

a dinner date doesn't imply dating

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a dinner date doesn't imply dating

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Summary

"Forgive me, Madam President, are you drunk?"

In which Michael and Laira share a few vulnerabilities.

Notes

written in January 2022 while season 4 was airing.

"Forgive me, Madam President, are you drunk?"

Rillak laughs, shakes her head and hides a hiccup behind her hand. "No, not technically."

Her skin's flushed pink, and she's giggled twice since Michael came into the conference room. Michael's never heard her giggle. She might not have ever heard her laugh, but here they are.

Picking up the water pitcher, Michael pours a glass and sets it down in front of the President of the entire Federation. Rillak wraps her fingers around the glass, then uses two hands because one is a little shaky.

She wasn't doing anything. She had a meeting with the Sheliak and Llugarian trade representatives. Michael's simply here as an honor guard, the Starfleet escort. The Sheliak representative left more than thirty minutes ago, and Llugarian beamed away shortly after, and Rillak didn't bring any of her aides. The Sheliak would want to bring an equal number and the Llugarians find numbers larger than three unlucky for negotiations.

The xenoanthropologist in Michael would find the difficulties of planning Rillak's meetings fascinating for a day or two. The captain doesn't envy how difficult it must be.

Rillak hiccups, again, and then tugs at her hair, pulling the complicated braid loose from the back of her neck. It's not down, but it's falling and Michael's never seen her hair like that. The flush of whatever this is makes her ridges brighter against her pink skin. Is she too hot? Is she ill?

"There's an enzyme in Llugarian ceremonial tea, beta-polyduterio-something, I can't remember. I've been told one too many times and the word's just gone. If I was fully Cardassian, it would kill me, all human and it would taste like soap, Bajoran and it might make my tongue go numb, but the combination of, well, me, creates vasodilation, slowing of my reflexes and mild euphoria." She lifts her glass with two hands, very carefully, as if it's a wind crystal from the high desert of Vulcan. "I suppose you could call it a temporary intoxication, so yes, drunk. Very confusing the first time it happened, but now that I know it's just-" she pauses, then smiles at Michael, "-mildly embarrassing."

"Can I do anything?" The words are barely out of Michael's mouth and Rillak shakes her head.

"Oh Captain, sometimes you can't do anything but wait, no matter how good you are at saving the galaxy."

Rolling her eyes, Michael sighs. "I'm not trying to save the galaxy."

"Just me?"

That glance goes on too long and Michael can't just hover, so she sits, pours herself a glass of water and watches Rillak pull her braid undone.

"How was the negotiation?"

"As miserable as expected. Our treaty with the Sheliak dissolved when the Federation was unable to maintain diplomatic ties in a reasonable fashion and the Sheliak don't like doing anything they're not contractually obliged to do. The Llugarians think trade negotiations should constantly be updated to the benefit of all involved, and are much more gregarious, but not finishing your tea is a terrible offense."

"And you can't swap it out?" Michael's still stuck on the part where she willingly drank the tea that made her drunk.

"If I were caught—" Rillak trails off and sighs, freeing her hair from the braid so it falls loose on her shoulders. She opens her jacket at the collar, then opens it down to her chest. "This was the least worst option."

"I'm flattered."

Hiccuping again, Rillak tilts her head, studying Michael like she's a ceremonial pot of tea. "What did you need, Captain Burnham?"

"Permission to leave orbit and return to HQ, ma'am."

"The Llugarians require—"

"Us to trade two ceremonial objects to show our sincerity an hour and three hours after the meeting." She knew that. Michael takes a sip of her water. So they are waiting. "Would you like me to change the environmental controls?"

"You're very kind, captain." Rillak shuts her eyes, and for a moment Michael can't figure out why she's making that face, but she's trying not to giggle, and she fails. "It's useless. We've tried co-enzyme antagonists, neutralizing induction factors. Luckily for me, I've only had to attend a few of these negotiations, Sometimes I can send one of the ambassadors, but—"

"The Llugarians would be offended if they sent their plutarch to negotiate with anyone less than our leader."

Rillak pats her hand approvingly. "You are good at this."

"I read the report."

"Because I was late."

"Because I wanted to read the report, you're not late, ma'am."

"I can't be late any more, can I?" Rillak shakes her hair out, running her fingers through it while it falls onto her shoulders. "Sorry, it makes my scalp tingle and then the braid feels so—"

"It's beautiful."

"My hair?"

"Yes. Especially in the light."

Rillak tilts her head, and her smile grows brighter. "Captain, you're too kind."

Michael frowns, pointing at the Llugarian's bright blue binary star outside the observation lounge's viewports. "The blue of the star and your hair are an aesthetically pleasing combination. I hope it doesn't offend you to say so."

"I'm flattered, truly, I—" she pauses, looking down at her hands before she meets Michael's eyes. "I spend so much time worrying about being effective and presidential that it's been a very long time since anyone found me aesthetically pleasing and was comfortable saying it."

"Lonely at the top?"

"Terribly." Rillak's response is too fast to be measured, too sure to be planned. Of course she's lonely. She's on a different starship every other day, constantly traveling, talking about the fate of the Federation, then attending meeting after meeting. Michael's not even sure she's seen her eat outside of a working meal.

"When I was first promoted to commander, my captain would ask me to dinner, twice a week, no matter what mission we were on or how busy we were. I thought it was for me, so I'd have someone to talk to that wasn't a lower ranking officer, but after a year, I realized it was as much for her as it was for me. I was the closest thing to an equal she had on board." Michael sips her water, smiling at the memory.

"I'm embarrassed that it took me a year."

"Was that Georgiou?"

"My captain." Michael tightens her fingers for a moment, then Rillak's hand is on hers, the warmth of her skin overtaking Michael's senses. "I was thinking about her recently. I made an Akaali lalogi orb and I hung her on my tree, both of her, and all of my parents, everyone I left behind."

"Is it overwhelming to look at them all? " Rillak's tone is gentle, and the question is innocent enough. "You left everyone."

"I have my crew."

"But whom do you have dinner with?"

Now that's a question. Michael sighs, tilts her head. "It was Tilly, then it was Book but—"

"I ruined that."

"No, oh no, he made the choices he needed to make you didn't—"

Rillak's little smirk is just about evil. "I know."

"You do?"

"I wanted to see what you'd say. It would be easy enough to blame me for putting you on opposite sides of an impossible situation."

"The sides were there." Michael finishes her water and Rillak's fingers are still on hers. She likes that they're there, maybe more than she should. "Maybe it saved us some trouble later, I -" she pauses, blinking back tears she wasn't really aware she had left. "I don't know."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

Pulling her hand back, Rillak hiccups again, then rolls her eyes in disgust. "The euphoria is fine, the hiccups are annoying."

"How long do they last?"

"A few hours, usually they're gone in the morning."

"Usually?"

"There was once—" Rillak doesn't finish but the frustration in her eyes is easy to read.

She almost can't believe she's saying it, or offering, but Rillak seems to create words in Michael's mouth. "Since we have at least two hours before I'm needed on the bridge, would you like to eat?"

"I might tell you more embarrassing stories."

"I have a few to trade."

"Is this a negotiation, captain?"

"No, this isn't a working dinner. Call me Michael."

Rillak tests the word with her lips before she says it. "Thank you, Michael."

She offers Rillak a hand getting to her feet. "We can even beam to my quarters if you don't want—"

"To be seen wandering the corridors of your ship looking so very unpresidential?" Rillak finishes for her, eyes twinkling.

"You look beautiful."

Rillak flushes more pink, and breaks eye contact. Can she blush? Was that the wrong thing to say? "Keep saying that and you'll have to call me Laura." She sweeps past Michael, very steady on her feet. Turning back, she winks. "If you can handle that."

"Starfleet captains are afraid of nothing, Madam President."

Rillak- Laura - pauses at the doorway, hand up for the controls, but she stops, then faces Michael. "I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage of you."

"By throwing yourself at me in your vulnerable state?"

"Letting you see me with my guard down."

"We all need that. I haven't had it either. I'd forgotten what it was like to just exist in a moment, without worrying about what it meant."

"Is this that kind of moment?"

It's very warm, all of a sudden, and Michael's acutely aware of the tingling at the back of her neck. Can this effect be contagious, even shared by contact, passed through the skin?

Laura reaches for her hand and the galaxy doesn't end when Michael takes it. In fact, she might even be able to forget about everything the galaxy needs for a little while.

Actions

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