

## **A vulnerability doesn't imply weakness**

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## **A vulnerability doesn't imply weakness**

by [ussjellyfish](#)

### Summary

Negotiations on Andor are as unforgiving as the weather and Michael helps Laira take a necessary weekend off.

Joann and Keyla help with some cultural diplomacy.

Did anyone know Michael had a girlfriend?

### Notes

written in early 2022, while season 4 was airing.

## Chapter 1

Usually she doesn't mind an agenda with many bullet points and sub-sections. The added layer of organization makes it clearer to read through. The Andorians, however, have enough subsections in the last paragraph of their proposed realignment with the Federation that the paragraph spreads over her Holo like a generational ship. The space behind her super orbital cranial ridges aches like she's pulled too many Gs going around a binary star. When she starts wishing for her creaky, worn, old pilot's seat, she's exhausted.

There at least she could steal a little sleep between proximity alerts. Rubbing her skull would be a sign of weakness, so she can't touch her face. Slouching would be unpresidential. The Aenar delegates on her right are all far too polite to read her thoughts, but if this meeting goes on as long as the last one, Laura might project her desire for it to end strongly enough that they hear it.

So far, she's projected the right air of calm and competence, been approachable, not too eager but not aloof. Managing all of her emotions, keeping her posture open: Laura has to control all of it, down to the way she lifts her tea. It's part of the dance - the negotiation - how you get to know each other.

Her hand misses the shift of perspective on her Holo. Small mistake. Could be clumsy. She's not presenting; only she saw it but her hand will not move where she needs it to. The graph about projected dilithium usage remains small when she needs to see the nuance they're arguing with her about.

Reaching for her water glass, Laura listens, nods politely, allows each delegate time to explain their position on the efficiency of dilithium allocation from their mining in the Verubin nebula. She asks for clarification when her hand still won't do what she wants. Her fingers aren't hers, somehow, and letting on would be chaos.

The planets hit hard by the Emerald Chain don't like the Federation meeting with Andor so quickly. Some of the previous Chain members want to go their own way, be the chain reformed. Reforged? That choice is appalling but she can't blame them for turning to what gave them security, even if she hates it. Osyraa ran an efficient organization, in some ways. She provided stability where there was none and sentient species always try so hard to fight the entropy around them.

Her fingers bend slowly as she grabs her water glass. They're numb past her knuckles and even the palm of her hand seems unable to register the coolness of the glass.

It's hardly warm or pleasant in the conference room, but she's not that cold. She can't be *that* cold. Her sinuses ache but it's so dry here that's to be expected, isn't it? It was bitter cold when they showed her how they're remaking art that honored the Chain into something less oppressive.

The cold always makes her vaguely unwell. Too much of her ancestors hated being cold, but she's been in this room was the last few hours, she should have warmed up.

No, no, they had lunch here, so since breakfast she's been in this room. Is that enough time? Would they have set the controls low to prove a point?

"Madam President?"

*Forgive me, I can't feel my hands. Forgive me, I haven't been listening. Forgive me, your methods of negotiation are exhausting and endless and—*

Shifting positions makes it easier to concentrate while the delegates across the table discuss how dilithium should be shared through the Andorian sectors. This doesn't need her, but it would be impolite to leave. Her aides know to schedule some kind of intervention with these meetings because otherwise they will drag on far too late and the Andorian day is already much longer than what she's used to on starships.

She nods along to their explanation, folding her hands in her lap so they'll warm, or at least they won't visibly shake.

Laura sees her first through the dense holographic representation of Andorian trade routes. Michael stands in the doorway, patient and professional, haloed in the golden light of Laura's holographic display.

Michael doesn't need her to keep her politician's mask. Michael—

Clearing her throat, she collects herself. "Forgive me, Captain Burnham requires my attention." Starfleet is important enough that she can bow out without offense, finally.

The delegates nod, acknowledging her with the deference her station requires because they too are treating this negotiation with the utmost care. The way they keep talking amongst themselves, antennae flitting back and forth, suggests they still have much to work out. Perhaps they don't trust that they're getting so much dilithium without having to trade for it in some fashion, maybe they don't approve of her suit, but it hardly matters. She's been pried free and they can argue for the rest of the night if they wish.

Thank the Prophets for Michael Burnham, who is an exciting enough visitor that she draws all the free eyes in the room. No one really notices that Laura's steps are halting, or that she's walking on numb feet. These boots are comfortable, and she thought they'd be warm enough but it's like the chill of the glaciers above the city has crept into her cells and taken up residence.

Michael waits in the doorway, remaining at attention until Laura's close enough to shudder at the snow in her hair. Envy Michael's warm jacket over her uniform, Laura resists the unreasonable urge to reach for her. They're not alone, they're not close like that, but Michael's hands were warm when she held them and her fingers are so cold now that they ache.

It was a short walk from her suite to the formal chambers, but that walk is through an open square and spring in the Andorian historical capital

city is thirty degrees colder than it would be on Bajor. It was merely overcast and cold this morning, now it's dark, and the wind whips hard through the stone and metal buildings. Much of the structures around them were built thousands of years ago and updated (or not) as the times require.

"The temperature has fallen several degrees since the morning," Michael says as they stand in the doorway. "The stones underneath us are orthorhombic heagaitite they and interfere with transporters. It's a great security feature, but it's about half a kilometer to the Rounem Gate, then personal transporters will work."

Half a kilometer is barely any distance at all, but today it stretches on like the Delphic expanse, dark and impenetrable except for the snow blowing between the buildings.

"The buildings are placed so the wind can pass between them, historically it cut down on snow drifts." Michael pulls on her gloves and looks around the door. "In my century, there were coats and winter apparel here, for visitors."

"Things have changed. Visitors were more common when they were part of the Federation."

Even through the doorway the cold's intense enough that Laira's hands remember sensation enough to sting, sending daggers up her wrists. She rubs her hands together once, but she doesn't dare keep doing it. Someone will notice; the perception of weakness could be enough to damage their negotiations.

"Are you all right?"

Michael's expression softens and she reaches for Laura's hand. It's such an immediate, instinctual *'let me help'* that Laira's chest tightens. How rarely anyone asks that and means it the way Michael does.

"It's been a long day. " Both true and understated to the point that Michael will not be able to leave it. She should have said something else, given more away, but security is near.

Michael's forehead furrows so those little lines stand out between her eyebrows. Her face is so expressive, so lively that she tells stories just with her eyes. "The schedule says your meetings started at nine, and it's well past nineteen-hundred. On my ship, that would get you tomorrow off unless it's a crisis."

"My only scheduled appearance tomorrow is an opera."

"Hopefully in the evening."

"I believe that's when opera begins."

"Do you want my coat?" Michael starts to remove it, but then removes the gloves she just put on instead. "Take these at least."

"Thank you." Laira tilts her head, but has to refuse. "I'll bring a coat when negotiations resume."

"If we keep in the middle of the buildings—"

"It's all right, Michael."

Using her name, not captain, frees the most beautiful smile to light Michael's face.

Outside the wind whirls around them, stinging her skin. Some of the historical documentation on Andor, before the Burn, mentioned how their weather control systems maintained their climate whilst making it less unpleasant for visitors from warmer planets, but there's been no such accommodation here now. Andor did not suffer as much as other planets during the period of limited warp travel. Being one of the home planets of the Emerald Chain brought it material comfort and stability as the Chain preyed on the surrounding worlds.

The chill hasn't just been in the weather during her visit. Her entourage was limited, a Federation Starship was not allowed to remain in orbit for the duration of their talks, as would be standard practice. *Discovery* was able to maintain comms distance for safety, but letting herself be vulnerable - *surely Andorian security will be enough for you, Madam President* - has been essential for this mission. Andor wants the Federation to return as the petitioner, not the bringer of gifts.

"Was the Aenar delegation willing to begin working to Auriello and the other spore drive scientists?" Michael may have asked the question twice, because she touches Laira's wrist and the sudden warmth of her fingertips hurts. "Laira?"

Hearing her own name is enough of a surprise that she stops worrying about the icy stones beneath her numb feet and turns. Michael asked for honesty; the wind is loud enough that no one will hear. "I can't feel my hands."

Michael takes her hands, staring at the blue-white skin of Laira's numb fingers before she removes her gloves and wraps Laira's hands in her own. Her skin's warm enough to shock like an unshielded EPS relay. "For how long?"

"I don't know, it crept up on me."

"Laira—" Michael rubs her hands along Laira's and the friction stings.

Hearing her name shocks Laira too, but in a warmer way. She hears it so rarely unless it's a message from home. Her breath catches for a moment, and surely her eyes are just misty because of the cold. Her eyelashes catch, freezing together when she blinks.

"You're likely hypothermic. Cardassians and Bajorans are less cold tolerant than humans, and much less so than Andorians."

"I assure you that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"I'm not doubting that, I—" Michael pauses, stares at her hands and then meets her eyes, radiant even in the darkness. "I was capable of taking care of myself for years, and then I started a war." Guilt lies dark in Michael's eyes, and no matter how much time has passed, she still carries it.

"You ended something worse than a war here."

Michael opens her coat and pulls their hands in, pressing them against the warmth of her stomach. "I thought I was a wrecking ball."

"Sometimes the structures have lost their use, or even become dangerous, and need to come down." It's not an apology. Michael has swung the universe around like she had a DMA controller of her own, buried in those endless brown eyes. She saved the galaxy in coming here, then saved them again, even saved those who hurt them from isolytic weapons and toxic subspace. Michael keeps saving everyone.

Even her.

Laira doesn't need to be saved, right? There's nothing wrong with the endless days of work and mandatory down time that seems to just involve more work. Laira goes from starship to planet to starship, never resting. Space is her home, and it's cold and dark, like the Andorian night.

Yet Michael is the sun in the morning. Michael is the supernova that creates a whole stellar nursery. She's warmth itself distilled into the most sincere smile. Maybe what needs to come down is her fear of holding Michael's blissfully warm hands, or playing with her hair. *Help me with myself, savior of the galaxy.*

"Let me get you inside."

Without Michael's fingers around her hands, her fingers sting, then burn as they go numb again. Her feet are worse, and Laira grabs the wall when she stumbles. Snow meets her fingers and it doesn't even hurt.

"Hey."

"I think I'm lightheaded."

"About a hundred meters." Michael glances around, planning their path. "May I?"

Michael's arm slips around her back and she doesn't have to find her footing, just follow Michael's lead. How rare it is to just follow, without worrying, without thinking.

The Rounem Gate passes over their heads and they can beam away, find the warmth Laira's forgotten how to feel, but there are aides here, security and deputy ambassadors. Half-collapsing into Michael's arms before they beam away will be a news item that reaches the far fringes. Weakness could be her undoing. Her feet are the Federation's and they dare not fail.

Against the tall stone wall, out of most of the prying eyes, Michael reaches up, touching her cheek. "I didn't think you could get more pale."

Her teeth clack together, and it's the strangest sensation. "Even my human side is cold."

"I can beam us to your suite."

Leaning against the frigid wall saps the last of her body heat, but it keeps her up. "*Discovery* returns in two days."

Michael tuts like her grandma worrying over a fever. "And you should stay in bed for both of them."

"I--"

"Madam President—"

The news service homes in on them like photon torpedos, looking for a useful quote. Michael leans in close, keeping her steady, she touches her chin, then Michael's lips press against her cheek so close that Laira tastes her skin.

It's not a kiss.

It sure as hell looked like one.

Michael has a plan, that was politics not—

They materialize in Michael's hotel room. The decorations around the fireplace have that curling, intricate Orion design. This was for Emerald Chain visitors. It has that cuphea wood scent. Though it's brighter and the wind isn't tearing at her face, it doesn't feel any warmer than being outside, and Michael drags her to towards the sofa.

"Sit." Michael touches her face again, molten fingertips against her cheek.

Sparkling lights float through her vision, threads of silver overriding everything else. Sitting is the first time she's felt steady. Michael returns without her jacket, arms full of blankets and a bright green box.

"Is it all right if--"

Nodding makes those silver lights dance, and even Michael's beautiful eyes can't hold her focus. "Sorry."

"I'm not sure what a baseline is for you, but your blood pressure's about 30 points too low for a human." When she doesn't reply, Michael touches her chin, lifting it. "Stay with me."

Does she know how tempting that is? Laira never gets to hold still, but this—

"When you get too cold, your body tries to pull your circulation back to your torso and protect your organs." Michael's tricorder collects information in gold and red (red is probably bad) and then Michael flicks the display away. Throwing a blanket over Laira's shoulders, Michael opens the medkit, digs through, reading things with her tricorder and frowning.

"When I was twelve, I thought I could hike up the mountain in the B'Lei on Vulcan, behind our house. It looks so close and I knew it was far, but I was mad and lonely. Never made friends in school, so I thought I'd climb to the top, look around, then I'd understand...everything."

"So ambitious."

"Oh I was." Michael chuckles, setting the medkit down.

That worried furrow between her eyebrows is back, and deeper this time. Her skin looks so soft and Laira can't help wondering what it would feel like to touch her.

"It's an Orion medkit: the painkillers are toxic, the antimicrobials would probably burn our skin, but the dermal regenerator would work great." Michael reaches for Laira's hands, carefully checking her knuckles, and her fingertips. "I don't think you got frostbite."

"Next time."

Michael's face is just as stern as her grandmother. Suppose that fits, she's almost a thousand years old.

"Next time you bring gloves." Michael wraps her hands around Laira's, resting them on her knees. She's sitting on the table in front of the sofa, worrying and smiling, because she can't avoid her optimism. "When I was hiking up B'Lei, I made it much further than you'd think, but the nights in Vulcan are cold, and it comes quick, and when I'd found the rescue station my fingers didn't even bend they were so cold."

Laira's still bend, but they have no feeling, like they're someone else's hands.

"You also have a viral infection, that the tricorder is sequencing." Michael pulls the blanket tighter around Laira's shoulders. "Hopefully it's something you've been inoculated against."

"We do have inoculations in this century."

"Probably more, and better ones." Michael checks the tricorder again, then leans in, touching their foreheads together. "I can bring you to the med center—"

"No."

"I can try and find an off book doctor."

"I'll be fine."

Michael looks at her tricorder readout again and sighs. "I didn't know metapneumoviruses had a group J."

Laira's very small smile only makes Michael roll her eyes. "Don't know, haven't had it."

"You have now."

"Oh."

"I don't even remember this being a virus that caused any problems in my century, adult seroprevalence of antibodies was almost one hundred percent in the 23rd century, but I don't remember knowing anyone who became sick with it."

"You went everywhere." She doesn't mean to sound wistful, but it can't be helped. Laira blinks and forces herself to focus on Michael's eyes. "Starfleet medical has reported that the incidence of minor diseases, ones we wouldn't think of vaccinating for, is up almost eighteen hundred percent since the resumption of mass warp travel. We've been marooned, and then you came."

"Well, Madam President, I think you have a simple upper respiratory infection, made worse by a mild case of hypothermia."

"Remind me never to experience a moderate one."

Michael's eyebrows fly up. "Absolutely not."

"Your bedside manner is excellent."

"Glad you think so, because we have to take off your clothes and get you warmed up."

"We?"

"You undoing those clasps on your coat with numb fingers?"

She can't even remember what she's wearing, it's like her brain's gone numb too.

Michael waits for the witty retort she doesn't have words for. "Thought so."

Holding out her wrist is about all she can do to help, and Michael's fingers open clasps, remove her bracelet, and then she switches to the other wrist, easing Laira's jacket loose with the gentlest hands. Her breath catches when Michael touches her neck. Michael's hands slip over the lapels of her jacket, then settle on the clasps in the center of her chest.

"I'm sorry, did I?"

"I haven't, no one's—"

Michael rests her hands on her chest, warm and firm. "No one touches you for months, then someone brushes against you and it's like your nerves are on fire."

"You're fire."

"I'll try not to burn you." The darkness fades from Michael's face as she smiles. She must have been so isolated in prison, six months of being Stafleet's only mutineer, alone with her thoughts. It's past now, healed, not without a scar, of course, but there's no hesitation in how she reaches out.

Growing up on cargo ships, things were tight, she was close to her crew, and Laira had to learn that the boisterous culture of hugs and enthusiasm she'd left in her grandparents homes was not the same one as the political area, which required space and a lack of contact. She learnt to lock her hands behind her back, to stay still and nonthreatening, not to move too close to anyone, lest it be a threat in these sensitive times.

"When we shook hands, on Ni'Var, your hands were so warm."

"I dreaded going on that mission."

"I thought so."

"It turned out well"

"You were perfect." Keep talking, don't think about Michael's hands easing her jacket off her shoulders, and the way the only fabric between her skin and Michael's hands is her camisole. Being surprised by Michael at least is a kind of warmth, one she'd almost forgotten she had.

Michael lays Laira's jacket on the sofa beside her and bends down to remove her boots.

"Are you like that with everything?"

Looking up, Michael tilts her head. "What?"

"Good at it, even if you hate it."

"I'm not good at everything." Michael removes her other boot and grins. "I'm a terrible dancer."

"I see. What a weakness."

"I'm awful at parties."

"I don't believe that."

"Because I avoid most of them." Michael reaches up, holding a tissue, and she brushes Laira's lipstick from her mouth with the same delicacy of Bajoran jeweler making sacred earrings. "Your lips are blue."

"I don't feel cold."

"You don't feel much right now, I bet."

"Well, now that you mention it."

"All right, well, sonic showers don't make a lot of heat, and hypothermia is serious, so, you're going to get into bed with me."

"It's been a while, but I think that's a very creative way to proposition someone."

"You know me, always looking for ways to make waves."

Michael offers both hands to get to her feet, she has to be warmer now, she should be fine, but her legs are shaky, her feet hurt and Michael reads her like an ancient scroll.

Tapping her badge once, Michael transports them the handful of meters to the bedroom. Sitting Laira in the bed, she strips off her own dress uniform top, baring muscled arms that glow soft brown in the firelight. Watching Michael take off her trousers is almost too intimate, Laira looks away, her cheeks almost warm enough to blush. Knowing her, they're probably bright red anyway, or blue, or—

Michael lifts her chin. "I need to take your hair down, but I think I can do that in bed. Is it all right if I...?"

"I trust you."

Taking a step closer, Michael embraces her for a moment, Laura's forehead against Michael's warm stomach. "Good, because I have to take off your pants."

"I can help."

"I got it."

Being released from Michael's embrace hurts like the windows are open to the snow outside, but Michael eases her trousers off Laura's hips, as gentle as she's efficient.

Michael circles the bed, and it creaks as she crawls over. Laura has to pick up her feet, lie back, and she knows the motions, but her limbs are stiff. Michael sits behind her, warm and steady and then they're under the blankets, wrapped together, Michael pressed against her like a rock in the sauna.

"You're so warm."

"You're an icicle."

"Mentions were made of me being emotionless in the past."

"You too?" Michael wraps her arms around her shoulders, her fingers tracing the markings on Laura's collarbone. That she feels acutely, like fire licking her skin, and she wants to hold Michael's hands to her chest until she's warm again.

"I was too emotional for a Vulcan," Michael continues, "too stoic for a human for a lot of years. Like to think I found a balance now, but sometimes I wonder. Is this who I am, really am, or is it another point I'll look back on."

Chuckling, Laura pulls Michael's hand into hers, squeezing it tight. "This is how you get to sleep?"

"I read, usually, but I need to take the pins out of your hair, and I can't hold my book."

"Hold?" That doesn't make sense. "How do you hold a book?"

"It's paper."

"You have a paper book?"

"In my bag."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

"Paper books are- well, they're- I've never seen one outside of a museum."

"Seriously?"

"We stopped making paper centuries ago, except for, traditionalists, hobbyists, I—" she stops, stumped. "I don't even know if I could get one if I tried."

Michael's very quiet behind her. "There must be planets where they still write their stories on paper."

"None that I've been too."

"My mom, Amanda, and I used to go to book exchanges. We'd shuttle all over the quadrant, meeting people and trading books. There would be stacks of them on tables, taller than I was, stories and poetry and textbooks full of drawings. The smell is incredible."

Michael shifts a little, possibly content for the moment that she's warm enough, and releases her hand to start pulling force pins from Laura's hair. She's careful and quick; her fingers brush Laura's scalp, tingling in the most pleasant way.

"Books have a smell?" She wants to turn, but Michael has both hands in her hair and her head doesn't ache as much if she doesn't move.

"They smell like libraries, leather, kind of dusty, but in a nice way." Michael pauses, her fingers tracing Laura's forehead. It's an idle motion, one of Michael's many little fidgets. "Suppose your libraries don't smell like that. Have you been to the Vulcan Temple of Vre'Shara? That has a book smell."

"I haven't been in with the scrolls. No one goes in there except for the most senior monks."

Michael sets the last pin aside and runs her fingers through Laura's hair, making sure she got them all. Her hair's damp from the snow, and Michael's fingers slide through easily. Curling up back behind her, Michael sighs contentedly. Her warm thighs press against Laura's own frigid skin. "Sometimes it feels like no time has passed, people are people, the Federation is here, there's Starfleet and we're still saving the galaxy, but Spock's drawings from when he was a child are precious relics and my ship's an antique and I—"

"Am a transplant in a new century."

"Yeah."

"You're thriving here."

"Am I?"

Rolling over would be too much effort, but kissing Michael's wrist is easy enough. "You're the brightest flower in the garden."

"Not too showy?"

"I might need to replant some things around you."

"Thought so."

For all she's lost and left behind, this century needed Michael. She has to know that.

Michael takes a breath, and the hand on Laira's shoulder runs delightfully over her skin. After a pause, she recites, as easily as the words were in front of her eyes, "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do : once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it. "and what is the purpose of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?""

"Is that your book?"

Michael nuzzles her back, almost sheepish. "I've read it so many times."

"I don't know if I have anything like that in my head."

"I also went through Vulcan educational conditioning."

There's another story there. So many behind Michael's little pieces of herself that she offers. Laira should ask: she wants to hear all of it, but the aches are fading into warmth, and she didn't realize how tired she was. "Keep going, please."

Michael settles in, her hands points of warmth where they rest on Laira's shoulders. "So, she was considering in her own mind, as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel sleepy and stupid—"

How nice it would be to be hot. Sleepy and stupid, Laira can manage. This is the best she's felt in bed for Prophet's only know how long. Michael can tell her stories tomorrow, and she's looking forward to it.



## A vulnerability doesn't imply weakness - Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Michael worries. Keyla and Joann are surprised, Hugh less so. Michael and Laira steal a date (and a kiss or two).

*Michael*

Rolling to her side wakes Michael while the night's still deep and dark around them. Laira fell asleep before she even finished reciting the first chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*. After things ended amicably with Book, her bed was hers alone again. Which she enjoyed, for a time, but she forgot how much she enjoys curling around someone, listening to their breathing. Most beings respire, some even sync their breathing when they spend time close to each other. It's one of the oldest intimacies to listen to another while you sleep, to know they're there and you're not alone in the darkness behind your eyes.

Perhaps that's why waking without Laira in bed brings Michael around so quickly. She sits up, listening, turning towards the bathroom. No lights are on, and the dark shapes on the floor are their clothes, forgotten in the rush to get Laira warmed up. Michael pulls the blankets off, ready to make sure--

"Don't worry, I didn't run off without my clothes." Laira returns to the bed and crawls in beside her.

Michael pulls up the blankets and remains up on her elbow. It's too dark to see much, even with the weak light of Andor's rings. "That would be cold."

"It would."

Laira's cool foot brushes her knee and both of them tense, just for a moment, then the contact's gone, and she misses it immediately.

"Are you all right?" It has to be asked, even if she's fussing.

Curling her arm beneath her head, Laira smirks at her. "My head hurts, some things are a little foggy."

"That's to be expected--"

"I have this vague memory of you kissing me--"

"I--"

"I'm sure that's just a dream."

Dropping to her back, Michael sighs, her face burning. "I wanted the news service to have something to write about that wasn't you appearing weak. I remember how much they wrote about Sarek and Amanda, my adoptive parents, often to the exclusion of what Sarek wanted to achieve diplomatically. I thought that us kissing, even appearing to kiss, might be distracting for them."

"Heroic Captain Michael Burnham romantically involved with the president does seem to be an attention getting idea."

Rolling her eyes, Michael scoffs. "They'll have to ask Starfleet and the Federation council for comment, neither of whom will comment, which means it's an unsubstantiated rumor, but it's too interesting of one for them to spend time on anything else."

"For someone who hates politics—"

Sitting up, Michael leans against the headboard, hands around her knees. "You're doing good here, and it's hard. The Federation has to be about hope, the promise of something better, and the galaxy's watching. If speculating about the two of us keeps them from writing negatively about what you're trying to do, I'm fine with that."

Chuckling a little, Laira touches her thigh. It's almost accidental, the way her fingers caress Michael's skin, but Michael's acutely aware of her cool fingertips. "It's nice to be surprised."

"Even by me?"

"Especially by you." Laira rolls to her back, smiling upward, eyes closed. "It'll be a pleasure to side-step talking about you for the next few weeks." Her hand lies there, over the blanket.

Michael trails her fingers down to Laira's wrist, then squeezes her fingers. "I know how hard it is to be vulnerable and feel like they're closing in on you."

"If they decide to write about me being ill—"

"They won't." Michael lowers her head to her knees, takes a breath, and then looks up. "And, I liked it." She doesn't look at Laira, just into the darkness, and that makes her confession float like a dream.

"A real kiss might be better."

"That's a logical conjecture." It's cold out of the blanket, so she slips back beneath it, lying beside Laira, looking up, not at her. Their elbows touch, and their legs are so close they might as well be. Her breath catches, and her chest's tight.

"Someday, we'll have to attempt to prove it."

Michael shifts her arm, sliding it over Laira's head as an invitation, then Laira's heads on her chest and her arms wrap close. The smell of her is new, and the way Laira fidgets with her tank top makes Michael smile.

"I can hear you worrying."

"I wasn't-" That's untrue. Michael strokes her forehead. "I doubt you should feel warm to me."

"Oh, I'm only part lizard."

Michael starts to protest.

Laira pats her quiet. "My grandfather would laugh and call my grandmother lizard woman across the garden. 'Don't eat my radishes, they won't be ready for another week, my lizard love.'" Laira's voice takes on that scratchy, low quality like a child intimating the adults around them. Michael could ask when she saw them last, or if they came to her inauguration, but there's a wistfulness in the way Laira speaks about them, and loss touches everyone.

Laira's breathing slows, and Michael runs her fingers through her hair, slowly, then slower, then she too falls asleep.

---

Setting three mugs of teas on the coffee table, Michael points to each in turn. "Soothing, very mild. Sweet and acidic for congestion, this one was Philippa's favorite: spicy and sweet."

"You're not going to tell me what they are?" Laira smirks on the couch, covered with the heavy blanket from the bed.

"Combinations from different planets and cultures, the replicator here has an excellent database and the tricorder promises you can drink all of them. Sense of taste is more personal."

Michael calls up her tricorder again, checking her scans. The inflammation in Laira's throat and upper respiratory tract is worse than yesterday, but her blood pressure looks much better. Laira's body temperature is lower than Michael's, but the flush of her cheeks and the way her eyes are too bright suggests fever.

Picking up the mug on the right, Laira smiles. "You're worrying."

"May I?" Michael lifts her hand, gesturing towards her forehead.

Leaning forward to make it easier, Laira sips her tea, waiting for Michael to touch her.

Michael rests her palm against Laira's forehead. The ridges are firmer, but softer than she thought, and the skin between seems to be more sensitive. Laira won't feel warm, her body temperature is only thirty-six degrees, but the tricorder can only report what it's found, not explain how far that is from the baseline. "Does your head hurt?"

"Some—"

"Yes," Michael corrects, "you mean yes."

"It's not bad."

"What would you call bad?"

Smiling over her tea, Laira wrinkles her nose. "Throbbing?"

She has no idea how adorable her nose is (or perhaps she does?) and Michael can't say anything, but she can't stop grinning. "And this is just —"

"Achy."

"I see, so that's fine then."

Sipping her tea, Laira leans on the sofa back in her replicated pajamas. "I'm all right."

"Your head hurts."

"What did your tricorder say?"

Michael opens the readings again, moving to sit beside Laira and show her. "I don't know what baseline is for you, I don't know what I'm comparing it to."

"That doesn't look bad."

"For a human, sure, a little cool for a Bajoran, but I don't know what it means for you."

Laira touches her, fingers gentle on Michael's wrist. "That bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, kind of does." Michael waves the tricorder display away. "You'll tell me if it gets worse?"

"Will you believe that I will?"

Rolling her eyes, Michael sighs. "Guess I have to."

"Where's my jacket?"

"Closet." Michael gets up to retrieve it and Laira holds her hand, making her stop. Everything stops, and it's ridiculous because they're just—

"You need my badge, it has a copy of my bioprint for emergencies."

"You tell me now?"

Shutting her eyes, Laira sets down her tea and presses her fingers into her forehead. "Nothing was making sense yesterday."

"You were hypothermic."

"You kissed me."

"Oh that's what it wasn't making sense? I kissed you? Not the complete lack of feeling in your hands and feet?" Michael plucks the badge off of Laira's jacket and returns to the sofa. She holds the badge up in front of them.

"Release security lock for Michael Burnham."

"That's it?"

"Try it."

Tapping the badge, Michael sighs in relief when Laira's medical data appears in front of her. "Thirty-three? Your average body temperature is only thirty-three?"

"Thirty-two-point-six."

"Like that's better."

"I told you I'm fine."

"Your definition of fine leaves a lot up to interpretation."

"There's nothing you can do, Michael. It's a low grade fever. It'll pass. You said the metapneuma—"

"Metapneumovirus group J-"

"Yes, that's not serious. You can't even get it."

"I can't get it because I've been vaccinated for the primordial version."

"You're not that old."

Somehow in the teasing Michael ended up next to her, so close that their bodies are touching and even though they spent the night tangled together, touching now on the sofa makes her heart beat loud.

"I didn't realize you had so many less vaccines now."

"We lost so much when the Burn happened. I grew up on Bajor and Cardassia, and I've been to some of the colonies in between, but until you came—"

"Just that corner of the universe."

"The Federation Council met over subspace link until we started mining the Verubin nebula."

"I knew that."

"You did, but it didn't make sense to you."

"I grew up in space. My parents were always going to one conference or another. The Federation was smaller then—"

"But it was bigger," Laira finishes for her. "You went places. Your brother was a hybrid."

"Not a lot in this century?"

"Romulans and Vulcans, Cardassians and Bajorans, species who were trapped close to each other, sure, but Earth and Vulcan might as well have been in other universe." Laira tilts her head, studying Michael's smile. "Yes, you've done that too, show off."

"The Terran Empire was not a nice place to visit." Michael picks up one of the mugs of tea Laira didn't chose. Licorice was Amanda's favorite to give her when she was ill as a child. Holding the tea, she looks out the window at the frozen landscape outside. "I've been here, before. Once with my parents, so my mom could give a paper. My dad and I went skiing, I came here a few more times with the *Shenzhou*. Philippa had training here and she knew where all the good cafes were."

"In this city?"

"Here and by the coast. She loved how different the beach was from home."

"Home was Earth for her?"

"Langkawi, which was, and probably still is, one of the most beautiful places in the universe."

"And that was Philippa's home?"

"The trees and the ocean, the way the sand goes on forever against the water—" Michael shuts her eyes, she can still see Philippa standing in the surf. "Someday, I'll have to show you."

"But what will you save me from when it's warm, Captain?"

Chuckling, Michael reaches out and touches Laira's very pale nose. "With your complexion? Sunburn."

Their faces are so close that they could kiss, and this time it would have nothing to do with reporters or distraction, it would be kissing for the softness of it. Nothing about heroic Captain Burnham or steadfast President Rillak, just them, and Laira's eyes are on hers, blue and brown. They've been touching - almost - touching since last night but kissing would be different, kissing would mean—

The door opens, startling them apart. Keyla and Joann have their badges keyed in, they're just across the hall from each other. Michael's boring, she should be stretching and drinking tea, not fantasizing about what Laira's lips will feel like on hers.

She won't know, because she can't kiss her in front of them. Michael jumps, Laira apparently less so because her mouth lands on Michael's cheek, warm and soft and it's all she has not to turn into the kiss and finish it.

They have guests.

Joann and Keyla sweep in, still in their winter coats, holding a bag of something. "We found samusi rolls!" Keyla announces, dropping the bag on the table as she starts removing her coat. "I remembered Captain Georgiou talking about how much she liked them. When we were here, she took us out and got them and we knew that would mean a lot to you—" Keyla keeps talking, but the words aren't processing for Michael.

Joann stares, and then she starts to smile and there's no subtlety. The President of the Federation is sitting on Michael's couch, hair a mess, bright green replicated pajamas that match Michael's. Michael might as well start a briefing by announcing they're dating.

"Good morning," Joann says politely, because she has that kind of grace, even when she thinks Michael just spent the night with President of the Federation. There's no judgement in the way she nods, just a soft sort of joy. "I'll grab coffee from the replicator, don't get up."

Laira tilts her head towards Michael and instead of surprise or mortification, Laira's smile's brighter than it's been all morning.

Keyla turns from the closet, removing her cold weather hat, the old one that says "DISCO" in white letters because some things were worth keeping in a new century. "Why do you have the President's coat?"

"What?" That's not the question Michael expected, and beside her Laira half-chokes on her tea.

"Your coat is here, and that blue one is the President's, it has that fancy decoration, seal of office sort of—" Keyla flops on the sofa next to Michael, removing her boots before she realizing the blanket covers two pairs of legs and Joann's over at the replicator. "You have the president's coat because she's here."

With Michael's head between her and the president, Keyla can flick her eyes over, silently demanding a host of answers.

There's not a good way to explain, and she doesn't have to say anything, this is innocent, there's nothing wrong they didn't— But Joann and Keyla aren't here to berate her. They're *happy*. Joann's smile glows as she sets down coffee with fresh mugs then pulls the soft chair over to sit across from the three of them.

"Laira got sick yesterday."

"*Laira*." Keyla mouths silently to Joann. She had to know the president has a first name.

Laira's hand rests on Michael's knee, warm and gentle. It's a little nonsense thing, but Michael loves it. Joann presses her lips together and has to look down because her smile's getting nova-bright.

"Michael graciously rescued me from a very cold meeting, unfortunately not until after I had caught something."

"The weather here is very unpredictable," Joann says, opening the bag and setting out the rolls. They smell warm, thanks to the insulated bag, and the spice and nuts are almost the same as nine hundred years ago with Philippa. "I grew up in a very warm part of Earth, so I always need a coat."

"Would you believe that she wore a coat on Betazed."

"It was raining."

"Betazed is all tropical, it's a planet of tropical, Joann."

"It was cold." Joann shakes her head and pours Keyla coffee.

Keyla tears a piece of a roll and takes a bite, very carefully not looking to her left because the President of the Federation is on Michael's couch. "Anywhere that's not temperature controlled like a starship is chaos. I don't know why people would want to live anywhere where the weather can attack you."

"The weather's not attacking anyone."

Keyla points at Joann and tilts her head at the snow blowing past Michael's window. "It is here."

"I didn't know you grew up on starships, Commander," Laura's question is soft, polite, but Keyla startles like a sehlat.

"Oh we're off duty," Joann insists, like they're talking to someone who wouldn't know any better. "You can call us by our first names, ma'am."

"I'm not calling her Laura," Keyla mutters under her breath but she nods. The president can call her whatever she wants.

"You don't need the ma'am then."

Joann nods, and puts out her hand for Laura's mug. "I can get your more tea, I know I try not to drink coffee if I've been ill."

Rubbing Michael's knee idly, Laura smiles. "Michael will have to tell you what it is."

Michael can barely form an coherent thought because Laura's playing with her knee like she's- like they're— "Blend 148 with extra ginger, thank you."

"Of course."

Keyla takes a sip of her coffee, and that makes her brave enough. "Did you catch a hard seal cold?"

"What?" The way Laura tilts her head makes Michael grin into her coffee.

"A hard seal cold, your ship's air exchangers sync with the port after hard seal and all of a sudden everyone on the ship has a damn cold because the port's full of viruses you've never had before."

Joann raises her eyebrows and shrugs. Michael's also never heard that but Laura turns, trying to see Keyla around Michael.

"The oldest members of my father's crew said things like that."

"Keyla's a spacer," Joann explains, "a real freighter kid."

Michael lifts her roll to take a bite and smirks. "Laura is too."

"It's completely different."

"You were?"

"My father had a cargo fleet, mostly food, between Bajor and Cardassia. I used to fly ships for him, sublight, mostly, sometimes solar sails, dilithium was nearly impossible to get, we had to save it for emergencies."

Keyla turns as well, talking over Michael while she tries not to make a mess with her sticky bun. "You said that, on the bridge, but I—"

"Thought it was bravado?"

"Spore travel can really weird and most people hate it. Why would you admit to being a freighter kid? You're—"

Laura waves her hand, stopping that before it goes any further. She sighs, leaning on Michael's shoulder. "Tell me about the ship where you grew up, Keyla."

"Why?"

"I'm curious."

"You love talking about it." Joann reminds her.

"Yeah but—"

Michael nods, nudging Keyla with her elbow. "Tell her about the shuttle you stole."

"Isn't that like, treason or something?"

"She's not Starfleet, Keyla."

"But don't we like—" Keyla trails off and Joann pours her more coffee as they argue about if stealing a shuttle is a crime against the Federation, or Starfleet, or both, and how much trouble pre-teen Keyla would get in now.

Laira curls in closer when Michael raises her arm. She hasn't reached for anything to eat, and it's only a few minutes later that Michael rescues her half-full tea from her sleeping hands.

Keyla pauses, but Joann shakes her head and waves for her to keep telling her story. Joann asks with her eyes how sick Laira's been, if she needs anything. Michael taps her own forehead to explain the headaches and mimes checking Laira's temperature.

"Our medkit's Orion."

"Ours is too," Keyla whispers, grabbing another roll. "We thought about bringing one from the ship but Joann didn't want to ski so I didn't think we'd need it."

"It's negative fifty up there, Keyla."

"It's colder in space, you live in space."

"With life support."

"Joann hates skiing."

"I hate how cold it is skiing, if you want to waterski, I'll go round you in circles."

Joann and Keyla smirk at each other and bets are made for the next warm planet.

"I wanted to go to museums anyway, and Stamets said the opera was incredible."

Opera. Michael knows something about the opera, what was it?

"Are we going because we like it or to make Stamets jealous?"

Michael remembers and nearly accidentally tips Laira off her shoulder, but she remembers to hold perfectly still. "Laira has opera tickets."

"What?"

"She's supposed to go."

"Fancy diplomat perks."

"She can't."

"No," Joann agrees. "It's colder than yesterday, and it's long, she should rest."

"You two should go."

Michael points at Laira's badge where it sits on the coffee table next to her own. "Hand that to me."

Keyla raises an eyebrow. "Badge privileges on a first date."

"It's hardly a date."

"Uh-huh."

Michael taps Laira's badge again, searching for her public calendar. She mentioned the opera tonight, but opening up today's calendar has a long list of events she's been invited to, from touring a shipyard to wine tasting before the opera.

"Do I see wine?"

"How can she have eleven events on one day?" Joann says, reading aghast from the other side. "They think she should go to all of these?"

"They're suggestions, I don't think—" Michael starts, but trails off. Laira probably would attend most of them, or feel like she ought to. Andoria is a founding member of the Federation. "Which ones to do you want?"

"What?"

"You're representatives of the Federation, what to taste ice wine in a frozen villa?"

"We do," Keyla says, nodding firmly. "We definitely do."

They spend the rest of breakfast deciding which of Laira's cultural events Joann and Keyla want to take her place at.

"Are you really sure it's all right?"

"The Federation hasn't attended anything on Andoria in hundreds of years, the two of you are great representatives. You're from *Discovery*."

Joann winks at Keyla. "We solved the Burn, and made peace with the DMA, we're heroes."

"Right, they should be honored we're there to drink their wine."

When they've taken enough things off of Laira's calendar, Keyla and Joann grab their coats and quietly start sneaking away, after promising to

see if they can find any human-ish friendly painkillers or a medkit.

"Don't make it obvious we're looking, right?"

"It's bad optics if the president of the Federation comes to Andoria and all that she gets from negotiations is a cold."

"You care about optics now?" Keyla wonders, all wide-eyed and innocent.

"This means a lot to her."

"Your girlfriend."

"We're not- we didn't—"

"She's in hotel replicator pajamas in your room and you didn't." Keyla folds her arms. "Right."

"They're taking their time," Joann says, smiling warmly.

That is not a clarification that they're not dating, which they are not, or support that they're not going to have sex, which her crew has already decided is going to occur. Arguing that either of these things are not happening, and will not happen, will take longer than they have, so Michael glares. "Go to your wine tasting already."

"Comm us if you need anything. We can always pretend Keyla broke her leg skiing if we need *Discovery* back faster."

"It's just a hard seal cold, right?" Maybe that's too optimistic. Laira's warm against her now and shouldn't she be cooler? If she doesn't have an appetite, is she more ill than Michael thought?

Both of them smile sympathetically, letting Michael convince herself. "She said she's fine, it's not bad. Thank you for the samusi rolls."

"They haven't changed, have they?" Keyla tucks her hands into her coat. "You know, Captain Georgiou would be proud."

"Of what, the rolls?"

Joann's very wicked smile should have given it away. "You dating the president."

"Shut up."

"I'll take Keyla away now, I hope Laira feels better." Joann tugs Keyla into the hall and then Michael's alone in her room again, empty coffee cups sitting on the table in front of her.

Laira's badge flashes once, then again, and the gentle golden glow it sends up must be unread messages. Michael picks it up just to look at the schedule and see what else Laira's going to miss tomorrow.

*One hundred thirty-seven unread communiques.*

She must have aides looking at them, but Michael whistles as she breathes out.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Laira murmurs, eyes still closed. "Hit two hundred yet?"

"Not yet."

"Give it until dinner." Laira groans, pulling her head off of Michael's shoulder reluctantly. "I like them."

"Your communiques or Keyla and Joann?"

"Your family, not my communiques." Resting her head in her hands, Laira doesn't look up, or move as Michael stretches and settles.

"How's your head?"

Humming is a non-answer.

Michael turns, pulling her feet up so she sits cross-legged on the couch. "Come here, put your head in my lap."

"What?"

"I studied Vulcan neuro-pressure, it might not be a neuroblocker, but I bet I can help."

Laira clumsily rolls her head into Michael's lap, smiling up at her with a wince before closing her eyes. "T'Rina's done that before."

"When you were sick?"

"Just a normal headache."

"This one's not normal?"

"This one's like my initial dampener's half-dead and my skull won't stop shaking."

"But you don't sneeze?"

"Hmm?"

"If my sinuses were as inflamed as yours, my nose would be running and I'd sneeze."

"Maybe if I was pregnant."

"What?"

"Bajorans have horrible sneezing attacks when they're pregnant. My mother wasn't even Bajoran and I gave them to her."

"You did?"

"It was awful, and funny, apparently." Laira opens her eyes, reaching up to touch Michael's arm. "Thank you."

"For what? Skipping the negative fifty degree skiing?"

"It's your shore leave."

"And as much fun as it is to be the third shuttle in Joann and Keyla's formation—"

"Oh they're adorable."

"In small doses."

"They sounded like home." Laira doesn't elaborate, and Michael runs her thumbs over the center of her forehead, tracing the spaces between the cartilage on her forehead and calming the angry nerves running up from Laira's inflamed sinuses. Michael follows the patterns she remembers, careful not to press directly on anything that seems more firm. Laira was right, the spaces between are much more sensitive, and her breathing slows.

Gasping when Michael hits a sensitive spot, Laira opens her eyes, tears shining in the corners.

"Sorry—"

"No, no." Laira blinks a few times. "I didn't realize how bad it was."

"Of course you didn't."

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

Humming again, Laira touches her cheek, trailing cool fingers along Michael's jaw. "I didn't think hot shot starfleet captains were such worriers."

Michael smirks. "Oh, I'm trying to be reasonable."

That earns a little laugh, and Laira strokes Michael's chin, exploring the lines of her jaw. "This is reasonable worry?"

"You have a fever."

"It's mild."

"Uh-huh." Michael leans down, kissing her forehead. "So far."

"Wouldn't I be worse, if it was worse?"

"Would you tell me?"

Laira traces Michael's bottom lip, then smiles up. "Well, if news service says we're together, I should probably tell you everything."

"For transparency and all."

Dropping her hand back to her chest, Laira meets Michael's eyes. "Is that all right?"

"What?"

"Transparency, you asked, I—"

"Me teasing you means it's fine. You've been very honest."

"Oh that's good."

"Don't worry."

"Only you get to?"

"When I have a fever and a headache you can worry all you want," Michael promises.



"I'm holding you to that."

---

More than a day later, Michael's turning the pages of her book towards the end chapter fourteen when Laira wakes up in sickbay. She was half-awake when *Discovery* arrived. Cognizant enough to consent to be brought to sickbay, and she must have been comfortable here, because she fell back asleep after Hugh started treating her. Not having to sleep through that pounding headache must have been such a relief.

Laira blinks sleepily, lying on her side on the biobed. Her red-gold hair tumbles over her shoulder and some of it falls over her face.

Reaching up to stroke her hair back, Michael smiles down. "Hey."

"Duty hasn't called, Captain?"

Now that Hugh's reduced her fever and softened her headache, Laira looks better: skin less flushed, eyes clearer, and the hard knot in Michael's chest is less acute.

"One of the great things about being the captain is that my shore leave ends when I say it does."

Laira's sleepy smile grows and she turns her head, then sighs, content. "My head doesn't hurt."

"Doctor Culber's great with headaches."

"And fevers," Hugh says, walking up behind her, hypo in hand. "Welcome back to *Discovery*, Madam President. I don't think you have seen our excellent sickbay yet."

"I had heard about it." Laira blinks at him, as if forcing herself to focus. "And call me Laira, please."

"Of course. Well, as Michael suspected, you have a metapneumovirus group J infection. Group J is endemic in former Emerald Chain territory and hasn't been recorded on Bajor since before the Burn, since this is your first foray into this part of space, it's not a surprise that you caught it."

"But Michael—"

"Has a robust immune response to much earlier version of the virus from our original century. She's fine. You, on the other hand, had no exposure to this type of virus, and a mild case of hypothermia didn't help." Hugh leans in, holding up the hypo so Laira can see. "I can support your immune system to fight it off, but I can't cure it outright. I've softened your symptoms and you should feel much better in a day or two."

"Thank you, doctor." Laira rolls onto her back, then experimentally sits up a little, resting in her elbows. Her smile broadens when she's not met with pain. "It's nice to not have that throbbing."

Michael frowns. "Wait, you said throbbing was bad—"

Hugh injects Laira's neck and holds up a hand in warning. "Before you get too wild, your body is still clearing the virus, even if your symptoms are better. You need to take it easy for a day or two."

"Don't jump right back into my unread communiques and work through dinner?"

"Please."

Michael tilts her head in her best 'I told you so' expression. Laira reaches out for her, fingers meeting, and she helps Laira to sit up. Her hair's a mess again and Michael can't help fixing it, even if it won't stay.

"Captain, Paul also wanted me to relay that we're doing some routine maintenance on the spore injectors, so we'll need to return to Starfleet HQ at warp instead of jumping. It'll be about twenty-one hours. He said we could spin it up in an emergency, but he'd need about half an hour."

"Noted."

Laira's little smile seems to match with the fact that it will conveniently take just as much time to get her home as Hugh wanted her to take to recover. "I assume you beamed up my clothes?"

"They're in guest quarters."

Staring at her feet, Laira rests her hands on the biobed. "I haven't been hungry in days."

"I know."

"Now I am."

"That's good."

"Where do you eat on your ship?"

"The mess, or the lounge on a good day."

"Let's say today's a good day."

"It has been." Michael holds up a hand Laura doesn't need to slide off the bed, but it feels right, as do Laura's fingers in hers.

"Oh?"

"Got to read my book," Michael teases, holding up the leather-bound paper.

"Another one?" Laura takes it and studies it like she's been handed the key to an ancient city.

"We finished *Alice*."

"So you needed another one." She sniffs the pages, beaming at Michael. "It does smell nice."

"Told you."

Inhaling again, Laura hands the book back, then smooths her pajamas. "I have to change, but I'd like you to eat with me."

It's such a small request but it's as precious as the book. "Of course."

"Half an hour?"

"Fifteen minutes," Laura insists. "I don't have to look presidential for anyone today."

"Fifteen it is. I'll meet you at your quarters."

"All right." Laura's eyes remain on her for a moment, and that smile sparkles before she beams away.

Hugh whistles to himself innocently, eyes cast down at his work.

"Paul just had to do the injectors today?"

"He likes to keep to a schedule."

"Every twenty-nine days?"

"He likes primes."

Michael rolls her eyes because she's never getting a straight answer out of either of them, but she only has fifteen minutes and the sonic shower's calling to her.

She's precisely on time, living on Vulcan taught her that. Laura emerges from guest quarters only a few seconds behind fifteen minutes, which is impressive. Michael's seen her being presidential, clothes and makeup both perfectly crafted to fit an image, and sick for the last two days where Michael's not sure Laura knew or cared what she looked like.

This is something in between. Laura's hair's down, curly and a little wild, and she wears a lilac knit sweater that looks like it belonged to someone else first. The cuffs are rolled, long, and more than a little worn.

Laura fidgets with a stray thread, and then tucks it away in her cuff. "I hope this is all right. It's my favorite sweater, I always pack it, I can't tell you the last time I've let anyone see me wearing it."

"I'm honored." Michael pulled on the first thing in her closet, an old black shirt from her courier days and pants she usually wears to the gym. Extending her hand, she offers it to Laura. "Dinner?"

"Please."

Civilian clothes usually mean no ranks, no ceremony. The crew has to have moments outside of rank and protocol, and that applies to the president. Out of her suits, with her hair down, she could just be a visitor, a trader or an off-duty Starfleet officer. Just a traveler, like all of them.

Dinner's full of laughter, falling pieces of stray hair, braids that misbehave when Michael laughs too much. Michael has wine, and Laura steals a sip, then two, and they finish desert sitting next to each other in the mess hall, taking turn with spoons, legs pressed against each other.

The off the book tour of *Discovery* starts with the lounge where the crew plays darts and chess, and laughs around a new card game they picked up from the crew of the *USS Nog*.

"I haven't played, but I'm told it's a Ferengi game called Tongo."

"It's an excellent game, mixes profit with bluffing, much more fun than poker." Laura's smile is very bright and impish; Michael is officially never playing Tongo with her. "Admiral Tanek lets me join his games at HQ. It's a blast."

They wander lazily through *Discovery*'s many science labs. Laura understands much more about propulsion and engineering than biology, astrophysics or chemistry, yet she's interested when Michael's crew reports their progress.

It's almost an hour after dinner, not late, but starting to get there, and Laura's hand's firmly in Michael's when they reach engineering.

"Last thing, I promise. Stamets said you can see the spore bay."

"I've read about it."

"It's beautiful."

"So, you need this so you don't pick up any hitchhikers," Reno says, reaching up and inoculating Laira against the spores with a hypospray to the neck. "We like the JahSepp to stay where they are."

There's no *ma'am*, or even the vaguest hint of deference in Reno's voice and Laira's smile betrays how much she loves it. It must be a weight, carrying the presidency all the time. Especially when she came from a fairly low ranking position as a sector representative before winning an election for president that it seems no one sensible wanted to win.

The spore bay doors open, allowing them in to *Discovery's* quiet garden. "These are *astoriae prototaxies*, the mushrooms that let us fly through space."

Bright blue spores drift through the air around them, like wandering fireflies.

Laira releases her hand to look at them, beaming. "Why do they float?"

Michael matches her smile. "They reproduce through dispersion. They can float the thousands of light years through space and colonize otherwise empty moons. Our crop here is contained, but we've seeded several moons, they're all incredibly beautiful, and vital to space travel."

"My great-grandparents talked about being on a ship with warp drive. How you'd hear the hum of the core like a heartbeat. I know *Discovery* has one, but this is her heart, isn't it?"

"Stamets certainly thinks so." Michael leans back on the rail, hands folded together, watching Laira's wonder. "As I understand it, the mycelial network connects us to our universe and a myriad others, bridging it all with threads we'll never see."

Laira turns, taking it all in and walks to Michael standing beside her at the rail. Her hand drifts to Michael's, taking her fingers, warm and familiar. "It's amazing anyone can connect at all, space is so vast and busy; we're all just passing through on our way somewhere."

"Paths cross, sometimes they even become shared."

"Thank you for sharing this with me."

Blue lights twinkle between them, and the whole galaxy stretches out beyond them. They'll have to go back, sit in meetings and sit on the bridge, live their lives, perform their duties...but this moment is theirs.

Michael turns, standing on her tiptoes, reaching up to touch Laira's chin. Their eyes meet, and Laira looks down at her mouth before smiling. The tiniest of nods is consent, the way she parts her lips is wanting. Michael almost expects the tension between them to spark like an overloaded conduit, but kissing her is warm and full of promise. Hope tastes like Laira's mouth.

Laira leans against her, their foreheads touching.

"I like sharing things with you," Michael whispers. "Even more when your head doesn't hurt."

"It's a bonus, isn't it?" Laira traces her cheek, lifts her chin and kisses her again, soft and gentle. "If this is—"

"An entanglement, shall we say."

"I like that." Laira sighs, sinking to the step. "I'm a horrible person to date."

Michael sits beside her, their hands finding each other. "I think your schedule is the horrible part."

"Yours isn't much better, is it?"

"Oh no. We're literally over the galaxy."

"Thank the Prophets for the mushrooms then, otherwise we'd never see each other."

"And what's what we want, to keep seeing each other?"

"I'd like that, very much." Laira leans in, her chin on Michael's shoulder.

"Me too."

"Then we'll make it work."

"All is possible, Tilly says."

"We might be putting that to the test."

"I hear I'm a wrecking ball."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

Michael crinkles her nose and beams. "No, you are not."

"Well, make us a space in the universe and I'll find a night for a dinner date."

"Deal." Michael runs her fingers over the scales exposed by Laira's sweater and stops just at her neck while Laira starts to squirm. "I'll look forward to it."

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