

free from destiny

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by [ussjellyfish](#)

Summary

Michael delivers a message in the middle of the night and the president has a really fantastic nightgown. They talk.

Notes

This was half a silly idea, then the dialogue was good. I'm going to use it for the Year of the OTP prompt for November, "growth".

Arriving at someone's quarters in the middle of the night opens a myriad of possibilities for awkwardness. They could be asleep, have unexpected company, or be deep in a very personal holocall. Admiral Cornwell was mourning her friends when Michael interrupted her to talk about how to end the war. The middle of the night is a private time, and Michael's intruding on the president's this time.

Michael's dealt with her share of awkward situations, and she's better at it now than she ever was as Philippa's first officer, lifetimes ago.

It's always the scenario she doesn't plan for that gets her into trouble. (Tilly is going to make fun of her so much for this when she tells her).

The task is simple, and if it were mid-afternoon, fourteen hundred instead of just past oh-two hundred, it would be different, but here she is, in front of the president's quarters, struggling to find the most basic of words.

She was in such a hurry that she didn't even zip her jacket. Admiral Vance said it was urgent news and she was almost in bed. The president won't mind the breach in protocol, hopefully. They're past that.

President Rillak stands in her doorway, one hand on the bulkhead. Her hair falling down onto her shoulders. Logically, her hair should be down, because it's so late. She can't sleep with her hair in that elaborate updo.

Yet there's no explanation as to how pretty her hair is in the weak light of the corridor. How it falls red gold over her shoulders in messy curls, because it was up, tight, and now it's down.

Michael's eyes could have remained in Laira's gorgeous hair, and she would have been done in by that alone. Thinking about the way Laira's hair would feel is definitely enough to make the words she needs to say tangle in her mouth.

But Laira's hair falling onto the pale blue silk on her shoulders and the her shoulders frame her exquisite collarbones and—

(She can hear Philippa chuckling at her in the back of her head, both of them, really because Michael is a Starfleet captain and she's seen so many wonders of the universe - the president's breasts in her masterpiece of a nightgown shouldn't be the sight that halts her ability to speak).

And yet.

It only gets worse when Laira smiles. That's her real smile: the one for behind closed doors and victory celebrations.

"Hello captain."

Michael is supposed to speak. She has words she needs to say. She opens and closes her mouth, then she manages. "My apologies, ma'am, I didn't mean to—"

"Must be important if you came down here in person." Laira's smile only grows as she glances down at her chest then back up at Michael. She has to know how beautiful she is. They're standing in the corridor at oh-two-oh-eight, and Michael needs to tell her—

"It is, ma'am, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, captain, truly. I wasn't asleep."

She carries too much on her shoulders to be asleep. Her skin has a tiny freckles that form constellations and Michael is not going to map them with her eyes. She's not going to dream about tracing a line between them or—

"Admiral Vance wanted me to tell you that 'the visitor agreed'. He said you'd know what that meant, ma'am."

Relief takes the tension out of Laira's neck and she drops her head for a moment. Her hair's only more stunning when it moves, then she relaxes, letting go of something heavy and harsh. This is the end of this awkward moment, Michael's leaving, Laira's going to sleep. They're not continuing this conversation in her quarters, starting a new one, or going anywhere together while she looks like that because Michael has not practiced her mental disciplines often enough lately, and she uh—

"Are you needed on the bridge?"

"No, ma'am."

There's paperwork, there's always paperwork, but Michael was waiting up for this message in particular, because whatever the message was is important in a way Michael doesn't know. Doesn't need to know. She has a duty. She's following that, not taking a step towards the president and her quarters and the way Rillak tilts her head to invite her in.

"Well, if you have a moment, captain, we could celebrate. I know it's late—"

The tension between them hums like a tractor beam. Michael can politely decline, walk away. It'll be fine. She has a polite avenue of escape, and she ignores it. "Wouldn't want you to celebrate alone, ma'am."

"It's been awhile since I had company." That soft loneliness only makes her bright blue eyes more tantalizing. Longing raises the frequency of whatever this is between them.

It's nothing, really. They're not— It's a stupid crush that won't go anywhere and shouldn't. Michael takes a step, and now she's almost past the threshold, which means nothing - and everything. "They do try to choose us for our bravery in perilous situations, ma'am."

Laira waves her in, walking away from the door so that Michael has a aching view of her back, half bare in blue silk. Pouring two glasses from an antique bottle that might just be as old as Michael, Laira hands her one and their fingers nearly touch. They're close enough that atoms of their hands are interacting on a quantum level, which must be why her hands tingle. The liquid in the glass is pale blue, like Laira's nightgown.

"Uncharted territories are your forte, unless there's something perilous about my quarters I don't know about."

Everything, ma'am.

"I've successfully crossed universes more times than we've talked like this."

Nodding, Laira sits, arranging the silk over her legs. She studies Michael, her hand lazily on her glass. She takes a sip and pauses, letting whatever they're drinking sting her throat. "You'll probably cross through a few more universes in your career, you've got plenty of time. No time travel though, that's illegal."

"Right, right, I'd never—"

"Forming relationships - of any kind - in my position is complex."

"All relationships are difficult, ma'am."

"As usual, you are correct, Captain Burnham."

Michael stares at her drink. In her youth, she never saw the point of drinking. Losing control was unacceptable. In her year as a courier, she tried many things, didn't like most of them, but now she's come to a comfortable place with most liquors, even if Tilly is constantly updating Michael's palate with new things.

This one is new to her. The smell is unfamiliar, but pleasant, vaguely herbal. Is it from Ni'Var? Something T'Rina gave her? The taste is intense, almost briny, and Michael coughs.

"Sorry, this one's a little unusual. T'Rina introduced this to me when we met, decades ago now. I'd been saving this bottle for the right moment."

"Admiral Vance's news?"

"Is good." Rillak leans back, turning her eyes to the window before she looks back at Michael. "I opened the bottle before you arrived. My former partner and I would have celebrated a milestone together tonight, but since our relationship has ended, we will not."

Michael lifts her glass and finishes it, letting whatever this is, burn the back of her throat. "Been there."

"I'm sorry."

"Book and I decided, some time ago now, and quite amicably, that we are best suited to a different kind of relationship."

"And he's well?"

"He is, ma'am."

Laira reaches for the bottle. Michael passes it to her and their hands touch this time, the promise of that first contact racing up her arm. "I wish we could say that we have that in common."

"Yours ended less amicably?"

"I handled it with the grace of a stranded gormagander."

"I'm sure you were a little bit better than that."

"It needed to happen, and I'm grateful for what it was, but at the same time, I'm relieved it's over. It's- what's that saying where something is and isn't at the same time? Surak's selat?"

Michael grins. "You mean Schrödinger's cat."

"Oh, well, it seems I had the wrong planet entirely."

"Close enough."

Laira raises her eyebrows. "You're one of the few people in the universe who can make that claim."

"That's true of more things than you'd think, ma'am."

"You do occupy a singular place in the universe, Captain Burnham."

Taking a sip from her second glass, Michael meets Laira's eyes. Her jacket's too hot and whatever they're drinking makes her flushed. She slides her jacket off her shoulders, leaning back in her chair. "After oh-two hundred it's all right to call me Michael, ma'am."

That makes Rillak laugh. "How late does it need to be before you drop the ma'ams?"

"Later than this, Madam President." Michael hangs her uniform jacket on the chair behind her. Her drink's making her warm everywhere. "I can't imagine how hard it is for you."

Laira's eyes follow her arms like she's contemplating an interplanetary alliance. "I thought I had an idea, before the election, and I certainly did not."

The number of people she can talk to and be Laira, not the president, must be an incredibly short list, and even shorter now, since her relationship with her partner has also reached a conclusion.

"How many people use your name?"

Laira pours a little more into her glass, and this laugh is mirthless. "Fewer than the founding members of the Federation."

"I'm sorry."

"It's temporary. Someday I'll retire."

"And then what?"

Blinking slowly, Laira stares at her, then smiles, almost wistfully. "I have a house, on Bajor, near Lake Sisko. It's beautiful, even when I haven't had time to tend to the flowers. I have an old shuttle or two as well, just so I don't get bored. "

"Sounds peaceful."

"It'll be there when I'm ready."

"Might still be lonely."

"It's the life we chose, isn't it?"

It's so quiet that their heartbeats mingle with the warp core, decks away. Staring into Laira's eyes is worse than the liquor, whatever it is.

"The admiral seems content."

"Charles was as extraordinary of a captain as you are, Michael, albeit in a different way."

"You knew him back then?"

"I've known him since he was a lieutenant, negotiating cargo runs with a very junior ambassador who said all the wrong things."

"Who was you."

So Vance is one of the few who uses her name, his wife and daughter are probably two more. T'Rina, likely, but there's not many. She said it was less than six, and she no longer counts her partner.

"When I first returned from rehabilitation, after the war, no one called me Michael. It took weeks for Tilly and I to become friends."

"And her friends would never use her first name."

"Absolutely not."

Laira nods, storing that information for later use. "After awhile, ma'am is my name and Madam President is who I am."

"Not tonight?"

"I'm tired tonight, you'll have to forgive me."

"I won't tell the delegates if you won't, ma—" Michael catches herself. "Laira."

"You say it correctly."

"It's a Cardassian name, Zora helped me with the pronunciation when I was introducing you in front of the cadets, I needed to get it right."

"You are dedicated to the details, even when you don't agree with my methods."

"It did take me awhile to warm up to you."

Setting her empty glass down, Laira rests her hands in the silk on her lap. "I didn't appreciate you enough when we met."

"I'm glad you see me now."

Their eyes remain locked together. Talking to a friend doesn't make her feel this vulnerable. That's not where they're heading. This course leads somewhere less predictable. Does Michael need to make the first move? Is that what's happening?

"You make an impact, Michael."

Lowering her eyes to Laira's cleavage, Michael introduces the possibility of flirtation. They might not be going that way - no - they are. There's a pull towards each other - a desire they ought to explore.

"So do you."

Laira's blush insists the opening move is appreciated. "When I was an ambassador, one of the few things I could control was my clothing, from my suits to what I slept in. Took me awhile to narrow down what I like."

"You have good taste."

"I'm glad you approve."

This is the moment, the turning point, the lull in the conversation where Michael makes her polite excuses and leaves. Michael rests her hands on her thighs, preparing to do the expected thing.

Laira's hand finds hers, cool fingers wrapping around Michael's. "Thank you for sharing this moment with me."

She could still leave. That's what she ought to do. Stand up, take her jacket, return to her quarters and lie breathless beneath the stars while she tries to decide what her hands want to do with blue silk.

"I know you can't tell me what the message is about."

"It's delicate."

Getting to her feet, Michael nods, and smiles. "I understand."

Standing with her, Laira ends up between Michael and the door, which must not be her intention, she wouldn't, they aren't—

"You could have had anyone relay the message."

"I was awake."

"And you knew I would be?"

Folding her jacket over her arm, Michael raises her eyebrows. "It seemed like a safe assumption." She takes a step towards the door, not that she even needs to leave, she can beam out, but she walked down and maybe she needs the walk to clear her head.

Taking another step, Michael stops by the door. "Besides, your nightgown is worth the trip."

Touching the silk makes it rustle, and Laira beams at her, even though she's trying not to yawn. "Came with the office."

"Found it in a drawer in the back?"

Laira chuckles, fighting a bigger yawn.

She must be exhausted, as is Michael. She doesn't even want to look at the time now, but she doesn't regret it. Some conversations are worth losing sleep over.

"When I was an ambassador, I was always travelling: ship to ship then this planet, then the next. Home was the one suitcase I brought with me and my favorite replicator recipes. I felt disconnected. One of my mentors told me to get nice pajamas."

"So you'd feel like home?" This time Michael yawns and both of them are too stubborn to give up on the conversation and too tired to keep it up much longer, but they have an incredible amount of willpower between the two of them.

"It's one thing that's not for the public, and they don't take up much space."

"Unlike everything else you need to bring with you, they're yours." Michael reaches up, touching her arm. Laura's skin is very soft, softer than she imagined. Not that she was imagining what Laura felt like. "I'm sorry, I'll let you get to bed."

"You don't—"

"I've enjoyed—"

"You could stay," Laura says, her voice so soft that Michael almost doesn't hear her.

The invitation almost isn't said. Michael can beam back to her own quarters in a moment. There's no practical reason for her to stay. Maybe that's the point.

Michael takes a breath. The invitation is there, for her to decline, even pretend she didn't hear it, or she could accept. That's not changing much.

Unless they want it to.

"Did you know we have the same bed?" Michael drops her uniform jacket to the chair and takes a step back into Laura's quarters. "The high ranking officers have the same beds as the guest quarters."

"And they were not upgraded to programmable matter when we overhauled *Discovery*." Laura yawns again, hiding a very bright smile behind her hand. "You wanted to keep them."

"Parts of the ship are worth holding on to, even though programmable matter is very comfortable."

"But it's not home." Laura takes a step back to the sofa, which is the middle ground. Not leaving, not climbing into bed together, but it's too late for that.

"It means I'll sleep just as well in your bed as I would in my own." Michael offers her hand, letting fingers slide down to slip in between Laura's own. "Can you tell the difference?"

Laura stretches, orders a water from the replicator and hands one to Michael. "Not really, a bed that's dry and comfortable is a bed. You're welcome to try the ones at HQ if you ever need a place to sleep."

"Are you assuming we'll sleep well together? What if I snore?"

Beaming over her water glass, Laura smirks. "I grew up on cargo ships. I can sleep through anything."

"That's a good skill to have."

Laura disappears into the refresher while Michael replicates her pajamas. She always wears the standard black Starfleet issue now, but they are comfortable. In a way, all of *Discovery* is her suitcase, so they feel like home. She changes while Laura's in the refresher, leaving them standing side by side to clean their teeth.

Looking into each other's eyes in the mirror is a soft way to flirt - and they're flirting still in the way they glance and look away - but there's a vulnerability in this moment.

Entering Laura's bedroom is the last chance to turn back. Michael could beam to her own bed, but sharing one with someone else is something she misses. There's warmth and comfort in another beating heart beside hers.

Pausing while Laura sits on her side, Michael smiles. "You sleep on the side with the stars, not by the door."

"I have security for the door."

"You like the stars."

"I do." Laura lies back, her head on the pillow beside Michael's. "Are the stars your side?"

"I sleep in the middle."

Laura's sleepy laugh turns into another yawn. Rolling onto her side, she smiles at Michael before shutting her eyes. "How early do you have to get up?"

"Depends on what the President requires of me."

"Hmm, hopefully she's not too tyrannical in the mornings."

"I'll cross my fingers." Michael rests her hands on her chest, closing her eyes. Laura's breathing slows almost immediately, and she remains on her side, facing Michael in the darkness.

She's missed this intimacy, the quiet of knowing someone's there, that they'll be there when she wakes up. They both have more duties tomorrow than will fit into the day, and they'll work around it, but this they can share.

For a moment or two.

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