passes the bowl to Laira, covering her hands with his. For a moment he's insubstantial, full of light, then he's solid again. "Just because you didn't conceive her here doesn't mean your baby isn't also their gift to you."

Laira blinks once, then again, relief breaking into a smile. "Thank you."

"The Prophets feel your gratitude, Laira, daughter of Bajor, Caradassia, and Earth. We bless you and this child of the stars." He drops his formal tone and leans closer, kissing her cheek. "She's incredible, as are her mothers, of course, but seeing her is an honor."

He sees her whole life, her children's lives, if she has them, her descendants and ancestors all laid out in front of him. Ben floats above the river of time in a way Michael and Laira will never understand, but from the way he smiles, he was a parent. He knew this love.

Laira takes a sip, then hands the bowl back to him, her gaze finding Michael's. "I would call you mine, here, and everywhere the Prophets can hear me, if you are willing." She uses the old Bajoran, the marriage vows they discussed walking up: words her parents said, and her grandparents. Promises they made here, lifetimes ago.

Ben hands Michael the bowl, but all that matters are Laira's eyes, blue and bright, soft with trust.

Warm and constant like a star.

The water's cold, yet it radiates through her as she takes a sip.

"I am willing, and eager, to be yours, from here to the edges of the galaxy, whatever universe, timeline, alternate reality: we're united, and I will call you mine as long as you wish."

Michael hands the bowl back, eyes locked on Laira's. Maybe if they were standing in front of the crew, if Ben was Admiral Vance, then she'd be nervous, but here, sweaty, dusty, with mud on her shirt, it seems right.

An odd continuation of a very strange beginning.

Laira's hand takes hers, tight and steady. So this is how marriage starts.

"The edge of the galaxy being something you've seen together," Ben says, softening the moment.

"We have."

"Isn't that fun?" He looks at each of them in turn and sighs, content, even a little wistful. "I wish I could tell you some of what's to come, but you'll just have to trust me. Remember to have fun. A good marriage has room for a lot of dinners. Try not to go to bed angry." He sets the bowl down and touches their shoulders, drawing them together. "Enjoy each other, and the little one; it'll fly by. My son was barely up to my knee and we went fishing for the first time, then I blinked and he was finishing his first book."

It's impossible to imagine their hitchhiker with a career, or children of her own, but Reno's seen flashes, and Ben's not even a temporal being any more, he sees everything. Michael's glad she can't. Experiencing all of it, all at once, is too much. She wants the little moments,

reading the same book a hundred times, watching Laira teach their daughter to play her complicated word games.

"A corporeal existence is a good thing," Ben agrees with her, patting her shoulder one last time. "Food, companionship, laughter...hang onto that, Captain."

Understanding tingles through her, because across time and space and centuries, he knows.

Michael follows Laira into the cave she didn't notice before.

Maybe it wasn't there. Intoxicating incense or water that's not water wouldn't be out of place here. The cave leads to another room, much smaller. There's stone benches on the side, baskets with thin soft robes.

Laira releases her hand and pulls her shirt over her head. "The water in the cave is a sensitive ecosystem."

"At least we don't have to go naked."

"That's later."

"Of course it is," Michael sighs, sitting down to remove her boots. "There's always a naked."

"Trill didn't make you get naked."

"We could have gotten married on Trill." Michael drops her bra into the basket and pulls on the shapeless robe. It's an undyed sort of beige, like it was plucked from straw, and perhaps washed a thousand times. It fits, better than she hoped, but it's strange.

People have worn this, over and over, all coming here to ask the Prophets for what they already have.

Laira lifts Michael's braids out of her robe, and arranges them on her shoulders. She strokes Michael's neck.

Turning to face her, Michael stands on her toes to kiss her. "Nice wedding."

"It's a little different." Laira blinks again and Michael kisses her damp cheek. "Thank you."

"Of course. As long as Tilly gets to throw a party, no one will mind missing the ceremony."

Nodding, Laira kisses her, lingering. When they part, she chuckles, nervous and awed. "The Emissary of the Prophets is one of the most holy figures of Bajoran history. I thought we'd see a monk—"

"He was a captain. It's professional courtesy."

"So Starfleet."

"Some of the best captains are."

"Mine is."

Wiping her tears again, Michael chuckles. "Come on, wife, the Prophets are waiting."

---

Bioluminescence is one of the simpler chemical reactions, it's found across planets in thousands of species. Michael lives on a ship with a bay full of glowing mushrooms, and it's still magical to stand beneath the tendrils glowing white above them. They reflect in the water, like infinite stars, and they're supposed to walk in.

The Orb of Union's deep within the mountain, at the heart of the spring, and it's in the water, in the glowing plants. Giving life to the jungle they walked through, and would-be parents who ask for it.

*Forgives us for not needing to ask. We need a different gift.*

"We just walk in?"

"The water itself is a blessing. Sometimes people see visions, my mother said they saw her parents, they were gone by then, and it was a glimpse—"

Michael wraps her arms around her waist, holding her for a moment. "I'd like to see them."

"My parents?"

"And my dad."

Laira sighs, and her heart must be as heavy as Michael's. Out of all their parents, only Gabrielle's alive to celebrate with them. Everyone else has gone before.

They start walking in, and the water's warmer than she expected, closer to a bath. They wade in reverently, quickly up to their chests, then their shoulders. The water's empty, clear and dark and the only ripples are from them, and they slow, then vanish and it's just them, adrift in the dark heart of the universe.

Swallowed into a the moment like the bubble that brought them here. Laura nods to her and they take hands. If they're going to see anything, it'll be after their heads are beneath the surface. If not, they say their thanks and go. It would be nice to spend part of their honeymoon in a bed.

Shutting her eyes, Michael sinks beneath the surface, and it's quiet. Warm, wet, and still except for her heart beat. The softer one has to be Laura's, because she's here, they're here together.

Or is it her mother?

Was this what it was like?

What it's like now for the hitchhiker?

"Dad?" Laura's voice cracks on the word.

A man walks out of white light, wearing a flight suit just like the one in Laura's old holos. The ridges on his forehead are much more prominent than Laura's, and his skin's greyer, so is the hair on his temples. His smile is bright and wicked and he reaches out for Laura, hugging her so tight that he lifts her off her feet.

"Look at you, Lar-Lar."

Visions can't touch them, or this is more, or it's happening in a split second—

"Don't over think it," a voice says behind her. Female, younger, maybe Michael's age?

"You're older, by a little." The voice belongs to a human woman, beautiful, with very red hair and a gentle smile. "Sorry, reading your thoughts is rude, isn't it?"

"I don't mind."

"You don't." The woman shakes her head. "No wonder she loves you."

"You're her mother."

"I'm Claire." She offers her hand, but Michael hugs her. If this is the only time she'll see her, she's not wasting time with handshakes. "She grew up so beautiful."

"And she's president."

"I thought ship captain, maybe Starfleet if we ever found them." Claire holds her hand very tight in both of hers, as if hugging Michael will make up for not wanting to interrupt Laura's moment with her father. "Though, she did organize the other children into a farming collective. Did she ever tell you that?"

"No."

"They wanted better working conditions." Claire takes a slow breath, and smiles, her blue eyes - so much like Laura's - shining. "That meant more ice cream."

"Definitely worth voting on."

"She was so proud." Shaking her head, Claire sighs, but it catches, like Laura's nervous laugh. " She's eight, in my memory, and I can hear her thoughts, yours, and she's grown and tall and astonishing, but she's eight."

"I'm so sorry you didn't get to see her."

"I see her." Claire squeezes Michael's wrist, swallowing hard. "I think I get to see her through your eyes, and you love her how she should be loved, how I'd want her to be loved."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you, you look after her. Make her smile, tell her to stop working there's so much I would thank you for. I- I want you to take her to Earth."

"The ocean?"

"Please, we tried, so many times and—"

"The galaxy is different now. We can go to Earth."

"Take your baby to the beach, put her in the sand."

"We'll do that."

Claire hugs her again, then walks towards Laura and her father, and Laura's little "Mama" wraps Michael's heart in a vise.

"You're going to take her to Langkawi," Philippa says to her left, and it's not her captain, this is the one who left in the snow. Emperor, but not anymore.



"It's the most beautiful place."

"It is." Philippa's voice is older, deeper, and her hair has gone as white as the snow on Dannus V. It cascades down past her waist, and years, maybe even a century, have only made her eyes kinder and her smile softer. This universe has worn away at her spines.

"I'm not soft."

"Of course not."

"You are, Captain."

"At least I made it to captain."

"I knew you would."

Michael touches her hand, and then they hug, and Philippa feels as she did, and as she never did, and there's so much they could say, should say, but Michael only sighs.

"Mom—"

"And now you call me mother?" Philippa touches her braids, and then her cheek. "Now that you're becoming one."

"it's a little intimidating."

"You'll be wonderful at it, as you are, with everything."

"I'm not."

"You are, Michael. Just accept it. She knows this about you, so, even if she's a politician, and part of a democracy-" Philippa frowns in distaste. "She calls you on your bullshit, which is good for you."

Chuckling, Michael nods. "That means a lot."

"As it should." Philippa touches her face once more, starting to fade into light. "The rest of your parents would try to protect your feelings."

"You never would."

"Never."

Philippa fades into the white, and Sarek walks forward, holding his hand in a familiar salute. He also is aged, well over two hundred, and it's good to see that his life was so long. She's seen the records, of course, but seeing him is different.

"I only have a moment, Michael."

"I know. It is good to see you."

"And you." Sarek glances at Laira, then returns his attention to Michael. "You are both happy."

"So very much."

"Keep that. Love only grows when you add to it. Loving our children was an incredible experience."

Amanda appears as he starts to fade, and she too has white in her hair and lines around her eyes.

"You're having a baby."

"Laira is, I—"

"Am right there, and that is an important place to be." Amanda hugs her, tight and the scent of her is exactly how it was, just for a moment. "Look after each other."

"We will."

"I'm so happy for you both."

Michael blinks, and she's gone, and tears are a hot and free and where's her father?

"He's after me." Philippa, the young one, the one she lost, her captain, stands in front of her. "I think. It's an odd experience."

"Joining my vision on a alien planet we hadn't even mapped?"

"You like crossing all the edges of the maps, number one."

Wiping her eyes clears her vision a little and this Philippa is so calm. Michael bites her apology, swallows everything she wants to sob. This is not the time for guilt.

"You finally have your own ship."

"I do."

"And it's everything you thought, isn't it?"

"So much more."

"Good." Philippa laughs, and she's missed her, so much. "Going to let the baby run around on your bridge?"

"Maybe a little."

"I like this future, Michael. Orions in Starfleet, peace with the Klingons, the Romulans, beings beyond—" Philippa shakes her head, then winks. "You know, of course, I'll be honored if you—"

"I haven't talked to Laira—"

Philippa raises her hand, hushing her. "The other me would tease you, so, I'll be honored by it, for both of us."

Michael has more questions than words, and there's no time, and yet infinite time, and they hug, and then she's gone. The hitchhiker will have to have her own name, of course, but she can have Philippa too. She has the wandering spirit in common with both of her grandmothers. (The former emperor would never let them call her that, but she is.)

Her heart's wrung raw, and Laira's crying with her mother and Michael looks down at her boots.

Her Starfleet boots, because that's who she is, in her mind.

"You can be mom too."

She hasn't heard her father's voice since he died, and that wound is sharp once again. "I'll try."

"You'll succeed." Her father opens his arms and pulls her in. "You are a wonder, Michael."

She's not. She's just here and she's—

"I'm so happy for you."

"Yeah?"

"You get the good life." He rests his chin on her head, and she's never been this tall and hugged him and she's never felt this big next to him. Part of her misses being small, but she knows this feeling. She can make it. They can make this for the hitchhiker, give her this kind of safety.

No raids, no Burn - they can't keep it all away, but they can make the galaxy as safe as they can, for all the children.

And the next, and the next—

"Remember to breathe," he teases, releasing her to look at her. "You have to balance yourself and the galaxy, what you want, what fills you, get those things first."

When she nods, he chuckles.

"The galaxy could always be better, safer, more studied, but there's only one first step, one chance to see the meteors over Andor."

"We'll try."

He nods, hands on her shoulders. "Your mother had a hard time with the balance, always did. She loves you, and me, but it's not the way you love. The way we do."

What is he trying to say? They only have a moment.

"We love with everything, that's our way. Gabrielle, her heart is complicated. I knew that, I tried to make sure you did."

"I did, I do."

"She's happy for you."

"She hasn't—"

This isn't the place. Michael hugs her father, letting herself sigh into him. She's never felt safer than with him, and this is what she has to make. This is what their hitchhiker should have.

This kind of love.

"You've got this." Her father whispers. "You're going to be the best mom."

Laira's parents fade as Michael's father does, the ghosts in the white becoming part of the white, and then they're back in the black, under the water, breaking the surface, gasping.

Laira reaches for her and Michael clings to her in return.

"They were happy," Laura whispers. "They were so happy."

"Can you imagine getting to see?" Michael rests her hand on Laura's belly, her chest crackling with love. "We'd be a mess."

"They were, I was, I—"

They don't talk, not until their breath is back and their tears are lost in the water around them.

"She comes from so much love, generations of it."

"It's a lot to live up to."

"She'll make us proud."

Laura swallows, and nods, eyes shut tight. "I can't even imagine."

"That's our mystery now, who will she be, what will she see, how will the galaxy shift around her."

"Towards the better, I hope."

"She's got a lot of momentum." Michael strokes Laura's belly with both hands, shutting her eyes. "Hundreds of years of making things a little bit better."

"My mother was so young."

"I know." Michael grins, kissing Laura's cheek. "Philippa was so old."

"Her hair—"

"It's beautiful. Was—" Michael leans back, letting the water hold her. "We are loved pretty fucking well, aren't we?"

Laura chuckles, then dips below the water again. She brushes her hair back from her forehead. "My parents asked for me here, I didn't know that."

"I'm glad they got you."

Laura reaches for her, embraces her, and this has that warmth. This is what they build on, everything that came before tucked beneath them so they can thrive.

There are so many little things to repeat, to carry forward like the oldest stones of the temple.

Start with love, then forward, together.

Belonging to each other, belonging to her.

Together.

### Chapter Summary

Reno, Veddra and Stamets finish the new spore drive, and Saru leads its first test. Laira gets a little help from Hugh. Laira and Michael attend a state dinner, then a less formal party.

### Chapter Notes

Many many thanks to Whimsically and Sanctuaria for plotting with me. You're essential.

"Think of it like calling up your transporter. You chose the destination, the VARS system translates that to a chemical signal and electrical map that the mycelium understand." Reno folds her arms over her chest and takes a bite of her candy. "Of course, we're not sure if we're asking politely enough."

"We are." Veddra insists, "We've studied mycelial signals long enough that we're fairly certain this is as polite as we can make the request."

"We're being nice to mushrooms." Reno raises her eyebrows, but there's a softness there. A humor that's more than friendly camaraderie. Michael said someday she'll marry the Romulan engineer, and their hitchhiker has a part in their wedding. Laira hasn't been to a traditional human ceremony, and if Michael performs it, she must put her own spin on it.

What is it like knowing her destiny? Is it a pleasant journey, knowing how it'll end? Is it tense, knowing there are timelines where this doesn't happen? Or is it set?

Michael said Reno's seen the hitchhiker, even knows her name, but she won't tell. Doesn't want to spoil the surprise. Laira doesn't know if she'd have that kind of restraint, if it was her. Knowing how her life might turn out doesn't seem to have changed Reno's approach to the universe, or her work.

"VARS system?" Laira asks, curious.

"The Veddra-Auriello-Reno-Stamets displacement-activated spore hub drive, ma'am," Paul explains. "We tried other arrangements of the letters, but this one was the easiest to say."

"I was pushing for RAVS," Reno teases.

"Or the SRAV drive." Veddra adds, smirking. "ASVR was impossible to say. ARSV was a fairly nasty respiratory virus, so we went with VARS. It doesn't mean I'm the most important, ma'am."

"Of course, doctor." Laira turns to Captain Saru, waiting for his opinion.

He seems pleased by the way he stands, and he nods. "Good work, all of you. We will conduct the test at 14:00 hours, as Admiral Vance had hoped, Madam President."

"Thank you, Captain. Thank you all for your hard work, this will change everything, improve billions of lives." Laira's throat's a little tight so she pauses, and all of their eyes are on her.

Veddra understands somewhat. She would have experienced some of the shortages on Ni'Var, but Ni'Var is full of scientific advancement and self-sufficient. Ni'Var was spared some of the worst of it.

None of them really knows what this means to the Federation, to the galaxy, to damaged shuttles that can be rescued instantly, to families who haven't seen each other for decades, to children with diseases that have cures that used to be a lifetime away.

If - when - they get this right, the whole galaxy will change. It's not the engineers' part to know what this technology will do, or see the whole picture. She has to imagine that; Laira has to lead them. For a moment, she's light-headed, like the laboratory's gone fuzzy, but it passes.

Help me with this, little hitchhiker. We have a long day to get through.

"Madam President?" Paul's voice is soft, and all their eyes are on her.

"I'm sorry, this- this is an incredible thing."

"Paling at our brilliance, ma'am?" Reno teases. "We are rather blinding."

Laira makes her polite excuses and in the hallway she holds onto the wall of the corridor just for a moment until her vision stops swirling. On *Discovery* she could ask Zora, or just beam herself to sickbay. She doesn't know the medical staff on the *Armstrong*, and they're probably charming and efficient, but there are only so many times she likes having the conversation about the hitchhiker.

She needs to get used to it. Find a way to say thank you, over and over, when she tells anyone she's pregnant. Not now. Now she has to meet Vruga and her ambassadors and plan *Discovery*'s tour of the Federation as they disseminate the spore drive tech and let them ask questions, see their leaders, show her their most beautiful places and feed her state dinners.

Michael better be hungry.

"The *Armstrong* is named for a first step in human history. Hopefully today, we can share our first flight with all the planets of the Federation. See you soon, *Discovery*." Saru signs off on a hopeful note.

"Fly well, *Armstrong*," Michael's voice carries over the comm and settles some of the butterflies in her stomach. The Bajoran term isn't butterflies, it's the bouncy little beetles that live in the tall grass, but her mother called the sensation butterflies. Having a stomach full of butterflies sounded beautiful when she was a child.

Laira didn't know what worry could really be like then. She'd listened to her mother and her grandparents talk about where her father's ship was going and if the harvest would be good. She'd heard their anxieties and imagined them as butterflies of a hundred colors.

Now she watches, waiting for *Armstrong* to jump away to headquarters and return.

Nothing could happen.

The ship could disappear forever.

Some other tragedy she can barely conceive of could occur.

Or it works, and if it works, they have a spore drive control system they can replicate and start installing on all Federation starships. One that doesn't need a pilot with Tardigrade DNA, but one based on the light-maps of the Ten-C.

Reno, Veddra and Stamets cracked it during her honeymoon with Michael, and Laira's seen the prototype herself, even called up Earth on the three-dimensional map of the galaxy this morning. T'Rina's not a pilot, but she called up Ni'Var. The interface is efficient, even beautiful, and it opens up space, from the edge of galaxy to the other.

*Armstrong* jumps.

Time passes, silent and tense, and the comm cracks the quiet like ice.

"This is Starfleet Headquarters, we have the *Armstrong*. Collecting telemetry now, then they'll be returning to you." Vance's voice is clear and thrilled. They're all right.

Saru's voice is equally pleased, and he should be. This is incredible. "This is the *Armstrong*, we have safely traversed the mycelial network. Returning to Bajor now."

From the space station in orbit where Laira stands in front of the viewer, *Discovery* hangs in space alone, then *Armstrong* spins and crackles out of the mycelial network into normal space.

Around her, they clap, then cheer, and everyone - from the technicians at their consoles to the Vice President at her side - erupts in joy.

The butterflies in her stomach can fly free now.

It worked, everyone's all right. They'll try it again, and it'll take time, but the *Armstrong* is safe. The galaxy just shrank to the time it takes to spin up the drive.

The Vice President touches her elbow. "Now you don't have to share your captain quite as much with the galaxy."

Laira chuckles, and her throat's so tight she's not sure she can speak. Luckily it is not her time to speak. Saru and Michael can handle the speeches.

Jen doesn't have to lean in, or whisper, because she is obnoxiously powerful enough of a telepath that she can just speak inside Laira's thoughts.

*"You're dizzy."*

"Yes." Laira says aloud. "It's on and off, it's fine."

"Why don't you go congratulate the engineers on *Discovery*," Jen says, all smiles and business. "I'll coordinate with the press for the afternoon round."

<p>Which would give her half an hour, maybe a little more.</p>

<p>Jen's very steely gaze suggests that what Laira should do is go talk to Hugh, sort it out before it gets worse.</p>

<p>"Thank you, Jen."</p>

<p>"I am here to serve, Madam President."</p>

<p>"You're here because you like being the center of attention."</p>

<p>"Isn't that service?" Jen waves her hand, the bright fabric of her dress following her arm. "I will take the attention for you."</p>

<p>"So kind."</p>

<p>"Go, beam." Jen is one of the very few people in the galaxy who can shoo her like she's a child, because Laira was barely a diplomatic intern when they met, and she treats every one in the galaxy like a child.</p><hr />

<p> </p>

<p>Sickbay on <em>Discovery</em> is quiet, peaceful after the crowded observation deck of the space station. She is usually surrounded by aides and ambassadors, even a security detail if they planet requires it. She's been spoilt, just being with Michael and her crew, walking through the empty jungle. Even if it was for a moment or two, it was nice not to be needed.</p>

<p>Hugh emerges from the back, holopadd in front of him because he's working something out.</p>

<p>"Hey." He waves the holo away and lowers his hands to his sides. "Need something?"</p>

<p>Looking down at the polished deck before she raises her eyes, Laira releases the tension in her back, even lets her shoulders fall. Beaming did nothing for stilling the fuzziness of her head. "I'm dizzy."</p>

<p>"Okay." He grabs the tricorder and tilts his head towards the biobed. "Do you have time to sit?"</p>

<p>"I do."</p>

<p>"Special occasion then."</p>

<p>Chuckling, she wraps her fingers together. "It was."</p>

<p>"Paul's very proud."</p>

<p>"Even though he's at the end?"</p>

<p>Hugh chuckles, running his scan. "You know I tried to help them with initial patterns, and Reno is right, none of the good ones started with S." He leaves her on the biobed and wanders to the replicator, then returns with a glass in his hand. "Drink this."</p>

<p>She sniffs it, then take a sip. It's some kind of cold fruit juice that she doesn't recognize, very sweet.</p>

<p>"Pomarrosa, from home. Look long enough and you can always find them in the trees." He pulls himself up on the biobed beside her, so it must be something simple. "Busy day?"</p>

<p>"Meetings, demonstrations, the first flight with a new experimental propulsion system."</p>

<p>"Watching's hard isn't it?"</p>

<p>"Brutal."</p>

<p>He pats her shoulder. "So, any time for lunch in there?"</p>

<p>"What?"</p>

<p>"In your not so busy schedule, did you eat?"</p>

<p>"I ate this morning."</p>

<p>"Ah." He rests his hands on his knees. "So, how long ago was morning?"</p>

<p>Toying with her bracelet, she sighs. "Is this a trick question?"</p>

<p>"Going by your blood sugar, I doubt you're going to tell me you had a leisurely brunch." Hugh nudges her shoulder. "Drink your juice."</p>

<p>Shaking her head at him and herself, she stares at the cup in her hand. "That's it?"</p>

<p>"Feel better now, don't you?"</p>

<p>Touching her forehead, she nods, then finishes her juice. "Glad that was an easy fix."</p>

<p>"Oh, that's the crisis fix, the second part is having lunch with me."</p>

<p>"You also had a busy morning?"</p>

<p>"I did, but no one's stealing the glucose directly from my blood." Hugh slides off the bed and takes her empty glass. "Let me guess, you could work all day, eat at the end, go to bed and be fine."</p>

<p>Rolling her eyes, she nods.</p>

<p>"So that you didn't have someone literally tapped into your blood stream. You need to make time for lunch, every day. Make your meetings lunch meetings if you have to, drink your lunch while you're saving the galaxy." He offers his hand to help her down. "Today, you're going to have lunch with me, you can tell me about your trip."</p>

<p>"All about the sacred temple where the ghosts of our parents appeared?"</p>

<p>Hugh grins, his brown eyes shining. "Michael's parents take awhile?"</p>

<p>Laira smiles, then chuckles. "Hours."</p><hr />

<p></p>

<p>Lunch with Hugh is pleasant, funny. He tells her about growing up in Puerto Rico, on Earth, and how he ended up in Starfleet. How much he annoyed Paul when they first met reminds her of Michael wanting to punch her in the face. Very romantic.</p>

<p>Laira sets her napkin in her lap and looks out the window of Hugh's quarters. "Maybe I should take her to the opera."</p>

<p>"Michael will love it. She's cultured." Hugh sets their plates in the replicator and returns with dessert, something white that trembles on the plate like a custard. "Trembleque is something the replicator gets right, and yes dessert is essential."</p>

<p>He passes over a spoon and takes her coffee to refill it. "Tell me again about Philippa's hair."</p>

<p>Chuckling, Laira swallows her bite of trembleque, which is sweet and coconut, perhaps orange? "I didn't speak to her, but one of them-"  
</p>

<p>"The former Emperor, she would have loved you," Hugh interrupts.</p>

<p>"She was very old, and her hair was white and incredibly long. Beautiful really."</p>

<p>"When I saw her last she wanted to die in battle, I like that she didn't."</p>

<p>"Sarek and Amanda were very old as well, but Michael's father was young."</p>

<p>"Like your mother." Hugh sets down his spoon, and waits, coffee in hand.</p>

<p>Laira traces her spoon along her dessert, then sets it down. The twisting in her stomach is too angry to be butterflies. "How many hypos would it take you to cure scosian fever?"</p>

<p>"Now?"</p>

<p>She nods, touching her bracelet.</p>

<p>"Two, maybe three if the fever was very high. The recovery rate for scosian fever is excellent, in a starbase medical facility or on a starship."</p>

<p>"Almost half of our village died, when I was a child. My parents sent me away—"</p>

<p>"Scosian fever is most dangerous to humans and Bajorans, Cardassians, Orions, they'd probably be all right."</p>

<p>"My mother said she'd be fine, and I'd see her in a few days."</p>

<p>"And she died."</p>

<p>"Very quickly. She wanted to write me a letter, but couldn't finish it, my father was off world so she didn't see him either. They didn't—"  
</p>

<p>Hugh passes across a clean napkin, and his hand rests on hers. "Antibiotics could have stopped the black plague on Earth, saved millions of lives. I have treatments in sickbay that would have saved Michael's first Captain, who was stabbed through the heart in the Klingon war. Starfleet could eradicate the ongoing outbreak of phthisus on Andoria, but Andoria hasn't asked for our help. There are probably a billion people suffering in our galaxy that I could save as easily as making you eat lunch."</p>

<p>"I should have put up more of a fight."</p>

<p>He laughs, shaking his head. "My job's hard enough, it's all right to be an easy patient for me. I won't tell anyone."</p>

<p>"There are always people we can't help, because of timing and distance, and I know that."</p>

<p>"Better than most."</p>

<p>"But I miss her."</p>

"I miss my mom too." He pats her hand, then squeezes her fingers. "She had a long life, a good one. She thought I disappeared, and I never saw my niece graduate from Starfleet Medical. Everyone on this ship has lost their family, and I know that doesn't make it easier, especially now when you might want to be able to talk to her for more than a few minutes."

Her eyes sting, and she hates it. Her mother died such a long time ago, there's no reason to be upset about it now, except she could be here. If they'd had the spore drives earlier or if it hadn't have been for the Burn or—

"My grandparents were a big part of my childhood."

"And your parents are gone, and of Michael's multitude of parents, only Gabrielle's alive."

Laira makes a face he must be able to read because both of his eyebrows fly upwards. "Gabrielle hasn't replied to Michael's letter."

"Ah."

"And she's the one here."

"She is and I—" Laira takes a breath, forcing the angry knot in her chest to settle. "I don't know why she doesn't want to reply to Michael. P'Jahr isn't sealed, she can send messages."

"Gabrielle was the only living being in the universe as she knew it for a period of time we haven't been able to determine, that kind of complex trauma, and the Romulan religious order she's joined—"

"I know."

"Knowing doesn't mean you can't be angry."

"I don't know what I am."

"Hopefully less dizzy?" He finishes his coffee and smiles: gentle, patient and charming and he might be the most pleasant therapist she's had. Maybe it helps that he's already family.

"That's much better."

"Remember to eat, because she will take everything, and quickly, and if your system's not—"

She meets his eyes, holding his gaze. "I hear you."

"Good."

Laira takes a bite, then finishes the last of her pudding.

Hugh drags a knife through his then passes over half. "Here."

"The replicator's right there."

"But I'd have to get up."

Laughing with him, she sits back, then picks up her spoon. Some kindnesses are about more than just the food. "Tell me about her, the Emperor with the beautiful hair."

"My worst patient." He leans in, like someone's listening to them. "She threatened to poison my children."

---

State dinners were considerably more fun when she was an ambassador. As president, it's her duty to be greeted, over and over, by everyone. At least *Discovery* stopping at headquarters brought most of her diplomatic aides and attachés. Michael's losing a conference room and two laboratories to make room for diplomatic offices Laira needs on board, but some of her science staff will be leaving for other ships who will be venturing into less known parts of space, so it's not a contentious change.

Still, it feels very permanent, approving changes to the rooms, sending power requirements and security upgrades to Michael's engineers and the Bajoran shipwrights finishing the overhaul. There are years left in her first term, and gaining the ability to visit all the planets, in person, is worth a little change in where the President keeps her office.

After nearly 900 hundred years on Earth, tradition changed, and changed again. Her predecessor kept an office on Tellar Prime, and Laira's been at Headquarters, but she's always traveling. She's not just being selfish, this is a good idea and it will be useful. Seeing the planets in the Federation, setting foot in their halls, might help keep them together.

Her aide, Vruga, is at ease with this dinner. Bajor is her home planet, and these protocols are comfortable. So is the weather. Taking advantage of the summer evening, the dinner's outside, on the beautiful terrace overlooking the plains below the cliffs. The air smells like grasses, rich this close to the harvest.

Michael and Arjun, the Vice President's charming husband, got to tour some of the farms, and Michael would have been briefed on the new set of protocols as Laira's official partner. Laira's already bracing herself for the inevitable teasing that will come with it. Arjun volunteered to handle the briefing, and as an official husband of decades, he's well-versed in all of it.

And kind, she's been fond of him since they met.



<p>"He's much nicer than me," Jen reminds her, pulling thoughts out of her mind as if Laira had said them aloud. "You thought I was intimidating."</p>

<p>"You are intimidating."</p>

<p>"Thank you." Jen lifts her drink and smirks. "Are you prepared to do this sixty more times?"</p>

<p>"Only sixty?"</p>

<p>"You know every planet in the Federation is going to throw you one of these."</p>

<p>"I know."</p>

<p>"You'll probably gain a few new planets too." Jen presses her lips together, her black eyes unreadable. "Good thing you'll be hungry."</p>

<p>Swallowing a laugh, Laira shakes her head. "Don't jinx it."</p>

<p>Patting her shoulder, Jen finishes her drink and grabs another from a passing waiter. "You're not done with that part? You were so nauseated it carried across the room."</p>

<p>Laira touches her hand, thanking her for her concern. "You're lucky the constitution keeps us apart so often."</p>

<p>"I truly am." Jen's hand brushes across her back and she leaves her to mingle into the growing crowd. Tilly's cadets are already dispersed through the area, elegant in their dress uniforms.</p>

<p>Historically, Starfleet officers were used to handle protocol and provide a social buffer at state events for the Federation. After the Burn, ranks were so thin that the practice was abandoned, but now they can use cadets on a diplomatic rotation. Tilly's been briefing them and prepping them for the last few days and the three she brought with her are up the task.</p>

<p>She nods to one as he passes her in discussion with the Kai: Cadet Harral, the young Orion whose father fought so hard against the worst of Emerald Chain. He almost smiles, but hesitates a little. Laira's office is often so intimidating. The pause to speak to her but she sneezes, twice, forcing the young cadet to maintain his composure.</p>

<p>Kai Ondara winks at her, mouthing her congratulations, and Laira's face burns as she walks away.</p>

<p>To a non-Bajoran, it's congratulations for the wedding. That was all over the Federation news channels. The Kai however probably spoke to the Emissary himself about her and Michael. Every Bajoran Laira sneezes in front of shares the hopeful look. None of them will mention it; they'll only smile. She remembers her mother smiling like that, wistful and gentle. Sneezing more than once in an afternoon, let alone multiple times at dinner is a very public announcement, but until she brings it up no one will ask.</p>

<p>It's as if they're all sharing the secret, and she smiles, perhaps too easily, perhaps too much, but this is a good thing. Enjoy it.</p>

<p>Michael does.</p>

<p>She makes it look so effortless, even talking the Council member Gozre, who gives Laira a headache on the best days.</p>

<p>Michael can handle him.</p>

<p>Michael shouldn't have to talk to him. He should just scuttle off to some planet that doesn't.</p>

<p>Looking at her brings a warmth into Laira's chest. Even if they're not sitting next to each other, even if she'll barely get to speak to her, Michael's presence carries as much warmth as the sunset over the fields.</p>

<p>"You look better, Madam," Vance says, nudging her arm.</p>

<p>"Thank you, Admiral."</p>

<p>"Must have gotten over that nasty Malindian stomach worm you had."</p>

<p>She starts to speak, then laughs. Turnabout is fair play. "You know, I just might be past the worst of it."</p>

<p>"Good." He walks her to the table, pulling out her chair. He won't get to sit next to his wife either, but he's had more practice. "I know it's hard to watch her be your wife from across a room at one of these fancy dinners, but I hear, unofficially of course, that there's a party later. Hopefully you'll find being her wife there a little more fun."</p>

<p>When the seating is complete Laira's between Kai Ondara and First Minister Reze. Reze whispers something to her aide and Laira's glass is filled with something other than the wine. The Kai touches her hand, then reaches up to grasp her ear.</p>

<p>"You've always been strong, Laira, but now...you're still."</p>

<p>"I didn't know what was something to strive for."</p>

<p>"Content." Kai Ondara releases her ear and pats her hand. "You were always searching for something, and seems you found her, or maybe she found you."</p>

<p>Laira reaches for her glass and takes a sip to avoid speaking. Her face stings, so she must be going pink, but there's no point in hiding any of it. "We were fortunate."</p>

<p>"You are blessed by the Prophets, many times over, it seems." Kai Ondara takes a bite of her salad, then smirks over her fork. "With more to come," she says in that cryptic, distant sort of way she gets. Speaking to the Prophets often changes the sense of linear time.</p>

<p>Better not to ask. "We are grateful."</p>

<p>"Because you are wise and aware, both of you. I felt your Michael's pagh, and she's extraordinary."</p>

<p>"She is."</p>

<p>"I'm glad you've learned to appreciate what is in front of you." Ondara looks ahead, but that smile is entirely for Laira. "I remember a very young, very determined ambassador who was only concerned with the Federation and making the galaxy a better place. Too busy for foolish things like love and a family."</p>

<p>"Too afraid."</p>

<p>"Busy is a very common method of being afraid."</p>

<p>Laira's chuckle is too nervous and too tight, but Ondara's right, of course.</p>

<p>"Don't worry, I'm used to being right. It comes with the job."</p>

<p>Laughing comes a little easier, but Laira spares one look at Ondara's wine. These dinners were easier with a little wine. She reaches for her water but stops, grabbing her napkin again so she can sneeze into it. The Kai and the First minister share a look across her and it seems like half the table pauses - smiling - sharing a very simple joy.</p>

<p>"They say you sneeze more when they're strong," Reze says, her voice soft so only Laira and perhaps the Kai can hear. "I hear anyway."</p>

<p>Smiling a little, Laira nods her thanks but doesn't reply. She doesn't need to. There's time, everyone can tease her later, when the whole damn galaxy finds out about the baby.</p>

<p>Not yet. There are a thousand awkward conversations she'll have to have, prying questions, well wishes, recriminations, hinting. Gozre will make it ugly in ways she can't even imagine yet, so it has to be controlled for awhile yet.</p>

<p>The way that it has been is comforting. Her aides know, Michael's crew, Vance and his family, but they've all been Bajoran about it. They know, but they'll let it say it when she's ready. The Prophets really have been looking out for them.</p><hr />

<p> </p>

<p>Michael tastes like wine. The good tulaberry wine when it's like the sun's been captured in the bottle. Of course, Michael makes it sweeter, richer, and do they really need to go to this party they could—</p>

<p>Michael breaks the kiss as if reading her mind. "We have to go."</p>

<p>"We do." Laira pauses, takes a breath, and then resumes the kiss. This is all she wants to do. Press Michael up against the corridor wall, the door, and taste her. "I missed you."</p>

<p>"We were in the same room."</p>

<p>"Felt like different galaxies."</p>

<p>Chuckling, Michael runs her hand over the baby, reconnecting them. "It was a nice dinner," she mutters while Laira devours her neck. "Good food."</p>

<p>"The dessert was replicated."</p>

<p>"It was delicious."</p>

<p>Laira grabs her hands, pressing them up against the wall. "You're delicious."</p>

<p>"Oh am I?" Michael kisses her until both of them have to stop to breathe, then laughs. "We're late."</p>

<p>"Only if we're using a precise sense of time. So many cultures use a more relative interpretation."</p>

<p>"We don't have time for what you want to do."</p>

<p>Laira runs a hand over Michael's breast, then sighs. "We don't."</p>

<p>"So we go in."</p>

<p>Nodding, Laira starts to turn, but laughing, she kisses her again.</p>

<p>Of course, that's when the doors to the cargo bay open and all of Michael's crew whoops until they have to stop. (though Laira would have happily kept kissing her).</p>

<p>Be the captain's wife. Smile, laugh, follow her lead.</p>

<p>Michael waves at her crew, sheepish, but proud. "Sorry we're late."</p>

<p>Tilly stands by the door. "Allow me to present: our dear Captain and her beautiful wife, Mrs. Burnham."</p>

<p>Laura hasn't faced a crowd this excited since they returned to Earth after meeting the Ten-C, or perhaps her election. Certainly not this intoxicated on either occasion.</p>

<p>The copious amounts of drink are definitely helping the mood, and Starfleet crews are just like the freighter crews she knew: the hardest cargo runs were followed by the wildest parties, just to let off steam. The closer they were to death, the more they celebrated life. This crew has carried so much, and with the spore drives going to other ships, they're no longer the first responder.</p>

<p>They could go back to science. Stop being the one ship between the galaxy and certain ruin. They've grown together in that environment, carried that love and affection for each other in the darkest of times.</p>

<p>Michael led them through.</p>

<p>And now they can celebrate her happiness, so no pressure, <em>Mrs. Burnham.</em></p>

<p>Her hand slips into Michael's and they walk in together. They manage to hang on to each other through the first set of hugs and then they lose each other when Michael gets picked up off her feet and Hugh grabs Laura.</p>

<p>He's an exceptional hugger. So is Paul, after a shy little smile. After that, it's a whirlwind of people, some in uniform, some not, smiling and laughing and there's no polite distance for Madam President, it's just arms around her shoulders and people patting her back.</p>

<p>When there's a break, Laura pulls her hair down, letting it fall lose onto her shoulders. Her suit jacket's already forgotten somewhere in the corridor. Michael was too pretty for her to worry about that. Zora's great at finding lost things anyway.</p>

<p>Tilly brings her a glass of water, and her eyes catch on Laura's hair. She reaches out but stops herself. "Fuck that's pretty down."</p>

<p>"Thank you."</p>

<p>"Sorry it's just water, you can't really have anything fun."</p>

<p>Laura smirks and sips her water. "Water's fine."</p>

<p>"Is it though?" Tilly wrinkles her nose. "It's so boring."</p>

<p>Patting the sofa next to her, Laura takes another sip and then holds up the glass. "Did you know replicated water tastes differently depending on the replicator?"</p>

<p>"No, it should be the same."</p>

<p>"Different ships have different patterns. Vulcan ships use a spring from the southern continent. Bajoran ships use the trace minerals from the capital city."</p>

<p>"You're going to tell me you can tell where our water is from."</p>

<p>Chuckling, Laura shakes her head. "<em>Discovery</em>'s? No, it would have been based on somewhere hundreds of years ago, or perhaps Zora changed it. So many things about this ship are unique, down to the water."</p>

<p>"Your ship. We're yours now." Tilly sets down her own cocktail and reaches for Laura's hair. "You can't wear it down, it's too distracting, isn't it?"</p>

<p>"I don't feel like I'm working when it's down. When I was on cargo ships, our artificial gravity was never that reliable. It would drift in and out and if my hair was down—"</p>

<p>"That's such a mess." Tilly toys with part of her hair, then wraps her hands into it. "You have a lot of hair, and that's like a lot coming from me."</p>

<p>"I'm honored to be in your company."</p>

<p>"We can start a club." Tilly leans on her shoulder and snuggles in. "Michael said the cave was beautiful."</p>

<p>"The ceiling looked like stars, so did the water." Laura shivers a little at the memory of it. "Michael even met my mother."</p>

<p>"Good, she's great with moms."</p>

<p>"Oh she adored her, instantly."</p>

<p>"Good." Tilly snuggles into her, arms wrapped around her back. "Michael should be adored."</p>

<p>"I do."</p>

<p>"Oh I know, you are so smitten with her. It makes it easy for us to love you."</p>

<p>Laura hugs her back, blinking away sudden tears. She can't even blame drinking. "Your crew is easy to love."</p>

<p>"We are, aren't we?"</p>

<p>Tilly stays with her, telling her stories about the crew she's just met, laughing with her as Michael has to play silly drinking games.</p>

<p>Vance and his wife are here, so is the Vice President and her husband. Vance so rarely relaxes anywhere, but this party is outside of ranks. These moments are so rare, so special, that it's almost a shame she can't join them.</p>

<p>Though, Laira might end up remembering more of it than some.</p>

<p>Reno has a little bit of a lisp when she guides Laira over to play a traditional wedding game.</p>

<p>"We have two Ni'Var traditions for you," T'Rina says, glowing with affection. "First the binding of hands, which is a Vulcan tradition thousands of years old."</p>

<p>Beside her, Veddra nods. "Then the Romulan side, which is lying." She pauses as Michael rests her hands on Laira's. "Historically, when Romulans were married they were forming a partnership tighter than state. To prove that, they lie. As your hands are wound together, you tell us a lie you've told each other, then a lie you've told about each other. Finally, you reveal a truth you haven't yet said."</p>

<p>Laira repeats it to herself, and nods. Michael's got it.</p>

<p>T'Rina and Veddra wrap their hands together in a strip of silk. The symbols on it are old Vulcan and the oldest Romulan script she's seen. Michael's crew surrounds them, smiling and drinking.</p>

<p>"A lie you have told each other, please." T'Rina gestures for Jen and Arjun to join them. "The Vice President and her husband have agreed to verify for us."</p>

<p>"Just in case?" Michael teases, winking. "You'd never lie to me."</p>

<p>Laira bites back a chuckle. "Oh mine is easy."</p>

<p>"Let me guess—" Michael pauses, waiting.</p>

<p>Glancing down, Laira sighs then looks up at her. "I feel fine."</p>

<p>Michael raises her eyebrow, and nods. "Oh that was it." She pauses. "I'm not worrying."</p>

<p>The cargo bay laughs around them.</p>

<p>"Too easy," Reno says, shaking her head. "Lies you've told about each other."</p>

<p>Michael ponders for a moment. "She's just here to tick a box."</p>

<p>Opening her eyes wide, Laira chuckles, winces. "She's nearly the finest captain I've ever seen."</p>

<p>"Just nearly?"</p>

<p>"That's the lie, dear."</p>

<p>Joann whistles, and Keyla claps and another round of laughter ripples through the bay, softer this time.</p>

<p>A truth she's yet to tell. Laira tilts her head, thinking for a moment.</p>

<p>"I'll go," Michael starts, and Laira's heart pounds in her chest. How much Laira loves her is stunning sometimes, overwhelming her senses and her control.</p>

<p>Clearing her throat, Michael presses her lips together. "I wanted the baby as much as you did."</p>

<p>The cargo bay grows so still that they're all breathing together.</p>

<p>Laira's eyes sting; her throat aches. "You reached for me in your ready room, when you were angry and I was grasping for control, and you wanted to make sure I was all right. Not Madam President, but me." Laira pauses, swallowing the lump in her throat. "And I loved you. I didn't have words for it then, but that was when it started."</p>

<p>Michael leans in, tugging their bound hands closer and they kiss, clumsy and perfect. "I had to reach you."</p>

<p>"And you did." Laira lifts their hands to touch Michael's chin. "You reached right into me."</p>

<p>"And here we are." Michael's eyes are dark and deep, like the space between the stars, endless yet brimming with hope. "I love you."</p>

<p>Laira's reply is swallowed by the voices that love them both, and after a moment, they're touched and hugged and wrapped up in the warmth of those who adore them.</p>

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira visit Tellar Prime, do a little negotiating, then find time for some fun. Michael goes on a routine mission with Keyla, using worker bees to free a stuck freighter, which gives them some time to talk about Joann. Michael and Laira talk each other to sleep over a comm channel.

### Chapter Notes

many many thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicalli for all their help.

This chapter features sex, and a lot of conversations, because I was in a mood for dialogue. Michael's fun for that. Hope you enjoy! Thanks for all your support, it means so much.

*"Sometimes, it's your job to say no. Be polite, be charming, and say no for her, because sometimes she can't." Arjun, the Vice President's husband, had smiled and nodded the line of reporters waiting for their chance to ask questions on Bajor. "Jen's excellent at blaming me for things now, and after a few decades, we have a good system. You'll get there."*

*Michael sighed, looking across the busy garden full of reporters. "We're not telepathic."*

*"It's not a requirement." Arjun finished his tea, setting down the cup. "I can read Jen's facial expressions faster than I can read her thoughts. You get so accustomed to shielding when you're not on Betazed."*

*"Do non-telepaths think loudly?"*

*"About everything." He patted her hand. "But, after decades, I'm used to it. Jen almost prefers it. Other telepaths are almost too easy to talk to. What they say and think matches, no challenge."*

*Michael laughed, and Arjun told her about the first time he'd spoken to the press after their wedding, and how awkward it had been.*

Now that Discovery has arrived on Tellar Prime, Arjun and the Vice President have returned to Headquarters and the Federation council, leaving the never ending press tour for Laira and her aides. The *Armstrong* has picked up some of the journalists and planetary dignitaries who were eager to experience the spore drive for themselves, and no immediate crises mean Laira can take the time to do a full official press junket. That hasn't been achieved since before the Burn.

Visiting all the official Federation member worlds, even with a spore drive, is an undertaking. Meeting with journalists after a day of meetings is optimistic. Yes, Laira's feeling better, and it's important to see how each planet in the Federation adds to the whole.

They can remind each planet that they matter. If they manage to finish before the hitchhiker arrives, Michael will be grateful, if not wildly optimistic that they can stick to the timeline.

Tellar Prime was scheduled for three days, and they're mostly through the second, but the itinerary for tomorrow just keeps getting longer.

It's raining outside the Great Hall of Leadership. The trees climb high and green into the clouds, branches forming a thick canopy that breaks the rain into mist. It's raining so hard above that the droplets have time to coalesce before they fall. Some of the trees are well over two hundred meters, and the sunlight rarely reaches down this far. It gives the whole campus of diplomatic halls a sense of being inside a much larger temple of green.

It's beautiful, and wet, and barely thirteen degrees. Michael has her leather coat over her uniform, and uniforms are designed to be comfortable in most weather, but it's a shock after the pleasant temperatures of Bajor.

Aides and council members start streaming out of the Great Hall and Michael heads in against the current. Her badge chirps, and she pauses, ducking into a side corridor of living wood. It's dark and carved like stone. The scent of the air is almost sharp, like sap.

"Captain, we've received a request for aid." Joann's voice is calm, but concerned. She's still a little nervous in the big chair. That takes awhile to go away. Owosekun was the right choice for first officer, definitely, but it'll take time until she believes that as wholeheartedly as Michael does.

"Gather the senior staff, evaluate what they need, then report back. You've got this." Michael smiles, knowing Joann will hear it. "Let me know what you need."

"Yes, Captain. Thank you."

She closes the channel, smiles up towards her ship above. It was a few lifetimes ago, but she remembers being that nervous with Georgiou in command. Philippa would be proud now. Her ship is her own and she's developing her own crew. Joann will be an incredible captain some day if that's what she wants. Maybe she and Keyla will even...

Michael smirks, because it's not her place to intervene. Her relationship fell into her lap out of a warp bubble. It made the dating part much easier, maybe too easy because they just—

But it was right. This is right. She's calmer, stiller somehow. On Vulcan, when it was Vulcan, she listened to them talk about the peace of meditation. How she'd know it when she found logic.

Maybe it works with love too.

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Michael's still shaking rain from her braids when she enters the hotel room. It smells of wood smoke, which is odd, and old, but there's a fire, a real fire in the fireplace and she holds up her hands.

Laira's suit jacket is on the chair and her trousers hang near the fire on a hook. She sits on the sofa in front of the fire, wrapped in a blanket up to her neck. Her hair's down in damp curls on top of the blanket, red-gold in the firelight. "I forget how much it rains here."

"Zora mentioned it," Michael begins, peeling off her damp uniform jacket. "Figured it's just rain."

"But then it falls all day."

"You got cold."

Laira hums that little noise where she's not going to agree, and not going to argue. "I'm not cold now."

"The fires of home are a central part of Tellarite culture. Clan fires, communal fires."

"This fireplace connects to the one in the hall downstairs, they have--" Laira stops, sneezing once, then again.

"Regenerative wood burning." Michael sits down beside her, letting the heat seep into her skin now that her arms are bare. "The molecules are continually cycled so the fire burns the same wood, over and over. It's clever."

Laira sneezes twice more into the blanket and nods. "And it smells good."

"Fires at home?"

"Sometimes." She shifts a little and blanket slips, and her shoulder's bare in the firelight. "Summer's hot, but we'd have fires in the winter. My mother liked to cook over them."

"That sounds nice."

Laira stretches and sighs, the blanket falls a little lower and her other shoulder is bare, so is her chest. Her skin glows pink in the firelight and Michael gasps. That's enough to make her flush.

"It was nice." She shrugs off the blanket, exposing her back, and her stomach and oh she's naked. Completely naked. "Speaking of nice - I was thinking of you during my meetings."

"Oh?" Michael stares at her breasts, then looks up, grinning. "I should take off my boots."

"You should." Laira lifts her knee, hugging it to her chest and that makes the blanket fall away to the sofa, and yes, naked. "You're overdressed for this."

"So many rules."

"Get naked, Captain."

"Yes ma'am."

Slipping off her boots, Michael knees on the floor, turning so she's between Laira's legs and Laira touches her shoulder with her bare foot. "The ambassadors just kept talking and all I could think about was you, and your arms when you get back from the gym."

"Sweaty?"

"Gorgeous. Joann makes you glow when she puts you in your place."

"Seems like you want to put me in a different one, ma'am."

Laira shivers, but that has nothing to do with the driving rain outside. "Should I tell you what to do?"

"No," Michael kisses her knee, guiding both of her legs up over Michael's shoulders. "No, just tell me about your day."

"Oh?"

"See how long you can do it." Michael slips her fingers higher, teasing her thigh and Laira's eyes go wide and dark, reflecting the fire. "Bet I break you before lunch."

Laira sighs up at the ceiling, squeezing Michael's shoulder. "If only you had."

"Your first meeting was security," Michael prompts, sliding her fingers over Laira's hips. She nuzzles her inner thigh and Laira shivers.

"We apprehended another spy at the Archer spacedock, presumably trying to—" Laira breaks off, whimpering when Michael licks across her skin on her way up. Taking her time is a gamble, Laira recounts the raids of the resettlement camps near Inferna Prime, how Andoria's still having trouble reconvening a central government after the fall of the Emerald Chain. Elections are a trick business, not as intricate as the patterns Michael makes with her tongue.

Laira's concentration is impressive, because she is almost making sense while explain the engineering discussion that followed, but the inner workings of the spore drive are a tangle on a good day and *prototaxies* is a mouthful.

(really the problem is that Michael has her mouth full but she'll give Laira some of the benefit of the doubt).

That little hiss of pleasure is sexy enough that it's Michael's turn to shiver.

"Stella-vi-" Laira slips into a string of curses Michael doesn't know and her translator doesn't pick up. "Fuck, Michael, dammit, why—" She doesn't speak after that, too far gone, and it's teeth and lips and curling her fingers inward until Laira's trembling on the sofa, gasping.

Slipping off her trousers, Michael drops to the sofa next to her.

"You're a menace."

"Wrecked you, didn't I?"

Laughing, Laira shakes her head. She turns, straggling Michael's lap. She's still flushed pink and her skins a little damp with sweat, but she tugs Michael's tank top off her shoulders. They're clumsy, hurried and they tumble onto the floor together, blankets beneath them.

Laira holds her face, her thumb running along Michael's cheek. "I love you."

Michael rises to kiss her, pressing their bodies together. Laira's hands are already trailing down her stomach, searching, promising, and talking is a foolish use of her breath when she'll need it to sigh and gasp into Laira's shoulder.

The fire crackles beside them, heating their skin while they trace patterns that are as familiar as trade routes. Michael lets her release come quickly instead of holding it off. She nibbles Laira's neck and whispers she loves her over and over again and it's rusing.

They're rushing, maybe it's the thudding of her heart - Laira's heart - maybe it's breathing together apart - within —

Laira's head lies on her chest, between her breasts. Her hair's sticking to her skin and Michael's fingers are slick.

"Who knew the mushrooms were sexy?"

"Stamets, I think, and Hugh but—"

"I won't ask with you around," Laira promises, giggling contentedly. "I've had relationships where we didn't leave bed, or the cockpit, for days but this is different, isn't it?"

"This is marriage."

"I only have a vague idea what that's like."

Michael kisses her damp forehead. "Me too. I know it can be good."

"We're good, aren't we?"

"So far, we're incredible." Michael curls around her, watching the fire throw shadows onto the ceiling. "I keep thinking about my parents, what they were like together. I don't remember a lot of my birth parents, I was so young when they together. Sarek and Amanda were happy, mostly good for each other. Sometimes I think the best marriage I know is Paul and Hugh."

"Charles and Ronia," Laira says. She starts to add something else, but her sneezing's back. After the fourth one, she pauses, fingers splayed on Michael's stomach. "My grandparents were happy together. Sarcastic, and happy. They teased each other so much."

"Should I tease you more?"

"Is that possible?"

Michael shuts her eyes, slipping her fingers into Laira's damp hair. "I could work on it."

"Doing the impossible is kind of your thing."

"Says the woman who pulled our baby out of a pocket universe."

Sitting up enough to look at Michael, Laira smiles down at her, her eyes so soft they could be part of the fog outside. "You're nine hundred years out of time, you keep saving the universe with hope and mushrooms, maybe your baby is the easiest thing."

"She hasn't been easy." Guilt stings, but she strokes Laira's hip, letting it go.

Laira kisses her cheek. "Easy is relative, dear. It's not like you've let me suffer alone."

"I can't."

"I know." Laura kisses her nose, then her chin. "It's cute."

"Cute?"

"Oppressive is a little too strong."

"I—" Michael stumbles over her thoughts, trying to sort the ideas in her heads even as she's speaking. "I need it to be ours. I know it's yours, but I can't—"

"You need to save the very small universe too."

"I get to worry about you in all the universes, regardless of how big the universe is, I'm your wife now."

Laura traces her fingers along her cheek, smiling like she's finally found the right treaty. "Wife sounds nice, doesn't it?"

"It's beautiful."

Laura's mouth brushes warm against hers, then Michael sighs into her, and talking, no matter how wonderful, is unnecessary.

---

As Michael flies through space in the tiny worker bee, she keeps thinking of what she wants to tell Laura when *Discovery* returns for them. "*Ever get one of your old freighters stuck in an asteroid belt?*" The older models of sub light, solar sail freighters, are huge ships, difficult to turn, even more difficult to carefully pry out of dense crystalline asteroids without damaging the ship or the cargo of grain.

Michael left a message for when Laura finally got out of her meetings, teasing her about leaving the bridge to flit around in a worker bee with Keyla. Laura hadn't replied when *Discovery* dropped them off, but she'll read it.

Michael eases a piece of crystal out of the nanomesh of the solar sail.

"Do you think they'll retire these things when we can give everyone a spore drive, or just make them even bigger so you can move all the grain in one jump?" Keyla's worker bee drifts past her to another choke point.

"We'll probably use what we have, retrofit until we can build new ships."

"And then jump them from place to place?"

"Means our cargo pilots can get in a lot less trouble."

There's a pause, and Keyla's tone changes. "Thought you liked it if when the cargo pilots got in trouble."

"What?"

"You want me to believe you haven't gotten into a little—" Keyla pauses, and Michael's doomed. Maybe she needs to pretend her comms aren't working.

Of course, Keyla keeps going. "Why yes, Captain, I'm only in port for tonight why don't we—"

"Keyla—"

"That sounds more fun than 'Madam President, here's a treaty for you to sign.' "

"Depends on what you think is fun."

"For you? Probably the mysterious cargo pilot who's only going to be here for a night."

"And I make her take out her jumpsuits?"

"Does she still have them?"

Michael sighs. "I haven't asked."

"You should."

Michael rolls her eyes towards the space in Keyla's direction and scans for the next place to work. "Your concern about my sex life is noted."

"You're married now, wouldn't want it to be boring."

Michael flushes, her face warm and tight. "Now I'm supposed to tell you some lurid detail, proving it's not boring and then you tell Joann and Tilly, winning some bet."

"Five-to-one odds that you ask her to wear her suit jackets to bed. Ten-to-one that you wear them, then of course, Reno thinks you're both into something kinkier."

"Your pilot scenario?"



"Oh that's pretty mild. Maybe it's rival couriers trying to get the same score or something leather."

"Leather?"

"Georgiou left you her things, there's a lot of leather." Keyla pauses, amused at her own cleverness. "I think that's it. It's gotta to be the leather. Swearing fealty and kissing the boots or something."

Michael waves one of the arms of her worker bee towards Keyla's menacingly. "Maybe you're trying to distract me from asking about you and Owo."

"Oh you can ask, you just don't because you're still Vulcan, underneath the charming captain thing, you're still Vulcan."

"Vulcans can be funny."

"So it's just you?"

Michael tries to keep a straight face, but starts to chuckle. "I really might be the problem." Stars spin around her worker bee as she rights herself, finds another place to work and frees the solar sail.

Keyla's worker bee disappears behind the huge freighter and the deep purple asteroid. The comm's still open, and Michael can hear her breath. It's comforting, not being alone in the quiet of space.

"You're happy now."

Space stretches out vast and silent between them except for the tiny sounds of the worker bee. Michael smiles to no one, even catches herself nodding.

"I am." That's not enough. "I have things I wanted in a relationship, in a family, and it's a little faster than I would have allowed myself to have."

"Because of the ship?"

"Because I take forever to do things. Took me more than a year to let Book in."

"Then he betrayed you."

Michael doesn't need Keyla to say *us*, because she can hear it. "He lost his planet."

Silence holds them for awhile. Michael's thoughts wander. It's delicate and difficult in the three-dimensional chaos of the worker bee, but it doesn't take much of her head.

"Faster with her makes sense." Keyla sighs, and Michael can almost hear her shaking her head. "Sometimes things take a really long time to work out, because you don't want to mess it up, risk losing something good to maybe get something better, and I suppose sometimes you just know."

How does Michael explain? "Laira's an incredible person, and I knew that, I respected her before I liked her. After I saw her, really saw her, the rest just popped into existence."

"In the bubble."

"Perhaps not how I'd recommend anyone start a relationship but—" Michael pauses, trying to get the laser cutter perfectly aligned. If she just turns a little more— "It works for us."

"And you could never have a boring relationship."

"If it wants to be boring from now on—"

"Oh no," Keyla insists. "It'll never be boring. It's you, it's her, she's the president of the Federation and cargo pilots are always trouble, even retired ones."

They stop for lunch, and it's only a few more hours until they've freed the ship, like a giant butterfly from a strange crystal web. Peeling off her environmental suit is a wonderful feeling, like her skin can breathe again. Yes, it's thermoregular, yes the suit balances the moisture for most species so her skin is fine, it's just sticky.

"Nice, isn't it?" Keyla says, stepping naked into the sonic shower. "Feel like the suits been wearing you after awhile."

"Years ago, Georgiou and I did advanced training in these for weeks, we slept in them. Taking them off is always a gift." Michael steps out of the last of her clothes and walks into the sonic shower next to Keyla. There's no privacy here, it's a all purpose barracks, and the crew's up in control so it's just them but she still halts for awhile.

"Bet your wife isn't a prude like you."

"No," Michael says, laughing into the warmth of the shower. "Oh no, yesterday she waited naked for me to come back to our room."

"Naked?"

"There was a blanket."

"Blanket didn't stay on very long, did it?"

"No, it did not." Michael shakes her braids under the sonic cleanser, watching the dirt and sweet swirl away. "It was fun."

"Good." The way Keyla grins at her makes Michael's face sting, but this is all right. This is good.

"Jealous?"

"My empty quarters and I are just fine, thanks."

"I've heard they're not that empty."

Keyla looks away, staring down at her feet as she puts her socks back on. "Mine are so empty."

Michael pauses, beaming. "Oh, Joann's are better?"

"Better view. Starboard gets the good nebulas."

"And her bed?"

"Warmer, somehow." Keyla pulls on her uniform jacket, leaving it unzipped. She lets her hair fall onto her shoulders and waits for Michael to finish getting dressed.

"So you're saying your room could be free, because I need to make more space for visiting dignitaries." It's a joke, really, Keyla can keep her own quarters as long as she wants, but Keyla's smile warms and she glances down just like Laura does.

"You know, next time that comes up, let me know."

Touching her shoulder, Michael lingers for a moment, then pulls her in, hugging her tight. "I'm so happy for you."

Keyla hugs her back, sighing in, holding her tight. "You should be, the nebulas on the port side are just lackluster and you don't want me to have to live with that."

---

After cheerful, delicious dinner with the Tellarite freighter crew, Michael returns to her guest quarters. It's small, utilitarian, but the sleeping alcove is carved wood, and it smells warm, homey. A little like the forests around Sarek's home. Checking the time, she taps her badge to interface with the ship's comms. It's late, but Laura never goes to sleep as early as she should, and a Tellarite freighter's on the same time as the Tellarite capital.

The gruff voice of the freighter computer announces they have made a connection with *Discovery*, and Zora replaces them.

"Captain Burnham, it is pleasant to hear your voice."

"It is nice to speak to you too, Zora. Is the president still awake?"

"President Rillak is not taking messages at this time."

Michael pauses, smiling at the single porthole in bulkhead. "What about my wife?"

"Movement in your quarters suggest she is still awake. Would you like me to raise her on comms?"

"Yes please."

"Captain, I must inform you that the vessel you are on does not have holographic capabilities and the connection will be audio only."

"That's fine Zora, I'll have to imagine what she looks like.

"I believe that will not be difficult for you."

"Thanks."

The channel goes quiet while Zora speaks to Laura, getting her permission to make the connection, and a moment later the kind of silence changes.

That's their quarters.

"Can't sleep?" Laura's voice is soft, gentle. There's none of her presidential tone, so she's long done for the day.

"I wanted to hear your voice." Michael leans back on the bulkhead, moving the heavy pillow so it's comfortable behind her neck.

"Ah," Laura pauses and Michael can see that sleep smile of hers. "I miss you too."

"Got used to having you in bed."

"Stealing your heat."

"Yeah, yeah that's a thing. I'll barely need a blanket here."

Laira hums in disagreement. "It's a Tellarite ship, you'll need two, even without me." She pauses, and silence carries them. There's an edge in her voice, a roughness. She hasn't been crying, Michael knows how that changes her voice, this is something else.

"Tellar Prime a little cold for you?"

"It's freezing, and wet, and—" Laira sighs. Fabric rustles. She'll have a blanket, even two without Michael there to keep her warm.

"Can't wear a field jacket to meetings?"

"I wish I could. Zora and I put more insulation into one of my suits." *I'm fine dear.*

"She's helpful."

"She is."

"You know, Keyla told me the stellar phenomena are better on the starboard side. Is that true, in your experience?"

"You mean in my years of ancient freighters with tiny portholes like the one you're looking out of now?"

"Yeah, tell me about that."

Laira sighs again, maybe she stretches. The bed wouldn't make that sound so now Michael wonders. Is she on the sofa? No, that's not right either.

"The first ship I ever flew was Cardassian, all angles and sharp corners. It was like trying to fly a rastipod through space, but she always brought me home."

"Never got caught up on a tetragonal spire asteroid belt?"

"With that ship?" Laira chuckles a little, then coughs, There's a pause while she reaches for her water. Maybe she has tea.

That's it. Her throat's raw. Not the sneezing Michael worried about. She threw up. She'd had weeks of relative calm. The nausea might have even been over with, but it seems like it's not.

"That ship could have plowed through a lattice of duranium."

"Good to be a rastipod."

"If you want to fly in a straight line for light-years, yes."

Michael glances down at her own tea. "I have some Tellar Gryzhu bark tea, which is a strange blue color but really good. Like cinnamon."

"Are you going to guess what I have?"

"This time of night?" Michael plays along. If she was really fine, it would be deka tea, because she loves the bite. If she's been throwing up again, it'll be something else. "Deka tea."

Laira makes that half-accusatory little sound that goes with that look. "You know it's Phylleean ginger, why don't you just say it?"

"Maybe I want you to tell me."

"I was tired, I skipped dinner. Then Tilly and Joann had me eat with them, and I almost finished before I threw up."

"All over the mess hall?"

"Corridor, actually." Laira sighs, exhausted when she's not trying to hide it. "I thought I was done."

Michael holds her knee, wishing she could touch Laira over subspace. "I'm sorry."

"It's because you're gone."

"It must be."

"The hitchhiker misses you enough to mess everything up."

"Protest hormones?"

Laira's little chuckle carries like she's in the room with her. "I'm certainly protesting."

"I'll be back tomorrow. *Discovery's* going to pick us up on your way to Rigel V."

"I suppose I'll make do until then, somehow."

"I love you, get some sleep."

"Yes, ma'am." Laira's tone softens. "I love you too."

"Would you like to hear about how Keyla and I valiantly untangled the solar sails or how Keyla told me she's moved into Joann's quarters."

That makes Laira perk up. "Really?"

"Oh, yes, solar sails are so delicate."

"No, no, Keyla and Joann, please."

"I knew you'd like the gossip."

Laira sips her tea again, but she sounds better. "Joann is so kind, and Keyla understands all my spacer jokes, tell me, please."

"Joann's quarters are so much less messy and have a better view because—"

"Starboard, yes, go on."

Michael tells her about Keyla and Joann, and how they moved in so quietly after such a long time. Then she fills in the gaps of their history, how Keyla and Michael became friends way back on Shenzhou, and how Michael and Joann connected years later.

They brush their teeth together, across light years, Michael reminding her to stay awake long enough to get to bed.

Eventually, Zora's voice replaces Laira's. "She's asleep, captain."

"Thank you, Zora."

"Sleep well, Captain Burnham, we will look forward to your return."

"You're in capable hands with Owosekun."

"Yes, we are."

The channel closes, and Michael shifts the blankets and pillows around until she's comfortable. Tellarite beds are almost like nests, and it's one of the more cozy bunks she's ever slept in. Would be better if Laira was here, but she's taken care of. She's all right, even if she's not. She's surrounded by people who love her, and that's the most Michael can ask for when she can't be there herself.

### Chapter Summary

Laira works with acting Captain Owosekun while Michael's off ship. Tilly, Joann and Hugh look after her while Michael's gone.

### Chapter Notes

Busier end of the summer than I expected, thanks for waiting! Many thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicalli for being my acting Captains. All the love.

*Discovery* jumps, and Laira shuts her eyes.

Her first spore jump was exhilarating, like the first time they had enough dilithium to go to warp as a child. Laira had wanted to show Michael she wasn't bothered by it, that nothing Michael could throw at her on her antique starship would surprise her; Laira had been through worse.

And it was strange and wondrous, making her heart race in the way a perfect maneuver did, back when she had time for such things.

Getting to step onto starships, watch captains at work, was intriguing, but *Discovery* had been unique. Not only was Michael one of the most fascinating names on her list for the *Voyager*, but so few people had experienced the spore drive, or seen the old ship. Laira hadn't known then special that would be, how much she'd be changed by this ship and its twinkling space mushrooms.

And Michael.

Thinking about her too much will make Laira miss her more, and she needs to focus. They're jumping to Rigel IV, and will retrieve Michael and Keyla from Cygni spaceport as soon as they can. That fringe of Andorian space has been chaotic since the Emerald Chain fell. Their own production capacity fell when they had other worlds to exploit, and resuming trade helps fill in some of those gaps, but replicators take power and power takes dilithium, which the Federation is happy to provide, but rebuilding takes time. Infrastructure crumbles so quickly when its not maintained, and often growing food is more efficient than replication, especially for staples like grain.

Hugh touches her hand, drawing her back to the moment. Opening her eyes, she stares up at the familiar bright sickbay ceiling. "Your estrogen levels are spiking because your ghoyoc levels rose and they feed into each other when the hormones break down. It's really quite fascinating how they form a positive feedback loop into each other like that. Luckily your progesterone levels have been following an even curve, and your ilkeah level is very steady."

She can guess what he's going to say, and as Hugh offers his hands to help her sit up, she waits for him to finish.

He points at the holographic display of her blood chemistry. "This one makes you nauseated, this one changes your body temperature, this one leads to more sneezing, and this might make you lightheaded. When they're high you're going to have a rough couple of days."

"Good thing my job's so flexible."

"I can give you a hypo to lower your fever, but it's going to be a little unstable until this spike passes."

She tilts her head, letting him inject her neck.

"This should help stabilize your body temperature, and this one should help with the nausea, but your body processes this more quickly while you're pregnant, and your particular biochemistry is—"

"Not conducive to help, I know." She takes a moment, hands on the bed, staring at her knees. "Did I do something?"

"No." He touches one shoulder, then the other and for a moment she can't help thinking of the way Michael talks about Spock. Laira's never had a brother, but this might be what it feels like.

"Sleeping more would be great, so would eating more regularly but there's no trigger. This week estrogen and ghoyoc are both high, maybe next week they'll both be stable and ilkeah will spike, or maybe all three will give you a hard time." Hugh shrugs, squeezes her shoulders and lowers his head to meet her eyes. "You're the first person of your genetic heritage to carry a child of this genetic heritage. It's all uncharted, and none of this, absolutely none of it, is your fault."

All of it is her fault. She wanted— No point. "I can't just eat the right things and stay warm and—"

"No, I wish it was like that."

She's entirely capable of getting down from the biobed without his help, yet his hands stay on her arms because he cares. He's a good doctor, one of the best she's known, but it's this part that makes her chest ache. He's family, already, this is what family feels like and she's been without it for such a long - too long.

Her eyes sting and she has to take a moment to wipe them, but he waits. "And here I thought it was just too many briefings before dinner with Joann and Tilly."

"If I say it's too many briefings, will you read less of them?"

Laura chuckles, soft and grateful. "I wish that was the case."

"Considering what happened yesterday on deck five, you need to plan on having a rough few days. If you feel like you're going to vomit, you most likely are, so be careful what meetings, or walks around the ship you think you can hold yourself together on. Maybe you can use that to your advantage."

"Oh, now you're thinking politics."

"I try." He wraps his arm around her shoulders, half a hug as he walks her towards the door. "Is there a really annoying Rigelian ambassador you can throw up on?"

---

With Michael on her way to the grain depot on the newly rescued freighter, her morning briefing is with Commander Owosekun.

Michael would run through the day unofficially while Laura put her hair up, and she's gotten so used to starting her day like that. The ready room is different, stranger still without Michael but Joann knows, and she sets hot tea in front of her.

"I'm afraid I don't know how formal this briefing is meant to be, Madam President."

"It's not formal at all." Laura touches the tea, lifts the mug and sniffs it. It's a thoughtful gesture, and the tea's not too strong. Drinking it should be fine, but dinner two nights ago should have been fine. It's so hard to predict. "Captain Burnham would inform me of the ship's course and schedule for the day and I tell her what the itinerary is on the diplomatic side."

"Sounds simple enough, ma'am." Joann sits straight up in her chair, at attention even in Michael's seat. "Go ahead."

Laura lays out her meetings, when she'll need unrestricted comm access and the planned departure time. She listens while Joann explains the training drills for the cadets, the diagnostics and the work in the science labs. It's much more detail than Michael would have given her, and it's sweet how Joann's so committed to being thorough.

Laura still has no idea what goes into a full shield diagnostic, or how they collect more spores from uninhabited planets, but her tea's cool enough to drink and it helps chase her nausea back to tolerable instead of acute.

"I'll see you at eighteen hundred hours for departure then, Captain."

Joann takes her cup and nods, starting to smile. "And dinner, ma'am."

"Dinner?" Did she miss something? A ship event? Laura reaches for her badge to check the schedules again, but Joann stops her, very gently.

"The Captain of *Discovery* has dinner with the president of the Federation, most nights."

"Oh you don't—"

"There's a precedent, ma'am." Joan leads her to the door. She has the gentlest smile. "Besides, I am a very good cook."

"So I've heard."

"I will make food from Earth, and I'm very good at it. I grew up in Nigeria."

Blinking very quickly doesn't stop her eyes from watering. "I've never seen it."

"Well, you can taste it." Joann pats her hand, her fingers warm against Laura's. "Good luck with your meetings, ma'am."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Acting Captain."

"You are a captain today. Best start wearing the title. It suits you."

Joann meets her gaze, not looking away or down and this is why Michael chose her. This fearlessness. "Thank you, ma'am."

---

It's eleven hours later that Laura finally extracts herself from her meetings. Taking a nap over lunch made the rest of the afternoon possible, but she had to push things back and rearrange. She can hear Jen in the back of her head, reminding her that a discussion where she can concentrate is better than a schedule, even when she's light years away, but the schedules are so carefully determined by so many people and asking them to change it is selfish.

She's not sure if making everyone wait so she can throw up is less selfish, and determining which is better is not something she wants to make a study of. Still, the Tellar delegation follows human norms and doesn't tell her she looks like three-day-old hasparat. Ambassador Prerthonch

has spent time on Bajor, she might know that Laira's sneezing is not the cold fog or the flowering guklufas on the table. The ambassador does not comment, and Laira's grateful.

She's late enough getting back that *Discovery* jumps right after she beams aboard, trying to keep her on her schedule. Laira removes her jacket, drops it on the bed and pulls a sweater on over her shirt. She could give up on the whole thing, eat something flavorless from the replicator and go to bed.

Joann's cooking, and she'd be rude not to go— Eating is more than food, her grandmother would remind her. Company might make her feel better. The bed won't have Michael in it.

She stops, eyes closed, slowing her breathing. Will eating make her feel better? Can it make her feel worse? Why doesn't she know? She's been here more times than she wants to admit.

Still, her transporter makes her stomach unsteady, so she walks to Joann's quarters, taking her time through the quiet corridors, passing Michael's crew. Laira takes a moment, collecting herself before she rings the chime. She's exhausted, and she could easily be convinced the stabilizers have stopped functioning, but it's her. Just her.

Laira rings the chime.

Tilly answers the door, smiles, reaches out and drags her in. "You made it."

"I'm so sorry I'm late."

Tilly guides her to the sofa, all stern like she's a woozy cadet after a zero-G training. "You know, I'm only saying this because we know each other well enough now that I know you won't have me expatriated to Breen, however—"

Smiling is so easy with her. "You can say it."

Cupping her face, Tilly tilts Laira's head up, studying her face. "You look like shit."

"I am aware."

"I'm taking your hairpins out, and then you're going to eat and I got this, for you, so don't feel like you have to throw up on the floor unless that's easiest." Tilly inclines her head towards an empty storage bin. "The DOTs are good at basically everything, so it's fine." Tilly calls back towards Joann's little kitchen. "She's here, I'm going to fix her hair."

"I'm sorry your meetings took so long." Joann carries the smells of the kitchen with her, spices and roast vegetables: and for a moment, Laira's stomach remembers what it's supposed to do. "Drink this, and let us know if you want crackers."

"I'm fine."

"That's a lie," Tilly reminds her, beaming. "I was at your wedding, so that's definitely a lie, and you thought you were fine before you threw up in the corridor."

She's never living that down, is she? "The ship yawed."

"We were in a steady orbit."

Laira chuckles, shutting her eyes and surrendering. "Were we? I don't recall."

Tilly deftly pulls pins from her hair, shaking it free a little at a time. Tilly pats her shoulders. "I'm sorry hormones are evil and Michael's gone because that probably makes it all worse."

It does, but Laira only smiles at her in gratitude, rather than voicing it. Michael is fine. They'll see her soon. Missing her is foolish and wistful and they've been attached like a tether since they found out about the hitchhiker, so this makes sense. It's a logical emotional response to spending time without a loved one. She just misses Michael. Nothing's wrong.

Laira repeats it for herself as much as Tilly. "Michael and Keyla will be back. Besides, Joann looks good in the chair."

"Doesn't she? It suits her."

Laughing from across her quarters, Joann scoffs. "Being captain is more than looking good."

"Looking good is a nice place to start." Laira shuts her eyes; Tilly pulls out the last few pins and starts running her fingers through her hair. When Tilly's fingers rub her scalp, Laira inhales, focusing on that sensation instead of the pounding behind her eyes.

"My grandma liked to rub my head like this," Tilly says.

"On Earth?"

"In Paris."

Laira opens her eyes reluctantly, nodding her thanks to Tilly. "You grew up in Paris?"

"Sometimes. We traveled a lot. My mother was part of the Federation security council, and my dad was in Starfleet. When I was young, I was with my mom, and then I ran away—"

"Oh?"

"Oh yeah, stowed away on a freighter, begged to be allowed to stay and learn engineering. Totally made a diplomatic incident." Tilly leads her to the table, pointing at a chair.

Joann sets dinner on the table, steaming in front of them. "Half of Starfleet out looking for you."

Tilly laughs into her glass. "Only like a third, but...yes, it was terrible."

Sitting down between them, Laira folds her napkin into her lap and waits for Joann to serve. "How old were you?"

"Fifteen. Things with my mom were bad after that for awhile. I went to live with my dad on his starship and that was way better."

Layering stew over rice on the plate, and adding some small round bread to the side, Joann passes dinner over to Tilly and then Laira. "Maybe you just needed to get off the planet."

"Worked for you, didn't it?"

Joann's smile is very bright. "That first little trip to the moon changed my life." She picks up the round little white bread and demonstrates dipping it in the stew. "I'd always had the stars above me growing up, but you leave the atmosphere and you can touch them."

"And then you met us," Tilly says, patting her arm.

"I did."

Conversation flows easily after that. The white ball on Laira's plate, is very soft, not bread but fufu, and the stew is all Earth vegetables, some of which she's heard of and some that Laira can't identify at all. Joann explains all of them gently, telling her how they'd grow them in her family garden. The wistful light in her eyes when she talks about growing up makes sense when Joann explains that she could never go home after she left.

"I visited, but it was not my home anymore. When I left their way of life, I left them" Joann's hand lies on the table between them and Laira takes it without thinking, squeezing her fingers.

Home was her parents, until her mother was gone, then her grandparents and her father, but when they died, home stopped being Bajor and became a well-worn bunk on a freighter. Then space stations, diplomatic shuttles: whatever ship she was on until *Discovery*.

And Michael.

Michael has made this ship home for her crew. Joann and Tilly included.

"I'm glad this is your home now," Laira says, meeting her eyes.

"Yours too." Joann stands, and then they're hugging, tight and warm, and it stings to breath but she remembers family. Family feels like this.

Bringing their drinks to the table in front of the sofa, Tilly waves them over. "Come, you have to tell me about your sex life."

Joann leads Laira to the sofa with a hand on her back. "Keyla's told you everything."

"Maybe I'd like to hear it from you."

Laughing, Joann looks at Laira instead, her eyes bright and wicked. "I think it's Laira's turn."

"For what?" Laira asks innocently, as if this is a game she doesn't know the rules of.

"When did you have sex for the first time?"

Joann looks mortified, but in a fun way. "Tilly—"

Laira takes a sip of her tea. If it was something stronger this would be more fun. "With anyone or with Michael?"

Tilly and Joann share a glance, and Tilly's face has the same brightness as a rookie pilot finding out she's allowed to fly a shuttle for the first time.

"Can I have both?"

Smiling down at her tea, Laira shrugs. "I was sixteen, looked older, we had to overhaul the navigational sensors and shielding, so we were on this spacedock for two weeks, not a lot to do other than drinking games and—"

"Sex."

"Goes well with games, sometimes less well with drinking, but—"

Joann and Tilly clink glasses and Tilly pats her shoulder. "When you can drink again, we'll drink together, any terrible deck polish you want."

"Anything?" Laira tilts her head. "That's brave."

Tilly beams, enjoying the challenge. "I got around the galaxy a little, thank you."



"It's a deal."

Pouring herself another drink, Joann nods. "I started out drinking moonshine my cousins made, I'm sure I can survive whatever pilot swill you can come up with."

This time Laira's mug joins their glasses. "You're on."

"When is she going to be out?" Tilly asks, downing the last of her drink while she looks at Laira's belly. "In case I need to practice."

Looking at her hands on the mug, Laira traces the handle. It's pottery, not a replicated mug. Someone made this, on Earth, centuries ago. Someone Joann loved sculpted this with their hands and sent it with her into the stars. She came from that.

Following Tilly's gaze, she shrugs. "Hugh doesn't know."

"He doesn't know?" Joann's words are gentle.

"Hybrid gestational timelines vary and can be difficult to predict."

"Wait, so you don't actually know how long you'll be pregnant?"

Sighing, Laira leans back, staring up at the art along the wall. "Longer than a Bajoran, less than a Cardassian."

"And that's a big window?"

"Several months."

"Fuck, that's awful."

Laira almost chokes on her tea. She takes a breath, but it's impossible not to laugh first. "It's less than ideal."

"Less than—" Tilly rubs her knee. "That's politician for it's a fucking mess isn't it?"

"I'm sure Hugh will be able to narrow it down."

"Give you a month instead of several?"

"Perhaps."

Tilly shakes her head, appalled. "So it's a completely unknown period of nausea, dizziness, exhaustion—"

"That will eventually kick me from the inside, sounds wonderful doesn't it?"

Leaving the sofa, Tilly grabs a bottle off the table. Something heavy and glass. "Sounds magical." She pours herself and Joann something stronger and sits back down. "At least you have Michael."

"She doesn't have to tell us about Michael if she doesn't want to."

"I don't mind."

That's an invitation Tilly can't resist, and she vibrates with curiosity. "So, did you have sex before your incident in the bubble, because you were so mad at each other before and some of us - not me - but you know, some of us thought maybe you worked some of that out with sex."

That's a thought Laira hasn't contemplated. Michael's incredible beautiful. Was there an attraction between them that early? Perhaps, but not something they could have acted on. Their positions wouldn't allow for it, she certainly couldn't—"I can admit I would have been intrigued by Michael demonstrating her leadership skills, but it we weren't together like that until after *Discovery* rescued us from the bubble."

"Very soon after," Joann guesses, leaning in.

There's a certainty in her eyes Laira finds fascinating. "Oh?"

Tilly holds up her hand in agreement. "Yeah, right after you got back."

"Why do you think that?"

Joann finishes a shot and sets the glass down. "You were happy. I know the baby's part of it, but—"

"Michael was a bigger part of it, you're right." Tilly agrees.

Looking from one of them to the other, Laira nods. She didn't know they were paying attention. She's touched, even surprised. "I wasn't happy before?"

The way they look at each other before they look at her says much more than either of them will voice. Tilly raises her eyebrows, and it's Joann who starts.

"We've all been through trauma: a war, another universe, leaving our home behind. We know what it looks like when you're a little lost in what happened to you."

Tilly fills their glasses again. "Not that we'd say anything to anyone. We saw it in you because we've been there. We've held the whole galaxy

in our hands, and it's a lot. So we know what it looks like when you stopped going to events at the Academy, not the important things, but the little things."

Joann tilts her head. "And you kept turning down Michael's invitations."

Protesting that she didn't isolate herself is pointless. How could Laira have explained what she felt? No one understood and explaining it took more than she had. Going quiet was her only option. They would have understood it, Michael and her crew, but she didn't- she couldn't— "I did."

Joann touches her wrist, and the warmth in her hand matches her eyes. "I hope it's better now."

Laira pats her fingers in return. Of course, Michael's crew loves like she does. "It is." Silence holds them with contentment, and gratitude. "Michael was the first person to worry about me, just me, in a very long time, even in the middle of a crisis, she saw me."

"We see you," Joann says, looking to Tilly as they both start to smile.

"We see the president and the cape and the hair, but we see you too."

Shutting her eyes before the stinging turns to tears, she blinks, looks away from both of them. They love her because Michael loves her, because family radiates outward from the brightest point, and she can let them. She can love them back, heedless and unfettered, like Michael does.

"Thank you."

It's not enough, but it's a start. Her life is full of beginnings, chaotic as they are.

Tilly changes the subject, teasing Joann about where she's going to put Keyla's things - there's not a lot, Keyla's a spacer kid even now - but it's kind. Funny.

Laira doesn't remember falling asleep. She's tired, always, but she's in Tilly's lap when she wakes up. The light's lower, softer, and they're both still here, Joann's right beside her.

"Zora has Michael on comms for you," Joann says, touching her shoulder. "We were tempted to let you keep sleeping, but it's nice to take off your boots and brush your teeth."

It takes more than a moment to drag herself back enough to remember where she is. Joann's quarters, it's not late, not really, but she could sleep for days.

"I thought it was going to take more than a day or two for Tilly to convince you to have a sleepover," Michael teases from the ceiling. She's still just on audio, but Laira can picture her, sitting in one of the comm chambers on the grain depot, or still on the ancient freighter.

She touches their arms, and their hands guide her up. Michael's voice makes it easier to smile "Your crew is incredibly convincing."

"We follow your lead, Captain-"

"The precedent is set by you, Captain-"

"It's like I'm there even when I'm not," Michael says, chuckling. "I'm glad you're together."

---

Tilly and her cadets beam down with her to Rigel V in the morning. Rigel V's capital is a few hours ahead of *Discovery*, so she's not expected until nearly eleven hundred, but the meetings will run late. Michael might be back tonight. Joann was hopeful that the freighter would reach the depot and *Discovery* only has to jump to get them.

Every message Vriga passes her is from Michael in her hopes until it's not. Rigel V's not as cold as Tellar, but it's the height of dry season and her headache might be from the change in humidity. The population of Rigel suffered much in the Emerald Chain occupation, and they are eager to show her how they're rebuilding, but that means beaming from site to site, and each transporter trip sets off her sneezing.

By the third city center they're rebuilding out of a crater, one of the cadets hands her a handkerchief and Tilly explains to the Rigelian Monarch in a whisper that Laira has allergies to dust.

Rigelians are similar enough to Vulcans that sneezing would never be connected to pregnancy, but Tilly's cadets are curious. Allergies will be a decent explanation for today. They'll know soon enough, everyone will, because it's impossible to keep any part of her life to herself.

This will be a good thing.

Tilly insists on lunch exactly on time and Vriga's little sigh of relief makes Laira smile. Lunch is filling, bland and unremarkable. The Monarch offers that they could return to the capital, make use of her chef, but there's food here in the city of Tir' Aresh. The Federation president eating with the relief workers in the shade alongside a new apartment spire is a good holo for the news service. Two of the cadets snap pictures, debating the light as they switch sides of the street.

Leaning in towards her ear, Tilly whispers, "How can their food be even more bland than Vulcan food?"

Swallowing her bite of pale blue fruit, Laira smirks. "The texture is more important than the flavor for Regelians. The climate here is so mild

that few of the native plant species have the defense mechanisms that make food delicious."

"So far, Bajor had the best food." Tilly's voice is soft enough that no one else could hear. "Which totally sounds like I'm sucking up, but I'm really not, I just like spicy."

"Maybe you'll enjoy Nausica. Some of their sauces are too caustic for many species to ingest."

"Well that sounds fun."

Laira takes a sip of water and looks up at the gentle clouds overhead. Michael would be able to tell her what Vulcan food this is like, and she'd probably know how to eat the dessert properly, but some of the children playing in the street come and eat Laira's for her. Which solves that problem.

Being nauseated while sitting in the shade after eating the most tasteless thing she's had in weeks is a feat. Michael's little hitchhiker could be a little less exceptional sometimes.

Parents of a particularly young child come retrieve him before he drags her into their game. They're overly apologetic - and it's worse when they recognize the Monarch of their planet - but the child waves at her as he's carried away.

How many diplomats will their child spill juice on? How many meetings will she leave to be mother before she's president? The galaxy will hold itself together with the Vice President and Vance, like it has before, but there's a longing to get to that point, a wistfulness to be past this creeping nausea and unending sneezing.

Before she's ready, their daughter will wave, and Laira both knows that to be true and can't imagine it at the same time.

---

Joann stands at attention in the door to the conference room during her last meeting, and she's too straight. Too at attention. Laira can't focus on what the Monarch is requesting for additional material support, so she requests a recess.

"I must speak with Captain Owosekun."

Her aides can collate the list in her absence.

Joann doesn't smile, and that in itself is a sign that sends Laira's heart into her throat.

"Forgive the interruption, ma'am. Discovery jumped to Cygni grain depot at seventeen hundred hours. Captain Burnham and Commander Detmer were in the middle of a firefight when we arrived. Andorian raiders had attempted to commandeer the depot, but they weren't expecting Starfleet officers to be there."

Her chest goes cold and tight. "Are they all right?"

"Yes, ma'am, they're both fine." Joann's smile is quick and soft, and her hand touches Laira's. "They're both all right."

Laira waits, because Joann's shoulders wouldn't be that stiff if everything was fine. All right has a caveat.

"The raiders were in rough shape, the outbreaks on their homeworld are worse than we thought, so is the state of their infrastructure. Zora and the biofilters found several pathogens, bacterial, viral, most of them aren't dangerous to humans, and *Discovery's* brig can be easily isolated from the rest of the ship."

The grain depots are old. Many of them were built before the Burn and repurposed. Their filtration systems would be far below *Discovery's*.

Her heart beats once, then again, and her mouth's dry enough she has to cough. "What were Michael and Keyla exposed to?"

Joann touches her elbow, then wraps Laira's hands in hers. "Scosian fever. Hugh has them in quarantine, and they're on board, but it's—"

"Slow to develop."

"Hugh won't know if they have it or not for a few days. He can treat it—"

"I know."

"They're all right."

"Thank you." Laira bites her lip, then bites it again when that pain doesn't bring her back to herself. She looks at the table, at the meeting finishing up without her. She needs to go back, to finish the—

She can't.

Scosian fever took her mother. Her mother didn't have Hugh or a starship or the Federation. Laira's hands are cold, and the roof of her mouth tastes like metal.

Vriga looks at her, ready to stop the meeting, but Laira shakes her head. Leaving without a word is a breach of protocol, and she shouldn't- it'll be so hard to—

"Breathe," Joann reminds her, squeezing her hands. "Michael's all right. I just saw her."

"Through quarantine."

"She's in isolation with Keyla. They're fine."

"We need to—"

"We are." Joann rubs her fingers and nods. "We are doing everything we can."

Keyla. Michael is with Keyla. Damn, she's being selfish. Laira glances down. "Keyla's all right?"

"They're both fine." Now Joann has that Starfleet captain smile. "When medical is sure they don't have any of the virus in their blood, they'll be released." She has the kind of hope of someone who hasn't seen a virus burn through a village. Joann's from another time. Hope is easier for her.

Finish the meeting. Everything is fine. Michael is fine.

"You can see her as soon as you beam up." Joann leans closer, her voice soft. "Do you want me to finish the meeting for you?"

"Tempting."

Joann smiles a little more brightly. "I'm here if you need me, ma'am."

"Thank you, Captain." It'll be all right. She'll see Michael in less than an hour, but nothing she can think of softens the knot in her chest. Not even Joann's optimism.

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Keyla are quarantined but can use holos to walk the ship. Michael feels like a ghost on Discovery, but she's closer to Laira and protecting her ship.

Ni'Var worries that the outbreak on Andoria has made them a lost cause.

#### *Michael*

"The holo will let you move around the ship, manipulate objects, hold things. You can't eat or drink, so you'll need to return here to take care of yourself." Hugh holds up the holographic projector. "It's not foolproof, so Owosekun will need to stay in command, but this should keep you from crawling up the walls in here."

It's a small comfort that she doesn't have to be mentally trapped in this tiny room, but it's small. Touching Laira won't feel the same, and she's not the captain right now, but small victories are victories.

"I'd take care of anything your body needs physically before you start wandering."

"And plan for bathroom breaks?" Michael teases him.

Hugh's shrug is obvious, even through his isolation suit "I would."

"Got it."

"I'm not currently detecting any of the scosian virus in your cells, but it's notoriously difficult to isolate, especially in small quantities." He lowers the tricorder. "Considering how dangerous it is."

Hugh doesn't remind her that this virus could devastate the ship, that it's unpredictable, and far more dangerous to Laira and the hitchhiker than anyone else. Most of the time with the resources of a starship or a starbase, it's curable, but there are some cases that just don't follow the rules. Like Laira's mother. She should have lived, but didn't.

"I appreciate your caution."

"Good, because I will sedate you if you don't." Hugh pats her shoulder. "Should just be a couple days."

Repeating it seems like bad luck, so she nods. "Thanks."

When Hugh leaves her alone, Michael eats rations and downs them with water, then uses the toilet without trying to dwell too much on how the quarantine cells in the back of sickbay resemble the cells in the brig on *Shenzhou*, lifetimes ago. Her life spiraled straight into hell after that cell. This time has to go better, doesn't it? There's not much chance of worse - and no - she's not thinking that. That's not. Everything will be fine. She and Keyla are in quarantine, neither of them is even sick.

Slipping the holo transmitter on, Michael shuts her eyes, and her physical body fades away. The holo makes another self, one that she projects into her quarters, and finally there's Laira, in the middle of a security council meeting.

The table from the conference room at HQ replaces Michael's table, and around it sit the Vice President, Dr. Kovich, Admiral Vance, the head of STArfleet medical and several council members. Laira sits with her back to Michael, listening as Kovich explains the danger of scosian fever reaching the systems around Andoria.

"Public health is difficult to maintain when a government collapses. The Emerland Chain was a cruel regime, but conditions on Andoria were relatively stable. While a government reforms, and there's a struggle for necessary supplies, it'll be messy. We're lucky we caught it now. The exposure of Discovery's two officers on the grain depot highlights how dangerous this could be. Grain depots and supply stations surround Andoria, and if there's not enough food on the planet, they'll be targets."

Jen leans forward, her hands on the table. "We can increase patrols around Andorian space, however, treating Andorians like the enemy will end diplomatic talks, stall their return to the Federation for years, even decades."

Blinking twice, Gozre looks at Laira only briefly, then to Kovich. Michael's chest is warm for a moment, her real one, not the holographic. She doesn't have any real reason to dislike Council member Gozre, and yet—

Michael doesn't linger on that feeling; she'll have to deal with it later. She doesn't even listen to whatever he says, because Laira is using a filter on her holo. That blue suit doesn't fit over her breasts at all right now, and in the holo Laira's suit is closed perfectly, and she less pale. It's fairly easy to tweak a holographic comm channel, especially with Tilly and Joann and Zora, and Adira would help if Laira asked them.

Is she just hiding the baby? Something else? Too tired to put her hair up?

Michael waits, watching until Laira notices her and smiles, really smiles, smiles far too brightly for a meeting about piracy and diseases. Laira

pulls it in, drags herself back, but the moment's like a stellar alignment. Michael's missed her palpably and they're so close.

And not, because Michael can touch her, but she won't feel it. It would be real until this horrendous quarantine period is over and they're together.

When it's safe.

The meetings ends, and almost everyone else ends their connection. Jen glances at the corner Michael's standing in and smirks, but disappears without comment.

Kovich doesn't look, just brushes lint from his suit before he vanishes. "I'm glad you're all right, Captain Burnham."

Laira in her suit beams at Michael, glowing with happiness, and her holophic filter flicks off as well. The smile's the same, but her hair is down, she's sitting on the sofa in pajamas, and there's no makeup above her eyes. She can be so pale without any of the sparkles she puts on her eyelids, without lipstick, and Hugh said her nausea was back. Green isn't quite the right color, but cheating the holo makes sense.

"I don't know if it's better or worse that you're only a few meters away, but we still have to do this."

"Better," Michael says, crossing the floor and throwing herself into her arms. It's not quite right, hugging her tight. Michael's sense of smell is off and Laira doesn't feel quite like Laira, but it's so close.

Laira exhales quickly enough that she shivers, and leans in, breathing in what she can of this version of Michael. "It is."

Touching her face, Michael traces her chin with her fingers and sighs. Kissing her like this will be miserable and hollow. "And worse."

"I'm so happy you're back."

"I'm fine," Michael promises her before Laira can even start worrying out loud. "Keyla and I are both fine. Really fine not you fine."

Chuckling, Laira cups her face, studying the holo. "You look like you."

"It's weird though."

"A little." Laira pulls her in, hugging her again. "It's so close."

Toying with Laira's hair, Michael touches her belly.

Laira smirks down at her hand. "Hugh says in a week or two, you should be able to feel where she is. Not her yet, but..."

"Where she is is something." Running her fingers back and forth, Michael tries to imagine feeling their hitchhiker move. "Feeling her still seems unrealistic."

"And you'd be feeling her on the outside."

"I would, yes, I would." Michael laughs, rests her forehead against Laira's and sighs. "So, are you holding the galaxy together?"

"Andoria won't let us help."

"Needing help and being able to accept it are often far apart."

Laira's cool fingers run across her cheek, then hold her face. "So wise."

"Oh, I've been there."

That little nervous laugh is softer, at least, even partially amused. "I'm glad you're here." Laira sits up, kissing her on the forehead. It doesn't have the same warmth, but Michael's chest aches. Laira could walk right through her, she's not really here. This is all a trick, but it's so much closer than being on the station that it tingles, painfully so.

"I'm glad you're here."

"Sort of."

Laira plays with her hair in front of the replicator, shaking her head. "Talking to you was the highlight of my day." She orders something Bajoran Michael hasn't tried yet, and it's covered in sauce that's probably hot. "This is almost like eating together."

"Isn't that going to be worse if you-"

"I'm not going to."

"When did you become an optimist?"

"Must be this damn ship." Laira sits down and takes a bite, rolling her eyes as she chews. "Optimism in every deck plate."

Watching her eat is almost as good as eating with her, and though Michael can't help feeling like a ghost in her own home, this almost has touching, and Laira is as real as she can safely get her. This is all right. Strange, because Michael has to duck out of the holo to pee, and drink some water, and when she's back Laira's yawning her way through cleaning her teeth. Which is right, this is where she needs to be, but she can only sit on the bed in a recreation of her pajamas. She'll clean her teeth after Laira's gone to sleep.

"I added Bajor to your holo," Laura says over her shoulder, shaking out her hair. "The path up to Resuna Idum, and the village I grew up in."

Chuckling, Michael lies back on the bed. "Zora, show us Laura's village."

"You don't need to—"

The holo sweeps their quarters away and replaces them with walls and a roof, warm brown, some kind of mudbrick, perhaps. Insects hum and drone, and the bird calls are brief and sleepy. Zora's matched night for night, and the wind smells of drying hay and tilled soil. The bedroom's smaller, cozier, and the stars outside the ship are behind a wall. Softer stars twinkle through the memory of a atmosphere.

"I was safe here," Laura says, reaching for a blanket. "Less than I thought at the time, but coming back here always makes my thoughts slow."

"I thought I was the one who thought too loud?"

Laura chuckles, pulling the blanket up over her legs. "My thoughts run too quickly, not too loud." She pats her feet and sighs, curling up on bed. "You'll disappear when you fall asleep, won't you?"

"If I'm unconscious it'll turn off."

Patting the bed beside her, Laura yawns into her hand. "But I'll fall asleep first."

"Undoubtedly."

"Hey."

"Sorry."

Michael curls up beside her, one arm over Laura's stomach. It's right but not and familiar but not, and she can't help feeling the bed in her quarantine room, not the bed in their quarters. It's still something. "You're cute sleepy."

"Good, because that's all you've been getting."

"You all together and presidential is extraordinary. You half asleep muttering things that aren't words in any language is something I'm very fond of." Michael nuzzles the back of her neck. "I love you."

Laura's long fingers wrap around hers, squeezing once. "Have I told you that I love how incredibly fucking romantic you are?"

"Might have come up."

"Oh dear, I'm too transparent."

"Utterly."

Michael would have believed Laura is asleep, and her own grip on the holo's starting to falter, but Laura whispers into the emptiness.

"I need you to be all right."

"I will be."

Laura's little hum could be optimistic, but Michael knows better.

---

She lives the next few days as a ghost. Her body hidden from everyone she could possibly endanger behind quarantine fields and sterilized air. Scosian fever is viciously contagious: a prion disease that replicates so slowly at first that it's almost undetectable without a full molecular scan before it establishes itself in the hypothalamus. Even with that - Hugh and Dr. Pollard worry that it hides in misfolded proteins, or reassembles itself into a virus. Parts of it make no biological sense, even to the magics of 31st century medical technology.

"The temporal wars left a mess," is Dr. Kovich's best explanation. "Seed a virus into the population of your enemy millions of years before you even encounter them, and they'll be dead before you can fight each other. We tried to clean up the timelines, but that was the work of lifetimes that we didn't have"

Scosian burns through Andorians, Orions, humans, and Bajorans with equal fervor. Cardassians are less at risk, perhaps Vulcans and Romulans might be safe - proteins in their blood are different enough. Someone, somewhere in time, made this to kill and it can, but time has softened it. They can support the immune system, keep fevers low, prevent dehydration and encephalitis. With a starship or starbase, death is rare but they're still limited. Saru and the *Armstrong* have already started jumping back and forth to take patients and potential patients to Cardassia and Ni'Var for treatment.

The new spore drive makes that possible, and construction and modifications are continuing on Federations ships, but their ships are so few, even now.

Two more days and Michael and Keyla will be outside the longest incubation period ever recorded for Scosian fever. Her molecular sequence can be compared with her first one from days ago, and Hugh's confident letting Michael and Keyla rejoin the ship would be safe. There will be no unchecked virus replicating within them, just...safe.

Eight days is a long time for refugees and raiders spreading out from Andoria.

Michael eats lunch with Keyla, and it's almost normal, except for the transparent wall between them.

"I don't know how you're doing this," Keyla says over her soup. "You're not going insane."

"I am, I just hide it better."

"You're hiding it too well."

Michael chuckles, and sighs, grabbing her napkin. "It's hideous, isn't it? We're here but we're not, we can touch them and we can't—"

"And they're both working too hard."

"Joann's more sensible."

"Joann is sensibility poured into a person," Keyla agrees, tearing at her bread. "She's working too hard."

"The chair does that to you."

"So does the entire Federation."

Michael toys with her salad. It should be good, she's lived on rations for the last few days, eating as quickly as possible so she can get back to pretending through a holo that she can leave this room. This is real food, with texture and more flavor and good company but—

"The Qowot Milat are coming to help monitor the borders of Andorian space."

"All of them?" Keyla raises her eyebrow. "I wasn't aware Andoria had become a lost cause."

"Makes it sound worse, doesn't it?" Michael tries to take another bite, and stops. She's not hungry. "The Federation isn't officially welcome on Andoria. Laira thinks it might be about trying to keep the galaxy from becoming a lost cause."

"It got that bad?"

"It could." Maybe that's why she's not hungry. "It gets to her."

"Of course it does. You said her mother died of it." Keyla rubs her neck, then picks up her water. "That's a lot."

"Her village died." Michael pushes her plate forward. "I don't know how much of it she remembers, losing her mother would have made everyone else fade into the background. Bajor sent Hugh the records from the last scosian outbreak, and they didn't have resources: unreliable replicators, no starships, and they lost thousands of people."

"Reminds you of another tragedy?"

"Docturi Alpha? My father and the whole nology? Yeah, it does, except that was intentional. Section 31 and the Klingons, all these moving parts I didn't understand. A virus doesn't have a mission."

"We'll stop it."

Michael nods, and sighs. "I'll feel better about stopping it out there."

"Yeah, who wouldn't?" Keyla laughs, rubs her neck one more time and gets up to put her plates into the replicator. "Joann's been a great captain."

"She has."

"I know she would be."

Chuckling, Michael beams at her. "And only you."

"I know her best." Keyla stretches and sits down on her bed. "Thanks for the company."

"I'm sorry you're stuck here, but I'm not."

"I get it." Keyla smirks up at the ceiling. "I make most places better. It's a gift."

---

When she's back in the holo, Michael has to wander the ship for once to find Laira. She's not in her office (formerly one of the starboard science labs). She's not in the briefing room or the ready room with Joann. Michael should be able to find her wife without trying. She knows her schedule - but Laira's off schedule - and finally she has to ask Zora to tell her.

"President Rillak is in cargo bay two."

Michael can transfer herself there, and perhaps it's her own fault for worrying about Laira first, before speaking to Joann about the ship's log. She's not the captain today, Joann can handle it, it's just—

Laira slips into Cardassian when she's angry. The translators catch it, there's not even a delay, but her tone grows clipped and flat. Michael didn't even realize it until a few weeks ago. Bajoran is for the soft moments, curled in bed together. Federation Standard, which resembles the



English Michael knew, is every day. What she speaks in meetings, but when she's mad, it's always Cardassian.

Michael doubts the Qowot Milat sister Laura's arguing with caught the nuance, but Michael hasn't heard her so angry since Book and Tarka disappeared in Book's ship.

Zora transferred her in behind the sister, out of Laura's eyeline, because they're over to side, beside a Ni'Var shuttle.

"Being a parent is not a convenient burden you can set down at will."

"And what do you know of it?" The sister asks - Gabrielle, this is her mother - because Michael would know her voice anywhere.

Laura is silent, still, and it's the kind of stillness from her that comes from fury.

"You think you hold the Federation in your hands, and you might. You put the weight of billions on your shoulders, but it's just one moment. You haven't seen what will happen if you fail." Gabrielle takes a breath, squaring her shoulders. "You mean well, and Michael loves you. She does that, better than anyone I've known. That comes from her father."

"Of course." Laura wraps her hands together, fingers over fingers. It's her secret to tell, but now is not the time. "At least you appreciate that about her."

"I hope you do."

"I do."

"Then we'll get along great."

Laura turns her head, glancing past Gabrielle, and she finds Michael. The smile happens in a moment, bright and sad all at once. "Michael."

"You didn't tell me you were coming."

"We did not know," that voice is familiar, but it takes a moment for Michael to find the speaker. Someone else is here. J'Vini, standing beside her mother. She was so focused, Michael didn't notice her. "This deployment of Qowot Milat is most extensive in recent history."

Including pulling J'Vini from rehabilitation.

"Ni'Var sent the Qowot Milat to help quarantine Andorian space. Romulans are less likely to suffer from Scosian fever." Laura's explanation is soft, her words no longer Cardassian. "It is still a dangerous mission, and trying to quarantine Andorian space is extremely difficult."

"Which is why we're here." Gabrielle smiles, turning to look at Michael. "You don't look bad for a holo."

"Thanks." Michael folds her hands behind her back. "Dr. Culber says I can leave quarantine in a few more hours."

"Not that you're counting down the minutes," Gabrielle says, her smile growing a little. "I'm glad you've gotten more patient."

Since she was a child, yes, of course she has, but that's not important. "You could have mentioned you were coming."

"We could have." J'Vini looks at Gabrielle and there's something there, Laura senses it too, but there's no time for a more serious conversation. "I know it is more traditional to meet over food after a life event such as a wedding, on Ni'Var, we would have had several days of feasting to celebrate."

"Even the Qowot Milat?" Laura tilts her head, and her eyes sparkle. "That would have been nice."

"We're nuns, not the Borg," J'Vini replies with a smile. "Congratulations to you both."

Gabrielle meets Michael's eyes, and regret - longing - something makes her blink. "We don't have time to do this the right way, we're being deployed, you can't eat, but we'll be back."

J'Vini takes her hand, announcing something with the joining of their fingers. Perhaps there's several conversations they need to have. "We would like to have dinner with you both, when we have time to do so."

Laura's fingers touch Michael's arm, calming her. "We'd like that." Diplomatic as always.

There's always so much more to say than there is time. Gabrielle's always going somewhere, doing something, finishing one last part of her project before dinner - many other things in her life come before Michael - and she knows this. She's faced this, and yet, she didn't write, didn't even say they'd left P'Jahr, or hey thanks for saving Ni'Var and negotiating with the Ten-C. No wonder Laura's speaking Cardassian.

Gabrielle and J'Vini beam into the shuttle and Laura sighs, one hand on her hip.

"I didn't tell her."

"You could have."

"I know." Laura shakes her head, then reaches for Michael again. "How many hours?"

"Five hours, about twenty minutes."

"Oh that's nothing."

"Right?" Michael puts her hand over Liar's on her hip, then pulls her a little closer. "You're very attractive angry."

The shuttle powers up and leaves the shuttle bay, leaving them alone with the stars.

Chuckling, Laira rests her forehead on Michael's. "She's your mother."

"It's complicated."

"It shouldn't be."

"Funny how the universe just doesn't—"

Sighing again, Laira laughs that sad little laugh and nods. "I'll be asleep in five hours."

"I'll wake you up."

"Oh you will?"

"Yeah." Michael touches her chin, losing herself in her eyes. "I've missed you."

Laira kisses her forehead, then releases her, pacing while she puts her thoughts in order. "Ni'Var offered the Qowot Milat, and we couldn't turn them down."

"It's all right."

"I thought we'd get a few shuttles, but they sent nearly everyone."

"J'Vini and my mother left P'Jahr."

"I didn't know."

Michael nods. "That's how she is." There's nothing she can say, and this will take awhile.

"I have the Federation Council in a few minutes."

Touching Laira's cheek, Michael nods. "Of course."

"Dinner with them will be nice, I think."

"We can have dinner with your family too, on Earth, when you talk to them."

Laira raises her eye ridges. "Oh, we're talking about that now?"

"You wanted to talk about family."

"I wanted to talk about your mother and her—"

"Very good friend?" Michael finishes. Romulan step-mother was not what she imagined, and J'Vini is extreme, at times, but there's a logic to how the Qowot Milat live. What choices they make. She can make this work.

Everything seems possible in five hours when she gets to be herself again and get out of quarantine. The holo is useful, but it's empty. It's a chance to be a ghost in her own life. Michael checks in with Joann and all the other departments, taking her time, five hours is plenty of time.

Too much time.

---

Yet time passes, as everything does. She's eaten and showered, dressed in her uniform - finally - when Hugh and Dr. Pollard come down to do the final sweep for prions, viruses and misfolded proteins.

"From what I've gathered from the research, the Scosian prions affect the proteins in the hypothalamus, interfering with pyrogens, which is why the fever is so intense after infection. Sequencing them in a way we can easily screen for is proving difficult."

Pollard nods, running a final scan on Keyla while she sleeps. "WE can easily weed out viruses with the biofilters, prions we can detect most of the time, but these break down, we've found unwelcome lipopolysaccharides in the blood of infected Andorians, and in old Bajoran blood samples from the last outbreak on Bajor. They're so small compared to a virus, and so common that it's difficult to find the right one."

Hugh's tricorder beeps approvingly. "There are no signs of any scosian fever components in your blood, brain or nervous system. You're officially released from quarantine, Captain."

Michael steps out, beaming at them both. "Thank you."

In her cell, Keyla's fast asleep beneath her blankets. Which is strange, Joann will be waiting for her. She has her quarters—

Pollard's tricorder makes a shrill alarm, not a beep, and Keyla doesn't move.

Keyla doesn't turn over as they try to get her attention.

"Her body temperature is elevated by two degrees."

"Detmer?"

"Keyla?"

"Her pyrogens are elevated-

"Heart rate is also too fast for her to be asleep-

Hugh and Pollard talk over each other, running sequence after sequence and Michel has to leave them to go to the bridge.

Joann's on the bridge. Michael has to tell her that she's out, and Keyla isn't. Her captain's uniform has that familiar heaviness again. Shoulders back, head up. Look after the crew.

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"We're transferring Keyla to the Starfleet Medical, I'm so sorry."

Joann nods, her shoulders steady even though her eyes soft with worry. "She'll be all right."

"HQ is sending us the three decks of Starfleet Medical to be used for a field hospital. The *Armstrong* and *Discovery* can jump with them, set up a base of operations at one of the grain depots near CJ-884. She'll be all right."

"I know."

But she can't. There's no way to know Keyla will be fine. She'll have the best care, she's tough, Starfleet Medical is always discovering new ways to help people.

But this is nasty.

And this is Keyla.

Michael hugs her, holds her tight and hopes, because that's all they have.

---

It's much later than Michael intended when she finally returns to their quarters. Laira's been asleep for hours, curled into blankets in the holo of her village. It's safe there - here - comforting in a way Michael would be if she was here. Michael finishes approving messages, and the last one is from Jen, who is pleased she's out of quarantine, and worried about Laira if she's hiding behind a holo.

Michael shakes her head and sends back a note that Laira feels like hell sometimes, but she's fine. Jen can somehow tell when she's lying in a note.

Cleaning her teeth, she fusses with the things Laira's left out in the bathroom. They're only a little out of place - Laira's had the whole place to herself for more than two weeks - and it's better with everything back in their places.

Michael strips off her uniform and leaves it on the chair by the bed. Her pajamas are there, but Laira's so warm lately, so she crawls in next to her in just her tank top and underwear. Michael nuzzles the back of her neck, then wraps her arms around her.

Startling a little, Laira moans, then starts to smile. "Hi."

"Sorry."

"Sorry?" Laira wraps her arms around Michael and holds them tight to her chest. "Like I can sleep without you."

"You seemed to be asleep."

Laira yawns into the pillow. "It doesn't count without you."

"Fair."

Crisis is simmering around them, Keyla's in danger, Michael has to support Joann and look after the ship and protect Starfleet Medical while they treat the infected, but she has Laira. She has the sounds of lazy insects in the night on Bajor and the smell of unfamiliar trees. Start here, start small, then save the galaxy.

"-love you," Laira yawns again, guiding Michael's hands down towards their hitchhiker.

"I love you too." Both of you.

Laira should be asleep, her breath has slowed, but she sighs again. "I forgot how good you feel."

"I'm pretty incredible."

"You are." Laira kisses her hand and her lips are exquisite, warm and soft.



Chapter Summary

Laira, Michael and the crew worry about Keyla. The Vice President starts planning for the state visit of Betazed. Laira helps Michael with a flying problem.

*Laira*

Michael laughs easily, it's one of her more charming qualities, but this kind of laughing - when she has tears running down her face - is new. Sometimes Laira forgets how short a time they've been together. Michael's always been part of her life, hasn't she? That's how it is. Michael is part of her.

Literally, at the moment.

"I don't know what's so funny."

Michael waves her off, trying to catch her breath. She wipes her eyes, shaking her head. "You-"

Laira waits, pulling pins from her hair. Eventually Michael will speak. Rubbing the back of her neck, she finally meets Michael's eyes.

"You don't know why you're tired."

Setting the pins into a box for tomorrow, Laira waves the drawer shut. "That's what I said, yes."

"You—" Michael starts laughing again, collapsing onto the bed. "You have the most difficult job in the galaxy, you're pregnant, you—"

"I was those things yesterday too."

"And you were exhausted yesterday."

"I wasn't."

Raising her eyebrows, Michael crosses her arms over her chest. "When did you fall asleep?"

"I don't remember."

"In the second paragraph."

"It was after that."

"You were awake for barely seven sentences. At this rate the hitchhiker will be able to read you the end of the book."

"That's not—"

Michael tilts her head as if actually doing the math required behind her gorgeous eyes. "It's entirely possible."

"You have a beautiful voice."

"Oh, I do, you should stay awake to hear me." Michael lies back on the bed, laughing up at the ceiling. "You should be surprised if you're ever not tired."

"Maybe next year," Laira says lightly. There wasn't really a timeline where she would be full of energy and well rested. She knew that going into this office, and she's worked long, sleepless days before. This funny, hazy sort of tired is new. Taking off her jacket, she unbuttons her blouse.

Michael's hands wrap around her waist, holding her close. "I love not being a holo."

Patting her hands, Laira holds her closer. "This you is my favorite version."

Michael rests her forehead against Laira's shoulder, taking a breath, then letting it out slowly.

"How's Keyla?"

"Lonely, bored—" Michael lifts her head, blinks a few times. "Refusing to let me apologize."

"It's not your fault."

"I'm here and she's—"

Laira's chest aches. She squeezes Michael's hands, slides them down. "I couldn't stand that."

"I'm here."

"I need you to be here."

Circling her, Michael touches her face, resting her thumb on Laira's lip. "I'm here."

Laira nods, kisses her thumb and retreats to the bed. "Starfleet Medical has the best doctors."

"And Keyla's from 900 years ago, maybe that helps."

"The 23rd century had sturdier humans?"

"We had to walk all the way to a transporter padd, carried our tricorders - life was just harder then."

"Oh that's it, must be."

Michael sits beside her, then rests her head on her shoulder. "Keyla will be all right. She's responding well."

"We don't even have a treatment."

"We don't have a cure, we have treatments." Michael's hand rests on her belly, warm and safe and healthy and perfect. Disease spares some, takes others, and they can't fight it, there's nothing, they can't—

"This is different."

Because of the hitchhiker? Because of Michael's impossible optimism? The universe bends around the point of light that is Michael Burnham. Physics means nothing when she has a mission.

Maybe that works for viruses.

"Pilots are lucky."

Forcing herself to take a breath, she allows the knot in her chest to tug. Fighting it will make it worse. "You're not supposed to know that."

Michael smiles down, then meets her eyes. "Sometimes the people we love suffer, and all we can do is wait."

"You speak from experience?" Laira's smile creeps up on her, and she can never be grateful enough for Michael.

"Well, perhaps." Michael sits up, chuckling to herself. Maybe at herself. She wraps her arm around Laira's shoulders and they lean back, curling around each other on the bed. Michael's breathing is so precious after the very quiet hologram that Laira shuts her eyes to listen.

"My worrying was unnecessary though, I hear you were fine."

Laira's little noise of disagreement makes Michael chuckle beneath her.

"I'm fine now."

Michael kisses her hair, hugging her a little closer. "Really fine?"

"With you, fine is insufficient."

"With me you've been sick for weeks—"

"And I'm grateful."

"Grateful?" Michael's incredulous little noise is yet another way to make fun of her, but she's adorable.

Lifting her head, Laira finds her best coy smile. "Haven't you heard, dear? On this ship, anything's possible."

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She can't keep asking Starfleet medical for updates. Keyla is all right, she's in the best hands in the galaxy. The Qowot Milat have prevented any diplomatic incidents so far, but even with support, Andoria's collapse is happening on so many fronts that it feels like she solves one problem only to stumble into the next, and so many of them are outside her purview. They can provide dilithium, medical supplies, replicators and resources, but they can't clean up all the remnants of the Emerald Chain, take away the fear and resentment.

Her tea is cold in her hands, but getting up to get more would be annoying. Laira has to stop ignoring the itinerary in front of her and tell the bridge when she needs to arrive on Betazed.

Protocol on Betazed will be more complicated than Yungnan II, and the food being excellent might make up for all the telepathic hoops she'll need to jump through.

"Zora, please open a channel to the Vice President, highest encryption."

"Yes, Madam President, one moment."

Laira gulps her tea, pushes up on her desk and walks to the replicator, ordering more. When it materializes, she stares at it, changes her mind.

She wants raktijino. She can't drink raktijino right now. Well, she could drink it but it won't end well. She won't keep it down with her stomach the way it is today.

Water - no, deku tea - no, she doesn't—

"Just get hot chocolate," Jen says, her holo popping in existence next to the replicator. "It solves all problems."

"It's too rich."

Jen tilts her head in sympathy. "Oh, we're there again?"

"No—"

"Rishkellan tea, it's almost as good, except it's not chocolate."

"Good enough is something."

"Good enough will keep you from projecting your nausea across the light years between us."

Laira glances down at her feet. "That doesn't happen."

"You say that, and yet—"

Shaking her head, Laira sniffs her tea. "How many times do I have to get naked when we visit Betazed?"

"Are you bringing Michael?"

Laira glares rather than answers and Jen chuckles.

"You see, as an honorary member of my family's house, you and Michael will be expected to demonstrate your union."

"That sounds very archaic—"

"Oh it hasn't been that much fun for more than a thousand years, but if you want to be traditional, I certainly won't stop you." Jen tilts her head as if contemplating how much she'd enjoy watching them *demonstrate* their union.

"Michael will kill me."

"I know, I know," Jen pauses, and sighs dramatically, "You do know that you're not going to be able to hide your little one naked, not that you're hiding her very well right now."

Not that Laira needed the reminder that her suit doesn't fit over her breasts or the rise of her belly, and she's sent measurements to her tailor, but hasn't seen her personally, and it takes time to make a good suit. It's an art. She could just replicate it, but some Federation traditions should stand, even when she's impatient. "I'm not, am I?"

"Oh no, you're luckily the Yungnani don't understand internal gestation."

"Not that I do—"

Jen leans in, studying her eyes before nodding her approval. "You look a little better."

"Just a little?"

"You haven't vomited today. I can tell by your eyes."

"You really should have taken talent like yours into medical."

"I really should have."

Jen's pulls herself up on Laira's table, perching on the edge. She's probably sitting on her own desk in her office, but the holo makes it work. Her sari rustles, silk sliding on glass. "It'll be good for you not to hide it. Good practice for the next planet."

Touching her belly, she forces herself to form the words. "I've been trying to wait for Earth."

"Might not want to wait—"

"There's a multilateral summit on the new VARS drive in a few weeks, Michael and I go to Earth for that."

"You'll destroy the galaxy's news cycle for at least two rotations."

"It's not like that."

"You are adorably dense, you do know I love that about you."

No one else would ever dare talk to her that way, and that's Jen's charm.

"Starfleet's rockstar captain having a baby with the president of the Federation that's literally a gift from the Prophets of Bajor is fun for everyone, and the galaxy needs fun, especially after the DMA, and the threat of the warp bubbles. I hope you're prepared, but I know you have no idea what you're walking into." Slipping off the table, Jen smooths her sari. "For the moment, you do know Betazed is going to have to show you what a stately dinner can really be."

Thousands of years of protocol means this will be much more intense than Yungnan II, which was almost casual. At least this means Michael will have to wear her dress uniform. She looks incredible in burgundy.

Jen wanders into the specifics, and Laira's thoughts should follow her, but it's hard to make it matter. She'll wear what she's supposed to wear - if anything - and follow Jen's lead.

Yellow alert startles her, they're supposed to be wrapping up their visit before jumping to Betazed. Maybe run a few patients back and forth to Starfleet Medical, but yellow alert shouldn't be—

"President Rillak to the bridge, please," Michael's voice carries through her comm, and Jen's eyes go wide.

"Well, don't you get to have fun."

"I'm sure it's nothing, Michael's just cautious."

Jen raises her eyebrows. "Well, go see what your darling wife wants, you know where to find me."

Shaking her head, Laira taps her badge and beams to the bridge. Michael's in the center seat, Joann at Ops in front of her, the rest of the crew at their stations, except Keyla's still at Starfleet medical. The Osnullus relief pilot, Lieutenant Cralev, lifts her hands from the controls and sits back as if Laira's arrival signifies something important.

An ion storm spins on the viewer, deep purple light shot with orange and red.

*Discovery* can simply jump around it, so she doesn't see why Michael wanted her. She doesn't approve anything for the ship.

Michael lifts her hand, pointing to the screen. "Thank you for joining us, Commander Owosekun, show her the transport."

The viewer magnifies the outline of a standard transport, high warp capable - one of the most efficient - *Skylark* class. The kind of ship that's all engines and amenities, slow to turn, slow to get up to speed, or even slow down.

The kind of ship Laira's family would have taken to Earth, if they ever had the time or the dilithium. Laira sets that thought free to drift with the ion storm. Be in the moment.

"I trust your judgement in a rescue mission, captain, we can delay our arrival on Betazed if need be—"

Michael's smile brightens. "Of course, ma'am. We'll be as quick as we can, while being safe."

Laira is missing something so obvious that it'll sting her nose ridges when she realizes what it is. "Is there something else, captain?"

Joann turns at her console. "Inside the ion storm transporters are non-functional, sensors are unreliable, even shields will be a mess."

"I've flown through a few. Cracked my head open once on the way to Ni'Var."

Michael rests her hands in her lap, and nods. "We haven't flown through ion storms. None of our pilots have. Commander Detmer could do it—"

"Of course she could," Joann says, her voice soft.

Laira's chest aches. Keyla is all right, she'll be back with them soon, but the bridge misses her. "We could jump back to headquarters, pick up another pilot. Several of the Academy instructors are very skilled—"

"We have a pilot." Michael waves from Laira to the helm, and that's what Laira was missing. They want her to fly *Discovery*. "If she'll agree."

"Captain, this is unorthodox."

Standing up from her chair, Michael takes a step towards Laira, reaching for her shoulder. "Detmer was training you to fly *Discovery*. Owosekun thinks you can do it."

"I watched you with Keyla."

Lieutenant Cralev steps back from the helm, leaving it vacant for Laira.

Michael meets her eyes, steady and confident. "Honey, we need you to fly the ship."

"Now?" It takes a moment to sink in that Michael's asking her to fly the ship now, into the storm, save people. "Right now. What's the plan?" She can't resist, can't argue. There's logic here, and *Discovery* will be much more responsive than any of the heavy freighters she used to fly. It's been awhile, but she's a damn good pilot. Michael knows that.

"Get us close enough to grab the transport and jump out."

"So, simple, fly into the heart of the ion storm, get within tractor range—"

"Oh tractor beams won't work in there either, this is going to be cables."



"Cables?"

"You'll need to get us within a hundred meters or so. Fifty would be better." Joann's smiling, and there's a challenge there. She'd tease Keyla, but she's more gentle with Laira.

"Oh, no problem. That'll be easy with unreliable shields and sensors."

"Spoken like a true pilot, ma'am." Joann chuckles, and the bridge rearranges behind them.

So she's doing this. Flying Michael's ship into an ion storm. No problem.

"Madam President—"

Laira clucks her tongue, removing her suit jacket and hanging it on the back of the chair. "Oh no, Captain, in this case, pilot will do."

Michael's fingers brush across her shoulders. *Discovery* is Michael's ship. It's home like her freighters were. She can do this. Remember the current, the eddies, *Discovery's* sleek, fast, it'll drift better than her freighters. It'll be quick, skilling a sailship through an asteroid belt.

Swallowing her nerves, Laira finds that stillness she needs to pilot from. She hasn't felt it in years, she hasn't needed to, but it's comfortable, like slipping into old boots.

"Take us in, Pilot."

The controls are Keyla's. The thrusters are slightly closer together than standard, so she can switch quickly from one of the other. Programmable matter is familiar and cool beneath her fingers, but this is more responsive. Newer connections, faster computers behind it. Her old freighters were old when she was a teenager, and *Discovery* has Zora.

Her father's voice echoes in the back of her mind. *"Don't over think it. When you're in, you won't be able to see anything. The sensors will be wrong. The readings will be wrong. Listen to the ship. The creaks and shivers will never lie to you Lar Lar, just feel your way."*

Ships have personality - moods and moments - and she's only just started to get to know *Discovery*. They'll have to make this work together. *Discovery* is Michael and Zora, Joann, Tilly and her cadets, Hugh and his endless patience. This is home. She can trust herself, trust the ship.

Don't think. Don't be presidential. Don't weigh anything, just fly.

She used to be so good at letting go, before she was an ambassador, before the election, before— there were so many before. Port twenty degrees, ride the current, stay away from the spiraling ball of energy just behind them. Lightning reaches for them, promising pain in the caress if it touches the hull.

"Pilot—"

"I see it, dear." The endearment breaks the tension, softens the worry around them. They're all right. Totally normal for an ion storm. The shields will hold. Energy crackles, space inside the storm follows its own patterns, tugging, pulling *Discovery* too far starboard, pulling them down, so she has to fight it.

Focus.

Fly the damn ship, find the way, feel for it. Going with the spatial currents will be easier, less tension. The shuddering will slow.

Light flashes, in the ship, outside of the ship, her eyes are unreliable, so she flies on the readings beneath her fingertips, follows the gravitational spikes, chases the quiet patches of the ion storm. The first part is easy, compared to the capture of the transport. Getting *Discovery* close to the transport is comparatively simple. Now she has to close to grappling distance.

*Discovery's* shields are stronger than they hoped, but the transport's are fragile. Laira can't even nudge them without risking the other ship, so she flies past, once, twice, and sweat tingles in her hairline on the third approach. Match the heading, match the speed and the roll, follow that spin to port, don't forget the list—

She's chewed her lip raw and adrenaline courses through her, but Joann lands the cables on the third pass.

Michael's voice cuts through everything, clear as the beam of a lighthouse in the stories her mother loved. "Jump."

The jump comes with the storm, rushing, crashing, and her console's much too close to her eyes for a moment, but she snaps up from the bright spot of pain. First Laira gasps, then laughter sneaks over her. There's nowhere else for the adrenaline to go, and her eyes sting when she turns to Joann.

"Keyla would be proud."

Laira raises her eye ridges. "She could have got it in one."

"Maybe two." Joann touches her shoulder, squeezing, and Laira shivers.

It's all right. They're all right. She's not even sure where they jumped to, but they're all right. Space is quiet now. They can treat the injured, repair the ship, get them back on their way.

Flexing her fingers, she sits back, releasing the console. Hands touch her shoulders, caressing her back, and it's Michael.

"I knew you could do it."

"I hoped."

"You did great." Michael touches the sore spot on her forehead, trailing her fingers over what's definitely going to bruise. There's a cut on Michael's cheek, blood on her lip, and the air smells like ozone. Sparks are still falling from the EPS conduit to Michael's left, but they're all right.

"Never thought I'd miss treaty drafting."

Chuckling, Michael touches her cheek. "We appreciate it."

"Captain, the transport is hailing us."

In the moment before they're in public again, Laira kisses her, lingering on Michael's mouth. Michael touches her belly, quick and subtle, and the adrenaline makes it almost too easy to blush.

Laira nibbles her lip, brushing against her skin with her teeth. "I'll be in my office if you need anything else, honey."

Michael raises her eyebrows, her eyes bright with gratitude, and promise. Her shift on the bridge usually ends in a few hours, might be sooner today now that they have something to celebrate. The mess hall will be busy, and the lounge full of laughter. Beating the odds always fills the ship with joy.

She could join them. Take her work, sit in the corner and listen to them laugh. She's offer too careful to work in public. Her presence changes most rooms.

Maybe she needs to trust the ship.

Sending her aides to help with the needs of the transport, Laira takes her work to the lounge. It's well designed, with corners to hide in, and nooks for romantic interludes. She shouldn't go all the way back, so she ends up near the bar, holo padd open over her tea.

She hasn't sought human food until she lived here, but with Zora's database and the ancient replicator patterns from centuries ago, the choices are different. Michael's crew is more than happy to share their favorites, teaching her about turtle brownies, chocolate malva pudding, red bean custard and purple taro. Adira insists that ghorayebah are one of the best things in the replicator, and Hugh and Paul always have new suggestions.

It's nice to be hungry, so much easier to enjoy eating when she wants something. Even if that means asking for three different desserts from Ensign Frarot, who grins and lines them up without a word. There's no official bartender, but Michael's crew makes it work on a system of volunteers and unofficial duty rosters not even Michael technically knows about. Someone is always behind the bar, steering the replicator, listening if anyone needs it.

They look after each other. They're all they have out here. That feels like home more than any Bajoran dessert could, even if she tinkered with *Discovery's* replicators and found a way to make it taste just off enough. The freighters of her childhood never had replicators in such good condition.

The hours pass faster than she expected. She's almost done with the trade reports, and completely done with all of her desserts when Michael finds her.

Her gentle fingers slip into Laira's hairline, then rub the tension along her spine. Michael leans in, resting her chin on Laira's shoulder.

"This is a surprise."

Laira smiles down at her plates, stacks them and pats the stool beside her. "I wanted the noise."

"Ship buzzes after a win."

Nodding, she pushes the plates across the counter. "Are you ready for dinner?"

"Still hungry?"

"I haven't flown in years. I forgot how it makes everything taste better."

Nodding, Michael takes the stool beside her. Pulling up the menus on her badge, she scrolls for a moment, then finds what she was looking for. "My dad liked to make barbecue when mom won another award."

"Oh?"

"Earth barbecue's all about the sauce. Doesn't really matter what's underneath it. Everyone says the slow cooked this or roast that, but really, it's the sauce."

"What are you going to put sauce on?"

Michael examines the options, then orders. Several sides come with the meat, and the cover the counter in front of them with plates. Ensign Frarot sets a thick stack of cloth napkins beside them and Laira tilts her head towards Michael.

"The sauce goes on your fingers, mostly, and your face. Gets everywhere."

"Ah."

"They get spicer as you go right, so if—"

"I'm all right."

"Flying good for that too?"

"You know...I hadn't tried it, but yes. I should fly the ship more often when I'm nauseated."

Michael laughs. "I'll let Keyla know she'll have to share."

"I don't think my job can share me much."

Wiping her fingers on a napkin, Michael nods sagely. "It's too bad, you're a good pilot."

"I'm a fantastic pilot." Licking suave from her fingers reminds her of a refueling depot her parents loved. "Have I ever told you about Little Earth?"

"Little Earth?" Michael shakes her head, reaching for her cup. "What is that?"

"A freighter stop, repairs and refueling. Legend was some humans started it centuries ago, and it was famous for Earth food."

"Barbecue like this?"

"Not like this."

Michael takes a guess. "Human traditional barbecue mixed with a whole mess of different cultures so it's vaguely human, but really mostly Bajoran-Tellerite fusion?"

"Yeah."

"You love it?"

"I haven't been since I was a child." Laura sighs, resting her head on Michael's shoulder for a moment. "Keyla would love it."

"Well, when she's back—"

Laura hums. Flying a ship again was intoxicating and exciting, but *Discovery* is Keyla's ship. She belongs here.

"Soon." Michael's fingers fold around hers - warm and strong - a little sticky, but so are her own. "She'll be back."

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira visit Betazed, experience a unique planetary festival, and find time to enjoy themselves while staying with the Vice President. Michael meets a reporter from Earth who seems to be looking for something more than a story.

### Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to whimsicalli and sanctuaria for letting me think at them until it turned into a chapter.

The Vice President's ancestral home is located within a busy part of the capital city. The cities on Betazed are dense, allowing most of the planet to be an uninhabited reserve. The oldest mansions rise above the street like cliffs, covered in flowers and vines. The plants have obviously but planned, guided up the houses so the flowers bloom in front of the windows, but it's subtle. Saru would love it.

Jen's home surrounds a courtyard, with a pool in the center of a large garden. Places to work and lie in the sun are hidden in the flowers and paths, and the house surrounds the nature at its' heart. Bedrooms surround the pool, hidden behind vines and screens, and it's one of the most full homes she's stayed in, and also incredibly private. It's possible to walk through the courtyard and not be noticed.

A Betazoid would hear her thoughts, so they don't need to hear her footsteps or see her through the trees. It's beautiful, mysterious and exposed all at the same time.

Betazed wasn't even in the Federation in Michael's time, so she has centuries of history to catch up on. Jen and Arjun are happy to tell her stories over dinner, and Arjun has an artist's way of looking through history. There's so much Michael doesn't know, that even if she studies, she's still constantly surprised. Not that she minds, really, she's a xenanthropologist, after all. It helps that Betazoids can answer her questions before she can ask them, though that's disconcerting.

The weather's warm, but wet, and Laira's hair is unruly, curly and messy - gorgeous, but she likes to grumble more than listen to Michael. Working with telepaths means that meetings end if Laira even thinks she's tired, so their first days on Betazed are pleasant. The Hitchhiker is a secret everyone knows here, but no one mentions, and the gentleness around Laira lifts something from Michael's chest she didn't know she was carrying. No one believes her *"I'm fine we can finish,"* and they end early without discussion more than once.

The Betazoid Ambassador to the Federation, Rima Enai, a stately woman several centimeters taller than even Laira, pats Michael's shoulder as they finish on the third day, smiling. "It's hard when it's not you."

"Is it easier when it is you?"

"Yes, and no." She leans closer. "It's never easy, nor does it get easier when you're parenting, it shifts, and it's beautiful, but it is a challenge."

"So you—" Michael's been trying to just ask, and not worry about what she's asking, because the telepathy makes Betazoids almost as odd to talk to as the Qowot Milat, but she's still working on it.

Ambassador Enai finishes the question for her. "I have been in your position, and that of your wife, yes, and I found being supportive suited me better."

Michael tries to imagine what it would be like were their positions reversed, if the Hitchhiker had found her home in her, and her thoughts do not spin very far. Perhaps that's a good thing. "I'm told I worry too loudly."

"Your thoughts are intense, but not loud." Ambassador Enai points her way down one of the walkways along a pond. "Your mind is very organized."

"Thank you?"

"Please take it as a compliment, I find your thoughts quite pleasant." Enai's smile has an ease to it that must make her very good at her work.

"Will you and the president be participating in Uril Onait?"

Michael knows what this is, Jen mentioned it, so did Arjun. It seems their visit to Betazed has happened to coincide with a planet-wide festival of renewal. Considering no one has given them any more information—

"You are right to be skeptical, captain." Enai chuckles, pulling the thought from her mind. "When we speak of renewal, we speak of renewing the bonds between those we have chosen to love. Your Admiral Vance called it a planet-wide marriage vow renewal."

"He participated?"

"Oh yes, he was a captain then, as you are, and his wife found it less terrifying than she feared."

"That's nearly a compliment."

"No one will force you to remove your clothing."

Michael sighs, glancing across the garden at Laira speaking with planetary leaders. "I know, I suppose I'm more comfortable with your thoughts in my head than taking off my uniform."

"That does make you rather charming, Captain Burnham. Most humans would rather be naked than have me in their head."

Naked vow renewal, of course. *Planet wide*. Vance did it, and he helped schedule this trip, so this is partially his fault. The rest of the fault would be Jen's. Michael loves Laira more than she values keeping her uniform on, and she'll do it. It's an alien custom, she's a Starfleet captain.

And yet...she can feel the furrow deepening her forehead.

---

After dinner, while the sun sets heavy and golden over the courtyard wall, Laira stops her on the path to their bedroom, holding her hand among the flowers, then reaches up to undo her hair. It falls in a mass of curls on her shoulders, and her shirt slips from her shoulders a moment later.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping you get used to being naked."

Michael watches Laira tug her camisole over her head and raises her eyebrows. "Being naked with you is a different thing."

"I'm delighted to inform you that I will be right beside you during the Uril Onait."

Shaking her head, Michael removes her uniform jacket and drops it onto a bench. "You don't mind being naked in front of thousands of people?"

"It's not my first Betazoid wedding."

Stepping out of her boots, she lines them up neatly beneath the bench, then takes off her trousers.

Laira's setting aside her bra when Michael turns back to her. "It's brief, everyone else is naked too, it's a very old, very sacred part of their culture." She holds her breasts for a moment, crossing her arms. They're still sore, and heavy, and she releases them to touch Michael's cheek. "Besides, honey, you're gorgeous."

"Thank you."

Kissing Laira makes all her worries float like the lazy flower petals on the surface of the pool. Fully naked, she steps towards the water, watching Laira step further and further in. She turns when they water's up to her hips, shutting her eyes in the warmth of the sunset. Her hands trace the surface of the water.

Michael's gaze settles on her belly, where the Hitchhiker is definitely present in the swell of her belly. It's not obvious in Laira's clothes, but naked, she's there.

Laira follows her eyes and smiles, shy, maybe proud, before she flushes pink.

Walking into the water beside her, reaching out to touch her skin, Michael sighs, content. Droplets of water glow golden in the light, running from Michael's fingers down Laira's skin. "We could barely see her on Bajor, now here she is."

"I keep wanting to touch her in meetings"

"It would be all right if you did."

Laira nods, blinking once before she kisses Michael's forehead. Her hand finds Michael's and they walk in together. The center of the pool is deep enough that they have to tread water. There were few places on Vulcan for swimming, and swimming was practical, not something to do for fun. One of the first times she swam for fun was with Philippa, centuries ago.

Sitting in the shallows, Laira waits with her arms around her knees. Her wet hair clings to her shoulders, as she watches Michael swim over. "When the stars come out, it'll look like the cave at Resuna Idum."

Kissing her knee, Michael turns, then sits beside her in the shallow water. The sky above is starting to cloud over, and it glows pink and gold. When the sun sets it'll be inky black. "I think you're being too optimistic about the weather."

Laira makes that little sound Michael loves and smiles up at the darkening sky. "It's still beautiful."

She's much more beautiful than the sky, and perhaps Michael stares too long, but Laira seems to read her thoughts as easy if she was Betazoid. She reaches for Michael's chin, touches her lower lip and they kiss, leaning into each other. Michael has her hand halfway down Laira's breast when she pauses, sheepish.

"Is this—?"

"Okay with me or okay with our hosts?"

"Both?" Michael's face is warmer than she'd like, and it's not that she's nervous about it, but she's not wholly comfortable with an audience.

Laira pulls her closer, her hands cool on the back of her neck. "They're telepaths, dear, unless you want to beam back to the ship— they'll know. Some of them might even be able to hear us on the ship - for the record - I think it's a wonderful idea, and you should absolutely continue."

Beaming back to the ship has a certain appeal, but Laira's kissing her and arguing would break that contact. Maybe the trees are so tall and the vines are so thick around the pool for this reason. Maybe there are privacy filters. Maybe it doesn't matter at all because Jen's one of the best telepaths on the planet and Michael's going to project what she's thinking as if she's writing it with lasers into the sky.

There must be societal norms where this is okay. They're a very open culture. Laira guides Michael up, easing her to the stone edge of the pool. She parts Michael's legs, slipping between her wet thighs and starts kissing her way down and oh—

"My love, you need to think less."

Laira's hands run over her hips, and one of them squeezes her arm. Her fingers are slick, and quick and over and across and then Michael's thigh is on her shoulder and Laira's mouth is a point of heat exquisite after the cool water.

Shields- mental discipline- control- Laira smashes them like she upended Michael's life. Maybe it's how much they missed each other, or gratitude or there's just something about the water, but Michael's orgasm hits like a shooting star. Half the planet has to hear it. Gasping, she leans into Laira's shoulder, and they tumble back into the pool.

Splashing, laughing, coming up for air and each other and it's all right.

Even with her skin tingling, Michael's apologetic. Anxious, ashamed—

*"It's all right."*

It's not a voice, not really, and Michael couldn't say who, it's not a who. It's as if the planet itself has reached into her thoughts.

*"Enjoy yourself."*

She didn't need permission. Michael wants to say she didn't, that she's fine with this, but it's easier now. It doesn't hurt to have absolution, and there's no meetings in the morning and dinner's still more than an hour away and Laira whimpers into her neck when her fingers slide down, down and in and—

Betazed is a communal society. Millions of people are feeling something like this, sharing, breathing, and reaching for each other with joy and affection.

Let the guilt go. Embrace where she is.

She loves Laira, and this is love seeking and touching, finding the delicate places between gasping Michael's name and digging nails into her shoulders. Michael lets her hands find their own way, doesn't think, simply allows her heart to rule her. The whole damn planet can know how much she loves her. That should muffle the more practical concerns about how Laira's half collapsed against her, laughing.

Their bedroom's less than twenty meters away and the vines are thick, and it's a planet where being naked is a sacred thing. Gathering their clothes would be responsible, but they're enamored with each other, and it's entirely possible part of her uniform is in the garden and Laira only drops one boot to the floor of their bedroom, but then they're on the bed together and Laira's legs are cool and soft and so slick once Michael's kissed her way toward her upper thigh.

Love floats on her breath, guides her hands and love is what Laira's moaning for. Maybe she climaxed back in the pool, perhaps she was close and Michael's sending her over the edge now, but this one makes her snap upwards like she's been shocked. After a few breathless curses, she falls back, soft against Michael. Panting, sighing, she fumbles with her fingers against Michael's back, then laughs. "And I was worried you'd be nervous here."

"I am, I was—" Michael rolls to her back, staring up at the vines on the ceiling while Laira's plays with her skin. "Then I wasn't."

"You know, I once asked Jen what it was like, sharing something that intimate."

"You asked? How undiplomatic of you."

"I was young, I didn't think—"

"And what did she say?" Michael tries to picture a very young, pilot-turned-diplomat Laira trying to navigate Betazed.

"She smiled, and didn't say anything, and I thought that was it, and then I went to bed."

"And?"

Laira sits up, kissing Michael's shoulder as she slides off the bed for a glass of water. "And she showed me."

"Showed you?"

"Could have been a dream." Laira takes a sip and her face flushes pink all the way to her neck. "I felt- pleasure- love- warmth- it was incredible."

"And you think?"

"Oh I didn't dare ask." Laira sits back down on the bed beside her, sharing her glass with Michael. "I still haven't, and it's been more than a decade."

"So that was her?"

"She's very happily married."

Michael leans in, kissing her cheek. "So maybe we just repaid the favor."

"Didn't think I would."

"Do what we just did?"

Laira shakes her head, blinking too quickly. "Not that, sex is, and sex with you is- I- I've never felt the way I do about you. I didn't think I would."

Michael strokes her hand, then sets the water aside. She smiles down at Laira's belly, then meets her eyes. "Wait until she gets here."

"Don't change the subject when I'm being romantic."

"I know you love me."

"I love you is wholly insufficient." Laira's eyes are far too blue when she's on the verge of tears.

Kissing her gives Michael time to think, time to find the right words, if they exist. "Love is a lot of things. Love is for cake, and the feeling of stepping onto the bridge. I love my crew, my mother, Tilly, and you, and our little visitor. It's transcendent, and all of those things at once."

That little noise means Laira's unconvinced, and Michael smiles.

"Think of it as a loophole."

"Oh?"

"There's love, and you have all the definitions that make sense, but maybe we were waiting for each other to come up with one more."

Laira sighs, shutting her eyes as she looks up. "Like stars on the flag?"

"Always room for one more system."

Pressing her lips together, Laira takes a moment, then another, and finally she shakes her head, tears caught in the fading light. "I always know what to say, and then you—"

"I ruin it."

"Utterly."

---

When they finally get dressed again, they're late for dinner. Everyone else is seated, and they've even started eating without them. Tilly seems most at home with the extravagant table, and the rest of the crew is enjoying the drinks with varying levels of comfort. Michael can't find Joann, and she looks around the dining room twice before she finds her, arms wrapped around someone with red hair.

"Keyla," Laira whispers, grabbing Michael's hand. "She's back."

"Your Commander Detmer wanted to surprise you," Jen says, handing them two glasses with drinks of dizzying neon colors. "Of course, you were so late for dinner that we weren't sure that you were going to come eat with us." Her eyes twinkled, and then she winks, because it's not enough that she probably heard ever moment of them. She has to rub it in. "The *Armstrong* dropped her off an hour ago."

"And then left?"

"Oh they'll be back, I told them about Uril Onait, so they'll make time for that. T'Rina's attended several times, and I'm sure I'll be able to send her a diplomatic invitation."

Laira mutters into her drink and leaves Michael to go speak with Keyla. They stand near each other, and Laira starts to speak, then their arms are out and they hug, wrapping their arms tight around each other.

Jen's eyes soften, and then she blinks, just like Laira does. "She's glad to be back."

"Laira's mother—"

"I know." Jen leans in, taking a sip of her drink as her thoughts reach into Michael's. "*Losing you frightens her more than she was ready to admit to herself.*"

"I'm fairly resilient."

"I'll say."

Michael watches, letting Keyla greet everyone else before it's her turn. Keyla's face looks a little thinner, paler, almost as bad as Laira on a day she'd lie about being fine, but Keyla's smile is bright.

"Hey, Captain."

Michael hugs her, tight and close and chuckles. "I knew you'd beat it."

"Flew circles around it. Just had to catch up."

"I'm so glad you're—"

"Me too." Keyla's hands stay on Michael's arms for a moment. "I've never been that- not even after the *Shenzhou*."

Michael almost winces, but it's all right. Her first ship can be a happy memory now. Philippa would want that. "We missed you."

"I hear you had to pull in a rookie pilot."

Nodding, Michael looks up and beams. "Obviously, She wasn't you."

"I hear she did good, considering."

"You're a good teacher."

Keyla tilts her head to disagree, but then lets it stand. "Of course, now that I'm back."

"Absolutely."

"I'm not learning to give speeches."

"I hear you can have many career trajectories, hot shot pilots don't all have to run for president."

---

Being naked in the central square in front of the capitol sounds like one of the nightmares Michael used to have on *Shenzhou* when it felt like she'd never understand how a Starfleet crew functioned socially. Visiting Betazed as a commander, back then, she would have loathed every minute of nudity.

Now, it's all right, somehow. It helps that everyone else is naked too, Jen, the Betazoid circle of leadership, Admiral Vance and his wife, T'Rina, Saru, other Federation dignitaries, and Laira.

Laira even left her hair down, and it's bright in the sun, past her shoulders to the middle of her back. Michael's crew came, and other than a few sheepish glances at each other, they're all comfortable stripping off their uniforms and hanging them up.

She's never been around so many people without clothes, even the kids, and there are plenty of them at the ceremony.

Maybe because the Federation is here. It's the biggest Federation presence since the Burn, and the children are fascinated by the aliens. Saru's a little shy at first, but T'rina speaks with them all with infinite patience.

Laira has what seems to be a very serious discussion with what seems to be most of an elementary school class, and when she returns to Michael, she wraps her arm into Michael's. "I met some of your future crew, just need to get them through the Academy."

"I'll let Tilly know to keep an eye out for them."

The gong rings once, summoning them to the ceremony instead of waiting in a sea of naked people. Laira touches her belly, just for a moment, but Michael watches and contentment settles over her. This is all right. Even in front of people, even when it's public. There are Federation reporters here, of course, and there's no holos while everyone's undressed, by Betazoid custom, but their Hitchhiker is right there.

And that's wonderful. She can let it be wonderful.

After the ceremony, Michael holds Laira's jacket while she gets her shirt the way she wanted, and then helps her slip it on. T'Rina and Jen need her to talk to the Betazoid circle of leadership, and some of the other Ambassadors, and Michael fastens her dress uniform jacket.

"Captain Burnham?"

Michael turns towards the unfamiliar voice: a civilian woman, human, with silver hair and gentle lines around her eyes. "I'm Captain Burnham."

"I'm Margo Holte, United Earth news network." She flashes a holographic press pass and Michael nods. There are many more reporters than she thought, but they've all been polite so far. Her press pass is different from the standard. She's an editor, not a reporter, and Michael doesn't know why that matters, but she's the first editor to want to ask Michael questions.

"Welcome to Betazed."

"Thank you, Captain." Margo takes that with a smile at least. "First time in my career that I've been able to cover anything outside Earth's system."



Michael can't imagine how strange that must be, but Betazed has some of the best press vetting in the Federation, so there's no reason to be concerned. "Feel like a rookie again?"

"It'll help me empathize with my reporters."

Michael tilts her head, trying to remember where she's heard her name. They only spoke briefly to United Earth's press when Earth rejoined the Federation, so much else was going on, and she hasn't met Margo. She'll have to look her up. Editor for United Earth press sounds more important than a beat reporter out for a feel-good story about a Betazoid holiday.

"I don't get out in the field much anymore, even on Earth, but this assignment came up, and I had to take it."

"Curious?"

"Warp across half the galaxy and meet the captain who saved the galaxy twice, or is it three times?"

"I'm not keeping track."

Margo's eyes twinkle. "And modest."

"I try to be."

"Do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

"And a few questions."

"I don't usually keep track."

Michael chuckles, and nods her agreement. "I have time." Laira will be in meetings and discussions for hours now, and the crew can comm if they need her.

Sitting in a little cafe garden along the main street, Michael finishes her coffee and orders another while she talks about leaving the galaxy and meeting the 10-C. She's gotten good at telling those stories, emphasizing the beauty of the galactic barrier, how the 10-C meant them no harm, and are a peaceful, kind, helpful race of beings. Talking about the DMA is more difficult, but she can explain the science of a static warp bubble with practiced ease.

Margo listens to all of that and takes a few notes, but the real questions come when Michael's halfway through her second coffee.

"I hear there was some tension between you and President Rillak at your first meeting." Margo sets her cup down. This is one of her more important questions, because she leans in.

"I didn't understand her methods."

"You thought she was appropriating a moment."

How can Margo know? Intuition? Michael didn't give that away.

"Politics was not something I enjoyed."

"Yet you spent months working directly for the president."

"Explaining warp bubbles."

Margo raises her eyebrows, and there's something oddly familiar about the way she chuckles. "You do have a flair for that."

"Thank you."

Michael takes another sip of coffee, then drags her fork through the heavy chocolate cake in front of her. It's delicious, but the piece is too big and she's grown accustomed to sharing everything with Laira. She wanted to eat about a third, but the whole piece sits in front of her. "I wanted to be sure *Discovery* was where my path lies. Helping out gave me some time to think."

"And you grew closer to the President? You'd already worked together to bring Ni'Var back into the Federation, and she spent time on your ship, several times, not just the mission outside the galaxy."

"We had time to get to know each other," Michael pauses, tilting her head. Is she being interrogated for who she is, her relationship, or something else entirely? "I suppose you could say we realized how well we understood each other. Starfleet and the Federation have been the heart of my adult life. I believe when we're working together, we can bring out the best in each other. Laira sees it that way too."

"So you found true believers in each other."

"And a partner who knew what our work was like, what we were getting into."

"Starfleet's reassigning your ship is a piece of luck."

Michael takes a bite of her cake and smiles a little. "Well, the VARS navigational system and the spore drive will make *Discovery* less important as a first responder. The *Armstrong* has already taken over that responsibility with great success. The *Mitchell's* spore drive will come online in a few days. The technology sharing conference on Earth next month will make the technology available to all Federation members."

"Flying to space in an instant thanks to glittering mushrooms is the stuff of holonovels."

"Have you tried it?"

Margo finishes the last of her cake and nods, eyes wide. "My wife and I took a high warp transport to the medical command post at the edge of Andorian space, then the *Armstrong* brought some of us here. We jumped, as you say."

"And?"

"It was incredible. We popped out of space, and back into space." She shakes her head, pulling her silver hair back behind her shoulder thoughtfully. "I lived more than a hundred years on Earth, and I thought I'd die there. Then you arrive, with your ancient ship, and I'm sitting here, on Betazed, eating alien cake with the heroic captain Burnham, who just happens to be First Lady of the Federation."

Michael feigns a whisper. "I did think about taking her name, being Captain Rillak just to make trouble."

"Oh?"

"But my crew calls her Mrs. Burnham instead."

"Really?"

"It started as a joke, then it stuck. Lets her be a person, when the office is heavy."

Margo touches her mouth with her napkin, her smile vanishing. "My wife, Bridget, is a doctor, one of Earth's finest researchers into infectious disease, and from what she says about Scosian fever—"

"It's terrifying."

"We're not used to working together, our President will lead us, and we'll try to rise to the challenge, of course, but we're rusty. Earth hasn't had a new virus since before the Burn, and everything from the outside—"

"Is a little scary."

Nodding, Margo taps a control on her holopadd, then shows Michael a projection. "The last case of Scosian fever was recorded on Earth more than a hundred years ago. We've been hiding behind our shields, shut off from everything, relying on our own development, our own research, for far too long. Our fleet is sblight, and some many of our threads of research have been stagnant."

"Now you're back in the Federation."

"And we'll be able to jump across the galaxy and bring back a hundred deadly viruses."

Michael will have to ask Hugh if he's spoken to her wife. "So far the Scosian virus is contained."

"So far, I suppose you are familiar with the old Earth expression?"

Michael taps the table with her knuckles. "Knock on wood."

"It's less old for you, isn't it?"

"A little."

"How old are you?"

"Nine hundred and sixty-four."

Margo whistles. "And you look great."

"Thank you." Michael's badge chirps, and Laira's voice joins them.

"Michael, if you're not busy, dear, several Ambassadors have questions about the spore drive that you would be most helpful answering."

Michael meets Margo's eyes for a moment, then they nod to each other.

"I'll beam over."

Laira's relieved sigh carries over the channel. "My explanation of the mycelial network gets worse every time I try."

"I like how you make it sound like magic."

"Magic I could explain better."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you."

The channel closes and Margo's eyes are so wistful that it almost hurts to look at her. She's looking for something: there's a piece here she hasn't seen yet, but it's not malicious. There's no anger here, just that sharp kind of loneliness that's so common in this time. Laira had it, still does.

"I'm sorry to cut this short, if you have any more questions, you know where to find me."

"Thank you for your time, Captain. I appreciate how busy you are." It's a formal goodbye, practiced, professional, but the longing doesn't leave her eyes.

Michael sets her dishes in the replicator and beams away. She can ask Laira about Margo, and if she doesn't know, Jen will. Jen knows everyone.

### Chapter Summary

Laira and Michael leave Betazed, visit Altair IV, and then head to Earth. Part of Laira's past that she thought was gone finds her after all.

### Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicalli for listening to me plot. You're the best.

Hugh turns off his tricorder and lowers a hand to help her up to a sitting position. "I think Betazed is good for you."

Laira's grown very familiar with his hands, warm, strong, and eager to help, like Hugh always is. "They've over protective here."

"Good." He finishes a note for her file while Laira stars down at her knees.

Her belly's rounder now, obvious in a camisole, obvious in a blouse, and her suit jackets won't hide her much longer. The weeks pass so slowly - quickly - she's still not sure what it is. Hugh can't even tell them how many are left. So few things in her life have followed a schedule, that maybe it's all right that this is unknowable. Their hitchhiker is a mystery like her mother.

"I even think about having a headache while I'm in a meeting, and we're done for the day," she says, fidgeting with her bracelet. "We've had to add three more days here just to get through everything."

Hugh directs her gaze out over the garden in front of them. The voices of the crew and Jen's family carry up over the sounds of the water and the birds, and the flowers smell divine, as they always do. "Three more days here is paradise."

"Everyone does seem to be enjoying themselves."

"The food is incredible, the house is beyond beautiful, and the whole city is thrilled to have us here." Hugh leaves his chair and sits next to her on the bed, lowering his voice. "Also, I don't know if this is true for you and Michael, but Paul and I have been having the most incredible sex."

Laughter comes easily, and Laira pats his hand. Michael would avoid the question, but she's not here. "I would say that's accurate."

"At first we were hesitant, it's a planet of telepaths, and who wants to share everything, but then-" Hugh pauses, beaming, "-it's like we're closer to each other. It's not like we have an audience, but there's something- the air?"

"Hopefully it's adding to the experience."

"Oh yeah," Hugh leans in, dropping his voice. "We're definitely going to need to plan a few vacations here if this is what it's always like. The opera house is beautiful too."

It takes her a moment to remember bringing her former partner here. Daar hated it, never got used to feeling like his thoughts were on display for anyone to see. "Michael's the first time I've had someone to enjoy it with."

Hugh reads into that like he's telepathic, and sometimes, she could swear he is. "Sharing your life can't be easy."

"It was easier, before the last election. Senator had less baggage."

"Well, Madam President, I'm glad the galaxy was able to give you some joy on Betazed."

"Michael certainly did."

Hugh chuckles, then winks. "Good. You need that."

---

Jen's library hides behind a delicate waterfall and she always insists Laira take it for an office when she's here. The wall can be made transparent, and the privacy shielding is the finest the Federation has to offer, but it feels like she's almost outside, and when the wall's open the mist from the water carries to her skin.

She sends Vriga off to enjoy herself, Betazed has incredible nightlife, and buries herself in another report about the collapse of the Andoran infrastructure. Federation law requires they negotiate with a planetary government, though they can provide aid to the scraps of regional government left behind, anything that survived the Emerald Chain comes from a history of pain and oppression. Replicators need power,

solar's unreliable on Andorian, but seawater cells should work. Sending them dilithium would solve their power problems, but it would also allow any former chain warlords to reestablish power. Do too little and the Federation adds to suffering and death, do too much, or in the wrong way, and a would-be Osyraa takes the dilithium.

Not to mention the Tellarite resistance to helping the Andorians at all.

"You can't solve it all tonight."

Laira shuts her eyes and waves the holopadd away. "Sounds like something a wise mentor would say."

Jen hands her a cup of hot chocolate and settles down next to her on the sofa. "Too bad you don't have one of those."

"I do suffer from a lack of close ties to veteran leadership."

"It's so tragic you don't have someone with decades of experience who passed up a beautiful retirement to help you run the galaxy." Jen sips her hot chocolate and rearranges her sari over her legs. "I still haven't forgiven you for making me be president, not once, but twice, so you could leave the galaxy and meet the jellyfish."

Laira smiles at the falling water. "I should have seen that coming when we started our campaign."

"As long as you never do it again." Jen toys with the gemstones in her necklace and stares out at the courtyard. How wonderful it would be to have this beauty to call home.

"Of course not, never, I wouldn't dare put you in charge for several months so I could do something selfish."

Jen tilts her head innocently. "Planning on leaving the galaxy again?"

Shaking her head, Laira reaches back for the brilliantly pattern silk blanket from the back of the sofa and drapes it over her shoulders. It's much more comfortable than her jacket. "Maybe Michael and I should head out to the 10-C, see if they want to put us up for a few weeks when the baby gets here, just so you don't have to be in charge while I'm in the same galaxy. "

"Might be the only way to get some quiet."

Fidgeting with the edge of the blanket, Laira can't help asking. "We shouldn't come here?"

"Arjun and most of my children are exceptional with babies, Luxoli prefers children when they can talk, but she's always been the most like me." Jen wraps her arm around Laira's shoulders, dropping her teasing tone. "You're always welcome, it's nice to have some extra hands when they're tiny."

"Thank you." Laira takes a sip, then sets her hot chocolate down on the table in front of her. It's delicious, but she can't taste it the way she should.

Jen's fingers rub her shoulder, warm through the thin blanket. She allows Laira to dwell in her thoughts for a moment, then says what Laira hasn't found words for. "It's all right to miss home."

"I don't know where I'm missing. Bajor? My freighter?" She has better things to think about than her vague sense of unbelonging, and yet—

"Michael is home now, isn't she?"

"She's not a place."

"You have Michael's ship."

Laira touches her belly, pressing in just a little. "I do."

"*Discovery* will be the baby's home, and it's Michael's. It's the closest thing you have, but—"

"I'm being ridiculous."

"You're allowed." Jen rests her head on Laira's shoulder. "I can pull the thoughts out of your stubborn head if you don't want to say them."

"You're so kind."

"Michael has a home, and a family. You have work."

"That's not—"

"Your farm is in other hands, so is your clunky old freighter, and even the apartment you had in on Bajor had more of Daar's things in it than yours, so—"

"I told him to keep it."

"So your whole life is Michael's now."

"I'm not upset about that." Laira doesn't need to insist, Jen can hear her thoughts, but saying it aloud helps. She doesn't blame Michael, she's not uneasy about Michael's ship and Michael's crew being her home. She married Michael, and everything that came with her. She adores them all.

"You think Michael might be upset."

"I know she's not."

Jen chuckles and corrects her. "I know she's not. You suspect, then doubt, and then convince yourself it's fine."

Laira sighs and pulls the blanket tighter. "How's that going for me?"

"You are dedicated and diligent in your efforts, as always" Jen leaves them in silence, Laira's thoughts drifting just beneath the surface.

When Jen thinks she's had enough time, she says it for both of them. "If she leaves you, all of it will be gone."

Taking Jen's hand, Laira squeezes her fingers. "She won't leave me."

"She'd be the first. Your mother, your father, your grandparents, even Daar left you, though I never liked him, so..." Jen's distaste of Daar was well hidden from him, and for a time Jen made the effort to hide it from Laira, though towards the end, Jen dropped her subtleties.

"I left him."

"You didn't give him a chance to leave you." Jen pats her hand. "You withdrew, became emotionally distant, and on top of the incredible stress of your position and the DMA...what was left?"

The thought of seeing him again makes her tense enough that Jen laughs into her thoughts. "Don't get nauseated on me now. You've had such a blissful few days."

"Maybe I'm not ready to talk about him."

"He'll be at the summit on the VARS drive." Jen hugs her shoulders the extracts herself to take her hot chocolate again. "He's a propulsion engineer."

"Of course he'll be there. I—"

"Am going to see the man you did not want to marry, with your wife, just in time for him to find out, along with the rest of the galaxy, that you're having a baby, which you nnever wanted to have with him."

"Not- I didn't- never isn't—."

Jen squeezes her hand. "Obviously you'll handle it."

Laira knows what to say to him. She has to. Difficult situations are what she excels at.

Michael rescues her so neatly from having to finish the conversation with Jen that it's possible Jen summoned her telepathically. Michael's out of uniform, wrapped in a gorgeous orange-gold sari that must have come from Jen's collection, and she looks like a goddess.

Michael pauses in the door, then turns around to show off. "Beautiful isn't it?"

"You look incredible."

Winking at Jen, Michael crosses the room and offers her hands to help Laira up. "Someone with good taste lent it to me."

"To the benefit of all, clearly" Jen says, leaning down to kiss Laira's cheek before she leaves them.

"Did I forget something we're doing tonight?" She's been so careful with her schedule. They have tonight off, she's sure of it.

"Oh no, this is for tomorrow."

"The opera."

"The opera," Michael repeats, guiding Laira up. "It's going to be fun."

"Vayshkaanaa is one of the most poignant Kasseelian operas ever written, fun is the wrong descriptor."

"You're going to cry your beautiful eyes out."

"Yes."

Michael sways with her, then pulls Laira in, resting her head against her shoulder. "My mother and J'Vini need us to reschedule."

*Again.*

"They're busy, the Andorian border—"

"Yeah." Michael looks down for a moment, staring at their entwined fingers, and then she touches Laira's belly, rubbing her thumb along her skin. "I want to tell her she's going to be a grandmother before she finds out from the Federation news service."

"We can wait to tell the news service."

Michael chuckles, leans down and kisses her belly, silk rustling. "I don't think we can. On Earth, after the VARS drive summit, that's a good

time. Sends a message about safety and new beginnings, and you thought Earth was right politically."

"It shows I trust them, that they're part of the whole." Laura runs her hands up Michael's arms, holding her shoulders. "I'm sorry. It's the third time we've had to reschedule."

"She's busy." That's not it, and Michael knows, but they dance around Gabrielle like she's debris in an unpredictable orbit. "I finally find her again, after nine hundred years, I have a starship where we can literally cross the galaxy in a blink and we still can't find an hour to sit down together."

Laura starts to speak, but halts. That's not a helpful thought.

"What?"

Looking down doesn't save her, because Michael is too observant.

"I don't want to be that busy."

"What?"

Touching her belly, she allows her hand to linger. "When she's here, when she's grown, when we're—"

Michael's confused expression turns into a smile, bright and sad and hopeful. "You want us to be less busy than my mother."

"Please."

"So, somehow, when you're president and I'm an admiral—"

"Fleet admiral, Vance will want to retire at some point."

"Okay, so you're still president and I'm fleet admiral and you want to make sure we can find a way to make it to dinner with our children?"

"Yes." They're decades away from even having to worry about meeting their Hitchhiker's potential partners and who knows if she'll want to have children and-- Laura's eyes sting.

"Hey, we'll be less busy," Michael promises, holding up her hands and kissing them. "So much less busy. Spore drives will be everywhere, everything will be peaceful, with no scary stellar phenomena, and dinner plans will be no problem at all." Michael says something else, teases her about something and it's light and hopeful and full of that sunshine Michael carries with her wherever she goes.

Michael said children.

*Our children.*

She could have misspoke. It's an easy mistake to make, but Michael's so careful, so thoughtful about her words. *Our quarters, our mission, our children.*

"You still with me?"

Nodding, Laura shuts her eyes. The future is vast - full of hope - and unknowable, worrying is exhausting. This moment is beautiful, and she needs to be here, now. The rest will follow.

---

Laura pulls her coat a little tighter. They're not going outside; the snow's falling so hard on Altair IV that it whispers against the windows. She shivers a little, then nods to the three council members with her. Negotiations are done for the day, they can beam back up. Michael's quarters - their quarters - are warm.

On her left, Council member Gozre looks as miserable as she does. At least, the climate here's as terrible for him as it is for her.

"I thought they'd never agree."

"They agreed this morning, we just needed to find terms that everyone else agreed with." Laura sighs. She wants to wrap her arms around herself, try to get warm that way, but she can't let Gozre see that kind of weakness. Though he is Saurian, if she's cold, he can tell.

They beam up to the conference room on *Discovery*, escaping the cold, but it's like the cold is inside of her. They stand together around the table, ready to depart for dinner and the lounge, but Hugh and another doctor, stop them at the door. The doctor with him is an elderly human woman, whose hair is as white as her uniform.

"Madam President, Senators, Starfleet Medical has implemented an advanced screening protocol. The automatic biofilters have already done their work, but ships have been having trouble catching everything, so we're scanning by hand. If you don't mind."

Laura rests her hand on the table, just for a moment, and she's still too cold, but Hugh steps towards her, so this is fine. Hugh trusts this doctor.

The doctor Laura doesn't know introduces herself to Senator Bav Tihg as Doctor Holte, a civilian from Earth. Michael mentioned meeting her wife. Senator Bav Tihg is cleared quickly, then Dr. Holte moves on to Councilmember Ralauth.

Gozre leans in to whisper. “Your body temperature is several degrees higher than this morning. I do hope you’re well.”

“It’s nothing.” Damn Saurian vision.

Clucking his tongue, Gozre shakes his head. He sounds sympathetic, but she struggles to trust him. “Scosian would make it awfully difficult for you to—”

Hugh clears his throat, taking Gozre’s attention. “Councilmember, if you would—”

Ralauth and bav Tigh are both cleared and nod to Laira as they leave. Dr. Holte gestures for her to take a few steps to the right, away from Gozre, and Dr. Holte ends up between them. Reaching for the catches of her jacket, Laira opens it. It’s too tight, and she’s finally meeting her tailor on Earth, which will solve so many of her problems with her suits, at least for a month or two. She’d take it off, but she’s cold.

Dr. Holte runs one scan, then another. “I’m Dr. Holte, I’m assisting the Andorian relief effort. I’m not detecting any sign of scosian prions, however, Madam President, you have a mild fever.”

*Again.* At least, that’s all it is. “I thought that might be the case.”

“I believe your elevated levels of ghoyoc are the cause, but Dr. Culber will want to check you over when he’s finished with your charming companion. While we wait, I’ll talk, you nod at me and I’m sure he’ll be gone in a moment.”

Laira carefully resists the urge to smile. “You’re from Earth, doctor?”

“Vancouver Island, right on rocky coast of the Pacific. It’s stunning, and I thought it was one of the most beautiful places I’d ever see, then I flashed through space with sparkling blue mushrooms to get here, so I’m redefining my ideas of beauty at the moment, ma’am.”

“The spores are incredible.”

“I enjoy them, Madam President.”

Gozre is cleaned by Hugh, and they share a look. The next election is still years away, but - he’ll be looking forward to it. Laira can barely get her mind to focus on tomorrow, but they’ll make it work.

Hugh drifts over, nonchalant, like he’s ready to start a conversation. No hurry. Nothing’s wrong. Gozre blinks at her before he leaves, finally, and Hugh leans over to look at Dr. Holte’s readings.

“Your ghoyoc levels are too high, again, which is why you have a fever, again—”

“Yes, doctor, again,” she repeats with him. “Just do what you did last time.”

Dr. Holte looks at Hugh, curious. Xenobiology would have been difficult to study while Earth was closed off, and Laira’s hybrid pregnancy is going to give Hugh so many journal articles.

“Laira’s ghoyoc levels spike, and then she runs a fever. I can break down the ghoyoc in her bloodstream, but I have to replace it with higher levels of estrogen to support her pregnancy.”

Dr. Holte’s expression softens sympathetically. “That has its own side effects.”

Laira slips her jacket off, trying to find equilibrium until her fever lowers. She’s too hot and too cold all at once, and nothing’s comfortable. At least the meeting’s done for the day. “I am a little better at dealing with nausea.”

“Fever can be a tense thing, especially now.” Dr. Holte studies the scan again, looking deep into the details of Laira’s hormone levels. “The intricacies of pregnancy in just one species are fascinating, the way your body has found a balance is as complicated as that mycelial network.”

“Maybe you can help me come up with a solution for Laira that doesn’t involve spiking her estrogen to compensate.” Hugh resets his hypo, then reaches for her neck. “This will bring your fever down. This-” he pauses, then injects her again, “will make up for the missing ghoyoc, but the side effects will likely be the same as last time.”

Last time, she threw up when the deck even glinted at her funny. “So you’re saying I shouldn’t eat anything exciting.”

“I am sorry.” He rubs her shoulder. “I could try raising ilkeah instead, but that doesn’t have the same effect on your pyrogens, and is more likely to spiral back into raising your temperature again because it’s more closely connected to ghoyoc cycling. Hopefully it’ll just be a few days.”

Leaning back on the table, Laira sighs, her hands sweaty against the cool glass. “We reach Earth tomorrow.” Her schedule is full of meetings and diplomatic events, from breakfast until far after dinner.

“We can try a mild dose of anti-emetics, maybe a different set—”

Those made her so groggy she would have asked the 10-C if they wanted to join the Federation, and Laira winces. “It’s all right, doctor.”

Dr. Holte and Hugh share a look, and Dr. Holte reaches towards her, touching her arm.

“Your pyrogen spikes might be an immune response, potentially something we could soften before we reach this point again. Dr. Culber has shared his research with me in hopes I’d see something he hasn’t.”

“Dr. Holte is one of the galaxy’s finest immunologists.”



Together both doctors explain what they find so fascinating about her hormone levels using words Michael would understand, but Laura's tired, and hungry, and none of it makes any sense, though they mean well.

"Thank you."

"And we're keeping you from dinner," Dr. Holte says, shutting down her holopadd. "With your permission, ma'am, I'd like to assist Dr. Culber, a trilateral hormonal negotiation is fascinating."

Laura smiles down at the floor, and nods. "Glad to be of service, doctor."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, Madam President - it's just - hybridization of humans is something I have so rarely gotten to study. Earth's been so closed off and I—"

She gets it. Laura's entirely fine being a research paper for the good doctor, but she's so hungry that she's about to get lightheaded, and the window of time she has before she wants to never eat again is shrinking. "Of course, doctor, perhaps you could tell me about your research in the lounge."

"I wouldn't want to intrude, ma'am, I—"

Hugh waves off her apologies. "We're leaving a Altair IV, so it's our family dinner night. We have a little celebration that the negotiations went well."

"Family dinner?"

"You'll see, it's nice. My husband and I replicate tostones and amarillos. You can replicate something."

"How nice. My wife can't be trusted near a replicator."

"Oh?"

"Margo has an aura of destruction, sometimes she needs to take notes on paper so technology doesn't get caught in her wake."

They talk, laughing with each other as they take the turbolift to the lounge together. There's something so old fashioned about taking the turbolift rather than beaming, but Michael's right, walking through the ship does give her time to greet the crew. When Laura's in her uniform, the crew's deferential, and the number of muttered 'ma'ams' increases with her cape. When she's stripped down to her blouse, carrying her jacket and her cape, the crew's more open. Their smiles are more amused. Even though she's still too hot, too cold, and hungry, it's hard not to smile back at them. They're so much more open than crew of Federation headquarters.

This is her home, and her eyes sting. *Enjoy it.*

She also should try to enjoy being hungry before she's not.

Will she have until the morning? Tomorrow afternoon? Her nausea seems to find her whenever the schedule's the most difficult. Gozre's going to be as insufferable, as he always is at any sign of weakness, but Laura wonders how he'll handle the public announcement of the Hitchhiker. He enjoys having a secret to lord over her, and when it's not a secret, perhaps he'll lose interest.

Paul intercepts Hugh when they walk into the lounge, and they disappear towards the table of food, leaving Laura and Dr. Holte to look for their wives together.

Laura's much taller than Dr. Holte, giving her the advantage as they look through the crowd in the lounge. Michael and Dr. Holte's wife are sitting together at one of the tables to the side. Laura's met her briefly: Margo - the reporter from Earth - sits beside Michael at a table, her long white hair pulled in a braid onto her shoulder. Dr. Holte came to assist with the scosian outbreak, and Margo must have found something fascinating enough to leave Earth with her. Margo's hasn't been a traveling reporter for decades. She's one of the highest ranking editors of a United Earth-wide news network. Being on *Discovery* must have offered something fascinating to get her out here.

Dr. Holte reaches for her wife's hand and squeezes it. Then she explains, "Margo's been writing about what life was like before the Burn, what it's like being on *Discovery* now, and the spore drive. She's been busy, which is keeping her mind off of my work on Andoria.

Leaving her seat, Michael touches her chin, then kisses her cheekbone. She takes Laura's jacket and her cape, then she leans in to whisper into her hair. "You're too warm again."

"Hugh fixed it." Laura relaxes into Michael's warmth, letting go of the tension in her posture. Michal makes everything easier.

"Fixed it the same way as last time?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"Oh." Michael kisses her cheek again. Her dark eyes far too soft. "Damn."

"It's fine."

Michael follows her towards the food with a look that says it is absolutely not fine, but she makes good use of that look. It's one of her better 'darling what are you—' faces.

"We can jump back to Betazed to pick up Jen."

"I doubt that'll be—" Laura stops, staring down at her plate. She's going to be miserable tomorrow, maybe for several days. She can fight it, insist she's fine, end up vomiting during an important part of the flag ceremony.

Or they pick up Jen. Jen charms the United Earth coalitions, makes their reporters laugh and maybe Laura can announce that she's pregnant in a way more eloquent than being sick in front of the whole planet.

Dammit. "That would be wise, I think."

Michael leans in, resting her chin on Laura's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"It'll keep Reno's betting pool interesting."

"There's a pool?" Michael asks innocently.

"If you manage to guess the last time I throw up, you can win half a starship."

"Just half?"

"Give it a few more months and I bet it'll be your own planet."

"Well, thank you for amusing the crew, dear. I know they enjoy a diversion." Michael touches her back, guiding her towards the table and their guests. "Margo's been telling me all about Earth."

"You've been to Earth, Michael."

Michael nods, pulling out her chair before she sits down. "I've been to Earth of the 23rd century. Earth changes much faster than Ni'Var, which rejoined with the Romulans and changed its name."

"Earth kept the same name." Dr. Holte tilts a wine glass towards her in a half-toast. "Though, we must have debated changing it."

"We did, several times, but Earth's stuck. Sometimes we get stuck." Margo looks right at Laura, staring as if she knows her, before she looks away. Too quickly - almost as if—

"I'm Bridget," Dr. Holte says over her wine. She glances at her wife, then takes her hand, squeezing fingers that keep fidgeting with her napkin. "Before my wife forgets to introduce me."

"Sorry." The apology barely seems to register, even as Margo says it. She keeps staring at Laura. Has she not met any hybrid humans before? Margo reaches for her own wine but doesn't drink it. She only toys with the stem of the glass, as if there are secrets in the smooth glass.

Michael looks from Bridget to Margo, and then her arm's around Laura's shoulders so there's something Laura's missing.

No point in rushing it, whatever it is. Eating keeps her from asking too many questions, or wondering why Margo's staring. Laura didn't think she was this hungry, and maybe that's good considering what tomorrow's likely going to be like.

Michael calls up the schedule for tomorrow on her holopadd, scrolling through. She adds in when *Discovery* will jump to Betazed and return, then starts noting which events Laura will not attend.

"Keep the flag ceremony."

Michael raises an eyebrow. "It's in the morning."

"Morning might be fine."

"*Might.*"

Bridget releases her wife's hand and picks up her fork. "Are you more nauseated in the mornings?"

Laura presses her lips together, and Michael starts to chuckle before she does. "There's no pattern."

"Ah."

"Bajorans sneeze when they're pregnant, did you know that?"

Bridget shakes her head, and waits for Laura to elaborate with polite interest. Margo stares at Laura as if she can't look away, like Laura will vanish if she does.

"Laura started with sneezing, then her human side kicked in, lately it's Cardassia."

Setting her bread down, Bridget nods. "Hugh mentioned the fevers, I'm sorry we can't do better than bringing your nausea back."

"It's fine—"

"Hell, isn't it?" Margo says finally. When Laura finds her eyes - blue like her mother's - she feels like she knows her.

They've met, no, that's not it they—

"My sister said it was hell, I mean," Margo continues. She fidgets with her wedding ring, wrapping her fingers around themselves like Laura

does when she's trying to force herself to focus. It's not uncommon, but Margo's hands look so much like her own that now Laira's the one staring.

"She didn't like being pregnant?" Michael asks.

"She loved it, but it was hell. She was nauseated most of the time, unless she was hungry, sometimes it was both, and it would happen so quickly. We'd go for a walk on the beach and she'd be fine, she was totally fine, and then fifty meters later she'd throw up into the Pacific."

"Our relationship started in bathrooms," Michael says, her voice soft and even in a way that seems divorced from the rest of the conversation. Bridget replies and Laira misses it. They're both so calm while Margo's tone has a wistful edge that stings, and her throat's tight.

Laira's is too. Her chest aches and she reaches for her water, but her hand on the glass looks so much like Margo's—

"My sister, Viv - Vivian, I mean - she was a doctor, like Bridget, and one of the smartest people, and there was nothing she could do, sometimes she just—"

Laira's pulse rushes through her ears. She's still too hot - too cold - in that flushed sort of way, and she's acutely aware the cold sweat on her arms, and her neck. "My grandmother's name was Vivian."

Margo's eyes shine, tears clinging to her lashes. "You never met her."

Laira has to shake her head. "She died before I was born."

"Oh, of course, space is—"

"My mother talked how much she loved the ocean, and the rocks, how Vivian had grown up there, near the beach—"

"Our house is on the island, Vancouver Island, on the Pacific, it's one of the most beautiful places in the universe."

Bridget touches Margo's shoulder, breaking the tension. "You've seen a very small part of the universe, dear."

"It'll be true, no matter where I go."

"My mother always wanted to see it."

"Our house?"

Laira nods, her throat too tight. Michael finishes for her, she knows the story.

"Claire, Laira's mother, talked about her ancestral home on the Pacific ocean."

"Our house," Bridget answers when Margo too is at a loss for words. "Claire is Margo's niece."

"Was, she's gone. My mother's gone." Laira should say it more gently, take a breath, but all she can think is that her great-aunt, her mother's aunt, never met her, never will, because the universe is vast and cruel and— Their house is still there. The one on the coast that her mother had always wanted to see: the most beautiful place in the universe.

Her food's cold when she finishes eating it. Margo ignores her food for the rest of the conversation, and it's not until the table's gone through several more glasses of wine and all of Laira's grandmother's childhood that Bridget reminds her to eat.

Laira will still be here. Her great-aunt will still be here. They can talk tomorrow, after meetings, after the party, they have years—

"Come see the house, soon," Margo insists as they hug goodnight. They're the same height, almost, Laira's a little taller, but Margo's cheekbones are so very familiar and the way she smiles is so much like her mother's.

"We'd like that." Thank the Prophets for Michael, who will make plans and remember where the house is and stand next to her, being the calm point in the chaos.

Laira has a family, and a house and history. Her aunts give them holos: decades of her grandmother's life, of the lives before, of all the people who lived on Earth before Vivian left for the stars.

Vivian looks like Laira. Her hair's lighter and she's tall and willowy like Margo, but there's something in her face, in the holos where she smiles.

It's very late when Michael gently insists on bed. The holos will be there. Her family will be there, but Laira can't sleep. How can she sleep? Her history is here, there, down the corridor maybe also failing to sleep.

Michael's arm lies over her, and the bed's warm, even though Laira's cold now - then hot - sweaty and awake and exhausted. Her mouth already tastes like metal and she's not even sick to her stomach yet.

*Discovery* jumps in the dead of night, and the familiar blue of the mycelial network crackles around them. Laira pulls the blanket up closer to her chest, and Michael kisses her neck.

"You should sleep."

"I can't—"

Betazed spins green-blue just outside their window, and *Discovery* hangs in orbit like a xikek bird before they jump away again. They have Jen now, and she can attend all the events Laura won't be able to tomorrow.

They could have gone to her grandmother's house right now, after dinner, in the morning, they're always welcome — and it's too much. Laura could have found her family before. Met Margo and Bridget after Earth rejoined the Federation, looked in the records and the database and found them.

She didn't.

She didn't hate them. Margo was so sure Laura hated them, and Margo didn't hate her for not being human and not knowing her history. Vivian didn't hate her sister. Grandma loved her sister, her home, she always wanted to go back.

Never did. Never could—

The sweat on the back of her neck means she's going to throw up. She has a minute, maybe she doesn't— She's awake and out of bed, across to the bathroom, and this should have waited until the afternoon.

When did her grandmother leave Earth? Was she still pregnant? Was her mother born on a transport ship? Or was she on Bajor already? One of the planets in between, in transit? How many bathrooms on strange starships did the Vivian that Laura never knew go through this in? When she's washed her mouth out and trying to decide if she should eat (probably) if she wants to force herself (probably not), Michael's standing by the bed with a bag over her shoulder.

"Are we going somewhere?"

Michael pins Laura's badge onto her pajamas. "The timing's perfect."

"It's the middle of the night."

"Only on *Discovery*." Michael's smile glows in her eyes.

They beam down when Laura has shoes, and the darkness of their bedroom gives way to another darkness, full of birds starting to sing.

They're on a beach: warm, where the air smells of flowers and the salt of the sea, and across the dark water the sky's starting to turn pink. Michael spreads one of the blankets on the sand and sits down, patting the blanket beside her. The bag sits by Michael's feet, and they sit, together in paradise.

It takes her a moment to guess. "This is Langkawi."

"Philippa and I came here once, my captain Philippa, and the other Philippa spoke of it all the time. The sunrises are extraordinary."

"And I couldn't sleep."

"I don't know if you've slept at all."

Laura starts to protest, but a tiny mammal jumps from a tree to their left and the forest hums with life starting to wake.

"It's the same ocean."

"Your grandmother sat next to this ocean."

"Threw up in it, apparently."

"Well, I'm sure you can follow suit."

Laura laughs, and Michael holds her, arms around her shoulders. Their history comes from this ocean, and the ocean of stars reaching out to all their other homes. Their history together is out there, on *Discovery*, across the Federation, and their future is there.

But they have safe harbors, places that define where they came from, and an ocean, and family.

"I wanted a baby because I was so alone," Laura whispers while the sky turns to gold. "My family was gone, they were all gone, and I didn't have anyone. I thought I could build something, build my life around a person, keep them safe."

"And we will."

"Of course, we will." Laura blinks, and Michael brushes tears away. "I was so ready to make my own roots, but I still had them out there."

"And you have so much family now."

"So many homes." Earth, Ni'Var, Bajor, Starfleet headquarters and *Discovery* and all the stars between. All of their paths led here, to the two of them and the baby.

Michael's hand on her belly is the center of the universe, and everything else reaches outward. There's family she hasn't heard of and history she'll never know, and there's Michael, and the sand between her toes and the whispering of the water.

Her grandmother's ocean. Philippa's ocean.

Michael kisses her cheek. "We can bring her here, when she's here." Their baby will see the ocean. She'll have to see it for Claire, who never

did, and Vivian, who never saw it again. Someday Laira and Michael will be gone and their daughter will sit here, thinking of them and everyone who came before: how many people loved her and her family. That's what family is: that unending history of love, reaching back to forgotten names and faces no one living can recall.

"She'll see it."

Michael holds her long after the sun rises bright over the sea.

### Chapter Summary

Laira's former partner looks for closure. Michael and Laira work a few things out together.

### Chapter Notes

many thanks to Whimsicalli and Sanctuaria for helping me plot.

Laira's fingers run along her neck, sink into her hair and then guide Michael up from between her thighs. "Wait."

Worry flashes through her, but Laira tugs her up, kissing her.

"It's not- I'm not - you're wonderful."

"Ah." Michael chuckles, kissing her neck before she snuggles in along Laira's side. Their skin slides, damp with sweat. "I am pretty wonderful."

"It's not you." Laira kisses her head again, her hand grabbing her shoulder just a little tighter. "It's—"

"You're all right?"

That earns an eye-roll. "Fine."

"Not—" Michael could list so many things, but Laira hushes her.

"Sometimes I don't orgasm."

That makes sense. Logical. Michael's been in that moment, been lost in her head. Happens much more by herself, with a partner it's easier, usually. She kisses Laira's arm, then her breast, working her way up to look at her eyes.

"Thinking too much?"

Staring at the ceiling instead of answering her, Laira sighs. She rubs her belly, rolls her legs to the side.

"We don't have to talk about it."

Laira makes that little noise in the back of her throat, and yes, they do need to talk about it. Michael trails her hand along her inner thigh, and Laira shivers a little. Michael leans in, kissing her to check if this is all right, if she can keep touching, and Laira nibbles her lip, just a little.

"I get stuck."

"We all do." Michael wrinkles her nose, then kisses her again, lingering before kisses Laira's forehead. "You have too much up here."

"Today was a good day."

"Good doesn't mean it can't linger."

Sitting up a little on her elbows, Laira sighs again. "I don't know what my problem is. I don't think it was negotiations."

Michael traces her fingers up, running along Laira's inner thigh, brushing against her very sensitive skin.

"That's not going to help me think."

"You need to think less."

They kiss, clumsy, and hungry, lips rough, then gentle. Laira sighs into Michael's neck when Michael touches her again.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No—" Laira whimpers, then finds her breath. "It feels good; you might be wasting your time."

"I'm a time traveler, remember? I am excellent with time."

Laira's eyes are dark and deep, and the little ways she trembles as Michael touches her and tantalizing. Why hurry? Did she need to hurry before?

"We don't have to be anywhere until tomorrow morning." Michael turns her head to look out at the brilliant blue planet beneath them. "That's

still hours away for Abuja. We have time.”

Biting her lip, Laura makes this breathy little sound that suggests this won't take nearly as long as she seems to think. “You don't—”

“Oh this is fun.” Michael shifts, balancing so she has freer movement with her fingers. “I don't mind things that take awhile.”

Laura's eyes soften, and the way she bites her lip has a story. “We never had time.”

That's it.

“In your last relationship?” Michael asks, stroking her thumb in a slow circle.

“We were so busy.”

And hurried, and they didn't live on the same ship.

“Makes it hard.”

“Not talking made it worse.” Laura gapes, staring up at the ceiling instead of looking at Michael. So her last partner wouldn't have asked and she wouldn't have volunteered.

“The last time Book and I had sex we knew what to do, we were good, we've always been good, but we weren't there anymore.” Michael kisses her shoulder. “We couldn't find our way back.”

“But you—” Laura pauses, her words caught behind her gasp. “You're still cordial.”

“Took a little work.” Michael moves her fingers a little faster, increases the pressure for an instant, then slows. “A lot of talking.”

“We haven't spoken since I—”

“That would be messier.”

“I don't- how do I- dammit, Michael.”

Kissing Laura's neck gets her that much closer, but Michael teases, keeps her touch too gentle. That little growl is exactly what she wanted to hear. Kissing her hard, Michael traces her jawline, then finds her eyes. “Sometimes you don't orgasm, sometimes I don't, but I don't think today is one of those—”

Michael pauses, holding her hand completely still while Laura squirms beneath her.

“You're infuriating.”

“And you're close.”

“Close isn't—” Nibbling her neck is almost cheating. Michael runs her palm across her breast because her nipples are too sensitive and that and her shoulder and the roughness of her thumb ought to—

Going taut beneath her, Laura exhales, panting. Michael eases her hand away, curling into her chest. They lie there, wrapped in each other, Laura catching her breath while Michael traces the scales on her skin.

“Do they teach how to gloat at the academy?”

“It's an important part of the command track.”

Laura pats her shoulder, then kisses the top of her head. “You really never give up, do you?”

“You didn't ask me to stop.”

“I didn't want you to, I—”

“You don't want to take more than you think you should.”

“I take so much from you.”

“I offer.”

“You do, and I appreciate that, I just—”

It's not a fixed point. Sometimes I give more, sometimes you do, if it gets out of balance, we'll talk about it.”

Laura sighs, kisses her forehead, and sighs. “You make it sound easy.”

“Hasn't it been?”

“What?”

Michael sits up, smiling down at her in the weak light of the bedroom. Stars reflect off the metal and glass in their quarters, like they're surrounded by tiny points of light. “We've been easy.”

Pushing up on her elbows first, Laura tilts her head, then sits up beside Michael, reaching for the tattoo on Michael's ribs. Her fingers run delicately across Michael's sweat-dampened skin. "I trust you."

"You do."

"I don't know where your optimism comes from, and you're infuriating."

"It's my best quality."

Laura reaches for her, touches her chin, then the corner of her mouth, and they kiss, slow and deep. Kissing her tastes of sex, and Michael could slide Laura's hand down, find that connection again, but she's content. She still tingles from Laura's tongue against her clit. She has such a way with that.

"I don't want to take you- us - for granted."

"So you overthink it."

Laura's eyes flick down, and she makes that noise and Michael toys with her ear until she chuckles. "Infuriating."

"I doubt, of course I do, but we both wanted this- us - so much we made each other the heart of a whole pocket universe." She shrugs. "That's basically empirical proof."

"Of course it is." Laura touches her cheek, then kisses her again. "I have ruined beautiful things."

"Well, we're exceptional, and neither of us know when to quit so...we're stuck with each other, and she's stuck with us." Michael leans down, kissing her belly, then meets her eyes. "It'll be incredible."

---

"So what did you tell your mother?" Tilly asks, leaning in over the champagne. Actual champagne, from France, because Earth has gone all out for the debut of the VARS drive interface. There's Romulan ale, and whisky, a dozen different cocktails from all over the Federation, but champagne is so human, and they drank it often in the 23rd century, but here...Earth was separate.

Now the Federation feels whole again.

"I told her that Laura's pregnant, that we're thrilled about it though it hasn't been easy. That we'd love to see her when she has time. Quick, easier than I thought although I drafted it so many times."

"That's just you."

"Finding the right words makes it better."

"Did it?"

Michael chuckles, finishes her champagne and sets the glass down. "I don't know if I had the right words. Telling her in person, where I could see her be happy for us seems like the right thing, but maybe it wouldn't have gone how I thought. Connections are hard for her."

"That doesn't mean you can't want a connection."

"I have one."

"Is it the one you want?"

Dammit, Tilly. Michael sighs, walking away from the excited crowd towards the "Part of me will always be ten, wanting my mother to come back and make me safe, but that's not her, not this her anyway." Saying it over and over will make it sink in better, won't it? "We have each other now, and that's such a gift, so I need to work with that."

"And you are, of course you are, but you're allowed to miss your other moms." Tilly leans back against the railing on the balcony, the setting sun lighting her hair. "Philippa would have been so funny."

"Funny?"

"You got the president of the Federation pregnant, and she married you, that's like a coup, isn't it?"

Chuckling Michael nods. "I did have to convince Federation intelligence that I had no plans of destabilizing the Federation's democracy."

"Not truly destabilized, maybe a little shaky, sometimes."

Michael can't help wincing, and Tilly laughs, holding her shoulder. "The Vice President was pretty funny yesterday."

"Her sense of humor is so different than Laura's."

"Her and the president of United Earth were a very snappy double act. Admiral Vance thought it would be good for the Federation to see joy in what we do. A spore drive on every starship makes the galaxy a very small place."

"Opens a whole host of new security issues."



“For security, you’re in diplomacy now, like it or not, Michael.”

“I hate politics.”

“So you say, over and over. I hate teaching, did I mention that?”

“No, you didn’t. You should explain it to me again.”

Tilly hugs her, holding her tight. “I think you’re going to be the best mom, and I’m proud of you finding your way to do that.”

She loves Tilly, so much, and holding onto her reminds Michael to hope. Gabrielle will be thrilled in her way. Michael will understand that, eventually. Her father tried to warn her, and the trauma Gabrielle’s been through has changed her, Michael has to remember that. Expectations won’t help anyone. They’re together. She’ll meet her granddaughter. That will have to be all right.

Later, Michael watches across the room as Tilly and her cadets show the Governor of Titan how she can use the VARS interface to find anywhere in the galaxy. Laura stands with them, radiant in her blue dress. She rarely wears anything tight, and her jackets have been unbuttoned for so many weeks that Michael’s almost forgotten how fantastic she looks in anything form fitting. Her tailor met them on Earth with an updated wardrobe and this dress clings to the curve of her belly like a wave on the sand.

Keyla nudges her arm as Laura laughs with the Governor. “So she looks happy, and you look incredible.”

Michael smiles, then nods. She rarely gets to attend anything without her dress uniform, but this isn’t about her being Captain Burnham, it’s a party for Paul, Reno, Veddra and Auriello, mostly a civilian occasion. She can wear a dress this time, and she’d been waiting to wear this gold one from Rigel IV. “Thanks.”

“Must be nice to not worry about anything.”

“Oh I can worry without a uniform.”

Keyla looks up at the starscape projected onto the ceiling. “About how the Hitchhiker’s going to go over with the rest of the Federation?”

“Second time we’ve dominated the news cycle.” Michael lifts her glass towards Keyla in a mock toast. “I worry more that Laura’s overcompensating and she’ll going to be miserable tomorrow.”

Keyla nods understandingly. “That sounds like her.”

“She doesn’t think so.”

“Course not, fun today, suffer tomorrow. It’s a classic pilot choice.”

“That’s where it comes from.”

Leaning in, Keyla whispers. “I can translate pilot sometimes, but some of our secrets have to remain secret. Sacred hot shot trust and all that.”

“Right, that makes sense.”

“Maybe you should find a way to enjoy tonight, instead of worrying. Save the worrying for when you have to wear your uniform.”

Michael pats her aarm, and Keyla hugs her, quick and tight.

“You’re such a mom.”

“Hush, I’m fun.”

Chuckling, Keyla grabs another drink and hands it to Michael. “Your idea of fun used to be chasing across a planet getting shot at.”

“It was fun, then.” Michael sips her drink, then sighs. “Sounds awful now.”

“Good thing you have the diplomatic ship.”

“Oh yeah, because diplomats never get shot at.”

Keyla taps Michael’s glass. “Better not worry about that. Drink, have sensible fun, tell your wife she looks hot.”

“She so does.”

---

Attempting to have fun is easier than she thought. The party’s jovial, even excited. The new spacedock should be able to install spore drives quickly now that they have a workable interface, and there’s still more testing to be done, but within several months most Starfleet ships should have their own spore drive. Federation ships will follow. That means more trade, more exploration, more connections.

She shuts her eyes for a moment and allows the giddiness of the crowd to wash over her. Earth is opening up. The latest reports about scosian fever on Andoria have been positive. Quarantine efforts are succeeding. Everything might be all right for awhile. Michael can enjoy this.

And everyone wants her too. President Montgomery shares a shot with her and explains how she met Margo during the most recent election.

The Vice President and her husband are in the middle of a group of people laughing.

There's so much laughter.

And joy.

Her shoulders are patted, her cheeks are kissed, and congratulations are whispered, once or twice they're shouted across a conversation. She finds a way to efficiently say they're happy, they are grateful to the Prophets of Bajor, and their crew - their family - for supporting them. They're very fortunate.

And yes, Laira looks incredible.

Michael's Vulcan memory training makes it easy to remember the names of all the scientists and engineers who presented at the summit. Dr. Merak doesn't seem to think she should know him, from the way he begins talking to her, and he's prepared to be annoyed that Michael doesn't know his name, but she does.

She's acutely aware that he's part of the slipstream group on Luna. She's seen a few holos of Laira and him, just in passing, and he's taller than she thought. Perhaps it's because he's trying to be imposing. He doesn't wait for an introduction, and he's the first person to talk to her in over an hour who doesn't begin with congratulations.

He doesn't extend his hand. "Do you miss your anonymity yet?"

"I lost that before I came to this century, actually."

"You create waves everywhere you go?"

"Seems that way." Michael shrugs, fighting fate gets her nowhere. At least being the captain of a time travelling starship is a better reason for being famous than mutiny. She can live with being the president's wife for as long as Laira ends up being president, there's several years left in Laira's first term anyway.

"You solved the Burn."

"We rescued a lost child."

He nods, but he's not listening. "And the DMA."

"Turns out that was actually pretty easy too."

"After you left the galaxy and met a new species with technology beyond our imagination."

"Not a lot of stars out there. It's weird how dark it is."

He stares, tilting his head, and Michael smiles back. She's in too good a mood to fall for whatever trap he's trying to lay. Laira was nervous about seeing him again, but she didn't elaborate. For a moment, Michael's acutely grateful she didn't meet Merak while he and Laira were still together. Pretending to like him would have been annoying."

"Did she fall for you then?" His hand tightens on his glass a little.

"You'd have to ask her," she says, setting down her empty glass on one of the floating trays. "Assuming you mean my wife."

"That didn't take you long."

"Some puzzles just fall into place."

"When we talked about getting married, she wanted to do it at Mudu Jigurna."

Michael doesn't know much about Bajor, only a handful of temples from her briefings and what Laira's told her. "I'm not familiar with that temple."

"No, she took you to Resuna Idum."

There's some context she's missing. Something he knows, something he's still bitter about. Laira didn't mention wanting to marry him. They were together, but they weren't heading for the same path. Michael and Laira found together.

Merak toys with the stem of his glasses. "Resuna Idum is one of the most sacred places on Bajor. It's like getting married at Borobudur on Earth."

Michael thought their former relationship was much less of a sore spot with him than it appears to be. Perhaps Laira did too. She believes people when they tell her they're all right. Ironic - considering how much she but it's something Michael adores about her.)

Shrugging innocently, Michael feigns ignorance. "I thought it was important to Laira because her parents got married there. Mine got married on a space station."

"How nice." His tone suggests otherwise. He takes a breath, then sets down his glass, as if he needs his hands free. "Laira told me that it didn't matter to her where we got married, or if we got married at all. We were living in the moment. Life was short and precious." For a moment, his eyes are soft and his wistful smile is gentle. Michael can see what Laira might have found attractive in him.

Then it's gone, and his eyes are as cold as parasitic ice. "We were together for years, I supported her through her campaign, and you're with her and then you're married and now" he pauses, shaking his head. "Well, it seems it was the will of the Prophets."

There's something about him she finds deeply unpleasantly, and her shoulders are tight, like a courier exchange has gone wrong. She has to be overreacting. She's jealous, or overprotective, something, but as much as she wishes she was the problem, because her reaction is something Michel can control. This isn't about her.

It about what Laira didn't want with him, and now has with Michael. That would be difficult to live with, of course he's upset.

"And we are grateful for their blessing," Michael says evenly. No point in aggravating his wounds. President Montgomery catches her eye across the room, and she thinks that's the end of it. He had his chance to snap at her and remind her that she's obviously the inferior partner. Losing a romantic partner is difficult, of course he's angry. Lashing out is a typical reaction. Still, it nags at her. Book is happy for them, for Michael especially. Even after everything they went through,

After meeting the governor of Titan and several of the regional leaders of Earth, Michael's almost forgotten about Merak. Everyone's hopeful, happy, and it feels like the end of the war, so many centuries ago.

She hasn't seen Laira for awhile. She must be with Margo and some of the other journalists because she can't catch sight of either of them in the ballroom. Bridget is with Hugh, Paul, Reno and Veddra, and the latter are decidedly flirty. Michael raises an eyebrow their way and Paul smirks.

Jen and her husband standing talking to Admiral Vance and Ronia, and the rest of her crew's spread out around the room, but she doesn't see Laira.

Michael heads out to the plaza, beneath the stars. The night air's warm and sweet, heavy with humidity, and the trees make a tunnel along the ballroom. She walks a few dozen meters, following the greenery. Around a corner, Michael hears them before she can see them.

Laira's universal translator is translating her Cardassian into the sharpest enunciation in standard. The voice that follows hers is human. Merak, Michael recognizes after a moment, and he's saved all that simmering frustration for this argument.

"The gaps in my knowledge of you are because you kept everything to yourself, hidden away like you had your own cloaking device." Merak takes a step back from her, his hands trembling. "I can't know what you want, because you don't share it, and then you walk away, because what we had meant nothing to you."

"That's not true." Laira stands still and straight, her fingers wound together. Her eyes on him.

"We built something important together, at least, I thought we had something that could have lasted, but you vanished on us." Marek paces away from her, then back, running his hand through his hair. "I lost everything to the DMA. My research, my lab...then you." Reaching for her face, he caresses her chin. "The lab can be rebuilt, the reserach doesn't matter anymore because the spore drive is moving forward and slipstream tech is about to be abandoned, and I could have gotten through that, if I had you. We were still together, I should have had you, but you—"

"I couldn't." Now her voice is soft, Cardassian diction falling away.

This is not Michael's argument. This doesn't even involve her. She should walk away, let Laira find her when she's ready. It bothers her how close Meraak is to her, how the way he touches her is wrong somehow. Michael's instincts are usually right, so she stays.

"You failed me when I needed you, and you know, I'd get it if you had a new relationship. Go on a mission, fall in love, but it wasn't even Michael you left me for, was it? You left me to rot because you didn't care what happened to me any more." He holds her chin roughly, his fingers digging into her skin. "Perhaps you never did."

Inhaling sharply, Laira turns her chin, shakes off his hand. "I loved you, not the way you wanted."

He balls his hand into a fist, tapping it against the garden wall. "I supported you through your campaign. I went to so many parties and speeches. So many of my paapers were late to publication. Maybe we would have finished if—"

Lairaa rubs her chin. The marks his fingers left are bright pink on her skin. "No."

"No?"

"You didn't slow down your research for me. I didn't ask, and it didn't happen."

"I did everything—"

Laira tilts her head, studying him as if shes's finally seeing him. "We supported each other, I think, perhaps not as well as we could have, or—" she pauses and Michael knows that nervous little laugh too well. "MAybe that wa the best we could do. I am sorry for how I hurt you, but there is no us now. That's past."

"And it meant nothing. It means nothing. All I did—" He taps his fist on the wall again, grunting a little. That hurt.

"It's over." Laira stands there for another moment, then takes a step away. "This is finished. Maybe it was finished a long time ago. Clarity doesn't come easily to me, especiaally with my own feelings."

He gestures at her belly, and the anger leaves his jaw, but his eyes are still too dark; his shoulders too tight. "You didn't want this."

"It's—"

“You didn’t want this with me.”

“I don’t think you did either.” Laira’s tone is soft, and there’s more sorrow in her voice than anger. “This wouldn’t have happened with us.”

“You can’t know that.”

Laira laughs, bitter and exhausted.

Michael should walk away - walk closer - make her presence known, but this needs to resolve, and she doesn’t want to walk away. She can’t leave.

“The Prophets would not have given us a child, and even if they did, you would have hated it.”

“You can’t say that, I’d love to have a child.”

Laira touches her belly, looks down and chuckles. “You would hate having a pregnant wife.”

“Because your perfect Starfleet captain doesn’t care when you sneeze your way through dinner?”

“That’s all pregnant is, a minor inconvenience?”

“You said Bajorans sneeze.”

Laira clicks her tongue, fidgeting with a fold of fabric in her dress. “Humans get nauseated, Cardassians lose the ability to regulate their body temperature. My blood pressure bounces around like a faulty shield regulator. The newest development is that it’s itchy.”

Disgust flits across his face.

“You know I threw up on Michael? I thought I was fine. I was fine. I’m always fine. Then—” Laira waves her hand in an arc and sighs. “We both had to change.”

“Surely that’s not—”

“It’s a mess. I’ve sat through so many meetings trying not to end it in the middle. I’ve nearly fainted in front of three different ambassadors. I can’t sleep, I can’t stay awake. My body’s not even mine—”

“You hate it.”

Michael winces, but she knows what Laira’s going to say. She could say it for her. Taking a step down the path, Michael starts walking toward them.

“I adore it.”

“You can’t possibly—”

Laira smiles, eyes bright. Her voice catches in her throat. “Michael and I made a person, and she’s here, she’s right here. I don’t know anything about her yet, but she’s going to be extraordinary.”

“And your work?”

“I delegate.”

He laughs, and this might be the first time Michael’s agreed with him. “You’ve never done that before.”

“I haven’t, I didn’t—”

Michael’s boots crunch against the stone and they both turn, eyes on her like searchlights. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s all right—” Laira begins.

“Nothing to interrupt,” Merak finishes. “We’re done here.” His shoulders are still too tense, and the marks on Laira’s chin are still too pink and Michael would be thrilled if they never saw him again.

But there are pleasantries.

“Michael, this is Doctor Daar Marek, leader of the slipstream propulsion project on Luna.”

He grins, all charm now that Michael’s here. “We’ve met, dear.” He leans in like he’s about to kiss Laira’s cheek, then looks at Michael. “Your wife was remarkably gracious about how her crew has made my life’s work irrelevant with their new spore drive.” His smile suggest it’s all a joke. Good fun among friends, but nothing in his eyes matches.

Michael touches Laira’s arm, then slips a hand around her back. “Progress often stings a little, doesn’t it?”

Laira’s grip tightens around her wrist, then eases. She’s all right.

“Like a slap across the face,” Daar replies, still smiling. “But there are always new technologies. Maybe next summit, I’ll have a surprise for you.”

“We’ll look forward to it.” Tension hovers in the air like a warp field, and then he leaves, his footsteps echoing into the night.

Laira’s hand finds her upper arm, holding on. Her breath’s still too fast and her back’s so straight her posture vibrates. “You, as always, have exquisite timing.”

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira talk about how her last relationship ended. Gabrielle calls, and Michael misses the rest of her parents. Laira talks to Zora about a new development and takes some time to walk around the ship while Discovery does her work

### Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Whimsicalli and Sanctuaria for being my cheerleaders.

The transporter whisks them to their quarters, leaving Earth behind for the moment. Michael touches her back, soft and supportive. "I'm going to get tea."

Star there, perhaps find words after. Michael's golden dress bares much of her back and Laira's gaze follows her shoulder blades, then her spine. She's so beautiful that it's hard to think. Her heart's still pounding in her ears, and her fingertips tingle. She left Daar so much quieter the last time, but maybe she didn't see it. There's so much she didn't see.

Didn't want to see.

Michael returns from the replicator, setting the tea on the table by the sofa. Sitting down, she slips her feet from her shoes and curls up, knees beneath her. "It was a good party."

She should sit, relax, let go of the tension in her back. A strange little flutter twirls in her belly. Not quite an itch, some kind of tugging. She can't place it. Wouldn't have even noticed it, but her body's easier to think about than Daar, or Michael. What's she supposed to say? How does she explain how much of a mess she made of her relationship with him?

"Are you all right?"

Yes - no - focus. Her feet ache, hot and stiff. Laira sits on the edge of the sofa beside Michael. Reaching down, she removes her shoes.

Michael shifts, moving down to help. The silken folds of her dress part and Michael's fingers wrap around her ankle. Kissing her knee as she sits up, Michael stares at her chin, but doesn't reach out. Laira follows her eyes with her fingers, stroking the marks Daar's fingers left. Little sore points that'll bruise by morning.

"He wasn't like that."

Michael nods, shifting her feet to sit closer. Laira reaches for her foot, pulling it into her lap. Rubbing Michael's feet will give her something to do with her hands. Let her focus. "When Voq was activated, he snapped, like a switch. He was Ash, and I loved him, and then he wasn't."

Laira sighs, running her thumbs over the ball of Michael's foot. "Daar's not a spy."

"Someone you love turning on you is the same betrayal, spy or not."

"I thought I ended it better." Laira's fingers follow the little bones that run up Michael's toes, finding a slow rhythm.

Michael grabs her tea and leans back on the sofa, facing her. "What did you say?"

"That I couldn't be what he needed." That was it, wasn't it? "Honestly, I don't remember."

"Too busy?"

Looking across at Michael, she loses herself in steady dark eyes. "I wasn't all right."

"You were pretty pulled in there for awhile."

"How could I be depressed? We saved the galaxy."

Michael touches her toes to Laira's belly, smiling over. "Of course, depression never gets us when things are all right."

"I didn't know how bad it was until it wasn't so bad."

"It's like this fog over everything, or being in one of those negative energy bubbles, everything's dim." Michael leans in, closing the space between them.

"Everything but you." Laira kisses Michael's knee, then rests her chin on it. "I didn't think we were going to make it."

"Neither did I."

“Not that you’d admit it.”

Laughing, Michael kisses her cheek. “Never.”

Sighing as she reaches for Michael’s dress, Laira toys with the material between her fingers. “It was dark for longer than I knew, I was.”

“I know.” Michael traces her chin, fingers warm against her skin. “I’ve been there, did that crawling back. Little less vomiting.”

Smiling comes so easily with her. “Being sick made it easier. I could end a meeting and go home.” And home wasn’t alone. Home had Michael, home had the little spark of the hitchhiker. Home existed again after the warp bubble.

“So that’s why you don’t hate it.”

“Being sick with you was the calmest my life has been in years.”

Michael kisses her cheek, still chuckling.

“I threw up on you, we’d been together for what, a week?”

“Six days.”

“And it was fine.”

“You were sick.”

“You didn’t leave.”

Michael takes her hands, wrapping Laira’s fingers in her own. “You never asked me to.”

She feared Michael would leave. She was sure of it for weeks. Everyone leaves. Her relationship with Daar only worked as long as it did because he’d leave, she’d leave - they were both too busy. She never counted on him to stay. Maybe she didn’t want him too, not the way she wanted Michael.

There were so many reasons for that. Perhaps Laira wasn’t ready, or she knew that they wouldn’t be able to be any more than what they were. She was never going to move further, they didn’t have a next.

But Michael did.

“I was so afraid that you would.”

Nodding gently, Michael kisses the back of her hand. “I thought you were willing to do this alone.”

“Willing and wanting are very different things.”

Michael meets her eyes, nearly in her lap. The endless dark of her brown eyes is warm and deep and full of promise. “My crew is my family. I know my place and I know my path. It’s taken longer than I thought to get there, but I know this is where I am meant to be. Where I’d choose to be.” She releases Laira’s hand and touches her chin, sad for a moment, then touches her belly. “Being able to share that is wonderful.”

“My mother has a family, my family but I—”

“You just met them.”

“My crew was close but they’re on one path and mine is another.”

“And yours is isolating.”

“It wasn’t at first.” Laira breath shudders in her chest, and carrying this truth for as long as she hasn’t doesn’t make it any easier to say. “Being an ambassador is wonderful: bringing in new people, making the Federation stronger, finding ways to benefit everyone - I made connections. I wasn’t alone.”

“Then they needed a president.”

“Jen’s already done so much for the Federation, some of the other council members are qualified, a few even wanted the position, but after you colved the Burn, the office of the president was going to be negotiating with everyone. Bringing them in. I could do that.”

“You do that well.”

Chuckling, Laira pats Michael’s hand. “Thank you, but you might be a little biased, dear.”

“My opinion is indefatigable.” Michael kisses her cheek, then curls in against her. The heat of her softens the knot in Laira’s chest.

“After the election, it changed. I changed. I know the Federation Council, the planetary leaders, but it’s different as their president. My role is different.”

“You’re set apart.”

“Further than I thought. I expected some—”

“But there’s light years between you—”

“And everyone,” Laura finishes for her. “Parsecs even.”

“And Daar?”

Laura shifts, moving her legs, pulling Michael in tighter. “He changed too.”

“It’s different dating a president.”

“Protocol changed, my security detail tripled, my schedule was inflexible—”

“And he didn’t want to share you.”

Taking a breath aches, as if her chest is too heavy. “I couldn’t be helpful to him. My presence changed a room.”

“And he wasn’t getting over it.”

“I shoould have—”

“No.” Michael sits up, touching Laura’s chin, tracing the little sore marks with that furrow in her forehead. “It’s not you. Some of this is on him. Being with you is complicated. The protocol’s long, and the security can be a lot, but it’s worth it.”

Laura swallows, her head aches like she’s going to cry. “It is?”

“Trust me, I’m kind of an expert on being married to the President.” Michael kisses her and leaves the sofa, taking the dermal regenerator from the cabinet. “Although, I think Arjun would have been a great first gentleman.”

“He would.” Laura sits up, holding her head steady for Michael. “I think Saru might, as well, if that interests him.”

Michael grins, her nose crinkling. “Oh he’d be great at it. Loves protocol, already speaks Vulcan and Romulan.”

The dermal regenerator glows, warm and bright, and her chin itches as it heals.

“You bruise so easily.”

“I do.” Laura looks down at the dermal regenerator in Michael’s hands, lowering her eyes.

“I know you want to blame yourself; it’s easier if you do. Then it’s not him, you’ve done this. If you’d done better, he wouldn’t be the way he is.” Michael sighs, sets aside the device and reaches for Laura’s hands. “He made choices, and who he blames them on is irrelevant. Relationships change, sometimes they end well, sometimes they don’t, and it’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

Nodding is easier than speaking, and Laura’s not sure if her voice would work. This, now, is better than she could have hoped, better than she could have imagined. If losing Daar wasn’t her fault, if she didn’t doom that relationship, then this one might make it. This can last.

“It’s a big galaxy, and a bigger universe and I can’t promise forever. I can give you now. I love now.”

Shutting her eyes, Laura nods again, then laughs, clearing the lump in her throat. “Now is incredible.”

Michael pulls her in, hugging her tight. “Isn’t it?”

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On the third morning after the party, they’re finishing on their visit to Earth. The ambassadors are drafting the last for the treaty language and the VARS drive specifications are going out to all Federation shipyards. Laura sits on Michael’s sofa, tea getting cold on the table in front of her. Michael’s in the shower. Velocity with Keyla left her dripping with sweat after breakfast and Laura can still taste the salt from when she kissed her.

Such a tease.

Laura shifts the focus on her holopadd from technological exchange between Earth and Ni’Var back to the Andorian relief effort.

Zora chimes in from overhead, gentle as always. “Madam President, I apologize for interrupting. I have an incoming message for the captain, and the connection is unstable.”

“I can get her, Zora, send it through.”

“It is from Andoria space, her mother, Gabrielle Burnham.”

Leaving the sofa, Laura pauses in the doorway to the bathroom. She raises her voice over the sonic shower. “Michael?”

“Everything okay?”

“Zora has a message from your mother.”

“My mother? Put it through, I’ll get a towel.”



Gabrielle's voice carries from the living room, where she stands, hands behind her back. "You can take the time to get dressed, Michael, I'm not going anywhere."

Turning towards her, Laura grabs her robe from the back of the sofa and pulls it on, wrapping it around her belly. "It's good to hear from you, I hope you're well."

"Not getting as much sleep as I'd like, but-" Gabrielle pauses, dropping her eyes to Laura's belly. "You'll experience that soon enough."

Several more months does not seem soon at all, but Laura nods. "We appreciate what you and the other Qowot Milat are doing. What you risk every day for the good for the Federation."

"And the galaxy," Gabrielle adds, releasing her hands. "The situation on the Andoria remains tense and unpredictable. Messy. A few factions are trying to organize elections, but there are many who long for the stability of the Emerald Chain, and resent those they saw as lesser trying to help." She looks past Laura to Michael, who emerges from the bedroom in a tank top and pants to stand beside Laura.

"Yes Michael, I got your message, and I know you would have rather told me about my granddaughter in person. I'm sorry that couldn't happen. It's so busy here, and even if it wasn't, I'm afraid I'm more comfortable being an observer in your life than a participant. J'Vini helped me realize that."

Laura slips her hand into Michael's.

"I can't imagine how hard it is."

"I let go of you hundreds of times, and you're back, and I love that, and you, I'm just not good at it." Gabrielle shakes her head and the blue fabric of her habit moves with her. "I'm happy for you, for both of you. Parenting is hard, worse than inventing time travel, but it's rewarding. Your father used to say that he found new levels of happy once we had you. You brought out things we could only imagine before." She pauses, staring through Michael at a memory centuries past. "It would be easier if he was here, I think he'd be more of what you want."

"I'm glad you're here," Michael insists: calm, sad, and steady. "I'm grateful you can experience this with us."

"Thank you, Michael." Gabrielle looks to her left, then smiles at them. "I need to go."

"I love you."

"I love you too, babygirl." That smile is absolutely radiant, just like Michael's. "Laura, being pregnant was hell, even when Michael took it pretty easy on me. I'm not going to tell you it's all wonderful, but it's worth it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I'll call when I can. Keep each other safe. Sleep now, because after she gets here the galaxy's never the same." Gabrielle smiles one more time. "It's that much brighter."

Her holo disappears and they're standing together, staring at the empty side of their quarters. Michael sighs, and the air in the room seems heavier. She squeezes Laura's hand then releases her fingers, smiling down sheepishly at her bare feet. "Guess I should finish getting dressed." She heads into the bedroom, not asking for company. She rarely does. Too independent.

Laura follows her, sitting on the bed while Michael takes her socks out of the dresser. Pulling up one leg on her left, she rests her chin on her knee. "Would your father be more excited to babysit?"

"He'd be thrilled." Michael pulls one sock on and stops, shaking her head as she smiles. "I have more memories of him. Mom was always so much busier. Dad did more things with me. Coloring in holograms of the galaxy, reading new parts of science, building model starships..." she trails off, pulling on her other sock. "I can imagine him tossing her up in the air so she'll laugh. He's tall like you, so it's easier."

"My dad and I used to assemble whole fleets of model starships, gluing them together in the mess after dinner, setting them all up so we could send images back to my grandparents." Laura reaches over for Michael's hand. "I wish her was here too, and my mother."

Michael slips her fingers into Laura's easily. "I can't help thinking about my dad, and Amanda, Sarek - and you know Philippa would be just wonderful with a baby, though we'd never ever be able to tell her."

"The former Emperor?"

"She grew up in that terrible place, full of darkness and betrayal, and she chose to be my mother. I mean, she adopted the other me, but here, she chose me again. I'll always be grateful for that."

"Your other parents choose you too."

"More than most, right?" Michael laughs a little, but it's soft, and Laura can feel the loneliness in it.

"Someone I love very much told me recently that we get now, and we can try to make now as wonderful as we can. We lost almost everyone, but we have your mother, and your crew, and that's a lot of family. She's going to be so loved."

Michael lies back on the bed, holding their clasped hands to her chest. "And Vance, and Jen, and I'm pretty sure half the planetary leaders in the galaxy are already enamored with our baby."

"No shortage of babysitters."

“None at all.” Michael toys with Laura’s bracelet, rubbing her fingers against the back of her hand. “I’m happy.”

“It’s okay to be sad too.”

“She can’t drop everything and—”

“Neither can we.”

“I know, right, absolutely—”

Laura lies down beside her, curling on her side so her face is almost on Michael’s shoulder. “But she’s your mother.”

“Missing everyone else is illogical. We have her.”

“Missing everyone else is absolutely right.” Laura snuggles in a little closer, her forehead touching Michael’s cheek. “After my mother died, I still had my dad, and he tried so hard to be there for me, to take me with him whenever he could so I wouldn’t be alone. I loved him, and I adored him for that, but he was never also my mother too. I still miss her.”

Michael strokes her shoulder, pulls her a little closer and they lie there, wrapped in each other’s breathing.

“Philippa would love arguing with you.”

“Oh?”

“She thinks democracy is foolish, she’d love me being married to you.”

Laura settles in closer, her head on Michael’s chest. “I think my chances of a bloody coup d’etat are less in our current system.”

“So much less.”

“Good.”

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“One last thing, ma’am. I’m adding Commander Nhan to your security detail.” Vance pours himself more coffee on his end of the holocomm. He wraps the cup in his hands and looks at Laura. “Coridan III is still recovering from their Emerald Chain occupation, it’s planetary security is less secure than we’d like.”

“I see.”

“Commander Nhan has worked with the *Discovery* crew. She knows them. She’s also had significant engagements with Emerland Chain remnants, so she knows what to look for.”

Laura nods. Extra security is wise, and Michael has great respect for Nhan.

“She’s also Barzan,” Vance adds, sitting back a little. His expression softens, concern showing through. “She can’t catch or carry scosian fever.”

So the person standing beside her in crowded rooms won’t accidentally give it to her. Smart, but worrying at the same time.

“Scosian has been difficult to track on Coridan,” Vance continues. “Coridanites are immune, but the spread across their planet suggests they might be carriers.”

Laura toys with her bracelet to avoid chewing the inside of her lip. “And we don’t know.”

Vance nods. “Starfleet medical has the best minds in the galaxy and we don’t know. It’s as if scosian was designed to avoid detection.”

In a timeline long gone, someone sat in a laboratory and tweaked and twisted this disease until it evaded biofilters, hid in the proteins of the brain, and spread in ways their best medicine struggles to trace. The makers are gone, their original enemies might also be gone, and scosian fever remains. Laura forces herself to release her grip on the arm of her chair.

“Commander Nhan and her team are an extra layer of protection. You’re an important symbol, now more than ever. The galaxy is stable enough to have a family, to be with your family, and to keep that you have to be safe.”

Laura has made herself more vulnerable. The whole galaxy knows about their hitchhiker now, and reactions can be difficult to predict.

“Thank you, Admiral.”

That sensation returns when she stands from her chair. Like a bubble inside her environmental suit, except she’s the suit and it’s there and gone. Like a nudge. Hugh said she’d be able to feel the hitchhiker moving soon, but this doesn’t feel like that should.

Although she has no idea how would a being moving inside her feel? Would it itch? Should it feel like a bubble rising up. She stood still too long, because now Vance smiles, curious.

“Anything else Madam President?”

“No, I'm sorry. It's —”

He waits, standing to mirror her. Coffee in his hand. “Lightheaded again?”

“It feels like bubbles, I think, but I don't know. It's disconcerting.”

“Ah.” Vance sips his coffee, grinning over the mug. “Comes and goes, a bizarre sensation you can't easily identify?”

He's nearly as calm about things as Hugh. “Yes.”

“No idea what that could be, ma'am.” Vance says easily, smiling at her belly before looking up again. “I've heard on very good authority that you miss the bubbles when you can easily identify a foot pressed against your ribs.”

“How lovely.”

“I'll speak to you tomorrow, ma'am.” His smile is far too bright before the holo clicks off.

Shaking her head at the empty space where he was, Laira paces to the window, tentatively touching her belly above that feeling of bubbles. Their hitchhiker won't be able to feel Laira's hand, of course, but it's almost like she's afraid of spooking it, somehow making it stop. She has work to do.

“Zora, what's next on my calendar?”

“You have a meeting with the ambassadors from Ni'Var, Deneva Prime and Akaali in thirty-seven minutes, Madam President.”

“Thank you.” She opens her jacket and slips it off. Usually it's very comfortable but she can't stretch her arms fully and her skin seems confining today. Leaving her jacket on the back of her chair, Laira glances at her notes. She has time.

“Madam President, might I make a personal inquiry?”

“You may.”

“Are you able to feel the motion of your fetus internally?”

Right to it. “I believe so. I'm not entirely sure.”

“Have you asked Dr. Culber for verification?”

Laira sighs, rolls her shoulders one at a time and then walks towards the door of her office. “I will.”

“You have not asked him yet.”

“I have not.”

Zora leaves her in silence for a moment, but Laira can hear the question floating in the air.

“Why haven't I?”

“It does seem like the quickest resolution to your question.”

“It is.” She walks into the corridor, plans a route in her head, and starts walking. Usually when her jacket's off, and she's alone the crew lets her slip by without being formal. Walking the ship as Madam President makes everyone a little more tense. The captain's wife in a camisole is much less intimidating.

“You do not wish to have your concerns resolved?”

“I do, and I will, I-” she pauses, just between the junction of bulkhead S37A and bulkhead I31A. The portal here is one of her favorites, and the billowing gas outside the ship is charged and bright pink. They're near a nebula, but not one she recognizes from this angle. “Where are we?”

“We are outside the Rosette Nebula, near stellar cluster 2244. We are responding to a distress call from an Orion trade convoy, which lost navigation in the stellar wind.”

“Do we have communications?”

“We do at the moment, Madam President, however, the likelihood that we will need to enter the ion storm to find the trade convoy is high. Would you like me to reschedule your upcoming meeting?”

*Discovery's* moving closer to the brilliant plumes of solar gases, and losing communications will make her meeting schedule tomorrow daunting, but she doesn't mind a break at the moment.

“Please.”

Zora pauses, more out of politeness than any effort it takes to rearrange Laira's schedule. “I must inform you that moving today's meetings will require filling all remaining space in your schedule today and tomorrow.”

“It can't be helped though, can it?”

“Unfortunately not, Madam President. The Orion trade convoy we are trying to find lost navigational binding and was split up in the ion storm. There are eleven ships adrift in the gas cloud. We are assisting the *Armstrong* in their rescue effort.”

Then they might see Captain Saru for dinner, which would be nice. It’ll certainly cheer Michael up. Laira takes the turbolift to engineering, rather than beaming, because the hum is soothing, and it always feels so antiquated in the most delightful way. She’s rather fond of *Discovery*’s turbolifts.

Zora waits for the lift to move before she asks, “May I elaborate on my query from our previous conversation?”

“You may.”

“Would not resolving your concerns now make the rest of your day more pleasant?”

“I don’t want to bother Dr. Culber.”

“It is safe to say assume he will not be bothered by your question.”

Laira shuts her eyes. She’s stuck, as she often is, but the difficulty of explaining her emotional knots to a sentient starship might help her make sense of them herself. “How do you know I can feel the baby? Do you know when she moves?”

A hologram of the hitchhiker appears in the turbolift with her: a tiny golden creature surrounded by darker orange light. She resembles a baby more every time they look at her, and it’s both wonderful and intimidating.

“I am aware of her movements. I track her biosignature as I do all of the crew. I must confess I spend more time monitoring her than other, less fragile beings on board.”

“You like keeping an eye on her?”

“Her continued healthy development is a priority, I hope I have not overstepped.”

“No, no, that’s all right.” Laira sacrificed much of her autonomy and privacy when she agreed to serve as president, and the number of people who relatively checked on her well-being rose exponentially after the election. “So you know when she moves, and you’ve been able to connect that to my behavior?”

“You become distracted.”

“It’s very disconcerting.” Somehow that’s the easiest to admit to Zora. Laira tilts her head, because she never thought to ask Zora about this before. “Do you ever find it strange when we move inside of you?”

“The movement of the crew within *Discovery* is an anticipated and pleasant part of my existence. If the crew were to be absent, I would be emotionally affected.”

“So perhaps you understand this better than anyone. The crew is your responsibility, and you keep them safe. Knowing they’re with you brings you joy.”

Zora changes the hologram of the baby to the blue circular shape she seems to be her manifestation. “That is a reasonable assumption.”

“So I’m happy, and nervous, and I feel like every time I have a question I race to ask Hugh about it, and I don’t know if that’s asking too much of his time.”

“He is very busy.”

Laira smiles at the blue shape of Zora and steps off the turbolift. The shape follows her, as if they’re walking together. “I feel like I need him a lot.”

“I believe that is an expected response to internal gestation. It is a confusing experience.”

“I should be able to deal with it on my own. Run a scan, ask you, trust that everything is fine. Not take his time.”

“Can you take what is freely given to you?”

“Of course.”

“Then shouldn’t you?”

Laira stops in the corridor, staring at the hologram with her. “Elaborate.”

“Dr. Culber devotes himself to the physical and emotional well-being of the crew of *Discovery*, which has included you and the being inside of you since you returned from the warp bubble. It would take very little of his time to confirm what you suspect, and that time would be well spent by his own measuring. Why do you doubt that he would wish to help you?”

“I don’t doubt him.”

“You doubt yourself.”

“I’m fine, Zora, and I will be fine if Hugh tells me I can feel her today, or tomorrow, or days from now. I don’t need—”

“Perhaps it is not about needing.” Zora moves the lights within her circle, as if fidgeting with her hands the way Laira can’t help doing. “You exist together on this ship and you would not hesitate to assist any member of the crew.”

“I’m their president.”

“Dr. Culber is your doctor.”

Laira stops, again, hands on her hips. She stares towards her feet, which are beginning to be eclipsed by her belly. “I feel ridiculous. I know I’m pregnant. I know what’s happening. It’s something I want to happen.”

“And your emotional response is not what you would like it to be?”

“No. Maybe.”

“I believe Dr. Culber would be able to assist with that as well.”

Standing beside Zora, Laira chuckles, looks upward and walks into engineering. Not that she needs anything, she likes to watch them at work and Reno and Stamets are always welcoming.

“How’s it going?” Reno asks without looking up from her console. “Ready to see the inside of stellar cluster 2244 perhaps a little closer than you like?”

“Zora’s managed to explain why I need therapy.”

“One of those mornings, eh?” Reno takes a piece of some small edible rope-like object and passes it to Laira. “I think she’s working for Culber, making sure his calendar is full.”

“His calendar is full enough for anyone,” Stamets says, glaring at the food but not saying anything.

“Earth licorice, it’s good, it’s candy.”

Laira sniffs it and takes an experimental bite. It’s sweet and salty all at once, herbal like deka tea from Bajor.

“Most licorice is good. Reno replicates the weird stuff from Northern Europe.” Stamets passes them again and watches Laira’s face as she takes another bite. “If you hate it, I can get you a real snack.”

Reno looks wounded. “What happened to ‘you can’t eat in engineering’?”

“Nothing. You, *Reno*, can’t eat in engineering.” He tilts his head towards Laira. “She’s the captain’s wife, the rules are different.”

Veddra chuckles from another console, smiling easily. “I like how her position as president of the entire Federation is not what gets her grace to eat in engineering.”

“No jacket, no rank,” Reno says, passing Veddra another piece of forbidden licorice. “No ma’am’s unless Mrs. Burnham’s dressed fancy.”

“Oh, I see, that’s a wise shortcut.” Veddra gestures down at the holographic work station in the center of the lab. “Since you’re here, and off duty, would you like to see how we’re going to save the Orion convoy?”

Laira nods, grateful that it’ll be so easy to just watch for awhile. “Please.”

“It’s really very clever,” Reno says as she leads the way down to the holo. “Even if some of it is the *Armstrong*’s idea.”

“Captain Saru was one of us.”

“And those were his best days.” Reno shakes her head at Stamets. “We’re trying to cultivate a friendly rivalry, remember?”

“Right, right.” Stamets touches Laira’s back, guiding her to the right place to stand as they call up a holo of the nebula. “I’m working on it.”

### Chapter Summary

Michael worries about rumors and Laura's security. Haz summons Michael for a game of cards and Keyla joins her.

*"Captain's log, 865814.9.*

*"Commander Nhan has joined us from the Mitchell. While it's good to see her again, I wish her presence wasn't necessary. Though there's no clear threat, and it's a precautionary measure, it's difficult to avoid dwelling on it. Danger is part of Starfleet, and I know how being a starship captain might end. I've seen it. Laura should be safe though. Politics should be safe and dull.*

*"I've reached out to Haz Mazaro, just in case he knows something and the whispers and threats. He always did like me. Book said he tell me if he heard anything. He's much closer to his courier contacts than I am, and he's kind to help.*

*"While Laura's on Coridan III, Discovery's going to be assisting with the spore drive testing, along with the Armstrong, so we'll see Saru. I'm hoping for an update on how he's enjoying commanding his own ship, and perhaps even some new developments with his relationship with T'Rina. It's good to see him, and even better to see him so happy.*

*"I should remind myself to focus on the good, because there's so much of it. We're surrounded by love and support, and as time passes, I keep reminding myself that this is the universe we're going to give our daughter - one of safety and love, full of promise. Thinking about that almost makes the rest seem insignificant."*

Michael pauses, glancing across the bedroom where's Laura's still asleep. Coridan III doesn't feel like a dangerous situation, so maybe it's not here, perhaps it's the next planet, or the next. Laura's always had security, and Nhan is incredibly good at what she does. Bringing her in is smart, and nerve-racking. Needing the best is a difficult place to be.

"Almost insignificant," she finishes. "I always worry. It's easier when it's me. End log."

Michael runs her finger around the edge of her empty tea cup. She should sleep. All her worries will still be there in the morning, waiting, no closer to any kind of resolution. Shaking off her anxieties, she centers her breathing, then stands, cup in hand. Setting it back in the replicator, she pauses by window. Philippa's telescope is up in her ready room. Touching it won't actually do anything, but it would make her feel better.

Michael figets with her wedding ring. Philippa's agates are there. Sarek and Amanda are in the candles. Her dad would love the masks. It would be easier if she had them. If she could just open a channel to Earth, to Ni'Var, to whatever planet Philippa was maming safe tonight. She can feel them, echoing through history. Stay alert, but don't let it ruin the moment. Neutralize the threat. (Thank you, Philippa). After another moment, she crawls back into bed, curls raound Laura and falls asleep.

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Commander Nhan, two security officers, Tilly's cadets, Tilly and Laura all beamdown together. Michael touches Laura's hand, pulling her in for a moment so she cana't beam down yet. Laura smirks down at her, then kisses her forehead.

"You worry very loudly."

"I'm sorry."

"We'll be fine."

Laura and the baby, Laura and the cadets, Laura and Tilly and Nhan and her aides...everyone will be fine.

"I needed a minute."

Laura's smile grows and she kisses her, bright and demanding and when she;s done Micahel wants to cancel the whole day. Winking at her, Laura drops her hand to reach for her badge. "See you tonight, dear."

---

Saru brought her tea, and a cutting of his suhket plant. "It keeps outgrowing its place in my quarters."

"You're too good to it."

"I'm not going to provide the plant with more adversity to slow its growth. I will continue to give it away."

"Get some suhket on all the ships in the fleet."

"At the rate its growing, I certainly will." Saru settles into the sofa and folds his hands in his lap. "Perhaps it is a good sign."

"Oh?" Michael grins at him and he chuckles. "Other things from Ni'Var are flourishing?"

"Indeed."

Saru reaches over, touching her hand. "You look tired."

"Well, you know what they say about the middle of pregnancy."

"It's exhausting?"

Michael squeezes his hand in return. "I worry, she can't sleep when she gets uncomfortable, and then sometimes she can't sleep because she wants to do other things in bed."

"That's what's exhaausting."

"In the best way."

"Of course." Ssaruru tilts his head. "I will bring you a tea for endurance."

Raising her eyebrows, she laughs. "Thanks. It's good. We're good. We really are."

"The rumors weigh on you."

"Putting aside the personal, the assassination of the President of the Federation would be catastrophic for morale."

Saru nods thoughtfully. "And that is why they threaten. To attempt to create that instability."

Taking her time to breath, Michael tries to soften the knot in her chest. "I didn't realize how much interest there was in becoming the next Osyraa."

"There will always be those who think force is better than compromise."

Michael touches her tea, smelling it as she stills her concerns. "I found it more manageable when they weren't trying to go through my wife."

"T'Rina's intelligence doesn't believe Coridan III is as dangerous as they originally feared." Saru pats her knee. "There are many networks, on many planets. Laira is more beloved than she is hunted. It will be all right."

"It's difficult."

"Of course it is." He clicks his tongue angrily. "I know what it is to be hunted, and it is never without fear. You are with family, and we will protect your family." He reaches over, hugging her close with his longarms. Her family has meant so many people. Now it's very small at the center, spiralling outward. Saru's right. She needs to trust.

That's always difficult.

---

"Captain, we have a very encrypted message for you," Lieutenant Christopher reports, his tone light and puzzled. "Like, ridiculous amounts of encrypted. I'm not even sure who its from. Non-Starfleet encryption, bouncing all over the place."

"In my ready room, lieutenant." She leaves the center seat to Joann, walking quickly.

A holograph of no one waits in her ready room. It's been run through so many filters that Haz shifts from being a black blob, to a gormagander, to a whisp of smoke.

"Starfleet Captain Right Hook."

"Hi Haz."

His holo settles in closer to him, if he was an Orion, for the moment. "Pretty fancy ship."

"This is *Discovery*."

"The antique."

"My antique."

Chuckling, he paces her ready room, looking at her treasures. "This was what you were trying to get back to."

"I found my way."

"I never doubted you. Glow-worm did, a little. Maybe he wanted to. That and the isolynium is aa heck of way to end things."

"We're friends now."

"So I hear." His holo shifts again, turning into an amphibian Michael's never seen before. "You didn't just go onto the law-abiding, narrow flight path, you went straight to the literally heart of the Federation."

Michael forces herself not to fidget. "I've always liked seeking the best."

"The fine things in life, indeed." Haz pauses, studying Philippa's telescope. "This is an antique's antique."

"It belonged to my mentor."

"Millenia ago, eh?"

"Just about."

Haz caresses the telescope with holographic hands that now resemble a Cardassian's. "You know, I hear things."

"You do."

"I hear some things that you should also hear." He pats the telescope one more time, and turns to her, Kelpien, just for a moment. "Can you make it for a private game? Just pop in, with your fancy ship."

"You don't want my fancy Starfleet ship in orbit."

"Pop in close, shuttle over. You need a nice, junky shuttle. Something nondescript. I can sell you one."

Michael shakes her head, chuckling. "I'll take the most beat-up one we have."

"Good choice. See you soon."

She sits in the silence, running her fingers along Philippa's telescope. Philippa never had a daughter. Never married. Her crew was her family. Must have made some of this easier.

"Captain?"

"Come in, Commander."

"Who was your mysterious message from?"

"Haz."

"Oh." Joann takes a step closer. "That is mysterious."

"He wants me to come play poker."

"Not for anything explosive this time?"

"Hopefully not." Michael reaches for her, touching her shoulder. She needs to go, and she can't bring Joann this time. "I'm going to leave you in command."

Joann nods, concern glowing in her eyes. "Take Keyla."

"She wants to see the Karma Barge?"

"She's great in sleazy places," Joann touches Michael's hand, holding her fingers tight. "Nothing surprises her, and she'll bring you home in one piece."

"I'll be all right."

"Of course, of course." Joann leaves her and studies Michael's desk, then circles to take her chair. "Not that I mind the extra time as captain."

"I'll try not to let you get too comfortable."

"Too late."

Michael laughs, perching on her own desk. "Look after Laira."

"We all will." Joann rests her hands in her lap. "She's ours."

"I know."

"You could stay, Keyla and I could go."

"Haz asked for me."

"And that's harder than it used to be, isn't it?"

Michael toys with one of the trinkets on her desk, running her fingers over the wood. "I could do anything when I was courier. That year, all I did was try to solve a mystery, fix one thing at a time. No family, no crew. Just me, sometimes Book, but it wasn't like this."

Lifting one of Michael's statues, Joann picks up the smaller one - the child. "They both need you."

"And I need all of you." Shaking her head, she tightens her grip on the sculpture. "I keep telling myself family is what we make, and we've built ours together. *Discovery's* home, and I can't think of a better place to grow up. She'll be happy here, we all will."



"But it's nerve-racking."

"That's parenting, right?"

Joann finds a very hopeful smile. "I hear it can be a bit more cheerful than that."

"I hope so." Michael sighs, letting her gaze fall on the little wooden figures in Joann's hands. "You've got them."

"We do."

Meeting her eyes, Michael smiles. "Course you do, you're the captain."

Joann's smile is quick but soft, and the light in her eyes echoes the tightness in Michael's chest. She knows how heavy this is. "I am, aren't I?"

"You make it look good."

---

*Discovery* delivers them close, but not too close, to Porathia, before returning to their diplomatic duties. Joann, Tilly and Hugh are all there with Laira, she's fine. Better than, because she's been in such a good mood lately. Hugh says when her hormones balance out, it can feel pretty wonderful. Making a person can be a joyful process. Michael should worry less, and enjoy it more.

"I don't know when it was exactly, but now you look tired and your wife looks great."

"Before it went the other way?"

Keyla keeps her eyes forward on the stars in front of them, not that she needs to while at warp. "Well, you're gorgeous, but she looked like hell. Your fault, I'm sure."

"It was." Michael nods along. "It definitely was."

Kelya glances over, then turns. She points at her eyes, indicating the bags beneath them. "So this is her fault now?"

"She has trouble sleeping."

"Unless you—"

Michael sighs, stares at her hands, her face burning. "Yeah, unless we— Hugh says it's normal, and it's fun."

"Having sex all the time is a blast, but you're not a cadet anymore?"

Chuckling, Michael shakes her head and taps the console into automatic. "I'm going to get more coffee."

"Because you're exhausted."

"Yes."

"Because your wife—"

"Yes, but it's great. It's—" she pauses, trying to choose the right words. "Hormones are really complicated. They made her feel terrible and now they don't. Which is great, and different, and yeah, there's a lot of sex, if you must know."

"And it's...?" Keyla waits, fishing.

"You really don't want to hear about sex with my pregnant wife." Michael returns with coffee for both of them and hands one to Keyla.

"You say that but—" She shrugs. "Your wife is pretty hot."

"She is."

Keyla's eyes twinkle. "I suppose we didn't used to talk about it, being you were so important and first officer and not part of the crew before."

"I was so socially awkward."

"Oh that's why you always talked Georgiou and not us lowly crewmates."

Michael sighs, looking out at the stars. Philippa would have loved it here, now, when they're building something. Exploring, trying to make things better. "She was lonely too."

Keyla leans back, hands wrapped around her coffee. "We thought so. I'm glad you're not like that."

"Lonely?"

"Lonely on purpose."

"How can I be? You'd never let me."

"Oh I'd let you make bad choices, Joann's the soft one."

Chuckling, Michael sips her coffee. "Thanks."

"Everyone needs someone to keep them honest. Tilly and I can do that for you."

"I hope you ask Tilly this much about her sex life."

Keyla shrugs. "You're the one whose wife is literally glowing."

"Not because of my prowess in bed."

"That's not what engineering says."

Keyla means Reno. "Reno's quarters are nowhere near ours."

Keyla raises an eyebrow, her smile turning wicked. "Veddra's a telepath."

"So instead of having sex with her own telepathic girlfriend, Reno lies in bed with her and they and talk about Laira and I having sex."

"I think they have snacks while they do it."

Unbidden, Michael's mind presents to her the image of Veddra curled up with Reno, bowls of snacks in bed, while Veddra recounts what the crew is doing. Vulcan telepathy is much stronger with contact, but Sarek could feel things when they were strong enough. It helped him in negotiations.

What does Veddra feel? Is it like Betazoids? More emotional? She should ask. She doesn't dare. Veddra's often so amused in her presence. Is that why?

They don't get to discuss it. Porathia's beneath them and they have a sea monster hologram to fly into. Keyla, of course, makes it look easy, and in they go.

---

"You didn't bring the bruiser," Haz says, studying Keyla in her leathers. "And you came under cover this time."

Michael nods. She can look like a courier, and it's almost comfortable, but it's not her anymore. The leather jacket is Philippa's this time, because she needed the confidence that comes from her. "I'm obvious enough."

Chuckling, he waves up several of the newsreels at once. Michael and Laira feature prominently in all of them. Script in several languages explain their wedding, and the baby they announced on Earth, along with the new spore drive. "You're making waves. Anyone who can get a copy of that spore drive interface of yours can buy a sector or two and retire early."

"Join the Federation."

"All those rules," Haz shudders like spiders are climbing his back. "Warp is fine. Everything I need comes to me anyway."

Glancing around the room, Michael tilts her head towards the back. "You mentioned a private game."

"Only best for you, Right Hook." Haz stands, gesturing for his staff to set them up. "I have a select few players."

As they follow him towards the back room, Keyla leans in close. "Book?"

"I doubt it. He would have come to me directly, this is probably a courier contact. I had a few."

"Course you did." Keyla falls in step behind, and they walk back to one of Haz's gaming dens. "I've been practicing leonine poker, but your wife still beats me."

"You'll lose a shuttle playing tongo with her."

"I've almost lost your ship." Keyla leans in close to her ear. "Twice."

Michael only has a moment to glare at her, then they're setting up the game. Across the table are two Ferengi Michael recognizes. Traders, sisters, who moved goods with couriers. Prish and Gacis, honorable, cunning, she liked working for them. Even saved their asses once or twice. Michael had a knack for the difficult contracts.

They sit down next to each other, leaving the other two chairs open for Michael and Keyla. Leonine poker, unusual for Ferengi, but not unheard of. They don't acknowledge Michael, no smiles of recognition, so they're playing this tight.

Haz takes a seat in the middle. "The stakes today are a most unusual item. I don't often allow biological specimens as prizes, but I'll make an exception for these mushrooms, they're basically food, right? Fry them up right and you'll have dinner."

Prish opens a container, exposing a sample of *Prototaxites Stellaviatori* as their stake. Not that unusual. They're found all over the galaxy. So there's something in the container, something encoded in the mushrooms themselves. She'll have to win them to find out. She and Keyla hand over a small fortune in latinum, but that's easy enough to come by. She still has latinum stashes all over the quadrant.

The table talk is quiet, even subdued. Prish is funny, at least on a good day. Gacis keeps checking the door, looking over her shoulder. Michael's not a threat, but anyone could be after them. They look at each other once in panic when an Orion walks past the curtain, but they don't seem to know him. Is this about the Emerald Chain? More would-be warlords?

The sisters are running an obvious feint. Not too obvious, they win a few, but no one's luck is that bad. Keyla takes the pot on a particularly good hand and Prish hisses.

"Why did you bring this human? We know Book's ear tug."

"And you beat us."

That finally gets a smile out of Gacis. "We did."

Two more hands and it's just Michael and Keyla left, so the *Prototaxes* are theirs. Prish makes more of a show of being a bad loser than Gacis, but they ham it up a little. Prish winks at her while faking her disgust at their loss.

"Humans can't be trusted."

"We're known for it."

"Indeed."

Gacis keeps her distance, but Prish brushes close to her. She presses something into Michael's hand, then they're gone. Michael toys with it, turning it over and over. Latinum, by the weight of it, not a bar or a slip, but shaped into something. A sculpture? Some kind of message?

She lifts it and starts to smile. "It's a toy." Handing it to Keyla, she holds onto her gratitude, and it warms her chest.

"A latinum replica of Discovery. Half-decent, really. Almost to scale." Keyla flies it for a moment, then grins. "Kid's going to love this some day."

Haz looks over and nods his approval. "Ferengi give you expensive gifts when you're growing a child. Helps offset the cost of raising one. The spoils are yours, I'll take the latinum. Feel free to drop by whenever you need anything rare and unobtainable."

Michael places the container of spores into a bag, then slips it over her shoulder. "Thanks for setting it up."

"Anytime."

Keyla flies the tiny ship back towards Michael, then tucks it into her pocket. "I think we should start collecting ships for your hitchhiker. Get some shuttles, some freighters, more starships. Get her a whole collection before she gets here."

"We have time."

"A complete unknown amount of time," Keyla teases, heading back to the shuttle. "I heard there's a window, but it's months?"

"Maybe one month."

"No, Laira said months, and she was mad about it."

Wincing, Michael opens the shuttle and sighs. "Hugh's not sure. Bajorans, humans and Cardassians have vastly different gestational periods. Hugh can monitor the baby's growth, keep an eye on her organs and her brain, but it's all a waiting game. When she's ready, she'll arrive, but we might not get a lot of notice."

"Well, that doesn't sound stressful at all." Keyla settles into the pilot's seat, taking the shuttle out of the Karma barge's holo while Michael studies the container of spores. "She'll probably just go into labor on the bridge or during some intense negotiation."

"We have awhile yet."

"Time to get some more starships."

"Exactly."

Keyla turns towards Michael as they break the atmosphere "What is in the spores?"

"I have no idea. They went to the trouble of collecting and storing them, and lost them to us pretty quickly, so there's a message here. Hopefully Stamets and Reno can determine what it is."

"Maybe it's just a note on the bottom and the spores are just to mess with us."

Michael rolls her eyes upwards. "That would be so easy."

"So it's not that."

"We're not that lucky."

---

Returning to the ship is not as simple as leaving it, of course. They barely dock before they're needed on the bridge. After a red alert and the adrenaline of rescuing a medical ship at the edge of yet another ion storm, they finally have the time to pick up Laira and the diplomats from Coridan III.

Michael hands off the conn to Commander Rhys for the night. Heading to engineering, she takes the long way, passing her crew in the corridors, thanking them for everything they do.

Adira nods to Michael. "Got any more messages in a mushroom bottle, captain?"

"Did you solve the last one?"

Adira tilts their head towards the lower workspace, where Veddra's perched on Reno's concole and Paul's trying not to watch them with a very soft smile. "They did."

"Oh."

"Bit like cadets if you ask me," Adira mutters.

Patting their shoulder, Michael slips past her. "It's good to see them happy."

Adira may have added in a whisper that Michael and her wife are just as bad, but Michael didn't really hear it. Clearly, Reno and Veddra are much worse flirts.

Down the ladder, Michael walks through the hologram of the latest ion storm. "Category six?"

"Seven," Paul says, moving the display. "Passed through three systems. The alpha quadrant averages a few category seven ion storms a year. We've already catalogued four this year, and two category eights. The *Nog* reported a category nine ion storm in the gamma quadrant, which is really wild."

Michael whistles. "Hopefully they were at a safe distance."

"Something's increasing the frequency and strength of ion storms, like superheating an ocean." Paul changes the map shrinking the galaxy down. "Zora's been collecting reports, trying to find a pattern. It's possible this is a normal cycle of the galaxy and we just don't have enough data to predict it, or something's passing by that's stirring things up magnetically."

"We don't know."

"We don't." Paul folds his arms. "We will."

"Good."

"Your puzzle was fun," Reno says, leaving her console as Veddra slides down. "Someone taught the mushrooms a set of coordinates."

"Taught?" Michael tilts her head.

"Exposing the spores to the magnetic resonance of a particular planet aligned the spores to its position in space." Veddra waves up a rocky little world. "I'd love to see whatever they used. Might be another prototype for a type of spore drive interface."

Reno nods, gesturing with her pretzel. "I don't know how accurate it would be for intersettlar travel, but in this case. It seems someone wants you to go to this planet."

Michael sighs. Another mystery. "Is it near any of the ion storms?"

"Nope, far corner of the Delta Quadrant. Former Borg space, incredibly isolated, almost as far out as the jolly jellyfish—" Reno is cut off.

"She means species 10-C."

"That far?" Michael raises her eyebrows. "Do we know anything about the planet?"

"Satellite four of a white dwarf, no signs of life. Barely more than an asteroid."

Taking a breath, Michael tries not to let her worries run away with her sense. "Report it to Admiral Vance, ask for additional information. We'll do our research before we go anywhere that far out."

---

She stays in engineering, talking about ion storms long enough that she's worried Laira's gone to bed, but Zora says she's in the lounge. Michael finds her in a booth by the viewports, finishing her ice cream. A half-drunk mug of tea sits in front of her on the table. Michael touches her shoulder, drawing her attention.

"You're back," Laira smiles up at her, tilting her head closer for a kiss. "How was it?"

"Mysterious, challenging, kind of exhausting really."

Nodding, Laira sets her spoon down and folds her hands together. "I'm sorry. Andoria finished their elections." Her expression's so fragile that something must have happened. "They chose the isolationist candidate, Sh'eqorrin, and when she takes office tomorrow, they'll begin expelling all Federation support from the planet."

"All Federation support?" Michael sets her wine down on table and sits. "They mean personnel?"

"Every Federation citizen must either evacuate or renounce their connection to the Federation."

"Why?"

Laira lifts her tea, making a face. It must be cold. "President Sh'eqorrin convinced enough of the population that the outbreak of scosian fever is caused by interstellar travel, and if they close their borders, they'll be able to eliminate it. Looking inward will let them find themselves. Fear is a powerful thing." Sighing, she lowers her head into her hands. "Before our hitchhiker, I would have gotten whisky."

"I'm sorry." Reaching across, Michael touches her fingers, and Laira's hand slips into hers.

Laira finds a small smile. "You might need to drink for me, dear."

Chuckling, Michael opens the menu on her badge and orders. "One for your day, one for mine?"

"Tell me what it tastes like."

"Burnt wood, usually."

Laira scoffs, kissing her fingers. "And get more ice cream."

One of the DOTs arrives with their order a few moments later and Michael takes a sip. "Admiral Cornwell was fond of Bourbon, which is from North America, whisky is from Europe."

"Not Paris," Laira says, starting her new ice cream. Cherry and chocolate, Tilly would love it. "Tilly said Paris is all about wine."

"It's romantic." Michael pauses, bringing her memory back. "The lights of the city reflect in the river, music floats on the air."

Dragging her spoon along the edge, Laira takes a bite and watches Michael take another sip of whisky. This one tastes like smoke, and she can picture the misty green hills.

"Taking a solar sail ship, away from the trade routes, when you don't have to go anywhere or deliver anything. You just fly. The deck doesn't hum. The sails sing a little, and your breathing is almost too loud. All the stars seem brighter when it's that quiet. That's romantic."

Michael sets down her glass, momentarily aware of the hum of the engines far beneath her feet. "You'll have to take me someday."

Laira has that faraway look for a moment. Their hitchhiker must be making herself known. Laira blinks, then nods, eyes bright - blue and endless. "We'll go."

### Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira deal with her increased libido while Laira leads negotiations on a dark trade world. Remnants of the Emerald Chain leave them shaken.

### Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Whimsicalli, Sanctuaria and the Rillham raft for helping me plot.

Nibbling along her ear, Michael chuckles into the side of her neck. "You're not tired?"

She should be. It's late enough to curl into Michael and go to sleep, but Michael's body pressed against hers is a wondrous feeling. Michael's knee between her thighs makes her gasp.

Playing with the skin of her belly with her fingers, Michael kisses her. They've been wrapped in each long enough that Laira's lips are smooth from kissing and Michael tastes of her. Sweat's drying in her hair and Michael's hand could be lower.

Laira whimpers, then shivers as Michael kisses across her collarbone. "No, I'm not."

"Will you be tired tomorrow?"

Shaking her head, Laira pouts up as Michael takes her time returning to kiss her mouth. "It's meetings anyway," she mutters into Michael's lips. "Not important."

"You're skillfully maneuvering the galaxy into peace dealing with a isolationist, populist—" Michael cuts off, kissing her way down to Laira's swollen breast.

"Don't remind me."

"You are the Federation," Michael says, nuzzling her way across to the other breast. She presses her knee a little lower and Laira rolls her hips up into it. It doesn't seem to matter how many orgasms she's had, she needs Michael to touch her.

Michael's braids tickle her chest, and Michael's hand finally slips downward, rubbing over her belly, then lower still. She's already had Michael's exquisite mouth between her thighs, twice, and yet, she aches for the pressure of her fingers.

Laira's been almost too aroused, all day, even in the endless after lunch meeting, where all she could focus on was the idea of Michael in bed.

She didn't even have enough patience for that; they started on the sofa as soon as they were through the door.

"Harder?" Michael asks, half-teasing. Pressure, speed, none of it seems to matter. Michael touches her and she's wet. Michael kisses her and she's shivering with want. Michael touches her and—

That can't be an orgasm, it's only been a moment, but her nerves are singing, tingling, and Michael pushes in, curling her fingers deep. It's her thumb that sends Laira's thoughts tumbling.

Then it's just panting, hissing, into Michael's shoulder as sensation spirals up, explodes.

Holding up her left hand before she kisses her again, Michael nuzzles her cheek. "Good thing I can alternate."

Laira's breath takes a moment to return, but her control is still somewhere in the mycelial network, for all the good it's doing her. "I think you could tell me I was about to climax, and I would."

"We should try that." Michael flops to the bed beside her, then rolls to grab her water. "Where your meetings all terribly dull?"

Dragging herself up enough to drink the water Michael hands her, Laira tries not to look too long at the smooth skin of Michael's neck, and her perfect shoulder, and the curve of her waist. "We talked about Ni'Var."

"So you thought about me."

"I thought about nothing but you."

"Picture me making my sensible face so you could get your work done?"

Imagining Michael shoving her back on the conference table, parting her legs and ravishing her with her extraordinary hands isn't how Laira's supposed to spend her time. The galaxy will have to forgive a little distraction. Michael's too stunning.

"Not the sensible face."

Michael rolls onto her stomach, studying Laira from her elbows. "You didn't."

"I can't stop myself."

Shaking her head, Michael sighs. "Hormones are intense."

"Maybe you're just gorgeous and incredible in bed."

"I am those things, true, you're very-" Michael pauses, finding her thigh with her hand. It's enough to make Laira squirm, then whimper. "- appreciative of my talents at the moment," Michael finishes. "There has to be a point where you'll be content."

"I am, I will be, I—" Laira's protest ends in a moan. Michael's hand's moving upwards and if she'd just— "Please."

Raising her eyebrows, Michael kisses her knee, then lazily works her way down, nibbling as she goes. As talented as she is with her hands, her mouth can match any rigorous demands Laira's hormones make. That Starfleet captain perfectionist trait is incredibly useful in bed. Michael's teeth almost hurt against her thigh, but she kisses the spot, eases Laira's hips where she wants them. Michael takes her time, and the warmth of her there - and not there - is maddening. She knows - she loves - but damn, she's —

---

"Michael doesn't think I should enhance your vision," Hugh says, patting her shoulder. "All the humans and mostly humans who have their eyes adjusted to Penumbra's weak light have reported side effects for a few days."

Laira tilts her head, folds her hands over and belly and waits for Hugh to say it. It'll be nausea. Lately everything leads to nausea. Now that she's finally over her own, the universe keeps swinging around to that. "Let me guess."

"Michael said she hasn't been this nauseated since she fell out of a wormhole through nine hundred years so, we're skipping it for you." Hugh presses the hypospray into the side of her neck. "This will neutralize the fungal spores in the air so you can breathe, but you'll need another dose in thirty hours." Hugh fills another hypo and hands it to her. "You should be back on board well before then, but just in case."

"Thank you, and I'll keep that in mind."

"Technological enhancement for your vision would go against Penumbrian cultural norms, so you'll just be a little blind, especially outside."

"Their night's only seventeen hours long, I'm sure that won't be a problem." She keeps her tone light and Hugh turns his gaze to Nhan, who nods.

"Everyone you're with will be able to see just fine. My low light vision is excellent. So you'll have to remain with your security detail at all times. Good excuse to follow proper procedure." Nhan smirks a little and Laira raises her eyeridges innocently. "Which, of course, you always do, ma'am."

"Anything else, Doctor?"

Hugh calls up a chart on his badge, pointing to a long list of foods in red. "They pride themselves on their self-sufficiency, growing their own food. Many of their dishes are incompatible with your biochemistry, and the hitchhiker's. You shouldn't eat or drink anything that's not replicated. So we'll send someone down with food when you have breaks in negotiations."

"Don't eat or drink anything, don't look around, keep my head down."

"If you could keep your head down behind cover, that would help," Nhan adds, and the look she shares with Hugh reminds Laira how fond she is of both of them.

They beam down with her ever-increasing entourage: two council members, Gozre and Vugoam, her security detail, Lieutenant Tilly and five of her cadets. The cadets have served as diplomatic aides on several planets now, and their presence is useful. They will be better prepared than any Starfleet officers currently serving, with a few exceptions. Michael and her crew, of course, are always in a category of their own.

Her first round of introductions and meetings takes most of the morning. The conference rooms have no windows, and are carved carefully into the stone. Instead of powered lighting, all the interior areas are lit with biolumiscent plants of some kind. Perhaps they are mushrooms, they're not plants, Michael's voice in her head reminds her, but they're growing and not animals and—

The hitchhiker turns within her, sending that sensation like bubbles along her left side. In the break before the next round of trade talks, Cadet Harral - the young Orion - hands her a water bottle from *Discovery*. She could ask him for tea, and he'd find it, because they're always so resourceful, but it feels decadent to want it. Lunch will be soon. Water from *Discovery*'s replicators started tasting of home at some point, and the metal of the bottle is the same. It's comforting.

Her thoughts are wandering and Michael's naked back in the light of the stars in their quarters keeps creeping into her thoughts. The way the sweat runs over her shoulderblades when she's just back from the gym...

"It's difficult to maintain focus, is it not?" Gozre asks, tilting his head towards her belly. "I am forever impressed by your ability to ignore what must be a very disconcerting experience."

"Internal gestation is one of the more difficult ways to grow a child."

"Saurian offspring are gestated in communal nests, and that has been made much easier with the return of dilithium. My partners and I have eleven potential eggs on our homeworld right now."

"Eleven at once?" she says, taking her time closing her water bottle. "You will be busy."

"Saurians are born much more developed than of your species. They'll start attending our educational centers within a week of their birth. My partners will see to their education." He lifts a type of meat on a skewer from the buffet. "The meat here is delicious."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it."

His huge eyes meet hers and she doesn't need to be telepathic like Jen to guess what he's thinking. She's too delicate, too fragile, overly committed to the raising of her underdeveloped organism and thus unable to serve at the same capacity as a Saurian who can trust his other partners to raise his children without his presence. The hitchhiker will be dependent on her and Michael for years in a way Saurian children never are.

Vulcan and Betazoid pregnancies are longer, Andorian pregnancies are much more fraught with risk. They all grow, and learn, and share the stars. Patience will have to be one of her virtues.

Nhan leans in, close enough that no one else could hear her. "Every time he talks to you I like him less."

"He does have that effect on many."

After sharing a glance, Nhan slips away again, falling behind Laira like a shadow. Just a few more hours after lunch, then it'll be over for the day. The planetary council of Penumbra is reasonably pleasant to deal with. They know what they want from the Federation and they're reasonably polite in reaching for it.

They agree on taking an hour for lunch, and another hour after that to rewrite the morning's proposals with their respective parties, which is again reasonable.

"If this gets any easier, I'll start hoping we don't have a hijinks," Council member Vugoam says, tilting her head. "That's not right, is it? What is the Earth saying?"

Gozre corrects her. "You would say that you don't want to jinx it, on Earth. A quaint, if puzzling saying." He turns his huge eyes to Laira and she shrugs.

"An apt ancient Cardassian saying is that we should already be aware of the knife we don't see at our throats, and ready for the next behind our backs."

"Are you suggesting we need to be more suspicious?" Gozre intends to fish for an argument with Laira, but Vugoam can't resist a feisty discussion, and she asks how suspicious it is right to be, which allows Laira to slip away.

Cadet Herral stands by the doorway with his message. He stands at attention in his red uniform, so stiff that he matches the stone beside him. "Captain Burnham is here for you, ma'am."

"Thank you, cadet."

Nhan's hand rests on her back, guiding her through the doorway. How badly Laira can see in the weak light is a reasonably well-kept secret so far, but it's darker outside than it was in the quiet conference hall. The clouds are thick tonight, so the stars are hidden. Penumbra prides itself on maintaining the natural darkness, so other than a few soft lights and some bioluminescent mosses, there's little for Laira to see. Nhan must see details in the stones beneath and the garden around her, but to Laira it's mostly soft darkness.

Michael's silhouette is fuzzy, a shadow in the shadows. It must be her, and Laira likes to think she can tell, but she must have hesitated.

Nhan leans in close to her ear. "I'll be back in an hour."

No ma'am means she's been released from needing to be the president, if even just for lunch.

Michael's hand finds hers, warm and solid. "I was hoping the clouds would pass, but it's pretty dense up there. When the clouds are gone the stars are incredible."

"I'll take your word for it."

It's too dark to see Michael smile, but it's in her voice. "Step up here, then there's one more."

"Taking us all the way to the back?" By the wall is better for security, the back is probably more romantic. One of the planetary leaders was just telling her how fantastic their green spaces are. If not green.

Michael reaches back to her elbow, holding her steady. "I may have forgotten how big the discrepancies in our vision are at the moment."

"Ah." There's a tightness in her voice. Like a growl. "Nausea does that to you, doesn't it?"

Michael winces. "How'd you know?"

"I've had some experience," Laira says, her tone light enough that Michael chuckles.



"I don't know how you dealt with this for as long as you have."

"I'm very good at convincing myself that something is worth it."

Michael's hands guide her down onto a stone bench and Michael sits next to her. "Is that how you ended up running for office?"

"Might be part of it." The light is so tentative around them that Laira could be in a powerless cargo bay. "Hopefully lunch isn't messy."

"You wouldn't be able to tell anyway."

"Good point."

Michael's hands cover hers for a moment, then her fingers brush her cheek. "How are negotiations going?"

"They're going well. I'm most likely not need to maneuver anything to bring you in on short notice."

"Saving something in reserve?"

"You've been an excellent last card in the past." The silence holds them for a moment, enveloping them like the darkness.

Michael stands a little, kissing her cheek so the warmth of her mouth lingers. She finds Laira's hands and wraps her fingers around the familiar shape of hasparat.

"You picked something I'd know how to eat in the dark."

"Soup seemed like a bad idea."

Michael picks at bread, uninterested, and Laira's achingly aware of what that sensation is like. Today she's hungry, and her hasparat's disappearing as quickly as it's polite to chew.

"Did you try the fruit?"

Handing Laira her water, Michael shakes her head, braids rustling. After a moment she realizes how useless that gesture is. "I didn't, I will."

"Try it. Fruit isn't bad, even if eating it ends up a temporary arrangement."

"You're the expert."

"I have a extensive knowledge, at this point." Laira leans over, gently resting her head on Michael's. "My experience with food poisoning and making terrible choices in a cockpit was fairly vast before I met you, so don't feel too guilty."

Michael holds up a piece of fruit for her to take. Laira doesn't recognize the smell right away, and her hands are greasy from the hasparat. She doesn't move to take it, and then it's at her lips. Michael feeds it to her, delicate and gentle.

"I should have given you the napkin."

Laira makes a noise in agreement and wipes her hands, but waits, letting Michael feed her again. Michael's fingers touch her lips for a moment and she sighs, approving, maybe a little too longing because now Michael laughs.

"It's not really dark enough for *that*."

"Not dark enough for what, Captain?" Laira runs her hand down Michael's thigh. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're implying."

Kissing her neck is evil of Michael, past flirting straight into taunting, because they don't have time and this is the wrong place and Laira doesn't mean to moan.

Not really.

"Keep going."

"You can't be late for your meeting."

"I can be late, I'm—" Laira stops, because Michael's lips are too perfect right there on her neck for her to be able to continue.

"You'll have to wait for dinner."

"You enjoy torturing me."

"I do, I'll admit it." Michael leans in, kissing her chin, then her neck.

Hissing with want, Laira digs her fingers into Michael's arm. "You have to stop that."

"You don't want me to."

"I absolutely do not, but I—"

Michael's teeth brush her lip, then she pulls away. "I'll see you later."

"Tease."

"You love it." Michael rests her forehead against Laira's and reaches down to touch her belly. "Good luck making the galaxy a better place."

"I try."

"Take care of the squirmy little one."

Shaking her head, Laira sighs. "I think you're right, she wants to be a pilot."

"Testing the limits of her domain?"

"She's up, then down, then over—" Laira stops herself. She loves knowing where she is, and that she's growing, but it's disconcerting. Distracting. "I'm not complaining."

"You're allowed."

"This is better than nausea."

Michael rolls her eyes. "Again, your patience with that can not be understated."

Touching Michael's cheek, Laira hums sympathetically. "You only have to deal with the eyes for a few more hours, then Hugh can switch them back."

"You're not going to tell me it's better than being pregnant?"

"I'd never dare."

"You know, being pregnant is best, of course, has to be when she's ours." Michael leans down, kissing her belly in the dark. Others around them might be able to see her, and see the way Laira kisses her head, but let them.

"I have to go."

"So I have to let you."

"That's usually how it works."

Michael steals one last kiss and helps Laira to her feet. "I suppose the Federation can have you for the afternoon."

"You get me at night."

"You don't want to wait for night."

"I don't want to wait at all."

Michael wrinkles her nose in that gorgeous way, and Laira could blow off the whole rest of the day to be with her. She can wait. It'll be just as delicious to take Michael's clothes off later. It'll give her something to think about while her meetings get mired debate and treaty wording.

Commander Nhan offers her arm this time, and Laira takes it. "Good lunch?"

"Wonderful, but I didn't get all the dessert I wanted."

Nhan's smile carries into her words. "That sounds just about right for someone approaching the middle, at least on Barzan."

"Oh?" Funny how some things go across cultures. Laira keeps her voice soft, so only Nhan can hear her. "I'm not used to being this...hungry."

"Food's never tasted this good, ma'am?"

"You could say that."

"Good." Nhan pauses for a moment, quietly holding her glee. "You should enjoy yourselves, both of you. Captain Burnham doesn't often take time for herself."

"She does better with that now, I think."

"She does, you're wonderful for her." Nhan leaves her for a moment and returns with a cup of tea. She leans in when she sets it down, her mouth just beside Laira's ear. "If you need me to end the meeting, turn the handle towards the door."

It's so dark that even in the conference room that Laira can barely see the door they came in through. She nods, touching Nhan's arm in thanks.

Her discussions run long, and deep, outlining the terms for Penumbra becoming a Federation member, what it would change, how they would need to enforce certain Federation rules. Trading in endangered animal species is one sticking point, but the planetary leader handles the new regulations well. Federation membership will provide them with many more ships, new trade partners and spore drive technology, should they wish it. Vugoam has a knack for treaty language and Gozre, frustrating as he is, is very detailed and she can let the two of them work out the details: her presence is more for her official capacity than her skills with negotiation.

Penumbra's mostly Orion population will be a welcome addition to the diversity of the Federation. Few worlds with an significant Orion

population are part of the Federation now, and even fewer are in Starfleet.

Cadet Harral's in the courtyard with Tilly and her other cadets. Bringing Penumbra into the Federation will bring more Orions into Starfleet to follow him. Laura hears his mother's very proud that he found this way to live his life and honor his father's memory. That's how they build a better galaxy, bringing people in, making room for everyone at the table.

Though Starfleet intelligence is worried about remnants of the Emerald Chain gaining new strength now that Andoria's closing its borders, and there are always whispers. Some know Michael killed Osyraa, and most know Captain Burnham ended the Chain. There are always whispers, and Laura has two security officers behind Nhan, and there are three more across the courtyard.

They're being overprotective, of course. No one would—

She's listening to Council member Vugoam detail how bringing Penumbra in changes their approach to Orion, and Laura nods. Then something moves in the corner of her vision, something fast, then there's light, too much, bright green— Nhan grabs her, drags her down, one of the security officers flips a table. Disruptors scream across the open space, phasers whine in reply and she can see her own hands, wrapped in Nhan's, in the flashes of light, but it's so bright that her eyes hurt and she shuts them. She can't do anything, she's not supposed to do anything. Nhan gets her down so fast that Laura's head hits the table, and stars fly across her vision.

Stay down, keep her head down, do what security needs her to do so none of them are in any more danger. The disruptors shriek less, and the phasers more, and the air reeks of ozone and smoke.

Then it's quiet.

Nhan has her arm around Laura's shoulders, and they're half against the flipped table. Emergency lights starts to come on around them, illuminating the space between the buildings that had been lost to Laura before. The lights hover in the air, bathing everything bright-blue white.

They haven't beamed out, so *Discovery's* not in orbit? Something's wrong with the transporters?

Nhan touches the bloody spot on Laura's forehead. "Stay here, stay down." One of the cadets stands above them, Sasha, she remembers finally. Adrenaline stings in her throat but there's no one to fight. Laura doesn't even have a phaser. Sasha has a phaser rifle and blood on her cheek. Red, lightly human, but there's green on her sleeve.

"Why didn't they beam us up?"

"*Discovery* must be—" Laura pauses, shutting her eyes. "They must be out of orbit."

Gozre crouches beside her, disheveled, with dirt on his hands. "They left us? Left you?"

"It's a peaceful planet."

"Obviously," he mutters.

Voices mesh, urgent and frightened, but no one's screaming. Planetary security beams in around them, sealing off the area, but Laura can only see their boots.

"We need a medic," Tilly says, calm in that way one can only be when something terrible is happening. She kneels down next to Laura, touching her head.

"I'm fine."

"I know." Tilly touches her cheek. "Your eyes are fine."

"What happened?"

"Chain remnants, people who want to avenge Osyraa on the way to becoming her. Andorians and Orions, disorganized. Probably a small group."

Tilly is telling her this because Michael is busy. That has to be it.

Tilly's eyes are too bright, her expression too careful. She's keeping it even on purpose. "Michael's hurt, she's all right, she will be, but she's bleeding and we're working on it."

Laura's heart thuds in her ears and her nausea rushes back like it's the first few weeks and everything's wrong. "Where is she?"

"Over there, when Nhan's sure it's safe—"

She has to go now, be with her now, and she starts to stand, but Tilly's hand is on her face.

"You have to stay here until Nhan—"

Forcing herself to breath, Laura touches her belly, chasing the very urgent sensation of a butterfly beating against her. She must be sharing the rush of adrenaline, and Laura has to keep her safe. Stay down, trust them.

"Her vital signs are low, but steady. Nhan's a good medic."

Tilly keeps talking, giving her something to focus on, but the words aren't making any sense because they're talking about Michael being hurt,

and she's only a few meters away but Laura can't walk to her.

She could lose her with this fucking table between them. Her eyes sting, and she can't fight that and keep her calm and look after the hitchhiker, so she looks at Tilly. She holds her hand, squeezes her fingers too tight and waits.

After an eternity, Nhan touches her shoulder, and she and Tilly help her to her feet. "Michael's stable. *Discovery* was lured away with a distress signal, likely by the same group. They're stabilizing the freighter and returning here. It shouldn't be long."

"Can I- Michael—"

"She's here," Tilly says, taking her arm to guide her over. A little group of people stand around her, security and diplomats, but they part for Laura. Michael lies on her back, looking up at the dark grey sky. Cadet Herral sits beside her, hands on his knees while one of the security guard treats a wound on his arm.

"Michael?" Laura drops to the ground next to her, knees against the stone. Michael turns her head slowly, her skin's too gray and her lips are a disturbing shade of blue, but her eyes are open.

"Careful."

"Michael—"

"I'm all right."

Blood's pooling on the stone beneath her and emergency medical devices hum on both sides of her left shoulder. Cloth's pressed there too. Tilly removes her jacket, slipping it under Michael's head.

"Looks worse than it is," Michael insists, blinking a few times. "I thought they were after you."

"They should have been." Laura grabs her hand, wrapping Michael's clammy fingers in hers. "I'm the fucking president."

Michael's weak little chuckle is calming, and Laura's heart might eventually stop thudding like a shaky EPS relay. "Revenge, Nhan said."

"They failed."

For a moment, Michael smiles, but her eyelids flutter.

The gravity drops out beneath Laura's stomach, and it's like she's fallen into zero G. She leans over her, kissing her damp cheek before curling into her good side. Maybe that'll help keep her warm. "Stay with me."

"Did you- treaty—"

"We're close."

"Good. I- I like it here. The scenery's fantastic."

"I've only seen this square, so I'll take your word for it."

"You can trust me."

"Oh?" Laura keeps her tone as light as she can. "You're an authority on architecture now?"

"It's part of culture."

Making that noise where she doesn't quite believe her, Laura takes a breath, and maybe, somehow, this isn't the end of everything good. She'll be all right. Hugh will be here soon.

"I know beauty," Michael says, and it's almost a whisper.

Of course she can be romantic, lying on the ground, bleeding, going into shock—

She's all right. Everything's going to be all right.

"I didn't think I could be this afraid anymore."

"Love's funny like that."

Laura nuzzles her cheek, takes another breath and lets go of the chaos around them. Michael's hurt's beating, and her fingers are still strong and she's going to be fine. The baby's not going to lose her. Trust Michael's crew.

"I love you."

Her - their - family will look after all of them.

### Chapter Summary

Michael has to take the day off to recover from her injuries, Laira needs some recovery time too, but hers is harder to get.

### Chapter Notes

I originally posted this chapter after working on this for a year. It's been fun.

"I have to go." Laira kisses her again, leaning over her. "Be good for your doctors."

Dr. Pollard touches Laira's hand, and Michael adds her own. She's safe. They've repaired the damage, replaced her blood, re-hydrated her: technically, she's absolutely fine. Tired, grateful; fine. "We'll keep an eye on her."

Laira squeezes her fingers, strokes her wrist, and her leaving aches - it's written on her face. Dr. Pollard reminds Michael again to take it easy, but she half-listens. Hugh catches Laira at the door, saying something to her softly. He rests his hand on her shoulder, comforting, worrying. Together they look down at her belly, and Michael's chest stings. How many more meetings with she have to attend after this? How many security briefings is this worth?

Before Laira can tap her badge to beam away, Michael calls across the room, "I love you."

Laira meets her eyes, flushing pink, even as her eyes are too soft. "I love you too," she replies, ending on a smile. "Be safe." She beams away before she starts to cry, and Michael wants to follow her to headquarters, hold her and kiss her until she's not afraid, but Laira has duties, and today, Michael does not.

"You're released, Captain. I recommend another day off duty, keep it low key. Catch up on your holoprograms, maybe take up knitting."

"Noted." Michael sits up, and nothing hurts, she's not dizzy. They do good work, as always. "Any other injuries?"

"Oh you were by far the worst, don't worry," Pollard says, looking over her padd. "A few injures in security, some scrapes in the civilians. Cadet Harral was released while you were still in surgery. He's doing well. You're the last."

Michael swings her feet to the edge and drops off the bed. "Thank you."

"Thank us by actually taking it easy." Pollard and Hugh share a look.

Michael shakes her head. "Fine."

She should get dressed before going to the bridge. Heading up in sickbay pajamas might say she was too urgently worried about them, or that she doesn't trust Joann, but a uniform is too much. Michael worries about it for another moent, then sighs. Pajamas will be fine.

It was alpha shift when she beamed down, and it's alpha shift again now. Joann's on the planet's surface, with Rhys and Nhan. They'll figure it out, find some clue about who did this they can report to Starfleet Intelligence, and Kovich will work it out. They weren't after Laira, and that's taken a weight off of her chest. A handful of angry former Emerald Chain members looking for revenge is much easier to deal with than anyone who is trying to destroy the Federation. Federation security can probably handle this. Philippa would love to, if she was here.

Keyla's in the center chair, but she doesn't get up when Michael arrives. "Go to bed."

Michael laughs, shaking her head. "Good to see you too, Keyla."

"We'd be more thrilled to see you tomorrow, after you've had some sleep."

"I was just asleep."

"See, being asleep and being unconscious are two very different things," Keyla says. "I've learned this."

"Paying attention to medical at last?"

"Only when it lets me make fun of you." She steps down from the chair, touches Michael's shoulder, and then they hug, tight and warm. "We're so glad you're all right."

"I'm good, our med staff does good work."

"They like it when we don't test them though."

"Could have been worse. Cadet Harral was right there."

Kelya smiles again, her eyes softer this time. "Nhan and Owosekun are tracking down the last of the group that attacked you. They're small, angry, much more pissed at you personally."

"Which is good."

"Don't know if I'd call it good, but..." Keyla returns to the chair. Then calls up the security footage. "These two at the far end are dead, the other three are in custody. Nhan doesn't think they have anyone else, and more security officers than I have ever seen are scouring over this. We'll figure it out."

"I know we will." Michael touches her arm, then hugs her again. "All right. I'm leaving, I'll go to bed."

"Good." Keyla turns towards the viewer, ignoring Michael so she can leave. She waits until Michael is nearly off the bridge, then calls back. "Joann will be back for dinner, sleep, so you can eat with us."

"Yes ma'am."

---

After she's showered and gotten dressed, Michael replicates herself a cup of tea and sits down on the bed. Recording a message to her mother takes a few minutes. There's plenty to say, most of it's easy: planets they've visited, stellar phenomena, how Laira' and the baby are doing. Michael hesitates at the end. Her mother would appreciate candor. She can say it.

"Ran into a little trouble on Penumbra. I'm fine, but I wasn't, got hit. A cadet saved me." She takes a breath, looks away from the holo camera and out the viewport.

"Feels like I should have been the one saving him. I would have done anything to save my captains. So I get where he's coming from but I also — He's my responsibility. He's my crew." She runs her fingers through her braids, pulls up her knees and hugs them to her chest. "I would have done anything to keep Captain Georgiou alive, and you and dad. I blamed myself for so many years." Shaking her head, she reaches for her tea, forcing herself to take a sip.

"He saved me, and that's what he's supposed to do. The captain looks after her crew, but the crew looks after me. I need to let them, don't I?"

"I'll work on it," she promises her mom. "My crew's got me, I'm safe."

Gabrielle won't worry, not like she might have before the Qowot Milat. Worry would interfere with Michael's path, so she won't do that, but she cares. She loves them.

"Dr. Culber thinks I'll be able to feel the baby move soon, Laira says she's very distracting, and I can't wait. Makes it seem more real, the bigger she gets. "Take care of yourself, and J'Vini. Write when you can. I love you, and I'm all right, I'm taken care of."

Sending the message, Michael takes another sip of her tea. Dinner is still a few hours away and she'll never get Laira on the comms. Grabbing an old favorite book off the shelf, and a new paperbound novel T'Rina helped her find, she settles in to read. It seems like she rarely has enough time for that.

Romulan novels are full of intrigue, with enough plot twists and intrigue that Michael should be taking notes. Usually she can remember but she's tired and comfortable maybe she fell asleep last chapter.

Just for a little while.

"Captain, I have Admiral Vance on comms for you." Lt. Christopher pauses. "He said I should tell you it's not mission related."

"A check in?"

"Seems like it, Captain."

Michael sits up, tucking a bookmark Tilly gave her into the pages to keep her place. "Put him through."

Admiral Vance appears in her quarters a moment later. "Captain, I hope you're healing well."

"I'm all right, sir."

"Please," he waves away the formality. "I'm interrupting your time off. This is an informal conversation."

"Well then." Michael gets comfortable in her chair. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you well?"

"I am, truly. I've been patched up. I'm a little sore--" she pauses when he nods.

"I remember. New skin doesn't really feel like yours right away."

"Like a patch."

Vance nods, hands behind his back. "For awhile, before you arrived of course, there were stretches of time where we couldn't replicate new uniforms, couldn't spare the power to replicate anything really, and I had to learn to patch my uniform. I had one that felt like more patches than the original, so many parts of it had been replaced, over and over. They say the patches are stronger, and that might have been true, but

so much of it was worn. Barely held together."

"How long did that uniform have to carry you?"

Vance's little smile has a softness that cuts into Michael's chest. "Until we found some dlithium on an asteroid, so much longer than I'd like. When I had a new one, it felt strange that it stretches in ways that one no longer could."

"Bet it was nice."

Vance sits on the edge of his desk, leaning back on it. The holo places him at the edge of her table. "It didn't feel like it was mine, and I was so worried about ruining it."

"I had to recycle the one I was wearing."

"I've seen the reports," he says, nodding towards the floor. "I bet you did."

"Did you find the people who did it?"

"We did, small group, radicalized each other. Perhaps supported by an outside influence. Dr. Kovich is looking into it." Vance meets her eyes again. "We don't think there's any more immediate danger to you, on Penumbra or any of your oncoming destinations. Of course, we didn't know this was coming so—"

"It's all right. I shook things up when I killed Osyraa."

"People are afraid, they lash out. Andoria's recent political developments—"

Michael lifts her hand. "I know."

"We'll do our best to keep you safe, and the rest of your family." He pauses there, taking a breath. "You know, I have spent long periods of time away from my wife and daughter, and I hope that is never something you have to do. Hopefully we've made the galaxy a safer place. Having my wife with me again made me think about how hard it was for her that I was always in daanger. I was in the thick of it, and she was safe, so I didn't worry, but she had so much to carry. More than her share."

"And that wore on her, didn't it?"

"Like my lucky uniform, unfortunately." Vance pushes himself off the table and meets her eyes, careful with his words. "She's resilient, more than anyone else I know, but I often need to remind myself that resilience doesn't take away pain, in fact, sometimes she's able to carry more of it than I would like."

Michael touches her book, one hand on her knee, and nods. "Got it, thank you, sir."

"I'm very glad you're all right."

"Thank you." He ends the transmission, popping out of her quarters.

Left alone, Michael sighs, looking up at the ceiling. "Zora, can you interface with the computer at Starfleet Headquarters?"

"I can, Captain."

"Where's my wife?"

"President Rillak is in conference room six."

Six is the most secure one. The smallest. Michael had to go through several interviews to even be allowed access. That means the meeting is important, highest level. She can't interrupt it.

"How is she?"

"Captain?"

"I know you can't hear her, can you read her vitals?"

"I can."

"And?"

"I believe she is under stress, Captain. Her adrenaline and cortisol readings are eleevated, and her blood pressure is higher than Dr. Culber would like."

"Can you give her a message?" Michael asks, trying to decide what she needs to say.

"I can deliver it to her when she leaves the secure conference room."

"That'll work."

Taking a piece of paper out of the box on the shelf, Michael lifts a pen. It's more antique than even her ship, and Laira will appreciate that. She pauses for aamomet, deciding on the words, then writes a note.

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She can't have Laira back until after dinner, maybe even later, so Michael finishes other things she's been putting off. Arranging some of Laira's trinkets on the shelf beside her own, looking at ways to reorganize their quarters once the hitchhiker needs space of her own. There's space to expand into what has been guest quarters, once they need to. It's a weighty thing, imagining how to reconfigure the ship for their daughter. It won't be perfectly safe, nowhere ever can be, but— Michael shivers, trying not to think too long about how it will be when their hitchhiker is old enough to now her mothers caan be in danger, and that there might be a mission where they do not come home. Michael lived in ignorance of that until the Klingons, and there has to be a way to prepare her better.

Not that she'll lose them. She can't.

When she's restless, she leaves their quarters and heads for the lounge. Replicating dinner, Michael settles into a corner by herself. Laira should be back, and she's not, which means that the political fallout might be more complicated, or Andoria is more messy than Michael thought. She attended security briefings rarely when she was at headquarters. They were less demanding than most of Laira's meetings, and she trusted Vance and Kovich to look after her and end them early if they needed to.

Would Laira let them do that today? Would she be able to ask for what she needed? Can she even put that into words?

Michael finishes her soup, and even then she's uncertain. Part of her wants to feign a relapse, manufacture an emergency, just beam over there and pull Laira away. The rest of her values duty, letting Laira set her own boundaries, and struggles to know her place. Captain Burnham has no protocol for taking President Rillak from her work.

Michael might.

Maybe she should.

Joann's back from the planet's surface; she and Keyla have a table in a quiet corner. She hasn't seen Hugh or Paul, so they might be eating in their quarters, perhaps on the planet's surface. Hugh loves to try new cuisines. Tilly and her cadets eat together at one of the bigger tables, and this one's a working dinner, because padds are out and the conversation is lively. Michael catches Harral's eye, nodding to him.

He flushes a deeper green and nods back before looking away. *All part of the service, ma'am.*

The Chain kills his father, Michael kills Osyraa and breaks the chain. He saves her life. He's the hope, with his fellow cadets. Maybe more of them can have long careers without killing, or being in the place where they're putting themselves between a weapon aand their captain.

Harral kept her stay in sickbay brief, even helped make it possible that she'll hold her daughter in a few months, but she can't make it a big deal, can't embarrass him.

They're part of the same family, and family looks after each other. She can leave it at that. Michael touches his shoulder in thanks as she leaves the lounge, smiles at Tilly and walks into the peace of the corridor.

"Zora, where is Laira now?"

"Still in conference room six."

Michael sighs. She was hoping she wouldn't need to interrupt, but it's late enough that she does. "Zora, can you open a channel to Adezie Vance?"

"I can, Captain. A moment please."

After a few seconds, the hologram of Adezie Vance appears in front of her. "Captain!"

"Hello, I'm sorry if I interrupted."

"I finished my school work, so your timing is good."

"I'm glad you finished. What are you doing now?"

"Waiting for dad."

"I see." Michael leans down, finding her best conspiratorial tone. "I think his meeting is going too long, and you might be able to help me with that."

"Oh?" Adezie glances over behind the end of the holo, looking at her mom. "How can I help?"

"Got any unanswered questions in your school work?"

Out of view, Ronia laughs. "Not tonight, Captain."

"What do you do when your father's meetings go on much too long?"

"Wait, mostly. Mom and I try not interrupt."

"What if you needed to?"

Ronia walks into the holo, standing beside Adezie. "I'm glad you're all right, Michael."



"Thanks."

"Addie and I try not to interrupt, but Jen can be helpful with that, if she's at headquarters. Maybe one of the planetary leaders?"

T'Rina, potentially, but—

Michael smiles at them both. "Thanks."

"Any time."

Michael walks towards observation. General Ndoye still owes her a few favors. Calling one in tonight seems selfish, but - as she was so recently reminded - life is short.

---

Ndoye must have been efficient, because Laura beams back to Disco eight minutes after Michael asks Ndoye to interrupt the meeting. She's exhausted, perhaps even a few levels past that. Laura hasn't been this pale since they had to adjust her hormone levels the last time. She meets Michael's eyes, smiles wearily and reaches for the back of a chair. Michael's across the room to her before her knuckles even go white on the chair back.

"Hey."

Michael offers her hand. Laura's fingers are cool, damp with sweat against hers. "You know, I'm supposed to be the one recovering."

"I'm—" Laura catches herself before she even gets to fine. She blinks once, then again and she's losing her control of her tears right in front of Michael "Tired."

"Did you eat?"

She nods. "I did."

"More than once?"

The little sound Laura makes in her throat is offended.

"Just checking."

They take a step, then another. The sofa is still a meter away and Laura stops her, squeezing her arm. "It's supposed to be me."

Michael squeezes her fingers. "What?"

"Danger, death, all of it." Laura takes a breath, but she shudders. "It's supposed to be me. I'm the fucking president."

"You are, and I love you."

Squeezing Michael's hand, she releases it, then takes a step on her own, then another until her hands rest on the table. "Making Discovery a diplomatic ship should have made you safer."

"I am safe. I'm fine."

Laura shakes her head, stares at the table and shivers again, as if she's very far away. "I can't lose you."

"You won't."

"I might."

This is a conversation they should have sitting down, but Laura shoves off the table, taking a few steps away from Michael; she has to pace. It's too much to hold in. She rubs the right side of her belly without thinking.

"After my father died, I've haven't let myself love anyone I could lose."

Michael gives Laura the space to move, sitting down on the couch, hands in her lap. "A scientist was safe."

"He never went anywhere dangerous, and Earth's moon was almost in the Federation."

"And the DMA changed that."

"The DMA upended the galaxy. He was in danger, I was in danger, everything was about to end. We'd fail, Earth and Ni'Var would be destroyed; if we even survived, we'd limp home for decades."

Michael nods. She knows how this goes. "What happened to you didn't matter."

"I have a duty."

Michael leans forward, elbows on her thighs. "As do I."

"I know, I know, I—"

"You hate it."

"I need you to be safe."

"I usually am."

"Usually is not good enough, you—"

"I'm fine."

Laira turns back, facing Michael even though she can't meet her eyes. "What if you weren't?"

"Then you tell her about me."

Laira's composure cracks, and her tears well, then fall. "I don't know if I can."

"Then my crew will."

"How can you be so calm about this?"

"I'm not calm."

Laira's chin trembles. "Bullshit."

Michael stands, hands up in surrender. "You might lose me, I might lose you. Either of us might have to raise her alone, but not, because my family, our family would help, and she'd be so loved."

"But she wouldn't—"

"I know my father," Michael reminds her, reaching for Laira's tears, first on one cheek, then the other. "He liked to read, and cook, and we'd give my mother a hard time when she wasn't ready for dinner, which she never was." Resting her hands on Laira's shoulders, she stands on her toes and kisses her lightly. "I wish I knew him more, but I know him. He's with me."

"This kind of with me is better," Laira says, her words catching in her throat.

"I know."

Laira takes a breath, and it's less sharp this time. They retreat to the sofa together, curling up. Laira resists for a moment, then her head's in Michael's lap.

"I'm not even accustomed to having you, how can be ready to lose you?"

"I don't think anyone's ever ready." Michael leans down, kissing her forehead. "I was terrified for you."

"You were?"

"I couldn't see you, I didn't know if you were hurt, or what you'd do without—"

"Without you." Laira shuts her eyes, and her tears start again.

"We're going to have to go through this. Worrying, not knowing, trusting."

Laira makes that incredulous sound and Michael grins down at her.

"You trust me."

"Of course."

"But it's still new."

"We're new."

Laira finds her hand and toys with her fingers, bringing it to her belly. "Everything about us is new. It happened so fast."

"I haven't let you down yet. I will, inevitably, but...I'll try not to let it be too often." Michael rubs her thumb in a little arc over Laira's belly. "You'll be perfect, of course."

"I asked Admiral Vance to increase your security, for awhile at least."

"All right."

"And you should let Owosekun lead more away teams."

"I can do that."

Rubbing the last of her tears away with her sleeve, Laira moves Michael's hand down, slightly to the left. "She's here. I wish you could feel her."

"Soon."

"Faster than we think."

"She'll be here faster than we think."

Laira shakes her head, finally smiling. "That doesn't seem soon at all."

"I imagine it'll feel like an eternity when you can't see your feet."

"You'll have to tell me about them."

Chuckling, Michael leans down, resting her forehead on Laira's. "I know this is hard."

"This isn't hard at all, it's so easy it terrifies me."

"How is this easy?"

Laira cups her cheek, her smile full of promise. "Falling in love with you was so easy."

"It was?" Her chest's warm and light and that smile could live in her heart forever.

Laira sits up, turning to kiss her.

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"Of course, Starfleet Intelligence is still working on the mystery you brought them," Vance says. "That Delta Quadrant location."

The one that came encoded in spores. Species 10-C would simply make a wormhole, so it's not likely to be them. This was hidden, well planned. Someone had the forethought to hid their location, give it to brokers, and arrange for them to lose them to Michael in a card game. That's a lot of steps.

"Do we have a short list?" Michael asks, pouring him more tea. When *Discovery* is close enough, they meet in person and Vance is fascinated by *Discovery's* ancient menu of tea.

"It's very short."

"Georgiou?" Michael guesses and he nods.

"Her, perhaps the being known as the Guardian of Forever, though we're not sure what he'd want. I'm tempted to send the *Armstrong*, or even a small team in a shuttle."

"Which would not include me."

"I don't think your wife would take kindly to my sending you on a dangerous mission right now."

Michael winces and nods. "Owosekun and Detmer could take a shuttle, use of the prototype spore drives. We could back them up if we need to."

"The message came to you."

"I trust them."

Vance studies her, then nods. "Your next diplomatic stop is Trill, which should be peaceful. We don't anticipate any problems, though that was also true of Penumbra, our intelligence on Trill is far more established."

"Then it's a good time to follow the mystery."

"Agreed. Keep us apprised on the mission."

"Of course, Admiral."

He finishes the last sip of his tea and stands, smiling. "I'll try to send your wife back before you have to involve any planetary leaders."

"I'd appreciate that."

Vance pauses, hovering behind his now empty chair. "I have an idea how difficult it is to balance your position and your marriage. I haven't always been able to make choices the way I've wanted too. It's better now."

"We're better now."

"It's never an easy conversation, and you're never done having it."

Michael nods. "Thank you for reminding me that we're not alone."

"One of my mentors used to say that in Starfleet, you're never alone, so you can keep that in mind. Many of us have been through what you're going through, with varying levels of success. Ronia's been extraordinarily patient, and willing to sacrifice for us so that our daughter could

grow up safe. Yours is going to grow up on a starship, and that's a beautiful life. Als a little dangerous."

"All planets have danger."

"And I've always believed the best place for a child is close to those who love her, and she'll have an abundance of that."

Michael sets down her cup. "Enough to balance out the danger?"

"Well, that's the question you and your wife need to answer, isn't it?"

### Chapter Summary

Laira's supposed to beam off the ship when Discovery is trapped in an ion storm, but it ends up not going as planned. Some things need to be said.

### Chapter Notes

many thanks to Whimsicalli and Sanctuaria for all their support.

The hand on Laira's shoulder shaking her awake is not Michael's. It's too gentle, almost tentative. Michael wouldn't be so careful. Yellow alert flashes above her, and Michael's voice carries over the shipwide comms. Something's wrong, Michael's on the bridge.

Protocol says—

Laira head swims when she lifts it, and her vision grays into tiny sparkles when she sits up, making it hard to focus on the face in front of her. She doesn't mean to moan, maybe she swallows it, then hands are on her shoulders. The alarm and the yellow lights should have woken her. Zora must have tried. She stirred when Michael left their bed, but Michael had kissed her and told her to sleep. That Laira remembers.

This doesn't make sense, and she's too tired to force her thoughts into order. Must be why Michael sent Tilly.

"There's an ion storm, nasty one." Tilly's hand finds her cheek, trying to help her focus. "You need to transport to the *Iria* so they can relay you to headquarters. Most of the crew's beaming out. You have just over two minutes before they're out of range and we power down so, let's find your shoes."

Tilly leaves her on the bed, searching the bedroom for Laira's shoes. Her boots are in the closet, but they'll take a moment to put on. She doesn't really have a moment- she should help - stand up- something. The room swirls around her while she misses what Tilly says. Tilly disappears for a moment, and hands her a glass of water.

"Drink." Tilly looks into the closet, looking through drawers until she finds a sweater. "You can put this on. I don't know if you've done it yet, but the emergency transport relay is unpleasant. You're going to have a hell of a headache, if you don't already." Tilly starts to hand her the sweater, and she's still talking but none of it is making sense. Like Liara's still asleep, or her translator is off.

The water's cold, and that helps a little, but swallowing reminds her stomach how annoyed it is. She winces, maybe even moans again, because Tilly's right in front of her. "Are you ready for this?"

"I'm fine."

"Of course." Tilly pats the back of her hand. "This is totally your 'I'm fine' face, not your 'I'm going to say I'm fine and throw up on your boots' face."

"You know that one?"

"I do." Tilly guides Laira's hand through her sleeve, then reaches over to help with the other side of her sweater. "If we're using how many times you've thrown up in front of me as a metric, we're closer than all of my Academy roommates."

Laughing a little, Laira stares at her bare feet. "And I was worried we wouldn't get to know each other."

Tilly offers her hands, helping Laira up to her feet. The deck's steady, because Tilly is, so it must be her head that's spinning. "You married my best friend," Tilly reminds her, as if that explains everything they haven't said to each other.

Beam to headquarters. Easy. She can be sick when she gets there. The doctors are HQ aren't Hugh, but she trusts them. Leaving is protocol, she always follows protocol.

Yet, she hates the idea. Leaving Michael tugs at her, twisting her stomach worse than hormones. Stress, Hugh has said. Too much stress and her body tries to compensate with one set of hormones, then the next, until everything's elevated, and she can't sleep, can't eat, and Michael's on the bridge.

She's safe there. Michael has to be safe there. She knows that bringing herself home is the most important. (Her own safety is still not a priority to her, might never be.) Laira's hands are sweating, and she wipes her palms against her thighs. Just beam out. It's what she's supposed to do.

Tilly carefully attaches Laira's badge to her sweater. Laira reaches for it, forgetting about the boots she never put on and the flashing yellow lights around them. This is her duty.

Tilly stops her hand, holding it in hers for a moment. Her expression softens, and her blue eyes darken in concern. "You're too warm."

"I'm—."

"Don't say fine, because you're not fine."

"I will be." Laura squeezes Tilly's fingers. If the long-distance relay transport is as terrible as she's been warned, maybe she won't have to be conscious to worry much about Michael. The medical staff at HQ are wonderful, but they're not Hugh, and she feels like a child trying not to be sent away. "Headquarters—"

Tilly interrupts her. "Sorry, headquarters, this is Lieutenant Tilly, we're going to need to keep our relief pilot on board for sublight exercises. Lots of clutter in this system, raining cats and dogs."

"I'll pass that along," the voice from HQ says, only pausing a moment. Hopefully they picked up on the code. "Keep your feet dry."

"We always try."

Laura blinks at her, too surprised to insist she has to beam herself away. "How do you know that? The medical override—"

"Oh that style of code's older than *Discovery*. My mom was on the security council, wanted me to be in the Diplomatic Corp, I have a great memory. Some things didn't change much, or maybe they came around again." Tilly squeezes her fingers. Her eyes are so steady, so certain, just like Michael's. "Since you're staying on the ship, we have to get to engineering."

"Engineering?" She's not following, and taking a step makes her head spin all the more. She has to let Tilly lead because her feet don't know where she's going. Never did put on shoes.

Guiding her towards the door, Tilly wraps her arm around Laura's back, "The best radiation shielding on the ship is in engineering. Of course, it was designed to keep the radiation of the warp core in, not keep a nasty ion storm out, but it's the same thing, just coming from different directions. The amount of neutron radiation in a class eight ion storm isn't usually this high, and this is high enough to pretty much liquefy everything living on the ship."

They pause at the corner of the corridor when Laura bends. The back of her throat burns and her skin's too hot, even worse than her fever. Tilly rubs her back, and waits. Eventually Laura can nod at her, but she doesn't trust her throat enough to speak.

Yellow alert glows amber on the cool deck beneath their feet and the ship is silent other than the alarms. What remains of the skeleton crew must be on the bridge, or already in engineering. Tilly talks to her, keeping her tone calm and level. Laura knows class eight ion storms are the ones you fly in the other direction of, even go sectors out of your way if you need to, but *Discovery* isn't a cargo ship, and the supply depot they're protecting is essential to the surrounding sectors. A tiny fleet of ships without strong enough shields would be here too, hidden under *Discovery*'s shields, like chicks in a storm.

Left, another left and they're in the turbolift. Laura shuts her eyes, rests her hand on the wall, and swallows, once, then again. It's not that far.

"If you throw up outside of engineering we're about to go through so much neutron radiation that it'll be turned to dust."

"That's..."

"Efficient?" Tilly teases, rubbing her shoulder. "Almost there."

"Wishing you sent me to HQ?"

Tilly pauses, waiting for Laura to meet her eyes. "That transport ride is fucking hell, and you need to be with Michael, and we've got you. We're good at this."

Laura smiles, weary and lightheaded, yet absolutely touched that she gets to be *Discovery*'s minor little problem for a few hours.

A day.

However long this is.

"Tilly, great we need—" Reno pauses for a moment, noticing Laura when she turns. "See, you're not the only civilian to miss the transport," she teases Veddra, who raises her eyebrows.

Veddra leaves her console, pulling her sweater tighter over her pajamas. "I loathe transport relays, I'm not sure what your reason is, but I'm sure it's an excellent one." She offers her hand. "Welcome to engineering, Mrs. Burnham."

"Thank you."

Reno and Tilly have a soft conversation about radiation shielding and long distance transporters and perhaps even how green Laura must be. She can't hear any of it from where she's standing at the back of engineering. Remaining standing her hand on the console is a small victory that she's almost proud of.

"You all right?"

"No, yes, it's nothing anyone can help with."

Veddra nods her head, her messy curls bouncing a little. "I might be able to help a little, take the edge off. I'm a rubbish telepath on the best day, but...can't really make it worse, can I?"

"I doubt—" Laura stops, putting her hand to her mouth. Heat comes before vomiting, most of the time, and she usually doesn't sweat when she has a fever, but her hands are damp. Hugh said it might get worse, is this that? Is it something else?

"May I?"

Laura's nod is half-hearted, but Veddra moves quickly, touching the back of her neck.

"Vulcans do their mind-meld with the obvious connection points, face-to-face, all very logical and sensible, but the points back here are faster." Veddra's fingertips sink into Laura's hair run up her neck, and her nausea's gone, lifted like a veil's been removed.

Veddra winces, takes a breath, then another, and shivers. "I can't believe you were walking."

"You get used to it."

"I've never seen the point in silent suffering, this is brutal." Veddra drags herself up, swaying before she grabs the console.

"That was stupid," Reno says, steadying Veddra's back. "Kind, but stupid."

"That's what you find attractive about me, my lack of impulse control."

Teasing each other comes easily to them, and they argue - flirt - through several rounds of shield strengthening and power transfers and Laura's so caught up watching them she almost forgot about Tilly until she returns.

"Drink this while your head is half-Romulan."

"Probably more than half." Laura accepts the water, wrapping her hands around it. "I didn't realize how bad it was."

"Good reason not to transport." Tilly drapes a blanket around her shoulders, sliding an empty supply container across the deck towards her feet as they sit on the deck together. "When it wears off, we're not going to have power."

"Throw up in the bucket, got it."

"Michael will be down from the bridge in a few minutes. You'll feel better when she's here."

She's right, and it's both a foolish thing and a wonderful one. Michael's her gravity well at the center of the universe. (And they almost lost her).

Without gravity all the stars drift away, don't they? They lose each other.

Laura's eyes sting, and Veddra gulps in sync with her, meters away. This time Reno kneels in front of her, finding her eyes.

"You could try thinking about sex."

"Oh?"

"Diverts blood flow, confuses your nerves." Reno pats her arm. "Haven't thrown up during that yet, have you?"

"No, no, I haven't."

"Might be worth trying."

"Michael's on the bridge."

"And she's hot up there, isn't she? Captain in the big chair, doing her thing. Think about that." Reno pats her shoulder. "We're almost done, then we'll just be trapped in an ion storm, no problem."

Think about sex is a nice idea, and she tries. Michael's lips are the are the softest, warmest— Laura curls her fingers into her palms. Not even that is enough. The fluctuations in the gravity make her hair raise, then fall back to her neck. Some of it sticks, caught in the sweat beading on her skin.

Too much radiation for the gravity plating or are they using so much power to execute - whatever Michael's heroic plan is? Does it matter?

This space station, Medical Depot Eta Twelve, crucial to the planets around it - immobile - delicate. That thought comes with a series of equations, attributes, technical things that Laura doesn't understand, doesn't know. These are Veddra's thoughts. Unspoken, floating in her head as if it were on a holopad inside her mind. Laura's head has never been this organized, nor has she understood the power conversion necessary to empty the phaser banks into the shield emitters. She'd heard jokes about it once or twice, how phaser baanks are good for blowing up someone else or yourself, but Veddra's a technical genius, like Michael and Reno and Paul and she focuses on that. The string of thoughts required to divert power and seal conduits and the hundreds of little calculations Laura wouldn't even know how to begin.

She's shared a handful of mind melds before. Several times it's been useful to share her thoughts with T'Rina, but T'rina's an accomplished telpath. Her thoughts have Vulcan discipline. Veddra's thoughts play in her head like a holonovel. They're not hers, but are, and of course she knows how to tweak the EPS manifold.

Engineering falls together in their shared mind like a word puzzle. Miraculously, neither of them throw up.

The expected miracle is that *Discovery* does not explode, and they manage to extend their shields around the space station. It takes every megajoule of power on the ship, but they manage to continuously cycle the shields through the spore drive and even inside Veddra's head it

seems advanced enough to be as magical as the 10-C.

Michael is the last one to arrive, after Joann, Keyla and the rest of her bridge crew. Laira can't even see her face from her corner of engineering, but her voice fills the room, and her presence calms it.

They've got this.

The conversations and the speed of hands across controls reaches a zenith, then it's quiet.

Incredibly quiet.

The lights fade, rather than snapping off. A new sound, something organic, unpredictable, like hail on the roof of her grandparents' home, whispers around them.

Michael's fingers touch her cheek, and nothing else matters in the universe. In that moment, she remembers calm - contentment. Michael's here, everything will be fine.

"Our shields are around the station, and all the ships too small to warp away. Neutron radiation destroys living things but it's harmless to most of *Discovery*. Here in engineering, we have the strongest radiation shielding, so the spores would be safe. No matter what *Discovery* goes through, no spores, and we can't fly."

"So the shielding is built in?"

"We use flerovium alloy. Neutrons just bounce off."

"And we can hear it - them- neutrons?"

Michael's smile is bright for a moment, but then it's replaced with her worried one. "We can hear the miniscule vibrations caused by the bouncing." Michael crouches down in front of her, then touches their foreheads together. "So yes, in a way. Kind of like micrometeors, but these won't get through. There's plenty of air, we have supplies—"

"And all the plants," Tilly adds, handing Michael a ration case.

Laira blinks, trying to follow Tilly's thought process as Veddra and Hugh arrive behind Michael. "Plants?"

Hugh crouches down, tricorder probe in hand. "Saru helped many crew members start their own gardens, and all of them are safe in secondary spore storage, so the neutrons can just pass through the rest of the ship." Tilting his head towards Tilly, he nods. "You were right."

"Usually am."

Michael opens the ration case but Hugh shakes his head.

"Veddra has her in a mind meld, that's keeping her more stable than she is."

"What?"

"I don't know if that's the proper Romulan term, but, look-" Hugh pauses, shifting the tricorder display towards Michael. "Their mental patterns are identical."

"Veddra didn't want me to—"

Across engineering, Veddra nearly demonstrates why they're locked together, stopping herself before she vomits onto the deck at her feet. Reno grabs her shoulder and they head towards Laira and Michael. Tilly crouches beside Hugh and in a moment they're all going to be around her.

Her mind must have swung too far towards Veddra's because Laira's not even nauseated any more and Reno's protective little smile does something to her chest it never has before.

"You were supposed to evacuate her," Michael reminds Tilly, and the softness is gone from her voice. "The president should be back at headquarters."

Laira could tell her that using the medical override Tilly did makes her not the president at the moment, handing it off to Jen, again, but that's not important.

"The transport relay is profoundly unpleasant, I helped test it," Tilly says.

Michael turns to face her and her tone is sharp, much harsher than usual. "Unpleasant and alive is better."

"We're not in that much danger."

Michael gestures at the dark engineering room. "We're counting on our radiation shielding to protect us from neutron radiation so deadly even all Linus' lichen collection is in the spore bay."

"We have excellent shielding, and a stellar engineering team, we're fine."

Taking Tilly's arm, Michael drags her away and they argue in the far corner of the room. Their voices are raised, and sharp, and Laira's never seen them argue like this.



"When I end the link, you're going to feel like hell." Veddra says with a very apologetic smile, "Assuming I feel what you do, or would—" she stops, covering her mouth. It takes her two breaths to speak again. "Good thing we're not going anywhere."

"The respite is appreciated."

Hugh nods to Veddra, who reaches for the back of Laira's neck. "I can't get a good read of your vitals, your neural signature is reading as Romulan."

"I didn't know that happened."

"Rubbish telepath, remember?" Veddra says, looking into Laira's eyes. For a moment, she's her and looking at herself and they gasp in unison, then it's over. The quiet, methodical part of her thoughts is gone, so is the quiet. She's too hot and too cold and her stomach's right in the back of her throat. Back to herself, with all that mess.

Hugh's tricorder beeps angrily, and even from the wrong side of the holo, Laira catches some of the yellow indicators drop into orange. The displeased shade of orange that usually makes Hugh make that face.

"You don't have to wait for this to get this bad."

"It wasn't—"

"Your cortisol levels are as high as your approval ratings."

She chuckles, shakes her head and then holds very, very still.

"You're asking your body to do a lot. something it's never done before, and you're putting it through more than you have."

"I've been in—"

"You haven't been in love, you haven't faced losing someone you love." Hugh leans in close, brushes the little sweaty wisps of hair back out of her eyes. "You nearly lost her and you haven't been all right since Penumbra."

Hands help her up onto her knees so it'll be easier to throw up, when she inevitably does. Tilly and Michael are still arguing and their voices rise above the rushing of the storm on the hull.

"Which one are you madder about, the president being on your ship or your wife?"

"They both shouldn't be here."

"Laira's not president right now. The medical override—"

"We are in the middle of an ion storm."

"And she still gets a choice."

"She's a civilian."

"She's your wife, and she loves you. She would have beamed off and been sick for days at HQ, waiting to hear that we were all right."

"It's not safe on *Discovery*."

"It's safe enough for us, why not her?"

"You know why not."

"You know you're not her captain, right?" Tilly's voice softens and she tugs Michael back. "Maybe it's not me you're mad at."

"I am still mad at you."

"You're also mad at her."

Tilly and Michael return to the little group surrounding Laira and Hugh. The rest of the bridge crew drifts over. Their family is here, all around them. Not that the argument was private, not in this small room.

Michael takes a very slow breath, then reaches for Laira's hand, wrapping her steady fingers around Laira's own damp ones. "I wish you weren't here."

"I don't want to be anywhere else."

"That's not—"

"You let Veddra stay."

Michael glances at Veddra, then back at Laira. "You know that's different. You have to keep the baby safe."

That's not fair of her to ask. "I don't want to you to leave us behind."

"I'm not trying to."

Laira coughs, fighting the stinging heat in the back of her throat. "You're not avoiding it."

"That's not--"

It's almost better that she throws up now, in front of Michael. She'll be able to argue with her better. Around her everyone's quiet, someone holds her hair, and hands steady her shoulders. She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand and stares at Michael. "You're never been careful enough with your own life, not before, not now."

"You're in a dangerous situation with our baby."

"Oh no, no, you don't get to tell me I have to keep her safe while you risk your life. I'm not doing this—" She doesn't get to finish her thought, because she can't even be livid without being a hormonal mess. Laira retches again, choking, then spitting. Hugh hands her a cup of water and she has to spit that out too. "I chose you, we chose to do this together, that means you stay."

"I'm not—"

"You almost died, and I had to watch. Do you know how few Starfleet captains we have? How singular you are in the universe? How much I love you? You can't go."

"I have to—"

"I could do this," Joann says, her voice soft and even. "You could have beamed out with Laira."

Michael shakes her head. "I'm the captain."

Touching the swell of her belly makes Michael wince. "You're also her mother, and if it's too dangerous for me, it's too dangerous for you. She should get both of us."

"She will. You have to trust me."

"I have trusted you. I've listened to everything you've asked of me. I've let you risk yourself to scosian fever and down on that planet and here, I was ready to beam off and Tilly stopped me."

That furrow in Michael's forehead deepens. "She shouldn't have."

"Actually, you should have gone down and beamed off with your wife," Tilly corrects her. "If you wanted to be sure she was safe, you should have gone. I made a decision."

"The medically correct one," Hugh adds. "There's no way Laira should have been taking a transport relay. It's too much cellular stress."

"But we're stuck here," Michael looks at Laira and the crew as if they've all started sparkling like the mushrooms.

"And we're together," Hugh says. "There's very little medical at HQ could do that I can't do here with a medkit."

By that he means there's absolutely nothing he can do to even out her raging hormones, but Laira doesn't even care anymore. She's too angry to be nauseated.

"I let you chose to come to headquarters, and I encouraged you to go back to your ship. I've never asked you to stop being you. You're Michael Burnham, and I love that about you, but I can't lose you. I won't."

"You know we're capable of saving the galaxy," Joann says, touching Michael's shoulder. "We've done it. You led us, but we chose, and we'd chose that again. We can handle it when you need to be mom."

Laira tries to drink her water again, and this time it stays down. Maybe she has a moment. "I thought it was selfish to ask you to be with me when the whole galaxy needs you. I've spent my life putting everyone else first, and I kept doing it, but we're allowed to be a little selfish. Sometimes, it's okay to let someone else be the hero."

Blinking too quickly, Michael shakes her head. "You know how hard that is."

"I think that's why I didn't want to ask you." Moving Michael's hands to her belly, she smiles. Her tears sting, then run hot. "I need you to stay, with me, with her, because she's our person. You let me pull you into my heart, put you first, and I need that from you."

Michael takes a breath, looks at her crew, and then her too-bright eyes find Laira's. She kisses her forehead, then her cheek. "I'm sorry." Her voice catches, too high and tight in her throat. "I know what it's like to be left, and I thought if she had you, it would be okay."

"She gets us both." Laira holds her hands tight. "We have to make that happen."

"We can help," Hugh says. "We got you." All the faces around them agree. They can do it. They know how hard this is for Michael, how much she needs to put herself in harm's way for them, for everyone. She'll have to trust them to protect her.

"I love you both." Michael falls into her arms, holding her tight.

"Love us enough to stay safe," Laira whispers. That's the hardest part of all of this. Knowing how much they mean to each other, how much they're loved. They have their family, they'll help them through.

Chapter Summary

Michael talks to Hugh and Tilly and comes to some epiphanies about how she's balancing the ship, her wife and becoming a parent.

Chapter Notes

many thanks to Sanctuaria and Whimsicalli for helping me plot.

Hugh tilts his head towards the back corner of engineering, and Michael smiles, making sure Laira sees it. They're all right. Change can be painful, so is growing a new life, and they rushed so quickly into this, of course it's hard. They're having a rough patch but their relationships is newer than the baby, so it's logical to struggle. They'll be fine.

Michael wasn't listening. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered if she was, because hearing, taking it in, agreeing with another point of view is all so complicated.

"She's been working too hard."

Studying his face, Michael tries to guess where they're going to start. "Laira said she was, we talked about it. Additional security meetings. She keeps falling asleep."

"Her hormones spiral, build on each other. It's a lot like this storm, really. Too much stress means too much cortisol, too much ghoyoc hormone and she starts running a fever, too much estrogen and her nausea's back."

Hands on her hips, Michael looks down at her boots. "I haven't seen it this bad in weeks."

"It hasn't been this bad. We talked, Laira and I talk every day, and she's had a few rough days leading to tonight, but waking up in the middle of the night for a crisis made all of our stress levels rise. You and I aren't trying to precariously balance being pregnant with the second most stressful job in the galaxy."

"The first being?"

"Starfleet captain of *Discovery*, of course."

"I deserved that."

"You did." Hugh pulls up a holographic display from his tricorder. "These readings are from before you were shot, this is after, and this is the spiral into where we are now."

"She said she was tired. Laira gets feverish when she's tired but—"

"It happens so often you don't really worry about it?"

"She doesn't want me to." It's not the right answer. It's not even a good one, but it's what they do.

"Always do whatever she wants?"

"Try to." Michael takes a breath, centers herself. "I let her tell me she's all right."

Hugh gives her a moment to think about what that really means. "How's that going?"

"Not well."

"Your well-being has a direct connection to hers, and I know you like to tell yourself that the best thing you can do is keep sacrificing yourself for us, but, that's not what I see here." He gestures at the curves on the graph. "This is when she's home, with you."

"I didn't know you were tracking her that closely."

Hugh gives her an gentle look. "That's our baby."

Chuckling wearily, she chews on her lip, fidgeting with her hands. "Right."

"A hybrid pregnancy can be tenuous. Different genetics between parent and child, it's complicated."

"It's a delicate balance." She's heard this, said it. Nothing's going to be stable until the Hitchhiker arrives.

Hugh's smile warms her chest. "In all the important indicators, they're both very healthy. I would like to be able to do more for the uncomfortable parts, but usually they're manageable. Laira's doing a wonderful thing, with more patience than most people would have." Hugh touches her shoulder. "We can make it easier for her."

"You mean, I can."

Hugh's gaze moves to Paul in the little group around Laira. They're taking something out of storage, emergency blankets, cushions. They're going to be here awhile, might as well be comfortable. "I left Paul alone," he says. "Didn't mean too, and I got to come back. He still went through hell. I wouldn't want anyone to go through that."

Michael touches his arm. "We've already made it through."

"And we will, until we don't, maybe that never happens. Maybe that happens tomorrow."

"It won't."

Hugh shrugs. "It's a numbers game, isn't it? Risk ourselves enough times and the probability goes up."

"It's not just math. That discounts our skills. We've been through a lot together."

"Maybe enough to take a break." Hugh doesn't take out the tricorder. Doesn't need to. "You nearly died a few weeks ago. We've been outside the galaxy, dodged a plague. The universe finds ways to keep upping the stakes and we've won. Hopefully that streak keeps going because I'd love to see your grandchildren some day."

Michel can't even picture the Hitchhiker's little face, let alone her children and everything that comes next. "Reno's probably seen them."

"That's one possible timeline, not a sure thing." Hugh's smile grows slowly, then lights his eyes again. "I'd like to see it. Catch a few more babies, watch you be the incredible mother I know you'll be."

"And you will." They'll be fine. They've made it through everything. Michael doesn't know where this doubt comes from.

He nods, then touches her shoulders, wrapping his arm around her. "I don't think you realize how much we love you, all of us, especially your wife." He leans in to whisper. "And she feels like shit right now, so as your doctor, the kindest thing you could do - for all of us - would be let things be boring for a few more months."

"We haven't had much boring."

"We could try it, just for the novelty."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Adrenaline makes everyone hungry. It doesn't matter that it's creeping up on oh-three hundred, or that the storm outside whispers against the hull like sand. She hasn't been in a sandstorm since she walked across the desert with Philippa, lifetimes ago. They could have been stuck there together, and must have been, in one of the branching timelines.

There must be one where Philippa's here, either of them, both— Michael takes some of the nuts Paul offers her and listens while Reno explains how they turned a large stack of rations into a picnic. The stack of crackers in front of Laira is more than she could eat in a day, and Tilly's organizing them. Laira's head rests on her shoulder, and Keyla's on her other side. Michael smiles, trying to decide how that seating configuration came to be.

Her crew can have a very detailed discussion about absolutely anything, Michael realizes as they continue discussing the crackers in the ration packs.

"One of the Bajoran ration packs has good crackers."

"If you can find Earth- they should have crackers."

"I thought everyone had invented a cracker at some point."

"Vulcan food is about as tasteless as the wrapper it comes in." Veddra drops two packs of emergency rations onto the pile, eating the pickles out of one of the Cardassian ones in front of her.

Reno lifts her hand, stopping Laira's protest as soon as she opens her mouth. "We all have to eat."

Laira's very tired smile is gorgeous. "You don't have to open all of them."

"It's a picnic." Tilly sits down beside Laira, easing in close. "You like picnics."

Laira squeezes Michael's hand when Michael starts to stand. She needs to talk to Hugh, and Laira's all right. the crew has her. She's safe with them. "We seem to keep having them."

"Because food is better shared."

Paul opens one of the packs and takes out the cheese before passing the crackers to Tilly. "I used to eat as quickly as possible to get back to my work, and I would have eaten at my desk, but it would have gotten spores in my food, so—"

"Those aren't the pizza mushrooms," Reno says. "Oh, here, try these." She passes over another set of crackers, and the pile in front of Laira

keeps growing. Then Reno breaks up a chocolate bar and passes pieces around. "Keyla's the warmest."

"How did you decide that?"

Joann shrugs. "She is."

"Keeping Mrs. Burnham warm might help convince her Cardassian side that she doesn't need to turn up the heat for the baby."

"Crude, but accurate."

Michael reaches for her, and Laira's fingers are less damp. Still too warm, but sweating less might mean she's less nauseated. Maybe that's too hopeful. "Thanks, everyone."

"Reno got to eat all the olives from about eight packs of rations, this probably counts as the best date we've had."

"Oh it does, culinarily. This is excellent. Rations have greatly improved in this century."

"Starfleet has the good ones," Laira says, looking at Veddra for confirmation.

"Oh the Ni'Var fleet's are terrible. Too much Vulcan influence, everything that's supposed to have a flavor tastes like a mufelk root."

"I hate mufelk root."

"Everyone with taste does."

Michael's crew glances between each other.

"I didn't think it was that bad," Joann says. Michael can't remember trying it, so it must be Romulan in origin.

"Because you haven't had vinareen."

Reno leans back, eating almonds. "That is apparently the most delicious thing to exist, but we haven't been to Ni'Var since we started dating, and the replicator won't do it justice, so..."

They make it seem so easy to tell stories about how they dated. Joann and Keyla have one about eating Betazoid street food together, when Keyla was safe from scosian fever. Paul and Hugh have years of dinners and breakfasts that they've shared, and the story Hugh chooses is how many times their attempt at getting dinner went wrong before the opera Paul didn't want to see.

"It's only the most romantic Kasselian opera of all time."

"Which means it's a great tragedy, all of them are tragedies." Paul mock glares at Hugh, and Hugh meets his gaze with affection.

"Watching a tragedy reminds you to treasure what you have."

"And I have the best."

"Damn right you do."

All of their eyes are on them when they kiss, gentle and calm. That's where Michael and Laira have to reach, happily teasing each other as they recount how strange the beginning of their relationship was. Laira sneezing in the shuttle is funny, so are the strange little moments where they started, learning to trust each other as lovers, as partners, eventually parents.

They'll get there.

Laira winces a little, sleepily rubbing a spot on her belly while Veddra tells a story about Reno on Earth and the dive bar Reno insisted they absolutely had to go to.

"Just for the potatoes."

"French fries are divine."

Everyone has an opinion about potatoes, fried, deep fried or otherwise. Michael lets the conversation wash around her, focusing on the little ways Laira bites her lip that have no pattern. The Hitchhiker must be awake, and determined to make her presence known. Hopefully it's comforting, if strange. She's been getting stronger. Laira tried to explain it as a difference between bubbles and tapping fingers but it still seems surreal.

"Do you have a date story for us?" Tully looks at Michael, rubbing Laira's elbow. Laira's too close to asleep to tell a story, if she even has one she wants to share. Their relationship developed like they'd jumped into it from the mycelial network.

"We had to go camping, on Bajor, walking up to Resuna Idum."

"Sacred camping," Keyla adds, stealing a piece of dried fruit from the food in the center. "Fancy sacred camping."

"Fancy would have been letting us sleep in a thousand year old hotel."

Laira smiles, and her eyes are closing as her head rests on Tilly's shoulder. "Michael hated every minute of it," she says, ending in a yawn.

"Every minute, especially the birds and the trees and worrying that the tent wasn't sound proof." Michael pauses, giving Keyla time to raise her eyebrows. "The coffee was good."

Telling stories gets them through closer to ship's dawn, and their collective adrenaline's starting to fade when they're all yawning more than teasing each other. The programmable matter they have doesn't need much power to turn into sleeping mats. They'll be firm, like Vulcan meditation rooms, but it'll do. Nicer than the cargo bay they slept in once on *Shenzhou*.

They have to wake Laura to move her from one corner to the other, and Michael's chest aches. She's still feverish, and she has to be so much more exhausted than any of them. She could be in her own comfortable bed on HQ, not balancing with her hands Michael and Tilly's shoulders.

"Nausea's better?" Hugh asks, checking her eyes. "Fever's worse, but at least you're only lightheaded."

Laura nods, returning his smile. "You're not going to need to ask me questions anymore. You know all my answers."

"Oh no, when I learn them something changes."

Michael kneels to remove her shoes, and she turns to help with Laura's, but Laura is barefoot already.

Has been, now that Michael thinks of it.

It's the middle of the night and her pregnant wife is barefoot in engineering, waiting to see if they survive the radiation swirling around them.

She hates this. Loathes it with all of her. Laura should be safe. (The idea that Michael should have left the ship to be safe with her seems as out of place as Laura's bare feet.)

"Where are your shoes?"

Shrugging once, Laura leans against the wall, careful to mind her balance. "We talked about them."

Tilly's little smile is apologetic. "We did. It was quick."

"Someone was more worried about me throwing up on the deck."

Michael had thought - hoped - Laura slept through the yellow alert because she was tired, and she sent Tilly because Tilly could have evacuated with her. That was logical. Tilly keeping Laura here, bringing her to engineering, making her part of their little skeleton crew: all of that is an illogical mess. Going down for Laura herself never occurred to her. Michael's place is on the bridge.

Except when it's not.

They could have jumped, found another ship, transported everyone they could. She thought of alternatives, Michael has to consider everything. She rejected them. Discovery could do this better. They developed the relay protocol for these situations. Almost everyone beamed off, even Tilly's cadets.

Not Laura. (Laura should have beamed off the ship and been safe and not here.)

Michael sits down beside them, arranging emergency blankets and watching Tilly turn programmable matter into pillows. Laura's hands are cool, but her face is too warm. She leans into Michael's hand.

"I told you I was cold."

It would be nice if cold meant cold, not that Laura's fever's back and some combination of hormones aren't balanced. What little Hugh can do in sickbay isn't even possible here. Hating that Laura's here won't help either of them, so Michael forces that down. Worrying about what can't be changed is a waste of energy.

They sit, side by side, Laura leaning back against the bulkhead behind them, eyes closed. She should be asleep. Michael touches her shoulder, then pulls her in. Laura slips into her lap, which is right. She's fallen asleep this way so many times. Michael strokes her hair, running her fingers across Laura's scalp. On the other side of the radiation shielding, particles whisper across the hull before they continue their journey across space.

"When we came here, in the wormhole, time rushed by me, and in the timesuit, everything was so close, like I could touch the centuries as they passed. Yet it was quiet; it felt like I was still as the rest of space surged around me, and then I crashed and it was a whole mess, but I heard the universe." Shutting her eyes, Michael listens to the rustling of her family getting comfortable around them: Keyla and Joann turning off emergency lights, Reno getting more blankets as Paul programs pillows to line against the wall. Something about sleeping in a group reminds her of the *Shenzhou*, and a few long missions where they slept on the ground together.

Her Captain Philippa would be so calm here, telling stories, teasing Michael for worrying.

Michael camped with Laura on the way to their wedding, and the storm outside is louder than the humming insects in the deep forest. Maybe Michael needs to think of this as just another journey. Walk up the mountain. Trust.

Tilly settles in beside them, drinking some water before she sets it aside. She smiles down at Laura for a moment. "Miss the part where you just had sex all the time?"

"What?"

"You were like two slime devils. I thought Hugh was going to have to start giving you vitamins."

Running her fingers through Laura's hair, Michael stares upward. "Felt like command training all over again."

"Stopped when you got shot, didn't it?"

So this is where they're going. Michael stretches, nods to Tilly but slips down beside Laura, curling into her. This conversation doesn't have to continue, but it will. Tilly's looking for something.

Tilly lies on the mat behind her, getting comfortable with a little sigh. "Sex isn't just about hormones you know."

"She worked too much after I was injured, her security briefings started taking up too much time. She was too tired. It isn't like we were fighting"

"All that energy disappeared?"

"It went into meetings."

"Bet those weren't as much fun as you."

Michael's face burns, and she slows her breathing. She could just fall asleep and end this discussion, but Tilly knows that trick. She's used it too often in the past.

"You're still awake."

"I am not."

"I bet that at first you were grateful for the break from constantly having sex with your gorgeous wife, but now, it's been a few weeks and sex is just not something you're talking about."

"We're fine."

"Laura thinks she's about to lose you."

"But that's not going to happen."

"You know, if anything happened to us, she'd be alone, like, totally alone." Tilly settles in beside her, snuggled up so she only has to whisper. "Vance and everyone would try to help--"

"But they're not us."

"Especially not you."

"We're going to be fine." They're not in any real danger, they'll return.

Tilly curls a little closer. "That's the problem though, isn't it? If we're not in danger, there's no problem with Laura staying, and if we're in danger, then—"

"I'm still the captain, we're—"

"An ancient starship, kind of retired. An antique with diplomats and cadets and—"

"We were the closest."

Tilly sighs, resting her hand on Michael's shoulder. "There are seven ships with spore drives now. Close no longer matters. The *Mitchell* has enough power that her shields could wrap around this little station and all the ships without even a drain."

They didn't need the *Mitchell*, they could handle the storm.

Yawning, Tilly mumbles a little, then repeats herself. "I know you throw yourself at every problem that needs solving in the universe, but you're going to be someone's mom. You're married, you're ours. Maybe we share the problems with the other starships, you know, spread the galaxy-saving around."

Michael lies there in the dark, listening to the whispered conversations until everyone else is asleep. She curls around Laura, resting her forehead on Laura's back. Her hand finds her belly, holding her lightly. Their Hitchhiker's down there. Swimming, sleeping- there's no way for Michael to know. Laura's mentioned her squirming, kicking out in her sleep, not enough to wake Laura, not most of the time. Though, when was it? Three days ago? The baby was active enough that Laura was awake for hours. Michael felt her come back to bed.

Tilly's right.

Are they losing the wonder of this? Buried in the day to day, surviving. Enduring. There's a person beneath her hand, getting stronger every day, getting closer to them. It doesn't feel real. That's a part of the process, starting to live with the reality of a person.

Their person.

Michael traces Laura's belly, finding a good spot for her hand. She's almost asleep. It's warm here between Laura and Tilly, and the rushing of the ion storm is calming. It hasn't changed, hasn't snuck up after them, they're all right. They can sleep.

Everyone around her is already asleep. She just needs to let go.

Something taps her hand. *Laira* must have moved. *Michael* takes a breath, begins her centering exercises again. The tap happens again, a nudge, closer to her palm. *Laira* doesn't move, her breathing is even. She's still asleep, as is *Tilly*.

That little motion happens again, and again, nudge followed by nudge, without a pattern or method.

Random, joyful, kicking tiny legs, flailing little arms: it must be so satisfying to have movement, to be able to start being part of the universe.

Swimming, twisting, tapping, over and over.

She can't sleep, and neither can the baby. *Michael* follows her with her hand, chasing that motion until finally the baby must be asleep, like everyone else. *Laira* has said that the baby has long periods of activity, that sometimes it feels like she'd never sleep. *Michael* can see her smile; that little head tilt.

Their baby's with them; moves with them.

This is her home. It's not that *Michael* has to bring her home, keep her safe until they arrive, no, *Discovery* is home.

*Michael* wanted to send her away. She's not fighting to bring their baby home, or even to get back to her, she's here and they're trapped, but it's not right.

(They're all right, they're safe here).

*Michael* buries her face in the back of *Laira's* neck, snuggling in while her eyes burn.

"We should have jumped," she mutters to no one.

The lights are out, and the engineering lab is blue-white from the glow of spore canisters. The depot beneath their shields is safe, as are the ships.

They could have been safe another way. She flew their home into danger. She's been doing it all wrong. Framing this as something she needed to protect *Laira* and the baby from, sending her away, separating them.

*Discovery* was the the ship that went everywhere, did everything, the first responder.

And now they're not. They're something else, *Michael* has to let them be something else. Let them grow.

It's all changing around her again, but this time she's not putting out the timesuit or failing *Philippa*, she's raising a person.

Tap by tap.

*Michael* lies awake, wrapped in the breath of her family, drifting in the storm.

This is home. Hers and *Laira's* and the baby's. It's a nursery, and it'll be a flight school, part of the Academy; whatever it needs to be so the cadets are ready to be the next officers.

*Discovery* is more than their ship. She's their family. Nearly everyone who will love their daughter is here. They will guide her daughter in ways they can't even dream of yet. She'll learn compassion and laugh and tug *Keyla's* uniform until she gest to sit on her lap. *Reno's* seen her growing up here.

*Discovery* is their village. They'll all grow here. *Michael* holds on to that idea, centers it, and starts the rebuilding of her universe. She focuses on saving everyone because it's the right thing to do. For such a long time, it felt like they were the only ones who could solve the problems they came up against.

But there are more spore drives. Ships with better equipment and crews with rescue experience. *Saru* has his own ship and he's one of the most competent and compassionate captains she knows.

*Laira* told her that she risked too much on the first day they met, and *Michael* dug into proving her wrong, over and over, but perhaps...she's been right. Even *Philippa* thought she took too much on her shoulders, and *Philippa* was from a place where they saved no one.

*Michael* shuts her eyes tight again, letting her tears die in her throat. *Philippa* would be proud. She'd be so thrilled about the baby, and *Laira*, and even though she hadn't experienced romantic love the way people did in this universe, she'd understand this. Probably be right here with *Tilly*, telling her how to do better.

Being mom first is terrifying, but she's faced everything the universe can throw at her. She's got this. She's not doing it alone.

She has to make sure *Laira* doesn't need to. That their hitchhiker gets both of them for as long as she can, and that will involve sacrifices. Not the kind she keeps wanting to make, not the easy ones.

There will be distress calls they don't answer. Missions they give away to the *Armstrong* and the *Mitchell*, and the rest of Starfleet. *Discovery* is their home, and she has to protect it.

She can do that.

She has to teach herself how.





### Chapter Summary

Laira has an interview so Earth can get to know her. Michael starts working on a new project for *Discovery*. Together they find a way to reconnect.

She's been married to Michael for no time at all, really, but it's also been long enough that Laira can tell when something is happening. She's not sure what yet. Michael's been in meetings with Vance and some of the other captains, then with the teachers at Federation HQ. Not just the Academy instructors like Tilly, but the secondary school teachers and even some of the parents.

Which means Michael's planning something. When Laira's done with yet another meeting about the ion storms, maybe they'll finally have time to talk about it. She glances at her schedule for a moment, almost hopeful she'll get to see Michael in between her meetings, but it's a lost cause today.

"Madame President, the Federation News Network is ready for you."

She forgot about the interview for Earth. President Montgomery brought up the idea that Laira should let Earth get to know her, and the scheduling finally worked out for today. Laira finishes the last of her coffee, touches her hair, and decides this will have to do. She wouldn't really change anything if she'd remembered. It's better they see reality on the holo news channels. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Admiral Vance would like to inform you that installing spore drives is still ahead of schedule."

"We have eight now?"

"Yes, ma'am, and thanks to *Discovery* there were no casualties during the last ion storm."

Laira chuckles a little. "Yes, Lieutenant, I was there." So they're looking for good news. She can do that.

Lieutenant Willa winces a little. "Right, sorry ma'am. That part is somewhat classified."

"We'd rather I didn't admit on the Federation-wide holonet that I spent several days in the middle of an ion storm?"

"As always, Starfleet defers to your judgement, Madam President," Willa hesitates and Laira knows what comes next.

"I will refrain from mentioning my own personal danger."

"We would rather civilian vessels remained far from ion storms, not attempt to ride them out because *Discovery* was able to."

"That's wise."

She sneezes twice in the corridor, and three more times while Willa transfers a few other talking points to Laira's holocomm. The words will hover behind the interviewer while they talk, in case Laira needs them. The questions will have been vetted by Admiral Vance and Federation intelligence before they get to this point, and it'll be edited before it goes out. All she has to do is relax.

The interview room is busy, full of people adjusting lights and sensors. One of the techs interfaces with her badge, syncing into the sound. Her first interview went to a tiny audience, when the election circuit was just starting, and now she'll be beamed to every planet in the Federation: every starship and colony.

Of course, back then she wasn't with Michael, hadn't even met her, and no one was twisting just beneath her ribs, and Laira wasn't trying to balance her life and the myriad competing demands of Starfleet, the Federation, her incredible wife and the ever-heavier baby. Rubbing her right side, she reminds herself not to fidget with her belly. Keep her hands still in her lap; project calm. They can edit out her sneezing.

Laira expects one of the interviewers she's had before. The Federation's pool of journalists is vast and talented, and it could be anyone—

Then her great-aunt Margo walks in, wearing a deep blue sweater. She has her notes on the holo in front of her and somehow she's become the interviewer. That must have taken some doing.

"Imagine my surprise when I found out that once Earth had rejoined the Federation, my credentials entitled me to put in for fascinating interviews like this one with the President of the Federation herself." Margo winks at her from her chair. "Should be fun."

Reaching across to squeeze her hand, Laira nods. "It's good to see you."

Margo squeezes her hand back, then leans in for a hug. It's quick and tight, yet comforting. "Any excuse."

Laira's chest tightens with joy. "How we disclose that we know each other?"

"I'll mention it in the introduction, should add a little bit of connection."

There's a practiced calm in the way Margo sits in the chair across from her. It'll be good for Earth to be represented in a way where they're visibly back in the Federation and it seems this is a more personal, less policy driven interview. Those are sometimes more difficult - Laira

can't help thinking her own life is a little dull - but it's important for unity. Their leaders have fears and triumphs too, and the personal interest story is important. Laura is not the alien president arriving to tell Earth how to be a part of the Federation and how to exist in the galaxy. In a way, she's coming home. Her mother always wanted to see Earth, and Laura's daughter will run on the beaches.

"This is an introduction to you, Earth missed the election cycle because we were ignoring the rest of the galaxy," Margo says, rolling her eyes. "So don't worry about policy or making an impression, we're just talking."

Laura raises her eye ridges a little. "Of course, no pressure."

"I can throw in some fiendishly difficult questions if you want."

"Trying to keep me on my toes?"

The lights come on around them, illuminating both of their faces so they'll carry well onto holocomms. Everyone around them steps back, leaving the two of them in a little circle of golden light, with talking points and Margo's list of questions hovering around them just out of reach of the holocomm.

"Might as well appreciate your toes while you can still see them," Margo quips. Her smile's bright at first, then wistful. "My sister - your grandmother - laughed until she cried when she couldn't see her toes anymore. Your mother got big, and then Vivien couldn't see her feet. I hadn't thought about that in years." Her gaze remains on Laura's belly for a long moment, then she takes a breath. A few blinks have her eyes clear, but there's old longing there still.

When Laura's grandmother left Earth, she left everything. Earth was not part of Federation or participating in the interplanetary alliances. She'd left her family with no way to see them again. Yes, she'd built another family among the stars, but she'd been away from her home for the rest of her life. She'd missed that home enough that Laura's mother had been enamored with the Pacific ocean that she'd never seen because her mother had talked about it so often.

"Maybe this will be harder for me. I seem to be getting soft in retirement."

"Are all your questions going to be sentimental?"

Margo shakes her head, her steel-gray hair falling loose on her shoulders. "I'll try to keep it together. When that light goes green, we're recording." She points at the holo behind her. "In five, four, three—"

The lights shift, adding a ring of green around them so everyone knows not to interrupt, and then they start. Margo begins with the easy questions, where were you born, how did you go to school, what was it like on a cargo freighter for some much of your childhood?

The way she first met a Vulcan with blood dripping into her eyes makes Margo chuckle, and once she's telling stories, the interview flies by. The stories that matter are about connection, when Laura helped bring planets together, when she reached out - that's what they're all searching for - what brought Earth back into the Federation.

"We were out past the edge of the galaxy, and everything's dark except for a handful of stars. We knew Earth and Ni'Var were in danger. I wanted to go back, I thought- I don't know what I could have done, - but I thought I could help—" Laura trails off, for a moment even the baby's still before she finds a new spot to kick. "Michael wanted to make sure I was all right. I couldn't stop thinking about everyone in danger, about my mother's family and Ni'Var-" she pauses, clearing her throat, "I don't know if I could tell you the last time anyone asked about me."

"And after that?"

"Well, she's a Starfleet Captain, she's brave, intelligent, charming and gorgeous." She's blushing and Laura must look like a lovesick idiot, but there's truth in that. Let them see Michael for the wonder she is.

"Comes with her own ship," Margo teases.

"That does help."

"So she swept you off your feet?"

"Effortlessly."

"You'll have to remind Earth what they say about Starfleet captains. We haven't had them for awhile."

Laura sneezes twice, then a third time before she can explain what a wonder Starfleet Captains are. They still only have a fraction of what they did even when Michael was back in her own time. Maybe that makes them all the more special.

"Starfleet is what holds the Federation together. Our shared values - the desire to help and support each other - all of that brings us together, and we try to move forward together, but Starfleet is what brings grain, and weathers ion storms, and rescues medical vessels. They're also our explorers, because there's still so much we don't know about our own galaxy." She pauses, looking at Margo and the camera behind her. "A starship captain is the person who comes to save you when your space stations spinning out of control. Someone who negotiates with planetary governments when it's all about to fall apart. When you call for help, they answer. When we're at peace, they look outward. There's something wonderful about that, how we have the resources to return to exploration."

"The Federation was inward looking for years."

"We had to be, we couldn't help everyone who needed it. So we put out fires and brought ships in and fought the Chain, but we couldn't make any lasting change, we could barely welcome new members, and now—" Laura takes a breath, smiling. "Now we can ask what's in that nebula, or why that pulsar has such a strange gamm ray signature. It's a gift we were missing."

"And your wife does that."

"She's an excellent explorer, so is her ship, and her crew. If someone has to stand between us and danger, I'd send her."

"That must put you in a difficult position."

"Luckily I don't make those decisions often."

"Still, that's a lot to balance. She's your wife, you want her to be safe, to be with you, and you have to send her out."

"A ship in spacedock is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." *Laira* touches her belly. Their daughter could have chosen parents with quieter lives, but that's not what happened. "There's risk when we leave spacedock, when we leave our planets and look outward. I know it's frightening. Losing *Michael* terrifies me, of course it does, but reaching out also provides us with solutions. Our spore drive technology allows us to cross the galaxy in a moment. That brings us together. Warp drive lets us touch the stars."

"And each other," *Margo* finishes for her. "Now that Earth is connected to the Federation again, I can see you and be home tomorrow. You can send *Discovery* into an ion storm, because she'll come home."

The entire Federation is watching her. She can't falter. *Michael* will come home, and she has to trust that.

"We are better together. That's the oldest ideal of the Federation, and it's the most salient. Our best chance at overcoming our differences is together, and we can best support each other, together. When we're supported and safe, we can reach outward and explore."

"That's what you think the Federation brings to Earth? Some of the Federation's critics say that Earth would have been better off without the Federation's help."

"The DMA would have destroyed Earth with the Federation. Our evacuation plans never could have saved everyone, barely half a million people, but Earth could have saved no one without us. Federation technology can rebuild a better planetary shield, Tellarite soil reclamation can heal farmland. We can give the stars to anyone who wants to see them." *Laira* sneezes into her wrist, once, then again, and she shakes her head at *Margo* before she can finish. "I met a young cadet from Titan who hadn't spoken to a non-human until she went to the Academy. Now she serves with many different species, even flies a starship. Her universe is brighter and more beautiful because she's chosen to join Starfleet. When Earth looked inward, she could have merely flown inside the solar system. Now someday she might leave the galaxy."

"Is that what we should aspire to?"

"We should retain our sense of wonder. We have all looked at the stars, from every planet and moon and starbase, because out there, somewhere, there's more beauty, more understanding, more potential, for ourselves and our people. That covers a wide variety of aspirations."

*Margo* nods, and sits back in her chair, smiling in pride. "Yes, I'd say that does. Thank you, President *Rillak* for your time."

The holo recording shuts off, and *Margo* shivers in her chair before hugging her again. "Oh you're good."

"Thank you."

"Really, that's—" she pauses, shaking her head. "I'll leave in some of the sneezing because it's adorable, and the way you teared up talking about *Michael* is perfect."

"I'm happy to serve."

"She's the most important person in the galaxy for you and you'll send her out to save any of us, that's...that's a hell of a thing." *Margo* has just enough time for dinner before she needs to return to Earth, and they have to plan a visit to Earth. *Michael* and *Laira* still need to see the house and it might be nice to take some time off before the baby arrives. There's much to schedule.

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*Laira* has two meetings with planetary leaders after lunch. A colony near Orion space is concerned with the security arrangements, and Commander *Nhan* joins her for another briefing on her security for the rest of her tour of the Federation. *Kaminar* is a quiet planet: the *Kelpiens* and *Ba'ul* have a peaceful communion, but there are smaller colonies near the Orion border, and more places that are rebuilding that she should visit. Those are more complicated.

"While Federation Security understands the importance of supporting planets that could become future members, and the visibility of the Federation, we have concerns about planets that were more dependent on the Emerald Chain. What the Federation can provide is different." There's a gentleness in the way Commander *Nhan* avoids the more difficult subjects.

Admiral *Vance* nods. "You mean using Federation technology does not provide the same standard of living that relying on slave labor and pillaged resources that the Emerald Chain could offer?"

"Changing how you live is a difficult thing." *Nhan* keeps her voice level, without judgement. "There will always be those who are angry, with the President, with Captain *Burnham*, or the Federation itself. It's my job to keep the president safe through that anger. Some planets are easier."

"We're saving *Barzan* for the home stretch."

*Nhan* smiles, squaring her shoulders a little. "*Barzan* will be an easy one." She calls up the tour schedule and indicates a few planets. "*Trion Prime*, *Saicury Four* and the colonies in the moons of *Zaecuta Lides* are the stops that pose the most security concerns in the coming weeks."

Their governments are less stable, there's more unrest, and Saicury Four nearly voted to remain in the Emerald Chain."

Vance follows her gaze to the map. "The remnants of the Chain are more dangerous without central leadership."

"Agreed," Dr. Kovich says. "Some former links want to rise to power, some just want to lash out. Osyraa was at least predictable."

"Until she wasn't."

Laira meets each of their eyes in turn. "I defer to your judgement in security matters, as always. I trust that you can make it work. A Federation presence on planets who are wavering can bring them closer, and avoiding scattered parts of the Chain makes us look weak."

"We'll make it work, ma'am."

"Good." Standing up wakes the baby, who reminds her that this is only going to become more difficult as she twists towards Laira's ribs. "I'll look forward to your solutions."

When she returns to her office, she's hungry, and though she wants hasparat it'll give her heartburn, and crunchy banta chips will make her sneeze, and there's no balance. Hugh would tell her to just choose what she wants and the consequences can be dealt with when they occur. He might say if, but he's more of an optimist.

Pretzels and banta chips do make her sneeze, but when she's alone it's less frustrating. She wants coffee but she's already had it once and tea is fine, but it's not what she wants.

What she wants... isn't going to come from the replicator. Her skin's too warm and her breasts are heavy and Laira keeps thinking about Michael's hands: her very talented hands. She'll be busy. She had meetings all of today. Luckily, Laira's the president. Meetings end when she needs them to end.

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Michael's deep in a meeting with two other captains and the Commandant of the Academy - it's busy and important and Laira's the president of the Federation, so she walks in.

Michael, two other captains and the Commandant of the Academy all stand, Michael smiling, proud and tentative. Laira smiles back, careful to radiate how this is a good thing, she's fine, and Michael - the most perceptive non-telepath she's ever met, relaxes.

"Captains, Commandant, forgive the interruption. Could I take Captain Burnham from you for a moment?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"Captain, I—"

Michael beams at her and it's that coy little smile that gets to her. Really gets to her. This is what she wanted.

"My aunt is here."

"Oh?"

Laira's nose itches and she sneezes, twice.

"She did your interview?" Michael guesses, helping the conversation move forward while Laira can't speak. "Is she well? How did the interview go?"

Nodding gets her somewhere, but this particular sneezing fit is intense.

Michael offers her hand, which steadies her a little. "I think Earth's going to find you adorable."

Laira finally regains her breath. "Margo's going to have to cut out the sneezing."

"Leave a few in."

"That's what she thought."

"See."

"We're meeting her for dinner."

Michael touches her cheek. "That'll be fun." Her fingertips linger, and Laira wants to keep them on her face as long as she can. Michael waits, not asking why she's here. This could have been a message, or waited, but it wouldn't have been the same.

"I wanted to see you," Laira admits in a whisper into Michael's hair.

"Everything's all right?"

"Everything's great." She touches her belly, then guides Michael's hand to the baby. "She's active today. Awake. I can't stop sneezing and I think I spent the last hour of my interview for Earth just telling the galaxy how much I love you."

Laughing, Michael taps her comm and beams them away. They materialize in her quarters, in the living room. *Discovery* floats beneath her window, bright in the spacedock.

"I think you must have gotten a few important political things in there."

"I tried."

"But Margo asked about me?"

"She did, she did and I—"

"It's all right." Michael kisses her cheek and *oh* that's what she needed. Fuck, why can't she tell when all she wants is this.

Laira turns into the kiss, searching for Michael's lips and kisses her, hard and demanding and she pulls her closer.

"I have to go back," Michael protests into her mouth.

"They'll fill you in."

"It's my meeting."

Laira kisses her again, slipping her tongue into Michael's mouth. She winds her "I'm the president."

"Yes ma'am." Michael reaches up for her collar, opening Laira's jacket. "You don't usually pull rank."

"I thought I was hungry, thirsty, I couldn't relax. I needed you."

"You need me naked."

Slipping Michael's jacket from her shoulders, Laira nods, biting her lip. "I do."

"Just what did Margo ask?"

"She asked me about Starfleet captains."

Leaning in, Michael starts kissing her neck. "So what do they say about captains?"

"Things you've heard, I'm sure." If Michael keeps doing that, she won't be able to talk at all.

Michael dances a hand over Laira's breast, and it's so sore and heavy and Michael's fingers are divine, light as the first snow. "I like hearing them from you," Michael says, nuzzling her cheek.

"Starfleet captains will sweep you off your feet, beam you away, have their way with you, and if they don't, you'll want them to and if they do, all you'll want is them again."

Warm fingers slide into her bra and Michael's palm cups her breast. That ache settles between her thighs and at least this she can do something about.

"So it was the badge and the chair that got you?"

"You look so good sitting up there."

Easing off Laira's bra, Michael finds her way to her other breast, caressing them until Laira hisses. "I do, don't I?" She pauses, kissing her again. "Still sore?"

"I didn't think they could be this heavy."

"They're beautiful." Michael flips her black tank top over her head and stands, removing her trousers. She pauses for a moment, standing in the starlight in her underwear, beautiful and strong, her skin that rich golden brown.

"You're beautiful."

"We're short on time."

"We have more than an hour before dinner."

Michael removes her bra and tosses it to the bed. "You need more than an hour."

"I'll need two minutes."

Easing her up, Michael helps remove Laira's clothes, efficient and gentle. "The first time."

"You don't back down from a challenge."

"Starfleet stubbornness."

"And it's wonderful."

Wrapping her arms behind Laira's neck, Michael turns them, putting herself closer to the bed. "Hugh says we're going to have to start getting creative with positions."

"I think we can manage."

Michael's thigh brushes against her and Laira can barely breathe.

"I love how captain is always a turn on."

"Captains are sexy."

"All of them?"

"One in particular."

The weight of what they haven't said orbits them, threatening to tug them apart. They lose each other when they're out of sync. Laira doesn't need sex to be in love with Michael. Sex is great and being with her is exquisite and she's over thinking it. Her skin tingles for this, and her nerves beg. They're fine, this is fine.

Michael touches her hand, gently finding her fingers and pausing. They're not angry with each other. They're both stubborn and this is new and it's that tentative messy part of figuring out who they are together. Michael - stunning, sexy, confident - Michael Burnham will not seduce her. She won't insinuate, won't ease her way in. Sex is trust and connection and hope and they're all right. They've been all right through all of this.

So many who love Michael have died for her, or at least tried to, parents and mentors and lovers — she deserves that kind of devotion. She deserves the galaxy spinning in the palm of her hand.

So of course, that's love: Laira and the baby safe while Michael carries the danger for them. She'll put herself in the way like a shield.

Laira needs her to stay. That's a different kind of sacrifice. That's all the Herculean good Michael could have done not caring about herself. That's asking hundreds and thousands of strangers to risk being saved by someone less incredible.

Because Laira needs her.

Michael's saved everyone enough.

They can have this.

They can build a life in the small moments. There are other captains. (none of them are Michael, but they're all qualified to save the galaxy).

Michael brushes a tear out of the corner of Laira's eye and pauses, still beneath her. "What is it?"

"I need you to let someone else save the galaxy."

Kissing her slowly, Michael runs her hand down Laira's back. "I know."

"It's a lot—"

"No, it's not." Michael rubs her hip, then her thigh. "Vance asked me who I thought should raise the baby."

"What?" Laira lowers herself to rest on Michael's body. Pressing their skin together is the most wonderful thing she's felt all day.

"If something happened to me, and you, he asked me where I'd want her to go. He could take her, with Ronia, or T'Rina, and she could grow up on Ni'Var, like I did. Hugh and Paul could raise a baby, Joann, Keyla— she could have a life on *Discovery*."

"Without you."

"Without us." Michael kisses her, closing her eyes for a moment. "I hadn't thought about losing you. So many people keep you safe, I- I told myself—"

"Sacrifice would not be my way."

"Right, but, it's something we should think about."

"Jen's a good mother."

"She'd kill us both for ruining her sleep with a baby."

"I know, but—" Laira's eyes sting. "*Discovery's* crew should raise her."

"Unless they're gone with me."

Shuddering, Laira swallows. "I can't—"

"I know, I know." Michael kisses her forehead, then her mouth. "We both have to stay with her."

"This is what your meeting was about."

"The secondary school here at HQ would like to send some of the older students on a starship. Kind of a space camp. We have the space, there's empty quarters, we can bring some of their teachers, make some dorms—"

"You volunteered for this?"

Michael touches her belly, rubbing her thumb in a circle over her taut skin. "We want *Discovery* to be safe for her, might as well start with other people's children."

"Vance wants to send his daughter."

"She's been begging to see a starship. Got her class to write letters to Starfleet command about how they should experience space."

"That sounds like her."

"Leadership can be learned, or genetic, she might have both."

"She might be worse."

Michael laughs, shifts done to kiss Laira's belly. "Take it easy on us, okay?"

Brushing Michael's braids with her hands, Laira cradles her face as she returns. "I love you."

"I love you too." Michael resumes kissing her neck, shifting beneath her, and it doesn't take much to make her need stir again between her thighs.

"Thank you."

"It'll be fun. Kids, diplomats, scientists—"

"It'll be chaos."

Michael teases with her thigh, then her fingers follow and Laira can't speak at all for a moment. "We can handle it."

Her fingers dive deep, then glide over her clit and Laira whimpers. She's so good with her hands. Michael finds her eyes, holds her gaze, and slowly, patiently, uses those too perfect fingers of hers to wrench an orgasm from Laira that leaves her gasping. That delicious tingling sensation runs through her and they lie there, wrapped in each other. It's probably hormones, or she's become accustomed to a different class of orgasm lately, but she turns her attention to Michael while her teeth are still tingling.

Flipping Michael to her back, she kisses her way down, half-reverent, half-hurried because she loves that little sigh of Michael's. Between her thighs is one of the most comfortable places in the universe and she settles in. Laira licks and plays and presses upward and inward until Michael curses in Bajoran like she's being doing that all her life.

"Your accent is adorable."

"I've been practicing."

"For this?"

"So I'd know what you said." Michael guides her up, pulling her in to her chest. "You never curse in standard."

"It's not polite."

"It's different in Bajoran?"

"It reminds me of home."

Michael pulls herself up, sitting her her back to the wall as Laira curls into her lap. "Home is the freighter more than the planet."

"Home is people who are gone." Laira toys with Michael's knee, shifting in bed so her back won't ache later. "Home is you now."

Michael lifts her head, cupping her face. "You know that I'll do my best not to leave you."

"I know." Her eyes sting again, so does her nose, and if Michael keeps looking at her like that, she'll cry.

"No one's been able to stay, for either of us." Michael rests her forehead against Laira's. "So we stay together."

"It's that easy?"

"Oh it's incredibly hard, we're just that good." Michael brushes her tears away. "We've got this."



Chapter Summary

Discovery visits Kaminar, Laura prepares for the annual memorial for the Burn. Michael integrates her new junior cadets into the crew.

It's one of those, look official, remain silent sort of meetings. Michael has more of them now that she's - as Tilly loves to remind her - the first lady of the Federation. Being Laura's wife does not technically come with a title, but there are unwritten rules to uphold. Her opinion carries more weight in some circles than merely being Captain Burnham of *Discovery* would.

This particular meeting should have ended half an hour ago, but Council member Gozre keeps bringing things up, and he's about to start his rotation as speaker of the chamber, which means Laura needs to give him the time so he can guide the council efficiently. Privately, Laura doesn't think he's worth his fancy jacket as a politician, but when she speaks to everyone but Michael, she must be diplomatic.

"And I know you don't need to be reminded that the memorial for the Burn is fast approaching." Gozre stands beside Laura, as if he can loom over her until she agrees with his position.

"I am aware."

"And the synchronized Spore Drive demonstration-" he begins and Laura glares at him, eyes flashing.

Her fingers are tight and stiff and she extends them as she talks, punctuating her words. "As we have already discussed, at length, the VARS spore drive demonstration will take place the day after, as planned. That way visiting delegations can see the spore drive in action without having to spend too much time away from home without taking away from the monumental tragedy of the Burn."

"You don't think we need the tangible hope the spore drive represents?"

"The council agreed-" she begins, still pacing, but now one hand's on her back. That hurts.

"The council's agreement was barely a simple majority. Some members want to move past the Burn. Showing them all of their options - our pathfinder drive and the spore drive, of course. If we want to be fair to our non-Starfleet scientists, the Luna propulsor lab's new prototype is also something we should be celebrating."

"We don't just move past millions of deaths." Laura's tone is deep and crisp. Her inflection went Cardassian a few minutes ago and Michael's not sure when it will recover. "And Starfleet is integral to the Federation."

"You know I am not one of those who think you're too close to Starfleet."

In bed with Starfleet, really, if he really wants to annoy Laura, but Gozre doesn't stoop to that. Michael stands silently in the doorway, letting them finish before she interrupts to ask about dinner. Though at the rate this is going, she might need to step in.

Nhan stands calmly in the corner, close enough to Laura to be her shadow in a moment, but maintaining a reasonable distance. She meets Michael's eyes, silently communicating that Gozre has been at this for awhile. He can be insufferable sometimes, and Michael hasn't determined if it's a lack of respect for Laura, an intentional desire to frustrate her as much as possible, or that he's just impossible with social queues.

"Your inclination towards the spore drive is well known, of course."

Laura's enunciation is knife sharp, and both of her hands are on her back now. Her eyes flash and she paces in front of the calm seascape beyond the clear wall. Kaminar's dark beauty is lost to her. "Spore drive technology allowed Discovery to solve the Burn and negotiate with species 10-C beyond the galactic barrier. It has proved safe and reliable on all the ships we've tested. Prototaxies spores can be grown on numerous uninhabited moons and asteroids all over the galaxy, without mining or any complicated equipment. Freeing ourselves from dilithium has been one of our development goals since the Burn—"

"Of course, Madam President, your point is well made." Gozre nods out of the way, but there's no real apology in his voice. Punching him in the head would be very satisfying, but Michael would have to stand on a chair.

Maybe telling Laura about it later will make her laugh.

Michael's contempt for Gozre rises hot in her chest and his mock-differential behavior just makes it worse. She clears her throat, glancing up at the swaying fronds of kelp as if they're an ancient clock on the wall. Gozre's superior visual acuity must be able to see how far the sun has progressed, even at this depth. She can use that.

"Apologies, honored Council member Gozre, Madam President. Ma'am, you're needed on the surface for the traditional benediction at the temple of LLuandrur."

Laura meets Michael's eyes, still vibrantly frustrated, and her back hurts. Again, like yesterday, and they need to make more time to talk to Hugh about it before Laura tries to punch Gozre.

She at least, could reach his smug face.

"I will confer with the council regarding the memorial for the Burn. I'll leave you to your rainwater, Madam President, Captain Burnham."

Laira's gaze just about scorches the door as he leaves. For an instant, it's that sharp when it lands on Michael but she takes a breath. "The temple's benediction is for me, and won't start until I arrive."

"He didn't read that part of the briefing."

"He never does." Laira stretches her back, wincing.

Nhan is too calm to smile, but there's a lightness in her step. "I will check in with your security team on the surface and make sure we're prepared for the temple, ma'am."

Nodding to her, Laira tries again to work out the crick in her back. With no one but Michael left to glare at, she grimaces. "You're handling me."

"It's my job."

"Captain, I hardly need to be coddled by you."

Michael raises her eyebrows. Her title is used so rarely between them that it's worth notice. "Captain? That's usually an innuendo, and I didn't think you were in the mood."

"I'm not-" Laira pauses, shaking her head. "Everything hurts and I loathe Gozre more every time I speak to him." Her eyes linger on Michael and she sighs. "We don't have time."

"And your back hurts."

"Of course it hurts." Laira gestures at her belly with vivid frustration. "She's heavy."

"Going to get worse before it gets better "

"Thank you, darling. Supportive as always."

Michael circles to her side, touching her back with gentle fingers. "Put your hands in the table."

"No."

"No?"

"You don't need to do some kind of magic Vulcan thing. She'll shift and it'll get better."

Michael studies her wife, grinning while Laira's eyes simmer with loathing. "I can help your back."

"Darling, nothing can. It's just going to hurt for the next few months, I need to resign myself to that."

If she won't accept help— Michael changes tactics. "When did you eat?"

"That's hardly relevant."

"It's not?"

"When I ate last also isn't a magical solution for how much my back hurts."

Michael leans against the table, arms crossed over her chest. "It's a solution for your contrarian nature."

"I'm not contrary."

Michael doesn't even have to argue with that. Laira reluctantly rests her hands on the table, shifting her hips. Maybe she'll let Michael adjust her spine after all.

"You were there when Hugh showed me what to do."

"Your daughter likes to press into my spine, which should be something we can negotiate in a gentler way than cracking my vertebrae like I'm a malfunctioning shuttlecraft bulkhead."

"Your vertebrae are very sturdy, dear."

Laira winces again and her words finally start to fall back into the softer tone which means she's finally not speaking Cardassian. She can't help it when she's mad.

"They don't feel like it."

"She's getting big." Michael runs her thumbs along the edges of Laira's spine, calming her nerves before she starts pressing against the strain.

"She's barely two kilograms, she shouldn't be able to change so much."

"There's water."

"Too much of that."

"Have you considered that you simply work too hard?" Michael presses in harder. "Are you braced on the table?"

"Aye, Captain." That could be an innuendo, but Michael's about to cause her pain,, so it hardly seems fair.

Pressing down as hard into Laura's spine forcing it back into alignment, one gasping vertebrae at a time.

"Other than your back, and Gozre, how was it?"

"Wet."

"Kaminar's famous for its humidity."

"I think it's worse-" Laura pauses, biting her lip as Michael presses the last vertebrae back into place. Taking a breath, she wipes tears from her eyes, but she can stand straighter without wincing. "I hate you when you're right."

"So all the time."

"It's a constant of our relationship."

Brushing her tears off her cheek, Michael kisses her. "I'm sorry her head's in the wrong spot."

"Hugh said she's facing forward."

"Puts the hard part of her head against your spine."

"Hurts like hell." Laura takes one of Michael's hands and helps her find the baby's feet. "And she keeps stretching."

"Maybe she'll be tall." The baby's little feet press through Laura's flesh, almost as if she knows Michael's there. She doesn't she can't, but pressing against her makes her smile. "Feet here, head back here, would track."

"I thought she was supposed to have room to turn."

"Maybe she likes it this way." Michael kisses her hand. "Shares your contrarian nature."

"It's not as bad if I don't sit."

"Then have standing meetings."

"Easy."

Michael shrugs. "It could be. Ask for what you need."

"It's—"

"Everyone knows being pregnant is difficult."

Laura's eye ridges head upward and Michael smirks.

"Maybe not everyone."

"Gozre makes having eggs sound much less uncomfortable."

"Tell you what, next anomaly, I'll see what I can do."

Laura takes a breath, then another, and finally she chuckles. "Dammit."

"It's a few more months."

"I bet I'll miss how comfortable I am now before the end."

Michael doesn't want to agree, but Laura has a point. "Enjoy it while I can still snap your spine back."

"Prophets—" Laura mutters, shaking her head. "When you can't fix it—"

"We'll come up with something else." Michael takes her hand, glancing up at Discovery, kilometers above them in orbit. They've been on Kaminar for several days, which is time enough for them to have quarters on the planet, but the suite of rooms Laura's been offered are incredibly formal.

Even cold.

Saru's family's tent was much nicer. Kaminar's too wet for Laura anyway, the humidity is doing unspeakable things to her hair. Even Michael's braids feel strange in the damp. her hair.

"If we beam to the temple, we'll be done with your itinerary."

Laira looks at her, then down, then presses her lips together before smiling. "I'm hungry. It will still be raining at the temple tomorrow."

"What happened to being hungry is 'hardly relevant'?"

"I was mistaken."

Michael leans into her shoulder, then wraps her arms around her. "What are you hungry for?"

"I have no idea."

One of those days. "Should we stand in front of the replicator again while everyone else orders?" That works fairly well. Laira didn't even know what the pumpkin curry she decided she wanted yesterday was, or where it was from, and she devoured it. Being in the lounge is good for her, all the noise and smells are home now, and she talks to the crew as much as Michael does.

"Yes. Let's do that. Is that terrible?"

"I think it's amusing."

"Always happy to be of service."

Today's dinner is coconut shrimp, wrapped in pita, which a bunch of sauces that take up the middle of the table. It was Rhys' suggestion, something he liked at the Academy, at some little cafe that must have cased to exist hundreds of years ago, but Zora still knows the recipe. Zora holds onto millions of recipes from lost worlds that the Sphere knew, some no one on *Discovery* has even had a chance to try yet. Someday, someone will, or they'll wait in the library for someone to be curious.

Maybe Laira in another month.

"What did you do last year for the All Stop?" Laira asks her over french fries dipped in some green sauce that's incredibly spicy.

"We were delivering dilithium, so we remained in orbit. Most of the crew hadn't been through one before so we watched the memorial speeches together."

Laira's been tweaking hers for weeks, trying to strike the right tone between solemn and hopeful. "The Vice President's was good."

"Hers was my favorite."

They're rescued from further heavy conversation by the arrival of their school group. Eight junior cadets joined them from headquarters, and eight more will be arriving in the next few weeks. The first group are boisterous and curious, and it's a change for everyone to have them on board, but the ship feels different.

They've been a family, growing and changing as the crew acclimates to the new century, and now they have children. They laugh and joke with each other as they line up at the replicator. Two teachers came with them, and Michael found volunteers among her crew to help them with starship operations. The junior cadets are particularly fond of Commander Reno, who has an unorthodox and engaging teaching style. Yesterday they were following her around the shuttlebay like comets pulled into a star.

Their dinner was awhile ago, and they're here for some well earned dessert after their studies. Adezie Vance waves at Michael and one of her friends whispers and they wave and then the eight of them surround her and Laira.

"Captain, did you know that Ba'ul can dive down to three thousand meters?"

"And that Kelpiens can run eight kilometers an hour?"

"They evolved together so many of their traits are in competition with each other," Rekesa - their Romulan junior cadet - has a distinctly Vulcan way of speaking that might actually be a way to poke fun at Vulcans, Michael isn't sure yet.

The junior cadets swarm them - mostly Michael - with stories of what they've learned today about Kaminar and the Ba'ul and how they go to go diving and what they got to see and Laira actually steers the conversation just as much as Michael does because her diplomatic skills do indeed extend to teenagers.

Most of the questions are directed at Michael, as are their comments because Michael is a starship captain and therefore somehow cooler than Laira could ever be.

Which makes Laira smie radiant with amusement. She spends so much time on the other end of this that the cadets lack of interest in politics at the moment is probably good for her.

Laira holds most of the cadet's attention while she explains how the Ba'ul and Kelpiens share a government, and how many of their rules had to be put in place because at shifting sides of history they've eaten each other. This is as fascinating to their junior cadets as it is disgusting to them.

Michael pulls Adezie aside and Rakesa comes with her, perhaps they're becoming friends. The junior cadet talking to Laira at the moment has a bowl of ice cream in his hands and Laira's looked at it more than once.

"Could the two of you get Laira some ice cream? Try Spumoni with hot fudge, but we might need to swap that if she doesn't want that one."

Adezie nods with the wisdom of a twelve year old. "Sthe still can't decide what she wants until she tries it?"

"It's been a day," Michael says. "Thank you."

They disappear to the replicator and return, ice cream in hand. Together they present it to Laira whose impromptu history lesson has become quite complex. She lights up at the ice cream, thanking them both profusely as she beams at Michael.

Spumoni does seem to be acceptable, at least for the moment. Laira giddily starts to eat her ice cream as Michael takes over the narrative of how they discovered the truth behind the Ba'ul and Kepien interdependence hundreds of years ago and the way that hunter-prey has evolved.

"We talked to one of the Ba'ul and they were dripping the whole time."

"Is it really dripping if they're like made of the water?"

"I think so if the water is falling."

"Is it really water or is it part of their body that like goes back up into them?"

"Do they have faces and we just can't see the faces or do they not have faces because their biology doesn't work that way?"

Tilly and their teachers wrangle the students away to talk to the senior cadets - who are only a handful of years older but seem so old and tall.

"Good night, Captain, Madam President," Tilly says, cheerful as always. "Thank you for your time." The junior cadets repeat it in a chorus and the much more suave older cadets nod their respect.

Laira's ice cream is disappearing before it even has a chance to melt and Michael reaches for her tea. "Thought you might have asked to share Scorret's there for a moment."

"I don't know if it would be share as much as commandeer." Laira licks her spoon and sighs happily. "This is really good."

"You don't need some other more esoteric flavour like jumja with extra chili?"

Shaking her head, Laira chuckles. "Not this time, though that might be good."

"I'll see about putting it in the computer."

"Oh Zora's very accommodating."

Michael steals a bite of Laira's ice cream with her own spoon and Laira glares death at her. "Zora likes you."

"It would be difficult for me if your ship didn't like me."

"Oh this is your ship now, you know that."

Scraping her spoon along the bottom of the bowl, Laira meets Michael's eyes, her smile softening. "Zora's adopted me?"

"I think they all have." Michael reaches for her hand and squeezes it. "Isn't that an old saying? Marry the captain, marry the crew?"

"I haven't heard it, maybe it's very old. You are very old, darling."

"Absolute ancient." Leaning closer, Michael touches her chin, then kisses her cheek. "I love you, they love you. The sentient being who lives in the ship loves you. This is your home."

Shutting her eyes, Laira takes a moment, then blinks against her tears. "I'm never going to be able to reassign you."

"That was the plan."

Chuckling while her tears continue, Laira kisses her, leaning her forehead against Michael's. "You were playing the very long game all this time."

"I was, it took so much plotting." Michael agrees, her eyes stinging. "Fly us into a warp bubble so you'd get pregnant, then fall in love with you, marry you, convince you that *Discovery* is the best place in the universe to call home, all so you will never reassign me to another ship."

Laira's cool fingers run across her cheek, and this kiss is almost too intimate for the lounge, not that anyone's watching them right now. "I do love you."

"I love you too."

"Or that's what you'd say, anyway, to get me to keep believing your game."

"Exactly, now you're thinking like me."

Laira's voice is light but her eyes are bright blue and tears glint in her dark eyelashes. "I don't know if I would be more in love with you if you'd engineered it, except that you're you, so it would be intense."

"Nothing like now."

Laira's voice sounds as thick in her throat as Michael's feels. "Of course not."

Helping Laira to her feet, Michael kisses her cheek. Time to go before either of them get too mushy. Both of them seem to have their hearts on

their sleeves, and at least Laira has the excuse of hormones. Michael's merely sentimental.

Her thoughts wander as they beam back to their quarters. Laira has her speech to work on and she takes her hair down while she worries about the tiny details of galactic politics. She mutters to herself, and paces, and tries to decide what she wants to do with her hands.

Her belly's been in the way for the last few months, and she can rest her hands on it, but that sends a message, doesn't it? Michael's heard her worries, and that conversation seems unending. What does it say to the rest of the galaxy if she rubs her belly while talking about tragedy? Is she fidgeting? Reminding them of hope? That they're all rebuilding, bit by bit.

The sonic shower lifts the dirt from her skin, and her braids, and the gentle hum gives her a meditative moment of quiet with her thoughts.

If she'd chosen, would she have built this? If she was the architect of her life, as she'd teased Laira, would she have brought herself to this place? It's amusing to joke about it, but Michael wouldn't have seen this. *Discovery*, yes, being captain is part of her, and this ship is her home.

Would she have chosen to share it?

Michael changes into her pajamas and sits on the bed, lazily reading one of her books, mostly watching Laira practice her speech, again.

Laira put on her pajamas while Michael was in the shower, and she's speaking softly to the reflection of herself in the skylight. She'll be fully dressed when she gives this speech, with cape and regalia and the entire Federation - and many other worlds - will stop what they're doing and listen to her. Remembering the Burn is one of their few shared experiences, everyone in the galaxy lost something, and they have to remember that as they move forward.

But they can't dwell on it. Michael's galaxy had the They're already planning on how to celebrate first contact with the 10-C as a joyful holiday of connection, while honoring the terrible loss of Kwejian.

The galaxy is a tender place, healing slowly, and it feels like going too quickly will make the process that much more difficult.

Or maybe they all need to be snapped back into place like Laira's sore vertebrae.

Laira's hair falls down her back in curls from the way she had it up, and it's bright against her soft blue nightgown. It leaves her shoulders bare in a way where she would have been freezing earlier, but this far into her pregnancy, the hitchhiker keeps her warm. Michael watching her must have been visible in the reflection on the transparisteel.

"Should I change something?"

Michael sets her book aside and crosses the room to her, wrapping her arms around her so that her hands rest on Laira's belly. "It's a good speech."

"And it could be better?"

Wrinkling her nose, Michael snuggles in. "I was thinking that I wouldn't have chosen this, not because I didn't want it, but a lack of my own imagination. Most of the captains I knew were lonely. Lead the ship, protect the crew, save the galaxy - nothing like this."

Laira's arms wrap over hers, and the vastness of the galaxy is still around them. "I doubt their ships were full of cadets, junior cadets, scientists, and diplomats."

"Diplomats are the worst."

Laura's chuckle vibrates through her. "You built something else, and that lets you have this life."

"I think some of them would have liked this better."

Turning to face her, Laira mulls that idea. "We can give it to the fleet. Make more ships with schools and hoards of junior cadets asking all the questions."

"It's only been a few weeks."

"You love it."

"I love you."

"You love building a better future," Laira says, touching Michael's chin. "You can't help it."

"It lets us have Tilly back."

"Having *Discovery* this way lets us have us." Laira kisses her forehead, serious for a moment.

"And I wouldn't let that go, even if I didn't know what it was."

"Me either." Laira's little smile has all the brightness of the universe, reflected across time.

"Funny how the universe works, isn't it?"

"It's like you're conducting it."

"I'm so not."

Laughing, Laura pulls her in, kisses her, and the rest of the night doesn't need much talking at all.

Chapter Summary

Laira visits the Temple of Llandrur on Kaminar, and the effects of her very full schedule catch up with her.

Commander Nhan smiles up at the rain, tilts her head and nods that the temple is clear of threats. "Of course it's raining."

"It's in the name." The rain falls in thick round droplets, plonking on the stones like musical notes.

"I thought maybe a planet where it rains so often would value the sun. I like rain, of course, but-" Nhan glances up at the heavy grey sky- "Still very wet, ma'am."

"Very." Laira's hair is tightly wound into a knot, but with this much water, even that will be soaked through. Hopefully it'll hold for the holos, and any press who happens to be here.

Nhan touches her back, one of her hands resting on Laira for balance, just in case the slippery stones aren't a good combination with Laira's inability to see her feet. Nhan remains a step or two back when Michael's here, as if trusting Michael with a little of Laira's safety is acceptable.

Today her boots are steady on the slick surface, but she misses Michael. Michael would worry about her balance if she was here, and explain the history of the Temple of LLuandrur. Laira's already late, and she rescheduled twice, but the attendants at the temple have been patient. The traditional blessing she's been invited to can happen at any time, if there's rain. Rain is easy to come by near the coast of the great green Kaminar sea.

In Michael's absence, Nhan stands a little closer, ready to catch her elbow.

By the time they're all the way up the meandering stone stairs to the cliff - the traditional path - Laira's jacket is soaked through; she can feel the chill of the rainwater on her shoulders, and her hair is heavy. Walking up is traditional, and being soaked is probably part of it. (She needs Michael for the history, she read it but it's hard to make things stick in her head lately).

A dark-green robed Kelpien nods to her and Nhan, welcoming them in.

"Thank you for your patience," Laira says.

Someone in a lighter green robe nods to her. Perhaps the robes lighten with rank? Maybe it's just a preference. The other Kelpien is equally unadorned, and neither seem concerned that she learn their names.

"We are grateful you were able to join us, Madam President. The rain is has come with you, which we welcome."

They exchange pleasantries, and her words feel like autopilot. The temple is a quiet place, full of dark stones and the sounds of water. Laira can't help thinking of Resuna Idun, and Michael - again - but Michael sits on the committee that is reviewing Kaminar's membership of the Federation, and all member worlds. They started just after breakfast and Michael's lunch didn't match with hers so they haven't seen each other since she disappeared into the chamber.

Which is fine, they will see each other tonight. She's being ridiculous missing her, yet Laira misses her. Michael would enjoy this.

"I know it must have been difficult to find the time to come all the way out here," their guide says, walking them through long, curved hallways of black stone. "The blessing of LLuandrur has extra significance during pregnancy, as we give thanks for the water below, the water above and the water within. It is fortunate you were able to visit us while you still carry your child."

Laira will be carrying her for a several weeks yet, longer than a Kelpien pregnancy, and much longer than the budding process the Ba'ul use to reproduce. She imagines pregnant Kelpiens do not get as rounded as she is. They're so tall and graceful that it's hard to imagine them as

The hitchhiker shifts, and rolls, finding a new position that is uncomfortable for a moment before she settles. Trying to keep her expression neutral gets harder as the baby gets stronger. For the last few weeks it feels like she's running out of space.

The guide walks them through the traditional blessing. The tide rushes up through cracks in the cliffs below and the rain falls. Being in it requires taking her boots off. "I know it's colder than you might prefer—"

Do it quickly, get it over with and she'll be fine.

"I'm warmer now than I've ever been." Laira rubs her belly with her left hand and shrugs, trying to find the positive. "She's like a heater."

"Good." The tall Kelpien inclines her head gracefully. "We were concerned that it would be uncomfortable for you, as you are not Kelpien. We are relieved."

Walking through rainwater on cold stones on her way to the sea will not be pleasant, at all, but it will be tolerable. She'll make it work. They're left to a bench to get prepared. Kelpien hooves won't feel the cold or the stones the way Laira's feet will.

"Too bad it's too cold for Saurians, ma'am," Nhan says. Her voice low enough Laira might be the only person who can hear. "You could share



this special moment with Council member Gozre, if he could come, but Linus says being cold and wet is incredibly unpleasant."

"And I was trying to be subtle about how we're in agreement."

"You're not even sharing the same space lane." Nhan shakes out her wet hair and sighs. Sitting down, she removes her boots and socks, then rolls up her trouser legs. "Would you like help with yours, ma'am?"

"I don't know if that's a choice or a necessity."

Nhan kneels on the cold stone by Laira's feet, and gently eases off her boots. Laira could step out of them on her own, but it'll hardly be dignified.

"Michael's been helping me. Seems like all of a sudden it I can't reach."

"Hitchhiker's had a bit of a growth spurt then, ma'am?"

"I think so." That familiar twinge of pain starts in her lower back, then creeps forward. Her hips don't usually hurt, but it fades after a moment. She can usually hide it, no one needs to know how uncomfortable this can be, but Nhan's obviously noticed.

It's her job.

Nhan looks up at her sympathetically, balling Laira's socks together for their return. "Everything all right, ma'am?"

"I'm fine." Laira takes Nhan's hands, letting the commander help her up. "Thank you. Everything gets out of place."

"Captain Burnham should be done with her meeting soon, ma'am."

"I should let her fix my back again?" Laira inhales, her eyes widening at the chill in the stone beneath her feet. "She gets so smug."

"I think that might be affection, ma'am."

"Oh?"

"Just an observation, ma'am."

Laira playfully narrows her eyes, as if glaring at Nhan. "You've been Federation security longer than you've been on my wife's ship, Commander."

Nhan grins, playing along. "Of course, ma'am. Captain Burnham is known for being smug and insufferable."

Patting her hand, Laira returns her smile. Nhan plays along well; Laira enjoys that about her.

The chilling stone beneath her feet is part of the great cliff that they climbed, and it's so cold because the ocean is beneath it and within, and it's so rarely warmed by the sun. The high tide forces the water up through channels into the sacred chamber, and the falling rain completes the connection. She just has to make it through her rather short speech.

The audience wasn't important, it'll be broadcast by the little floating holocams. The little crowd around the center of the room has a few bright gold Starfleet uniforms, and the cadets came down with Tilly, both groups of them: those in Starfleet Academy's red uniforms and the keen little junior cadets *Discovery* has been hosting.

Bringing them here was a good idea of Michael's. They've been so eager to learn everything *Discovery*'s crew can teach them, and visiting other planets with Michael's crew brings them such wonder and joy. Meeting more people of different species will help them hold the galaxy together, when their time comes.

Even in the rain.

Nhan hands her a towel for her face. "There's more towels after the blessing, so you can warm up, ma'am."

"Are you saying I should talk fast, Commander?"

"Only if you're cold, ma'am."

Laira's part of the ritual is very short. So it's up the elder clergy to speak quickly. She's grateful to be asked to participate in one of their sacred rites, and she's honored to receive their blessing, on behalf of the Federation. Laira's been part of hundreds of ceremonies and rituals, many as an ambassador, as a sign of Federation good will. Now, as president, she's part of every tradition; every ritual a planet wishes to ask of her. Bajor was her home, now all the worlds must be.

The sea rushes up through cracks in the stone, worn into the cliffs over thousands of years, filling the dark stone with frothing water, which settles into the sacred pool beneath the rain.

The eldest member of the clergy stands in the water, waiting for Laira with hands outstretched to the sky. The roof is open above the center, so that the grey sky hangs above them, soft and velvet.

"In our oldest tales, the Kelpiens come from the meeting of rain and sea. We began in the sea, as did many species, and the land was a desert, dry and uninhabitable, but the rain came, and with that came life on the sand. Our ancestors ran between the droplets, and the rain made the sand and stone flourish around them.

"This tale could be of drought, or perhaps it speaks of the earliest rains on our shores. Our tales change as our world changes. Kaminar is an island in the stars, a pool of life, separated from others by the vast desert of space. We share that desert with many other planets of the Federation, and our villages hold billions of lives. Space is more vast - and beautiful - than our ancestors could ever have imagined, yet we all share the rain. The rain falls on Tellar Prime, on Ni'Var and Earth, as it does Kaminar. We are part of that rain, walking out of the sea, finding our way in the amongst the unfamiliar stars.

"The rain connects us, as it did when we first built our villages. Our rain follows us into space, between stars and darkness, and reminds us of the softness of our skies at home."

The Elder squeezes Laira's hands, her long fingers as cool as the water. "The events of late have reminded Kaminar of our place in the stars. We are grateful to the Federation, and the our starships, like *Discovery*, who sail out, taking our precious rain into the darkness, bringing home new stories, and old friends."

The Elder's gaze falls on her belly, and her smile is bright with hope. "Su'Kal is home now, and the Burn is behind us. The DMA is gone. Space is still full of danger, as threatening as the dark shores, but we are the rain. We support each other across the void, and we bring hope with us, rain under the rain."

Laira repeats the blessing, following the Elder's gaze up and down. Her words on behalf of the Federation are grateful, and brief, just as she promised Nhan. Kaminar deciding to look outwards, sending their scientists and engineers to the Federation, while they begin the slow process of rebuilding their fleet.

The universe their hitchhiker will be born into is full of connections, and she will know so much more stability than Laira did. Being Michael's daughter means she'll be surrounded with hope - that pure, everything is possible *Discovery* hope.

Laira smiles easily. "Our villages, our worlds, will be strengthened by Kaminar, and all you share with us. We are grateful for your friendship, and all that you share with us under the rain."

"All the rain touches, we offer in friendship," the Elder says, bowing her head.

"All the sea of stars holds, we offer in gratitude," Laira replies, bowing her head so the rain falls cold on her neck. The traditional form of the blessing was merely the sea, but as she's visiting from the stars, the change seemed appropriate. Her aides must not have told the Elder about the change, because her smile brightens in surprise.

The Elder leans close, whispering into Laira's soaking wet hair. "I hope your little star child knows the brightness of our hopes."

That's what they're trying for, isn't it? Giving everyone a brighter galaxy, full of possibilities. Michael sees that so easily. Sometimes all Laira can see is the work it'll take to get there, but maybe she can believe. The Hitchhiker deserves to grow up into the galaxy Michael sees.

Eyes stinging, Laira hides her tears in the rain. Everyone's looking at the sky and the sea, not at her and she shivers. The cold rolls through her. Nhan steps out from the shadows, bringing Joann and Keyla with her. They're all much drier than she is, because they were allowed to sit outside the sacred rain. They brought towels, and Laira's tears run faster.

Looking after her is part of their duty, of course, but they aren't fussing about her wet hair because she's their president.

"You must be so cold." Joann says, patting her face dry.

"She means good speech, ma'am." Keyla adds, shaking her head. "How's the water?"

"Cold, Commander."

Joann apologizes with her eyes, but only a little. She's all heart with the people she cares about. Forgetting a ma'am just shows her affection. "Do you need to speak to the clergy or can we take you to get warmed up, ma'am?"

Laira completed her part of the ceremony, and she's not needed any more. Glancing around the room, she checks for anyone that she must speak to, where she'd be offending them if she didn't, but she doesn't recognize any of the faces. She starts to shake her head, but her back hurts, again, this time more of a spasm. Yesterday when it was a slow, steady ache, but this is different. This tugs, finding new ways to be uncomfortable, even painful.

"I suggest that Lieutenant Tilly handles the diplomacy, ma'am, she's excellent at it." Nhan decides for her, guiding Laira to the side. Joann and Keyla follow, and the rest of the officers from *Discovery* disperse, asking questions, sightseeing in the temple, showing things to the cadets.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Joann asks, her eyes full of concern. "What hurts?"

"How do you—?" Laira stops, they're leaving the space where she's Madam President and sliding into Mrs. Burnham territory. Trusting them is right. "My back hurts, Owo," she replies, giving Joann space to drop the formalities. "I don't know why, I haven't been sitting and that's usually what sets it off."

"Does standing help?"

"It comes and goes."

Keyla disappears for a moment, walking into the crowd with purpose.

Joann dries her face, and Nhan has another towel for her feet.

"Can you sit long enough to get your boots back on?"

That seems fine. It's an entirely reasonable thing to do. She did it, before, and Nhan took her boots off, but sitting makes her back hurt, stretching out with that tugging pain like tendrils. She squirms, and Joann holds her hands, squeezing gently.

"It's worse?"

"It gets so tight, I don't know what's happening."

Keyla returns with Hugh and Paul. Laira didn't even recognize them in the crowd, even though Hugh's white uniform makes him stand out against the dark stone.

"Her back hurts," Joann reports for her. "But it's coming in waves, not like yesterday."

"We should get Michael," Paul says, and Michael's crew share looks back and forth. She's missing something.

"She's in the Kaminar committee review—" Laira stops because it hurts, enough for her to wince, even inhale too sharply. Joann and Hugh get her back to her feet, their hands on her hands. All of their eyes are concerned, too gentle, too caring, and she should tell them she's fine, convince them not to worry.

Nhan touches her holopadd, pulling up the notes from Michael's meeting. "Captain Burnham's meeting is still sealed."

"She's the president." Keyla crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head towards Laira. "That shouldn't matter."

"The Ba'ul are very particular about the protocols " Laira takes a breath, shifts her weight a little and it's gone. She feels fine. She's not even cold any more. Is that bad? She needs Michael, it's like she can't form a thought without her.

"Better?" Hugh taps his own badge, subtly opening up his tricorder.

For a non-telepath, he's the most observant doctor she's had. "How did you know?"

"You don't hide it well."

Hugh checks something, and an instant of relief washes over his face. He usually hides everything so well that she's curious. "I'd like to get you in sickbay."

"What is it?"

"You're not dilated, so I'm not worried, but your emyargleanine is elevated, and I think that's causing your discomfort."

Dilated? What is he talking about? Why is Joann's hand so tight in hers? "Why would I be dilated?"

Hugh touches her shoulder, helping her focus. His voice is gentle. "Emyargleanine causes contractions, usually after the baby's head is pressed against your cervix, but it can be triggered by stress."

"Which she doesn't experience at all," Keyla mutters, as if she's filling in for Michael's sarcasm.

That twinge returns, sharper, but faster, and it doesn't linger. "This wasn't stressful."

Hugh touches a few indicators on his tricorder. "Stress can accumulate, your endocrine system is under an incredible amount of stress, no matter what your day's meetings are like. The baby's very high, and, as I said, you're not dilated, so I don't think she's coming today, but I would feel better if I can run some more detailed scans. I think you'd feel better if you weren't in pain."

Pressing her lips together, she smiles at him. "You make a compelling argument."

"Reno, Adira and I can stay with Tilly and the cadets. Reno heard there's a buffet." Paul touches Hugh's shoulder, and they share that little *see you later* smile.

Their transporters whisk them up with a pop. Laira's grabs her a moment after everyone else's. Zora must have triggered it when she didn't. Nhan comes with Laira, she usually does, and Joann still has her hand. Keyla beaming with them back to the ship surprises her a little.

After they materialize in sickbay, Hugh pulls in Dr. Pollard, and scanners light up all around Laira while all of them fuss.

Keyla returns from the replicator with water. Laira didn't notice her going, but it's kind of her. So is the way Joann has Laira's hand and Nhan stands behind her, easing off her soaking wet jacket. Sickbay seems so warm and so bright after the dark temple.

"You're flushed," Joann says. "We need to contact the Vice President and Admiral Vance."

"It's not that serious," Laira says, watching the indicators for her and the baby appear on the biobed on her left. Nothing's orange, orange is bad. Yellow makes Hugh concerned but there's no orange. It'll be fine.

Doctor Pollard and Hugh examine the holo of the baby, checking her vital signs. No one's asked her to get on the biobed because it'll make her back hurt.

Nhan draws her attention to the buttons on the front of Laira's shirt. "You're soaked through."

"I'm very blessed."

"And cold, because the sacred rain was freezing, we're going to take this off."

Keyla holds her water so Laura can get her arm out of the sleeve, and then Keyla hands it back and they all orbit around her, like DOTs repairing a satellite. When the water's gone, Keyla disappears again, then returns with a mug of something that smells sweet.

Keyla takes her clothes away. Laura thanks her over her hot chocolate, which she starts to drink but her hands are trembling, She's not cold, she doesn't feel cold, why are her hands so unsteady?

Her back tightens, again, and the cramp radiates outward through her belly, tight, then sharp, and she gasps when it ends with that familiar ache of the baby's hard little head against her spine.

"Breathe," Hugh says, touching her bare shoulder. "Being tense will make it worse."

"Just relax and the pain will go away?" she mutters through clenched teeth.

"Relax and we can help."

"I can press on your spine, but it is going to sting," Pollard warns her, and Keyla takes her mug and Joanna and Nhan have her hands. Pollard's hands are quick, and strong, like Michael's and not Michael's. Missing her makes her eyes sting.

Michael's in a meeting, they can just— Laura can't let herself. The Ba'ul are very concerned with balancing the needs of Kelpiens and Ba'ul, and making sure Kaminar's place in the Federation serves their ideas of balance. Pulling Michael out of the meeting when it's not an emergency will need diplomatic handling and seem selfish and she can't—

Pain runs like lightning up her back, demanding all of her attention for an instant. Her sudden little gasp has everyone's eyes on her again and her breath hisses when she inhales.

"Sorry," Pollard says, rubbing Laura's spine. "Her positioning isn't doing you any favors. Walking around a little should help"

"The erratic contractions aren't moving her down." Hugh says, guiding her attention to the holo of the baby, who is wedged right against her spine, again, and her feet kick in the holo which makes then sensation sharper within. She has such bony little feet.

"We don't want her down, not yet anyway, but she's getting tugged around, and your muscles are strong, so it hurts."

"I admire your ability for understatement."

Hugh smirks a little, then turns serious. "I want you to take a few days off. Send the Vice President to the Federation council meeting."

"It's the last one before the Burn memorial."

"You can miss it."

"I just talk—"

"The last meeting was almost fourteen hours," Hugh reminds her. "Fourteen hours on your feet might get you some much stronger contractions."

"I can sit—"

"Oh no, your back's not going to take that well at all," Pollard agrees with him. They do united front far too well. "You need to rest, change positions often, go on a nice walk, then sit for awhile, take a nap, go for a swim, give her a chance to move out of the places where it hurts you."

"Go for a swim?"

"Get the pressure off your bones." Hugh manipulates the holo away from the baby to show Laura her own painful spine. "At the end of pregnancy, ligaments and connective tissues start to soften, preparing the body for delivery. It also helps with the demands of carrying a heavy baby. Some of your hormones are signalling for that process to start. The Bajoran hormones you produce, like emyargleanine are ready to wrap things up."

"I've been pregnant longer than a Bajoran would be."

"And some of your hormones are on a different timetable. Your connective tissues respond most to tollissityn, which is a Cardassian hormone, but you're not producing much of that at all, and that fits with the slower gestational rate a Cardassian would experience, but it makes things now a little uncomfortable."

"That's an understatement."

Hugh pulls himself up to sit on the biobed she's leaning on. "Pain is a signal. It can be a signal that something is out of alignment, or a reminder to slow down. You're asking your body to create something incredibly complex and resource intensive, while changing your posture, your gait and your ability to breathe—"

"I understand."

"Great. I know the memorial is important. If you want to make it through that in a few weeks, then you're taking three days off now, maybe more if you keep having these contractions."

Sipping her hot chocolate, she sighs, trying to focus on the warmth. "You said not to worry about them."

"I don't want you to worry about having her prematurely, or that the contractions are causing her discomfort. When I say don't panic, that does not mean that we should ignore what's happening." Hugh's voice is low and kind. "You're in the ending weeks of a very taxing experience, mentally and physically, not to mention emotionally."

The faces around her all agree with him, and Joann's eyes are so loudly concerned.

Hugh rubs her shoulder. "When you're exhausted, that tells your endocrine system to hurry up and get her out, but your skeletal system isn't ready for that yet. Letting them debate is going to cause you more pain, which will make the meetings longer, and the more contractions you're trying to avoid, the more distractions you'll have at the meeting. The Vice President can handle the council."

Dr. Pollard adds, "You're in a marathon, and the last leg is a doozy, you need to be prepared when you hit the last hill."

"Never really enjoyed running."

Both doctors smile at her, rolling their eyes at each other. "I'll see if I can find an appropriate metaphor for you, ma'am."

Laira thought she might lose a day, maybe two if Hugh was feeling protective. Sending Jen to the council meeting sends a message, one she wasn't ready to send quite yet, but maybe she needs to be. The Hitchhiker's nearly ready, and this is that last little gravity eddy before the Bajoran system. Almost home.

"Michael can take the time off too," Keyla says from across from her. "Joann can handle getting us in orbit of Akoszonam and a few science experiments."

Joann nods, and the eye roll is just for Keyla. "She has such faith in me."

Laira runs through several ways to protest, but stops. It's selfish, too selfish, and she should, but it'll be better with Michael. "Thank you, all of you."

"Of course." Hugh slides off the biobed. "Go, do something fun."

"Fun?"

"You remember what that is, right?" Nhan teases. "When you do something that makes you happy, not because you need to, or the Federation needs it."

"I think I'm aware of the concept."

Joann nudges Keyla. "You know, Keyla has a pilot game she's been playing with the cadets, and you'll love it."

Keyla blushes a little, then explains. "Zora helped us program the holos in main shuttlebay so we could make a simulator. We have some routes from the 23rd century that no one from this has been able to beat."

"Are you appealing to my sense of competition?"

"Oh no, I'd never do that, Madam President." Keyla's eyes twinkle, and Laira is aware of a metaphorical gauntlet being thrown.

"Is it fun?"

Joann shrugs. "Maybe for hot shot space pilots."

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She's never flown a shuttle this old. It's closer to the days of sailing ships on Earth than the programmable matter controls they have now. It's a stunning antique, and the controls are bizarre. No neural interface, no haptic feedback. It has buttons.

Shiny buttons. Even the oldest freighter in her father's fleet never had buttons.

Keyla gives her the easy one first. Sol's asteroid belt. Keyla says it's from cadet training at the Academy, when the Academy was on Earth. Lifetimes ago.

"None of the cadets can survive this one, not yet anyway."

"None of them?"

Shrugging, Keyla gets comfortable on a crate next to Joann. "I must have made it too hard for them in the antique shuttle. You try it. If it's a breeze, you can try Jupiter."

The controls are antiquated, messy, too sharp and too slow and she spins out of the belt four times. (That doesn't really count, and she's not simulated-dead so Laira flies back in and they start again. Keyla flies through it once, so she can see what she does, and then something starts to come back. Laira blows herself up spectacularly around one turn, then again when she underestimates how fast one of the asteroids is spinning.

Then it clicks.

Her hands know what they're doing. Her head's a mess of thoughts about the last two planets she needs to visit and the council meeting she's going to miss and Michael and the memorial.

Some day - soon - they will have a baby. She won't just be feet and a sharp little head, she'll be a person. Their person.

Her contractions won't be erratic and the pain will get worse, and the Hitchhiker will go down and they'll finally know what she looks like. It's a series of steps, and they end with a baby, and she'll have Michael and they'll have Hugh - and everyone. Michael's - their - family will love the Hitchhiker so much.

Just get her to the end.

One last dive around the big asteroid. The shuttle sparks, and the hulls whines in a way that hasn't changed in centuries. Steer into it, let the gravity do the work for her. Wait.

She never used to be good at waiting, not the way she is now. Laira would rush when she was younger, pull it too tight, come out of it laughing and panting and nearly dead.

Now - she's remembered - it's easy.

The shuttle chimes in victory, the simulation ends in open space. The whole galaxy twinkling in front of her. Huge and unexplored - unknown - because this is Michael's time. The far past where Michael is from.

"Congratulations, darling," Michael says, her voice light and teasing. "First person from this time to beat Keyla's death course."

"She said it was easy."

Michael's smile lights up the entire shuttlebay like a supernova. She's tired, she has to be, and there's worry in her eyes. Did she talk to Hugh? Did she come here directly? When did she get out of her meeting?

"This is the hardest course I've made yet."

"What?" Laira looks at Keyla and Joann who smile innocently over their tray of snacks. They've been cheerleading her through all her tries, offering popcorn in between races. Laira has no idea where they got it.

Keyla's smug face is more self-satisfied than Michael's. "If I told you, you never would have tried."

Joann looks more apologetic. "You needed a challenge."

Michael's hand slides into hers and the universe feels still.

"That was difficult."

Michael stands on her toes and kisses her cheek. "And you did it."

Hugh and Dr. Pollard were right, fun is nice. So is seeing Michael, even if there's worry written in the lines of her forehead.

"I'm sorry I didn't break you out of your meeting."

"Would have felt real?"

"Too real."

"You know, it's all right." Michael holds her hands, sheltering her fingers like shields cradling a ship. "I don't think anyone really feels ready."

"You do."

"I have a reputation to maintain as the captain who solves everything." Michael flips her braids back over her shoulder and chuckles before she sighs. It weighs on her too. "Hugh says she's not coming today."

"He's usually right."

"It's good that you know that about him." Michael kisses her cheek, squeezes her fingers, then touches her forehead. "I don't know if I should be telling you to calm down, or suggesting another impossibly difficult course for you."

"I don't know if I have anything left."

"You did well today."

"I did?"

"You beat Keyla's impossible monstrosity and I hear it's raining on Ni'Var, you were that good at the teple."

Now Laira chuckles. "I'm sorry."

"I need to be here."

"You're here."

"You know what I mean."

Looking down doesn't save her. Michael lifts her chin and her eyes are the deepest ocean between the stars.

"I got out of my meeting, and Hugh was waiting for me. My heart beat so fast. I couldn't breathe."

Now Laura's the one kissing her forehead, trying to calm her. She brings Michael's hand to her belly, finding that little bony foot through her belly for Michael to feel. "I'm all right. We're all right."

"First thing out of his mouth was that you were fine, but in the heartbeats in between were eternity."

"I'm sorry."

Michael leans down, whispers to the Hitchhiker, then rubs her belly. "I need you to take me out of the meetings, even when it's stupid and nothing and it doesn't really hurt."

"Oh this hurt." Laura's chuckle catches in her throat. "And I wanted you, and I felt like an idiot, because she's not coming today and it's my biology working against me, and I was fine, I was so safe, and still I wanted you."

"I think that's marriage." Michael nuzzles her cheek. "I don't know though, I'm still pretty new to it."

"Me too."

"Lot of new things coming."

"Not today, thankfully." Joann hands Michael some popcorn.

She shakes the tension out of her shoulders. "Thank you both, for being here."

"That's our baby too."

Keyla flushes pink a little and nods. "She is."

Michael touches Keyla's shoulder, then hugs Joann, tight and slow. "Did you steal this from surprise movie night?"

"Oh uh, actually, the test shuttle makes a feed that we play in the cargo bay. The cadets love watching it."

Laura stares at them both. "I was the movie?"

"Well, visiting pilot LB is the movie," Keyla explains. "They only see the shuttle go through the course. No one knows it was you, Mrs. Burnham. It's fun to watch. "

"So half the ship watched me blow myself up a few times, for fun?"

"And you then beat the hardest course I've ever designed. Trust me, in cargo bay two right now, you're a rock star." Keyla pats her shoulder. "When you go, we'll let the cadets in and give them a chance to try to beat your time, but I want to preserve the mystery for a while. Give them someone less impossible to beat than me."

Laura shakes her head, then grins. "I am honored to be of service to the Federation."

Michael kisses her cheek again. "See, you had a great day."

"And we have the day off tomorrow."

"Together." Laura's eyes sting, again, and kissing Michael doesn't hide her tears. Now does she need to.

"Absolutely." Michael touches Joann's shoulder, then Keyla's hand. "I have total faith in your ability to handle some experiments and the cadets."

"After we jump to Akoszonam, Tilly's planning a field trip to the fissure of Jorat for them. She says it's gorgeous."

Michael went there, with Tilly, in the quiet after the DMA was gone. Laura still hasn't been, but perhaps on this visit, they'll make time.

"And there are a number of science experiments scheduled for the freshwater oceans. Plenty to compare to Kaminar's." Joann hugs her and Michael together, and tugs Keyla in. "We can handle the ship, take your time. You don't have a lot left for just the two of you."

"We're not alone," Michael says, her voice soft and thick. "Thank you for that."

"You know, if you're done being mushy, I have a co-pilot course I've been waiting to test."

Michael rubs her eyes and looks at Laura, waiting for her to agree.

Squeezing her hand, Laura nods. "I'm up for it if you are, darling."

"I might be a little rusty on shuttles."

"It's fine, cargo bay 2 loves an explosion, or three."

Michael looks at Joann, then Keyla. "All right, we'll do it, but only if you two do it afterwards."

Laura leans in and whispers. "Are we getting competitive?"

"No, no, just some friendly back and forth."

"Right." Laira nods, then stretches her hands. "Nothing competitive at all, purely for fun."

Keyla winks at them. "Winning is fun."



Chapter Summary

Michael and Laira talk about what to name the hitchhiker and attend the Burn memorial. Michael watches a very old holo message.

The second time Laira gets up to use the bathroom, *Discovery* has jumped to Sanctuary Six, dropping off two gormaganders. Maybe if they get enough of the solitary creatures in one sector, they can increase their numbers. Though gormaganders are much better off in this century than the one Michael left behind. No one has had enough dilithium to bother to hunting them since the Burn.

And now...perhaps no one will want to. She can hope.

Laira returns to bed with cold hands from the sink. Michael helps guide her legs back into bed, rubbing the silk from Laira's pale blue nightgown over her knee.

"If I was a gormagander, and I lived in zero-G, my back wouldn't hurt, would it?"

"In this hypothetical scenario, are you still pregnant?"

Laira rests her hands on her belly and rolls to her side. She still can't get used to sleeping on her side, and she moves slowly, taking her time to find the right position. "Is there a universe where I'm not?"

Toying with her thigh, Michael grins. "Maybe one or two."

"If I was a pregnant gormagander—" she pauses, fixing Michael with that adorable little smile where she has no idea how the science of something works - "Do they get pregnant?"

"They do."

"Oh good, so, if I was a gormagander, and I was pregnant—"

"Would your back hurt?"

"Yes, that's the question." Laira rolls her leg over Michael's and snuggles in, finding the pillow she's supposed to put between her knees and wedging it in with a grimace.

"Gormaganders are vertebrates with incredibly strong bones, considering that they live their lives in space. Xenobiologists theorize that they interact with graviton eddies, even asteroids and need the skeletal structure to survive that. They might even be able to travel between different gravity fields. Keeping that in mind, if the Hitchhiker was her usual, contrary self—"

"Her little space-whale skull would get wedged into my spine."

"It's entirely possible."

"So I don't want to be a gormagander."

"I don't think it would alleviate this particular problem." Michael touches her cheek, then rests her hand on Laira's silk nightgown. "I'm sorry she's in a strange position again."

Laira sighs, shutting her eyes and wincing, again. "I can feel her foot against my ribs."

"At least it's a foot."

"If she had her head in my ribs, it wouldn't hurt my back."

"She'd probably find a way. She's very resourceful."

Chuckling, Laira opens her eyes again and mock glares. "She gets that from you."

"Her tenacity will be useful, later." Michael touches Laira's thigh, toying with the silk. There's so little she can do to help with the constant discomforts. "Maybe she will also be punctual."

Laira groans. "I don't know how she can be punctual when we don't know when she'll be ready."

'She'll tell us."

"Maybe that's what she's trying to do with her head."

"Sideways is definitely not-" Laura pauses, moves her thigh and hisses before she finds a comfortable position.

"I'm sorry."

"I love her, and how easy it is to tell, now that she's a person, I can feel all of her limbs, I just—" Laura stops, and it takes Michael more than a moment to realize she's distracted by Michael's hand working its way down to her knee.

"Sorry, does that tickle?" Michael pulls her hand back.

Laura catches her fingers, bringing it back to her knee. "No, no, it's good." Her eyes meet Michael's, and she shifts a little closer in bed.

That's one way to distract her. Reaching down, Michael strokes her thigh, her hand sliding easily over the silk. Sighing gently, Laura kisses her neck in response, leaning in. Her breath quickens almost immediately.

Michael slips her knee between Laura's thighs, taking the pillow out of the way, and starts easing up her nightgown.

"What are you doing, captain?"

Chuckling, Michael lets her hands glide up Laura's thighs. "Helping you sleep."

Laura's hands wander over to her breasts, then down her belly, toying with her pajama pants. "I didn't mean to imply—"

Michael kisses her, almost rough, demanding, and Laura makes that whimper, then melts into her. Kissing is soon devouring, and Michael's half on top over her on the bed. Laura's hand slips into her pajamas. Returning her attention to Laura's neck, Michael shudders when Laura's fingers slip across her.

"I think you're past implying."

Panting against Michael's mouth, Laura laughs. Really laughs, then she squirms, gasping when Michael touches her thigh.

"Is this going to help me sleep?"

"Usually works, doesn't it?"

Kissing takes away from their ability to speak for several moments, and Michael's fingers are past teasing when Laura gets her breath back.

"Not that sex with you is dull."

"Oh I know." Michael winks at her in the dark. "Climax is a good way to unwind."

"Are you insinuating that I'm tightly wound?"

Gliding her fingers over Laura's incredibly sensitive skin, Michael chuckles. "You're like a spring of annoyance right now."

"I am not - fuck - Michael—" Laura squirms, tilting her hips into Michael's hand. She whimpers, which is incredibly sexy, and together they find ways to thoroughly distract both of them.

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They sleep late, even eat breakfast curled up in bed. There's nowhere to be. Joann has the ship, Jen has the Federation, everyone's in capable hands.

Laura tucks the long braid of her hair out of the way, and curls into the pillows with Michael. Sex makes her face pink, even after they've set breakfast aside, and Michael's had two cups of coffee.

"It's funny how orgasms are the nice version of a contraction."

"Because they don't hurt?" Michael traces her belly, finding the baby's elbow. Perhaps it's a knee? She moves and Michael can picture her fidgeting like her mother.

"They hadn't hurt like they did on Kaminar, not yet anyway." Laura finishes her tea and burrows further in. "I suppose they'll just hurt more until it's the real thing."

"And that doesn't worry you."

Laura crinkles her nose and kisses Michael's cheek. "You'll be there, and Hugh, Keyla, and Joann— we'll get to meet her at the end."

"You're looking forward to that."

"I'm looking forward to seeing my feet again."

Michael sighs, cuddling into Laura's chest so she doesn't have to meet her eyes. "Says the person who might be in considerable pain for hours." Days. Cardassian births are much slower than human, or Bajoran, and there's no way of knowing Laura won't get the worst combination of the three.

"Why are you worried about that?" Laura's fingers toy with her braids, and run over the back of her neck.

"None of the neuroblockers that are effective for you are particularly useful during labor."

Kissing her head, Laura chuckles. "You checked."

"Of course, I checked."

"I'm sure Hugh will work out some ways—"

"For your very stubborn skeletal structure—"

Laira guides her face up to kiss her. "That's the problem isn't it? My cartilage is too sturdy, or something."

Staring into her deep blue eyes isn't helping the knot in Michael's stomach. "You've suffered enough."

"Apparently not." Laira's tone is light.

Michael's chest is too tight. There's nothing funny about watching her suffer, but Laira's not bothered by it.

"Would it be easier if it was you?"

"This part?" Michael rests both of her hands on Laira's belly and shakes her head. "I'd be terrible at the carrying the baby part. I wish I could take the end."

"I'll be all right."

"I know."

"You're pretty incredible for my pain tolerance, you know that?"

"Thanks. I think."

"Well, it's a good thing." Laira taps the back of Michael's hand. "You know, I don't want to interrupt your brooding about things that might not be bad at all, but after my terrible ordeal, she'll need a name."

"Don't—"

"Sorry." Laira kisses her cheek again, trying to soften Michael's worries. "You're named after your father."

"His family had a tradition."

"Do you want to follow it?"

"Another Michael?" Michael shrugs, her face stings a little. She loves her name, but it's not for the Hitchhiker. "No, that's not right for her."

"She should have your surname, mine will carry too much."

"That mine doesn't have?"

"You could try to be less heroic, dear." Laira smirks at her.

"I'll try." Michael tries to picture the little squishy face that's going to need naming. She's never seen a newborn. It's going to be such a change. "Is there anything you like for a first name?"

"Michael."

That stinging flash of affection returns. "No."

Laira chuckles. "Fine. My name comes from my village. They tried to use the same names, repeated them every few generations, so we'd know our history."

"When you were born, your name had to be Laira?"

"My mother liked it."

"Then pick one you like."

"A name from my village?"

Michael sits up, taking her hands. "*Discovery* is my home. It might be nice if she had a connection to your home."

Blinking once, then again, Laira takes a breath. "Then you chose her middle name."

Michael smiles. "Pick one from my village?"

"Please."

Michael stares up at the swirling stars. "Philippa." On Resuna Idun, the ghost of her captain said they named the Hitchhiker after her. Both of her Philipphas brought her to the stars, made her who she is. Her captain would be honored, and her mother would tease her, once she got over how honored she was. The former emperor's still out there, somewhere, earning all her silver hair. She'd never admit it, of course, but she'd be touched.

"Both of them meant so much to you."

"Our Hitchhiker can be a little of each them. I think they'd like that too."

Laira grabs her holopadd from the side of the bed, calling up a long list of names that Michael recognizes as Cardassian and Bajoran, some seem to be combined. Slipping her hand into Michael's, she squeezes her fingers. "I like that we can honor them."

Nodding, Michael opens her arms and Laira curls into Michael's chest this time. "My captain would tease me. I finally have my own ship and I fill it full of diplomats and children, as if herding scientists wasn't difficult enough."

"She'd be proud of you." Laira says, with absolutely certainty.

"She'd adore you." Michael takes a breath, because she lost the other Philippa so much closer to now, and their Hitchhiker would be her granddaughter, in a way. In all the ways that matter. "My Philippa, the one who was almost my mother, would be so amused by you, and I, and how somehow the universe gave me a child, and the president."

"Warp bubbles are funny things."

Michael holds her a little tighter. "I'm grateful - every day - for you, for the Hitchhiker, for the strangeness of the universe."

"I love you," Laira says easily, then sighs. "I think then, in the warp bubble, I needed to love someone."

"We had her less than a day, and you loved her so much." Michael remembers how distraught Laira was in the turbolift, how much her entire universe shifted to encompass the Hitchhiker, and Laira, and how after that instant of a third life sign, everything changed, kept changing, spiralling to here.

Laira snuggles into her neck. "You, and her, are so easy to fall for."

Taking a breath, Michael kisses her hair. "You did warn me that you'd fall in love with me if we had sex."

It takes a moment for Laira to remember, and she laughs - really laughs - and she sighs. "I tried to let you leave."

"I'm not going to leave."

"I thought something would make you."

"Too stubborn."

"You really are, aren't you?" Laira toys with Michael's braids, wrapping them in her fingers. "You're too wonderful to possibly stay, but also too stubborn to disappear."

Holding her close, Michael slips her fingers into Laira's and they rest on the baby. She's so close to here with them, but not yet. Not yet. Everything will change again, when she gets here. Maybe they need to enjoy this time.

"You put your heart in my hands. You trusted me, completely. What else could I do?"

"Your only logical response was to fall in love with me."

"Yeah." Michael squeezes her fingers. "The logic was unassailable."

"Fortunately for me."

Is this luck? Michael doesn't believe in fate. She believes in what she can do, and that's led her here. The warp bubble was unplanned, unimagined — and yet — she wanted contentment. She wanted to belong to someone; to share the universe. There are so many wonders: the 10-C, the Abronians, Gormaganders and whatever else is out there. She can show them all to their baby.

It's not the life she imagined. Hell, this isn't even the century she thought she'd live in, but Laira's here, so is her crew. Their daughter will open her eyes here, in safety, surrounded by love. That's a good start to life. She can be proud of that.

---

*Discovery* will observe the all stop for the Burn memorial from Headquarters. Laira's speech will come from the council floor, and she's been going over it in her head, debating words all morning. She has meetings, but Michael will stand behind her for the speech. slightly to the left, a step behind Admiral Vance, two steps behind the Vice President, near Arjun. Most of the holo news won't show Michael, or the other dignitaries surrounding Laira, but some will. It's important she be there.

Keeping an eye on Laira matters too. Michael's being paranoid, and perhaps that doesn't matter. *Discovery* will be absolutely fine with Joann in command. All they need to do is power down the warp drive, and wait.

Michael fusses with her burgundy dress uniform collar, and reminds herself to be still. It is a day for calm, and gravitas. Laira is wearing her full regalia, her red cape tucked carefully over the Hitchhiker. She's radiant now. Michael's not sure it because this is the end, and the calm that comes from that, or if it's that the last few weeks, she hasn't been ill. The sneezing's gone, so is the nausea. Hugh found a balance so she's not feverish, and her blood pressure's been staying in range. Now, at the end, they've balanced most of it.

Of course, now the Hitchhiker's so close, and Laira tires, and there seem to be a hundred other things to worry about, from how her back hurts to how the baby's positioned that day. Doing too much leads to contractions, but those aren't going anywhere yet. Not until the Hitchhiker gets her head down, which is easy enough to check, but that's just one more thing to worry about.

Michael remembers Hugh saying at their appointment that morning that the baby is lower today. Laira said it was easier to breathe. Lower is closer to delivery, but it's a slow process. Hugh was quite calm. There's no reason for her to worry, and she isn't, not really, she's fine. They're fine.

*"The baby being lower doesn't mean down." Hugh reminded them that morning when Michael's face must have said too much. "When her head's effaced, your cervix will open, and a whole list of things tend to happen to make sure that happens at the right time. Doesn't always work, but, when it's time, we'll know."*

*"Being able to make it through my speech would be nice."*

*"Your speech should go well," Hugh promised, patting her shoulder. "I don't think she's coming for a few more weeks. Not that she wouldn't be fine, today."*

*"We know." Laira's so much more patient with this than Michael is.*

*They know. They're fine. They're trusting the process. After Laira's down from the biobed, joking with Hugh, Michael kisses her cheek, standing on her toes.*

*"See you for the speech?"*

*"I'll be there."*

*"I have—"*

*"Meetings, I know, I'll see you there."*

*Laira touched Michael's chin. "Save some of your worrying for later."*

*Raising her eyebrows, Michael glanced down. "It's a renewable resource."*

*"Ah. Well, stop mining it, darling."*

Of course, it's never that easy just to let things go. If Philippa's going to be their Hitchhiker's namesake, maybe the Emperor will share her knack for surviving, from wherever she is.

Michael rests her hands on the smooth, cool railing in front of the viewport, looking out at the fleet of ships waiting for the memorial. Philippa knew they'd name the baby after her. The ghost of her mentioned it at Resuna Idun. Laira has compiled a list of names for the hitchhiker's first name. There's one Michael likes more than the others, but she chose Philippa, so she can wait, see what Laira likes when the Hitchhiker gets here.

Maybe they'll look at her face and know what they should call her.

"Your face looks like I've already told you that the calculations from the Luna propulsor lab are all wrong, but I haven't told you yet, so I don't know what you could be so worried about, Captain." Reno leans on the rail next to her. "Also holding the snacks until after the silence is cruel."

Veddra raises her eyebrows in a way that's almost Vulcan. "Reno believes she could mourn just as effectively while eating."

"The Grazellans believe the same thing," Michael says, finding a smile.

Reno returns her smile, hopeful. "Can we put the Grazellans in charge of the next memorial?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Discussing the Luna lab's new variant of the pathway drive was on Laira's agenda for today, and she wasn't happy about either. Reno hating it is validating. If they agree, they're probably right.

"The council wants to put this on a ship?" Reno calls up the schematics on her holocomm. She angrily circles a few portions of the calculations in red. On first glance they look fine, but Reno and Veddra point out several discrepancies Michael never could have seen.

"The shuttle tests were positive."

Veddra nods, raising a hand to prevent Reno's complaints so she can explain it more reasonably. "A shuttle would need a much smaller quantum slipstream. The mass of a starship, even a small one like Discovery, would need an exponentially greater slipstream, which is then less predictable. The power consumption curve isn't possible with a standard matter-antimatter reactor. They must be using something else, but that's not part of their calculations. They might be trying to keep their reactor design under wraps, but that worries us."

"What Veddra means in her circuitous Romulan way, is that they can't say for certainty that they'll end up where they say they'll end up, because they're not even being honest about their power source."

That cold knot finds in a home in Michael's stomach. "But the council gets to decide."

"The council does not have enough scientists, nor are they famous for listening to them," Veddra says. "Scientists rarely chose to serve in that manner."

Reno waves the holocomm away as a group council members walks by. "Don't suppose your wife gets a veto?"

"Unfortunately not, not on a project like that." Laira would be overstepping her authority terribly. "Council member Gozre is very fond of this particular project. He believes diversifying the fleet's propulsion will lead to greater security. The spore drive, quantum slipstream and the pathway drive are all being researched simultaneously."

"Crystals and mushrooms are already pretty diverse. We can use dilithium and the mycelial network. Spores are sustainable, and we have improved our travels so we pose no risk to the Jah'Sepp. It's not hard to see the winner."

"Maybe it's still to strange for them."

"Half-baked calculations are stranger."

Michael nods, touching Reno's arm. "I'll make sure Laira know your concerns, but she felt just as stuck."

"Council member fancy-pants has built a coalition?"

"He has."

"Well, maybe he wants to be part of the test."

Michael glances down at her shiny black boots. "We don't risk politicians that way."

"Unless they're your wife."

"Well, she's unique, and she chose the risk."

Veddra folds her fingers, much like Sarek used too. "Now *Discovery's* spore drive isn't seen as a risk at all. We have children on board."

"And they're safe. All the spore drive's we've installed have been very reliable."

"Ni'Var ships are installing them now. Their shipwrights have approved the VARS navigational system."

Reno slips her arm into Veddra's. "There's a vote of confidence. Maybe the synchronized spore jump will convince them."

HQ's computer voice interrupts them. "The memorial for the Burn will commence in five minutes."

Reno tilts her head upwards. "You better get to command."

"Give the president our best, captain."

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"We honor the lives lost to the Burn by stopping, remaining at sublight while we respect what we've lost. We're remembering our ancestors; honoring their stories. The Burn ended how we saw the galaxy, made it dangerous and fractured, and we lost touch with each other. As we rebuild now, we have a chance to remember why our ancestors travelled among the stars. They explored, conducted scientific research, traded between each other, and looked outward with wonder."

Laira pauses, taking a breath, almost smiling. It's the right tone, and she knows, but Michael's in awe of how easy she makes it look now, after so many hours practicing. "We can honor them by finding our way back to that sense of community. We share our galaxy, and our strengths, and together our descendents will remember that we rebuilt our connections, together. We reached for each other as we restored our ships and our alliances. Our connections to each other survived the Burn, and the DMA. So that we remain, reaching for each other, not only in remembrance, but in hope and unity."

The moment of silence passed respectfully, and Laira's speech seems to have gone over well. Jen's smiling, the council members on the command deck seem pleased and the communication staff are already back to their posts, making sure Laira's holo makes it to every corner of the Federation.

Headquarters hasn't felt this full since the DMA summit, where the toll of what they were facing seemed to be in the middle of every room. This memorial has a somber tone, but it's hopeful. They're together, looking forward. It probably helps that most of them weren't alive for the Burn, nor were their parents. It's a generational trauma, to be sure, but other than a few long-lived species, like members of the Ni'Var and Kaminar delegations, they're all a few generations removed. Laira's great-aunt Margot wasn't alive for the Burn, but she lived with the aftermath.

Now they must be turning a corner. There are delegations from each of the Federation's sixty member worlds, and Laira has completed official visits to fifty-eight of them. Michael knows most of the ambassadors. Laira's message of hope carries through, and the reception is pleasant, even warm.

When the refreshments Reno was waiting for are unveiled, the tables are multicolored feasts for the senses, stretching all the way around the council floor. Every member culture has to be represented, and each planet has a variety of their own. Zora was even consulted about historical recipes that might have been lost to the Burn.

"Captain Burnham, may we have a moment of your time?" Dr. Kovich has a knack for appearing out of nowhere, but he has a plate in his hands

She finds Laira in the crowd with her eyes, making sure she has a plate in her hands. Jen is with her, walking with her past one of the tables, and Nhan's a step behind.

"Of course, doctor, admiral." She follows Admiral Vance and Dr. Kovich into one of the secluded offices.

Vance's very bright smile must have everything to do with Laira, and he gently touches her shoulder. "The president's speech went well."

"As anticipated," Kovich adds. "Her speaking prowess was never in doubt."

"Captain Burnham was nervous."

"Not about her speech, sir."

Vance nods. "It is difficult to be calm about an event that will change your life forever when it occurs, and you know it's coming, but you have no idea when."

"Yes, sir. The gravity and the unpredictability are difficult."

Kovich nods, but his face is neutral, as always. "We have something to show you, but first, we need to ask something of a personal nature."

"Personal, sir?"

"Commanders Detmer and Owosekun retrieved a holographic message from the mysterious spatial coordinates you obtained. The message was incredibly old. It had been stored with several redundant backups, with shielding and some of the twenty-fifth century's best encryption."

"The twenty-fifth century, sir?" Spock lived nearly that long, but he died in the past. She wouldn't have known anyone else there, unless—

Her chest tightens with loss, but Philippa had a good life. She was old and content when Michael saw a vision of her.

"Philippa Georgiou left a message for you there, we've examined it, and it's genuine. She placed it somewhere safe and arranged for you to get it now. We apologize for the delay, but there's information in the message you might not want to be surprised by."

"What kind of information, sir?" Neither of their faces hint it's something dangerous.

Vance toys with his sleeve. "She knows what you name your child."

Michael smiles, and the knot in her chest eases a little. "And you didn't want to spoil it for me, sir?"

"The president mentioned you'd decided on your daughter's middle name."

"We have, sir."

"Then now is the appropriate time to show you." Kovich touches a control, and Philippa shimmers into existence. When Michael watched her captain's will, she was drowning in her own guilt. Now she misses her, this mother who was not her mother, and was, in all the ways that matter.

"Michael, I've gone to great care to make sure this message reaches you the slow way, so that no time travel laws will be broken, and what I have to tell you is also from the past, so your Federation intelligence should find no fault with this." Philippa smiles, very pleased with herself. Her hair is silver and black, so this was before the version of her that Michael saw last. There's a peace in her eyes that she didn't have when she left.

"In 2447, ion storms increased nearly one hundred fold. Due to your excessive diligence, we don't have a spore drive, and it took us many months to determine the cause was an extra galactic fly by. A super-dense galactic cluster passed through the fringes of the our own, we experienced a class twelve ion storm."

Michael holds up her hand, and Kovich pauses the holo for her. "Class twelve? It's a logarithmic scale, that would cover almost forty percent of the galaxy."

"Oh it gets worse," Vance says with that sort of graveyard cheerfulness he has when things are dire.

The holo of Philippa folds her arms. "We were able to mitigate much of the potential damage by keeping our ships at warp for the duration of the ion storm, our losses were minimal. Of course, we have extensive dilithium reserves that you do not, but b-perhaps by the time this reaches you-" she grins at her own joke- "You will have solved that problem. Our scientists predict the galactic cluster will return in seven hundred-forty three years. My hope is that this message reaches you before it does."

"I've attached all of our data, in case it's lost your history. I don't recall reading about this when I hacked into their systems, so you will need it."

Philippa looks at Michael, as if she knew where she'd be standing, and her chest constricts, hot. Missing her is a different ache than the others she left. Philippa was here, but she couldn't stay.

"Give my namesale a galaxy that's worthy of her, Michael." Philippa's smile glows across the centuries. "I'm glad you found someone to marry who takes her responsibility to the galaxy almost as seriously as you do, look after her, democracy is an exhausting, inefficient form of government."

Philippa glances down, and there must be so many things she can't say. "I suppose I ought tell you that I did take your advice, and I told my stories to the people I met, eventually. My favorite stories to tell are always about you, Captain Burnham."

Philippa brought them another mystery, and there's data to go through and they'll need to ask the 10-C for extra galactic sensor readings, and

increase scanning for ion storm activity.

But Michael stares at the empty space where Philippa's holo was, and tries to imagine her with people who know her, who trust her in return, where she's shed some of her bad habits, become less sharp, maybe even happy.

She wouldn't admit it if she was content, and she liked the Hitchhiker's name.

"Did you show the president, sir?"

Kovich rests his hands on the table. "We reported to her. We've shared the scientific data with with all Federation scientists . We're also investigating the geological record for traces of the class twelve ion storm Georgiou mentioned."

Vance shrugs. "She was right about your daughter's name."

"She would be a reliable source in my opinion, sir."

"We looked for a service record for her, in the time period she mentioned, and other than a few vert redacted missions that I can't access even iwth my clearance—"

Kovich finishes for Vance. "She seems to have become part of Starfleet intelligence at a time when they needed her." He nods to them both. "I am needed elsewhere, captain, admiral."

Michael watches him leave, then her eyes return to where Philippa stood. Did she see their baby? Did she keep in touch with the Guardian of Fever? Some other kind of time travel? Maybe she found the Prophets of Bajor and asked to use an orb. She's endlessly resourceful.

"You chose worthy namesake," Vance says, touching her shoulder. "Makes it seem real, doesn't it, once she has a name."

"Laira's still choosing her first name."

"She mentioned her village's tradition." He leans on the table beside her. "It's a mission you really can't prepare for."

"As much as I wish I could, sir."

"Raising my daughter is what means the most to me. I have a career, more of one than I'd like some days to be sure, but she's the part I am most proud of."

"You think I'll feel the same way?"

"You've had an exceptional life, captain, hopefully it's prepared you for the incredibly stubborn toddler you and the president might have."

"Bedtime can be a difficult proposition?"

"We had more trouble with baths."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir."

He chuckles. "When my daughter was born, I felt like the only person in the room not doing something important."

"Oh?"

"My wife assures me that was not the case, however, I thought I'd warn you. If it feels that way to you, you're not alone."

Turning, she leans on the cool glass table beside him. "Thank you, sir."

"It'll be bumpy, but you fly through."

"That's one of your shorter analogies." Michael takes a breath, her chest warm with feeling.

"It is, isn't it?" Vance looks out the stars beyond the viewer. "Becoming a parent is impossible to prepare for, and you rise to the occasion. That's something you have some practice with, at least."

"I'll have to keep that in mind."

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