

## ineffable

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1787) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1787>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Star Trek: Discovery</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Gabriel Lorca/Michael Burnham</a> , <a href="#">Gabriel Lorca (Mirror)/Michael Burnham</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Gabriel Lorca (Mirror)</a> , <a href="#">Gabriel Lorca</a> , <a href="#">Michael Burnham</a> , <a href="#">Original Character(s)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence</a> , <a href="#">Fix-It</a> , <a href="#">Found Family</a> , <a href="#">Canon-Typical Violence</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of <a href="#">ineffable</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-09-07 Words: 121,161 Chapters: 39/39

## ineffable

by [meriwethersays](#)

### Summary

“You can’t just slap ‘logically’ onto the beginning of a sentence and win the argument,” Lorca tells her.

Burnham raises an eyebrow. He thinks she might be laughing at him. “Do you disagree with the logic of my conclusion?”

—

Lorca stays.

### Chapter Summary

It only takes a moment to see that the person in front of him, wearing Michael Burnham's face, is not the Michael he knows. His Michael was--unrestrained, splashy, trailing destruction, flush with the confidence of being the Emperor's daughter. His Michael feared nothing, cared about little, enjoyed inflicting pain even by Terran standards. Of course, his Michael is also dead.

This Michael is tight, precise. He'd read that she was raised by Vulcans and he believes it; she wears that eerie Vulcan façade better than some of the Vulcans he's met. She wears the Starfleet prison jumpsuit like an officer's uniform.

It was easy enough to find her when Lorca came to this universe. Michael Burnham's infamy appears to be a universal constant. But it took a few months more to engineer the right circumstances to intercept her prison transport in a way that wouldn't be too obvious.

Lorca wants to be there in the shuttle bay to see that first moment when she steps out into Discovery. He wants to see her face again. But there's no reason for Discovery's captain to be lurking in the shuttle bay--a place he goes only to board shuttles--when a prison transport is unloaded.

Landry tells him that the fight is coming before it starts; he tells her to bring Michael Burnham once she's won but before she kills someone, and watches the security footage of the fight as it happens. She doesn't move until the attack comes. She fights brutally but economically, knocking out each opponent as quickly as possible, no flourishes. He wonders if she would have killed her fellow convict if Landry hadn't intervened; the Michael he knew would have broken the man's neck without hesitation, even with Landry pointing a phase pistol at her.

The doors hiss open. He waits a moment to see if she'll speak and then says, "No matter how deep in space you are, you always feel like you can see home, don't you think?" What a lie. She's silent, and he adds, "Maybe it's just me."

She still doesn't speak, and he wants her to say something, so he tries, "Forgive the lighting, or lack thereof. A recent battle injury. There's nothing they can do if I want to keep my own eyes, and...I do. I have to suffer light change slowly. I like to think it makes me mysterious." He laughs softly at that and turns to see her. "No?"

It only takes a moment to see that the person in front of him, wearing Michael Burnham's face, is not the Michael he knows. His Michael was--unrestrained, splashy, trailing destruction, flush with the confidence of being the Emperor's daughter. His Michael feared nothing, cared about little, enjoyed inflicting pain even by Terran standards. Of course, his Michael is also dead. This Michael is tight, precise. He'd read that she was raised by Vulcans and he believes it; she wears that eerie Vulcan façade better than some of the Vulcans he's met. She wears the Starfleet prison jumpsuit like an officer's uniform.

It's surreal to say "Captain Gabriel Lorca," to introduce himself to this person wearing a face he knows so well. "Welcome to Discovery." And she still lets the silence hang there. His Michael was never silent. "Come in, don't be shy," he says, and beckons her toward the fortune cookies, eats one and offers her the bowl. She still says nothing and how he wants her to respond, wants her to say anything. "It was the family business a century ago." For this Lorca, maybe. His own family was an unbroken line of Terran captains. "That was before the future came and hunger and need and want disappeared. 'Course, they're making a comeback now, thanks to you."

She still doesn't respond. Of course she's heard that accusation before, but any normal person would have said something, would have shown some flicker of emotion. His Michael would have been proud, or would have punched him in the face if she'd thought it was an insult to be told she'd started a war.

"Michael Burnham. The Michael Burnham, on my ship." Every time he pauses, he wants her to interject. "When I saw your name on the shuttle manifest, I reread your file, pulled up your court-martial transcripts, and...you're something." She hadn't denied the mutiny at the court-martial, hadn't tried to explain it.

"Captain, what am I doing on this ship?" There, at last, something.

"I guess you might have to ask that storm out there." He glances at the window.

"I received no warning that I'd be transferred to another prison facility, which is customary. And my shuttle changed course halfway through the journey."

"Maybe the universe hates waste." Another attempt to be enigmatic, to draw her out. It doesn't work.

"Sir?"

"The question is, what am I going to do with you?" Lorca can think of too many answers to that question even as he asks it. She holds his eyes until he looks away. "If I put you in the brig, someone's going to die, and I don't have the time for that kind of distraction." He wonders how long it would take her to kill the other three; the Michael he knew would have started the fight, but he doesn't think this one would. He walks around the desk and approaches her; as soon as he's close enough to touch her, she takes two measured steps back, and he leans back against the desk instead of following. But he can't stop himself from staring at her, trying to see the Michael he knew somewhere inside. After another long moment, he says, "You have training in high-level quantum physics, don't you?" He glances away. "My engineers tell me it's going to take three days to clear the lightning bugs out of the prison shuttle. I have something on deck that requires every trained mind available. You're going to help us out."

“No,” she says.

Lorca leans closer again. “Excuse me?”

“No thank you.” She holds his eyes again. “Respectfully, I owe a debt for my crime, and it’d be best...I’d prefer to serve my time without getting involved.”

He can’t help but laugh at that. “You think I care what your preferences are? Until your vessel’s repaired, you’ll be assigned to quarters and put to work,” and what a thought, that he can order her to do anything—to do something, that is. “I’m not a chauffeur, there’s no free rides on my ship.” Even if she won’t react, he feels his own emotion rising—anger, mostly, that he has wasted all this time and effort just to get this Michael-shaped shell. Burnham. He wanted her, the Michael that he knew, the Michael who would have laughed at the idea that he thought he was in charge. “You were once a Starfleet officer. I will use you, or anything else I can, to achieve my mission.”

“And what mission is that, sir?”

“To win the war, of course. Send everyone home. Safe and happy.” Send himself home, at least. Lorca wants her to speak, to argue, to come around the desk and shove him against it, dig her fingers into his uniform and the skin beneath, but she does nothing. His mouth twists and he tells her, “Dismissed.”

She turns and walks out the doors and he stares after her. He’d wanted Michael Burnham, the mutineer—who’d turned on her captain to start a war the way his own Michael had turned on her emperor—but either that’s been beaten out of her (and they don’t use agonizers in Starfleet prison, just long years of grim hard labor) or it was never really there to begin with. Saru says she’s dangerous. But in another universe, Michael ate Kelpiens for dinner, so he’s not about to trust Saru’s opinion.

And yet. The first night, Burnham steals a breath sample from her roommate to access the spores. He supposes she doesn’t have much to lose—life imprisonment is Starfleet’s worst punishment, no quick death in this universe—but when he sees that she’s done it, he lets himself hope a little.

When they lose the Glenn, he orders Stamets and Landry to board it. Stamets argues with him and he can feel Burnham watching him, feels that shiver that he remembers. He doesn’t let himself look at her until he tells Stamets, “Pick a team. Take Burnham with you.” He turns away.

“Sir!” Stamets says, and sometimes he wants to hurt that man. “It’s one thing to make her a data cruncher in my lab. But to integrate her into this project at such a deep level?”

He wishes that in this universe, he could instill fear with more than harsh words. But he turns and says, “I understand that you lost a friend today, but this is not a democracy. You understand?” He knows she’s watching, listening, assessing.

“Yes, sir.” Stamets hates him fairly frequently, he knows.

“Number One, you sailed with Burnham aboard the Shenzhou, What is your assessment of her abilities?” He looks from Stamets to Saru without letting his eyes stop on Michael—on Burnham.

Saru looks at her and then back at him. He keeps his own eyes on Saru. “Her mutiny aside, she is...the smartest Starfleet officer I have ever known.”

“Huh.” He can’t look at her. Instead he digs at Stamets, says, “And he knows you,” and walks away. She’s still watching him.

She survives the Glenn and the monster onboard. Walks into his office with maybe a hint of swagger and Lorca says, “Well, there she is.” And maybe it is her, just a little.

“Captain.”

“Michael Burnham, I would like to extend an official invitation to you to join the Discovery and be a member of our crew.”

“Sir, I’ve been court-martialed and convicted...” she starts.

“Don’t worry about Starfleet.” Never worry about Starfleet. “They gave me discretion to fight this war however I saw fit.” What a miraculous thing that had been, letting him persuade them to hand over an experimental ship to a disgraced captain. He waits for her to say yes, to claw at any chance she can get—

“I’m afraid I can’t take you up on your offer.”

Lorca can’t believe it. “Are you hell-bent on self-persecution?”

“That’s not it. Not all of it, anyway.”

“Why wouldn’t you stay?”

“Let me answer your question with a question. Why do you want me to stay?” And there, he sees Michael there, feels the jab and loves it. “I’m not here by accident,” she says, and finally, finally, she walks toward him. “I think you brought me here. I think you’ve been testing me,” and there’s an accusation in her tone.

“And why would I do that?” Of course he has, though he’d almost given up hope of her noticing. But he feigns confusion, just to provoke her.

“You’re developing some kind of experimental technology. Some kind of spore-based biological weapon.”

“Oh?” She used to take him apart when she spoke to him, break him down into pieces and then watch him try to reassemble them and he glories in hearing it now, even a pale imitation.

“The kind of weapon that is explicitly forbidden by the Geneva Protocols of 1928 and 2155.” He wants to laugh at that. Only in this universe would Michael Burnham care about the legality of a biological weapon. His Michael had never been a scientist, but she’d ordered scientists to create those weapons. “And you need someone to help you.” She’s so sure that she’s right and it’s thrilling to watch. “Enter me. A mutineer. Who intended to wage unsanctioned war on the Klingons. A trained officer who’s been banished from Starfleet and someone who would presumably do anything to get out of their life sentence in prison, including illicit weapons tests, like whatever went wrong on the Glenn.” She’s defiant, certain, so confident that she’s caught him out. Arrogance is one of the few emotions that Vulcans have never been able to hide.

“Enter you, indeed.”

“I’m not who you think I am,” she says, and it sounds like a warning from the universe. Maybe one that he should have expected. “Before I was a mutineer, I was a first officer in Starfleet.” She lifts her chin and stands straighter, proud. “I’ll never bear that rank or any other again. But it is who I am, and who I will always be. It is by the principles of the United Federation of Planets that I live. And by them I will most certainly die.” It’s bizarre to hear those words coming from a mouth he knows, to see the conviction in eyes that used to laugh at him.

But he says, “I know who you are, Michael Burnham. I know exactly who you are.” He lets out a breath. “I know you love being right. But I suspect that you hate being wrong even more. So let me stop you going down a path you’ll regret.” She lifts her chin at that, at the challenge in it.

Lorca takes her to Engineering, tells her to walk into the spore chamber, and tells her about the wonder they’re building. She’s suspicious, but she lets him talk about winning the war, watches the spores with a touch of wonder until he says, “Imagine the possibilities.”

He turns it off, walks to her, and stands in the doorway of the spore chamber. Burnham walks to him, still wary, as he says, “I did choose you, but not for the reasons you think.”

Their fingertips touch when she finally yields and takes the fortune cookie from his fingers, the first time they’ve touched for months. Lorca can’t tell if she feels it, but he holds on a little too long, just to prolong the contact. Her fingertips are hot—his Michael had always run hot too, even in the cold of space. Sometimes when she put her hands on him, he’d imagined that she would leave a handprint burned onto his skin, even wanted it. The Michael that he’d known was never still and rarely silent; here and now, Burnham watches him, fixes him with her appraising dark eyes and...waits. He doesn’t know what she’s waiting for—him to say something else? Offer more reasons for her to join him? Touch her again and find out how deep the differences go? What would she do if he did? The moment stretches on, as though she’s daring him to do something, until finally he has to say “Dismissed” and watch her walk out of the lab, every step measured and even. He wants her badly in that moment, surprisingly—her, not the Michael that he knew. He wants to make her laugh or yell or cry, wants to pull at the threads holding her together until she tears through them and he sees the woman who would mutiny to start a war.

Landry comes to him later to assure him that she’s gotten the monster on board. He likes her in this universe as he did in his own universe: blunt, loyal, not too concerned with conventional morality. Lorca had trusted her there, probably more than he’d trusted Michael. Her only real flaw is her dislike of Burnham, but that can be remedied. It’s not as though he can tell her that Burnham is the key to getting home. And maybe he’ll take Landry with them, if his Landry isn’t alive anymore. With a little persuading, she could fit in well enough. She tells him, “Anything, anytime, Captain,” and he hears the offer there, an hour’s pleasant distraction—but a distraction nonetheless, and he can’t afford those. So he tells her, “Dismissed,” and turns to the containment chamber, presses a hand against the containment field as the monster flings its body at him. He’s always been fascinated by dangerous things.

## the butcher's knife cares not for the lamb's cry

### Chapter Summary

Would the Lorca of this universe have been moved to greater efforts by the video, by the little girl screaming for her mother?  
Would he have wanted to see it?

Lorca dreams about her that night. It's his own Michael inside the containment field, fighting the monster; in the darkness, he can only see her face in the flashes of light that reflect off her armor or her knife, each flash a stab to his eyes. He can't make himself look away, though. She kills it somehow—he hears the body fall to the ground—and steps forward to the front of the containment chamber. Then she kisses the tip of one bloody finger and presses it against the containment field, just enough to make it light up. He sees something out of the corner of his eye and turns. Burnham is standing there, waiting, dark eyes fixed on him for another of those infinite moments. Then she says, "Computer, lower containment field."

He wakes up angry at himself, at his body, at everything, and goes to the bridge several hours before his scheduled shift. There, he inflicts his towering bad mood on the crew, running them through battle simulation after battle simulation because he can, killing them all over and over to remind himself that this is not his universe. It's not good for morale, but neither is dying, and hell if he's going to die before he has the chance to get home.

Burnham comes to the bridge in the midst of one particularly agonizing loss. He's trying to direct them, ordering them to do exactly what they should already know how to do—"And we're all dead." This time it's Landry's fault. He indulges himself in a sarcastic slow clap and says, "Very nice. Very polite." He reminds them of what they should already know: Discovery will be the most powerful ship in the fleet, when Stamets gets her running properly, but they will always be alone when they fight. "We will not have backup. There's just...us. And we get one chance to get it right."

Landry says, "We'll do better next time, sir."

He's feeling less charitable towards her now. "It will be hard to do worse." Though at least this time they'd managed to destroy one bird of prey. Small mercies. Lorca tells Saru to run the simulation again and again and snaps, "Burnham, you're with me."

She follows him off the bridge and into a turbolift without commenting on the disastrous performance, lets him rant uninterrupted. "We're the tip of the spear in a science vessel, filled with wide-eyed explorers." They walk down a darkened hallway as he says, "You know what they need us to do, don't you?"

"They need us to win," she says.

That's what he wants to hear from her. "They need us to survive, Burnham. Want to know how you're going to help me do that?"

"I'm happy to assist Lieutenant Stamets with the refinement of the spore drive."

"Said the xenanthropologist." He tries to imagine the Michael that he knew choosing to study alien cultures, and fails.

"I also studied quantum mechanics at the Vulcan Science Academy, sir." Quantum mechanics and how to fold herself into the shape of a Vulcan, so well that he can barely spot her sometimes.

The light come to full as he says, "I know, but I'm going to put you to better use," and those words could taste differently on his tongue if they were somewhere else. Lorca sends her into the weapons room first and follows, watching for her reaction.

She walks along one wall, examining the cases and their contents, no flicker of emotion beyond scientific interest. Then she sighs softly, so briefly that he barely hears it, and turns to face him. "These are some of the deadliest weapons in the galaxy." Her voice is even. He wants to hear excitement, outrage—something that says what she thinks of him.

"I study war. And this...is where I hone my craft." It took time to collect them all, these toys that he used to use casually, and he was still missing some, some whose shape he could still feel in his hand and the one who stood in front of him. "I try to learn from the best." Somehow everything he says comes back around to her. This time he doesn't let the pause drag out. "Here." He nods toward the containment pen. "Now this, I think, you'll find uniquely interesting. You've met once before."

Burnham waits, watches, until the monster flings itself against the containment field. She flinches back a little at the first impact, but stays steady for the second and third.

"It has a natural aversion to light, same as me," he says.

"Why would you keep something so dangerous on board your own ship?" There's the judgment, a little scorn mixed with surprise at his choice.

Lorca tells her he wants to learn from it. "If we're going to win this thing—if we're going to have a chance of saving the Federation and everyone in it"—because that's what she would consider victory—"we need the best weapons available." The irony is not lost on him, that just last night he assured her that he wasn't creating a biological weapon, and now he wants her to take this thing apart to make more conventional ones. "I need you to find out—and weaponize it." Only then does she look away from the containment field and up at him, turn her shoulders just a little in his direction. But she doesn't protest.

He sends Landry in to provoke her, and to keep her on track. If ever there was a person committed to provoking Burnham, it's Landry. But when he finally goes to eat for the first time in...he's not sure how long, Admiral Cornwell calls and immediately chides him for eating. Cornwell makes him uneasy, and has since he first met her. She has no counterpart in his universe, not that he'd ever met. She's even, steady, without any obvious agenda beyond a sincere desire to protect the Federation while playing within the rules, none of the defiance that occasionally flashes in Burnham. She tells him about the Klingon attack on Corvan 2, plays the distress call video and then tells him about the dilithium mines. He wonders why she played the video at all—there's no extra information there, nothing he needs to know beyond the value of Corvan 2 to the war effort. Would the Lorca of this universe have been moved to greater efforts by the video, by the little girl screaming for her mother? Would he have wanted to see it?

She asks if the spore drive is ready and he tells her yes, because he will make it be ready. Stamets is outraged to hear it, argues with him, throws scientific protests at him, insults him, claims that it can't be rushed. But when he says, "They need us, now," Stamets suddenly has ideas. Stamets calls "You're welcome" at his back as Lorca strides away and he wishes passionately for an agonizer to teach the man a lesson.

And then whatever Stamets tries doesn't even work. It sends them into a star, and he has to tell them to put shields up, to reverse, the things they should all know how to do, to go to warp until they figure out how to fix their mistake. Stamets fractures his skull, banters with his husband in sickbay, complains, "Time is an essential element of good science."

Lorca wants to hurt him, badly. He tells Stamets to get off the ship if he doesn't want to fight, if he can't accept their mission. Asks if Stamets wants to be a selfish little man who put his own ego before the lives of others. This is how he knows how to motivate people. But he remembers Cornwell, the video that she showed him, and tells the computer to open a shipwide hail. Tells it to play the distress call from Corvan 2 and lets everyone all over the ship hear the screams, hear the little girl begging her mother to wake up, the woman begging them to save her children. (Some part of him remembers that Burnham's parents were killed in a Klingon attack, but he doesn't have time to worry about that now.)

Then Landry goes and gets herself killed. He stands in sickbay next to Burnham and tells her, "Find a use for that creature. Don't let her death be in vain." He looks back at Landry, at her mangled body, and feels a pang of loss. He really had trusted her, would have brought her home with him. Then he looks at Burnham, stares at her until he sees something more, some flicker, and nods shortly at her before walking away.

She finds a use. They jump in above Corvan 2, draw in Klingon birds of prey and destroy them with another jump. They save Corvan 2 and the dilithium mines and the miners too. Burnham is brilliant, miraculous, suddenly exalted across the entire ship, but she disappears before he can congratulate her. He wants to know if she was angry when she heard the distress call, angry at the Klingons for their actions or at him for playing it aloud, if it was what triggered her discovery or if she was already too deep into the mind that graduated from the Vulcan Science Academy, or maybe if it didn't hurt her at all. Maybe the Vulcan in her has compressed all of that down so tightly that it registered only as the sound of humans requesting urgent assistance from the Federation.

Lorca knows that she's in her quarters and thanks god that she has a roommate. He wouldn't trust himself if he went there right now like he wants. And he does want. He wants to press his thumb against her lips and see what she does, put his mouth on her neck and find out how she tastes, pin that lithe body against the wall or the bed with his own, touch her everywhere until he knows what she likes, what makes her gasp or cry out, slide in deep enough to find the human and then deeper—

But she's in her quarters and she has a roommate, and if he orders Stamets to call the roommate to engineering for hours, everyone will know. If he summons her to his own quarters he'll be lost entirely. And who knows if she would stay when she discovered why he'd called—or if she would stay and watch with that critical gaze as he put a desperate hand on himself until he shook apart. The Michael he knew would have enjoyed that, but he wanted to know if she would like it, what she would think of him.

But she's in her quarters.

## choose your pain

### Chapter Summary

“Needs of the tardigrade outweighed the needs of all Federation citizens? Not very Vulcan of you.” He pauses and then teases, “You’re not very careful with your captains.”

Lorca tries to avoid her for the next week to clear his head. When he’d started looking for Michael Burnham, and when he saw that she was the first (convicted) mutineer, he’d assumed that she would be a restrained version of the Michael he knew, bold and brash and barely willing to follow orders, eager for conflict and barely fitted into the Starfleet model. When he met her, he’d seen only a shadow of Michael—not even a shadow but a shade, with straightforward Vulcan intelligence to be used like a tricorder. But suddenly she’s not only intelligent but clever, flexible enough in her thinking to link the monster to the spore drive instead of just trying to saw off its claws.

He reports their victories to Starfleet, only to be told that now he needs to stop. Only in this ridiculous universe would his successes be penalized. The other admirals sit quietly while Cornwell blindsides him with it, telling him he can’t use his spore drive unless Starfleet allows it. He stays in the room as they all walk out, stunned at the stupidity of it, trying to calm himself before he does something truly unacceptable in this universe. Here there’s no challenging orders by knifing the person giving them. Here, Burnham’s mutiny is unthinkable; in his universe, the only thing wrong with it would’ve been failing to kill the captain.

Cornwell walks back in as he’s treating his eyes, turns the lights to full, and he yells at her. She’s unsympathetic, tells him to get his damn eyes fixed, clearly impatient. He calls her Katrina—he’s decided they were on this level of familiarity, once. But she’s not there to make nice or apologize for what happened; she wants to make clear that she did him a favor.

“By the way, there’s something I didn’t bring up, lest you think I was piling on,” she says. “The matter of Michael Burnham.”

There it is. He’d been wondering when someone other than Saru would complain about it. He reminds her, not in so many words, that he’s been authorized to do virtually whatever he wants with whomever he wants to win the war—that no one is supposed to look over his shoulder. “Are you uncomfortable with the power I’ve been given, Admiral?”

“I’m your friend,” she reminds him, and he realizes that he shouldn’t have retreated into the formality of her title.

“It’s my ship. My way.”

Then, as though they knew he was coming, the Klingons capture his shuttle. They gut his pilot, grab him by the neck, and march him into their ship. The female Klingon calls him by name, which is good news. It means they’re at least likely to keep him alive and torture him for information rather than mindlessly bludgeon him. And if he’s alive, he can escape.

Lorca regains consciousness in a filthy cell and registers that he’s grabbed someone’s throat only as the man chokes. It’s Harcourt Fenton Mudd, too clean and unbruised to trust, living all-too-comfortably next to a beaten half-dead man who dies in the next few minutes. Mudd is happy to inform him of all the terrible things that happen on this ship and then says, “I’m a survivor. Just like you.”

Five minutes later, Mudd is snoring peacefully while Lorca paces the cell, learns where the walls are jointed, looks for weaknesses, stress points. As he does it, he comes across another person in a Starfleet uniform, half-conscious on the floor. “I didn’t realize there were more of us in here,” he says.

The man eases himself up. “Pulled out of rotation. Sometimes they let us heal up, so we last longer.” He looks closer at Lorca’s uniform and says, “Shit, you’re a captain?”

Lorca doesn’t answer. He walks back to the main cell area and finds a spot to collapse. Without his eye treatment, the light in the cell is excruciating. The man limps after him, though, and tries to pass him some food, even tries to insist that he eat it. He says he’s already lost one captain and won’t lose another—Lieutenant Ash Tyler, who’s been here seven months and says maybe he’s tougher than he thought.

“Or a liar.” Everyone in this cell is too damn comfortable, except the dead man that the Klingons dragged out. “No one survives Klingon torture for seven months. What are you doing here? They got a reason to keep you alive?”

Tyler admits it, that the captain of the prison ship has “taken a liking” to him, turned him into a personal pet, and Lorca grimaces at the thought. Of all the things a Klingon might do to a human, he’d never thought of rape as one of their preferred methods of torture. Inefficient, too close to humans.

More important than Tyler’s personal suffering is what Tyler might be able to offer. He knows how many crew are on the ship, though he can’t tell Lorca anything about the layout. Lorca hears slight movement from Mudd’s corner, just enough to know that the man is listening. He tells Tyler that Discovery can get here, it’s like a ghost, and Mudd’s pet scurries in as they speak and snatches the food. He’d bet money—or his life—that the creature is part of the way Mudd keeps his captors happy. Then Mudd launches into some rant about how Starfleet doesn’t care about the little people like him, and if there’s anything Lorca cares about less than the high-minded principles of Starfleet, it’s the complaints of petty crooks who feel forgotten by it.

When they come for Lorca, Tyler tries to stand in the way, but he can barely stand up at all. They strap Lorca into a chair and the first thing the female Klingon asks—in English—is if he’s ever been tortured. It’s hilarious, or it would be if he weren’t anticipating some physical damage. The agonizers in his own universe were made to cause pain, but for all the suffering, they broke you mentally first. You’d lose your mind long

before they inflicted any permanent damage. That was one of the reasons they were so useful, and he'd spent enough time in them to know just how effective they were. But Klingons would pull a person to pieces, leave wounds that bled out slowly or turned gangrenous, maybe take one of the eyes that he'd so jealously guarded.

He'd rather not think about the way she lovingly strokes the tools, so he says, "Your English, it's excellent," for a subhuman.

After some self-aggrandizing talk, she calls his ship "a ghost," and there, he knew it, Mudd was listening. But it's too early to congratulate himself on successfully spotting a traitor, because she's pried his eyelids open and from the pain, it feels like she's gouging out his eyes.

By some miracle, Lorca still has his eyes when they drag him back to the cell, though they're throbbing in agony. He can see well enough to shove Mudd against the wall, pull the transmitter out of the creature, and smash it under his shoe. He should've done the same thing with the creature, but he flings it against the far wall instead. Tyler grabs Mudd and says, "You're finished. And when it's time to choose our pain, we're choosing you, until there's nothing left." Lorca likes him.

"Captain," Mudd tries, "are you really going to let this idealistic young man humiliate himself by siding with you? Have you no decency, Lorca? Actually, that was a trick question. I know you don't. We both know you lost that with your last command." It's gorgeous, the irony, especially because Mudd doesn't know the truth of it.

Tyler takes the bait, of course. "What's he talking about?"

Mudd repeats what he thinks is the real story, "the tragic tale of the USS Buran. It was ambushed about a month into the war. The Klingons boarded it and blasted it into smithereens." He's relishing the words. "Only one crewman managed to escape—Gabriel Lorca. Apparently, the honorable captain was too good to go down with his ship."

"That's only half right," Lorca says, and it's more like a quarter right. "We were ambushed, and I did...escape. But I didn't let my crew die." Tyler wants to believe him, he can see, wants to believe whatever will let him follow Lorca out of here. "I blew them up." He tells Tyler what would have happened, what Tyler already knows would follow, and says, "Not my crew. Not on my watch." And Tyler, dumb desperate kid that he is, accepts it as enough. He doesn't even ask why Lorca didn't stay too.

Only minutes later, the Klingons come back in and tell them to choose their pain. Tyler says, "Choose me, captain," and even though it's part of the plan, he sounds like he wants it. The Klingons beat him half to hell before Lorca sees his opportunity and they both attack. Seconds later, Lorca enjoys the crack of the first neck he's broken since falling into this universe; Tyler gapes at him and then follows suit.

Mudd babbles happily as they collect the weapons, until it dawns on him that he's not coming. "You can't be serious," he says.

"Oh, but I can." He would break Mudd's neck too, but Tyler is watching and killing a human might be too much for him to stomach, so Lorca hits Mudd across the face with the Klingon disruptor and locks him back in the cell as he begs them to bring him.

Tyler fights well but is too hurt to keep up, and he tells Lorca to leave him behind. A month ago, maybe, Lorca would have, but Landry is dead and he needs someone else with that kind of loyalty, the kind that only comes from saving someone's life. When he goes back to find Tyler, he's atop the Klingon woman, so engrossed in punching her over and over that he's oblivious to the other approaching guard until Lorca kills it. Lorca pulls him off, shoots the female Klingon too and drags him out, and then Tyler flies them out into Discovery's transporter range.

\* \* \*

As soon as Dr. Culber has fixed him up well enough—repaired two cracked ribs, dealt with the concussion, checked his eyes and pronounced them no worse than before—he escapes from sickbay. Tyler will be there at least overnight while they scan him and try to repair him, but Lorca won't stay any longer than he absolutely has to.

He sees Burnham in the turbolift on his way to quarters. "I hear you freed the tardigrade," he says. Saru has already given him the whole story, complete with an apology for allowing genetic manipulation in violation of Federation law and an apology for torturing a sentient creature, also in violation of Federation law. Saru doesn't approve of his orders, but spends a lot of time apologizing anyway.

"It was logical to search for an alternate solution. The spore drive was weakening it."

He turns his head to look at her. She's staring straight ahead. "You mean it was suffering."

"And deteriorating. Sir." She pauses for a long time. "Were you ever in the room when we used the spore drive?"

"Not that I recall." He didn't let anyone else initiate a black alert when he was on the ship, and he only initiated a black alert from the bridge. And the science itself wasn't beautiful to him, only its results.

"Every time," she says, and he can almost hear a hitch in her voice. "Every time, it screamed."

"So do pigs when we slaughter them."

"Vulcans are vegetarians."

"You're not a Vulcan."

She turns on him and snaps, "I was raised as a Vulcan," of all the things to get angry about.

"So, you found a way to save it. Nearly mutinied against Saru. According to him, you were very...passionate. And Stamets turned himself part tardigrade." His eyes burn as he stares back at her, but he can't stop.

"I was confined to quarters."



“Better him than you,” he says. At her “Sir?” he realizes that maybe she meant that she had no involvement, not that she should have been the one to do it. “I assume you would have done it, if Stamets hadn’t.”

“He’s vital to the design and operation of the spore drive,” she says, which means yes

He can’t stop a smile at that. “Necessary, now. I hear you made Stamets take the spore drive offline to avoid hurting it.”

“I shared my concerns. Captain.”

“During a Starfleet-ordered mission to rescue me from being tortured into revealing the Federation’s secrets.”

He’d expected her to flinch, but she doesn’t look away. “Torture is prohibited under the 1994 Convention Against Torture,” she says. “Even to save the life of another person. That’s what we were doing.” She does love her laws.

“Needs of the tardigrade outweighed the needs of all Federation citizens? Not very Vulcan of you.” He pauses and then teases, “You’re not very careful with your captains.”

She stiffens and drops her gaze and heavy silence descends. Damn it, wrong soft spot. “I apologize, sir.”

He touches her wrist lightly, lets his fingers rest there, thumb on her pulse point. “No harm done. Well, nothing lasting.” He would describe himself as wryly humorous, but she doesn’t seem to agree. Of course, he’s only ever seen her laugh with Cadet Tilly, this universe’s bizarre incarnation of the woman he knew as Captain Killy. “And I picked up a gift from the Klingons.”

She looks up at him again and he realizes he’s still touching her. “Sir?”

He should let go of her wrist. It’s a strange thing to be doing. “It’s been a long day, Burnham.” He’s not sure what’s happening with his vision. It seems to come and go, and when she makes a soft noise, he realizes he’s clenched his hand around her wrist to stay upright. When the turbolift doors finally open, his first step out doesn’t land quite right and he finds himself reaching out for a wall to brace himself. Burnham more or less catches him, props him up, and starts to say, “Computer, site-to-site transport—”

“Computer, cancel that,” he manages. “I’m fine. Culber cleared me. Just need to get to quarters and lie down.”

“Sir,” she says. “I don’t think—”

“I’m the captain,” he tells her. “Just help me get there.”

She heaves him up fully, puts one of his arms around her shoulder, and says, “Lean on me and walk.” He’s very cold and she’s a solid line of heat against his side, albeit one that keeps jostling him. His eyes are throbbing again, almost as bad as they were when the Klingon woman finally turned off the light. He closes them and leans heavily on Burnham and lets her steer him blindly to his quarters and then to his bed. She sets him down as though he’s drunk, guides his head to the pillow, and then...stands there.

He can hear her breathing quietly and reaches his hand out again in the general direction of the sound, brushing what must be her knee before he lets his arm drop again. “Dismissed,” he says.

“Yes, captain.” He barely hears the doors close before he passes out.

Chapter Summary

He would be lying to himself if he said that he was about to embark on this unsanctioned mission for any reason other than that Sarek is Burnham's father and Burnham said please and—well, the honest list ends there.

He likes Tyler, he's decided. They run battle simulations while he calls out strategies and questions Tyler about every facet of his life, and Tyler gets 36 kills to his 24 and lies about it. "Captain, out of respect—" Tyler starts to say.

"Don't apologize for excellence. I want my chief of security to shoot better than I do." As long as they're never shooting at him, and he doesn't think Tyler ever will be. He's grateful, eager to please—too eager to please, even—and hungry to make up the seven months lost since the Battle of the Binaries.

Tyler runs after him. "You offering me a slot, captain?"

"Well, I figure I've seen you fly, shoot, fight like a Klingon..."

"Klingon guards beating on me for seven months, I was bound to pick something up."

"Most people would've given up. You learned." He remembers Landry and says, "My last chief of security and I went through a lot together." His Landry was probably dead, and this universe's Landry had died trying to saw the claws off a monster. "I need someone I can trust, someone that understands war. What it takes to survive, what it takes to win. I think that's you. Is it?"

"I'd be honored to serve on the Discovery," Tyler says, and his answer was never in doubt. "I won't let you down, sir."

"Good," he says, and claps Tyler on the shoulder. He leaves it to Tyler to imagine the consequences of failure.

Of course he doesn't trust easily; he watches Tyler, watches the video feed from the mess hall where he sits alone, watches as Cadet Tilly leads Burnham over to his table and introduces them both. Tyler talks about judging people in the here and now and offers his hand. Burnham takes it and then she stands slowly, clutches her side, screams in pain, and collapses from something no one else can see. He's never seen her show pain before and it's terrifying to watch.

Culber saves him from appearing in sickbay unsummoned by paging him almost immediately. Lorca is there when Burnham wakes up gasping "Sarek," her vital signs spiking.

"What's the matter with her?"

Culber can't tell him, but she says, "It's not me, it's Sarek. He's in trouble."

"How do you know that?"

"I share part of his katra, his eternal life force." Something Vulcan.

"How can you share a soul with Sarek? You're not Vulcan."

"I was raised as one," she says, as if they couldn't all tell. "After my parents were killed at a Vulcan outpost—"

"Sarek and his human wife Amanda took you in. Your story's well documented." Written into everything she said, the way she moved, the way she thought. It was maybe the sharpest divergence from the Michael he'd known—her parents died somewhere, before the Emperor adopted her, but he'd never known where or why.

"He believed I could serve as humanity's potential," she says, and there's the pain again.

"How could he put that kind of pressure on a child?" Tilly is blunt and overly emotional, but it seems to work with Burnham.

She explains her second round of childhood terror, the extremist attempt to kill her to keep humans out of their culture. "I was dead for three minutes. The katra, it has a healing power. Sarek used it to save me. A kind of soul graft. It's a procedure that's frowned upon, and rare."

Lorca can only imagine. "So you're...linked with him. He gets wounded, you feel pain." She nods, and he can tell from the way all her muscles are tensed that she's still in pain. "This has happened to you before?"

"Once. The start of the war. He sensed my distress and came to me. But this is different, I can feel him slipping away." Burnham's words speed up, building—he would call it panic on anyone else. "I don't think this is a conscious effort on his part. Sarek is delirious, he might be dying." She's been speaking to all of them, but now she looks at him alone. "Captain," she says, "please." It's hard for her to say. "Captain, help me find him."

Lorca can't help but nod, even as he knows he'll be forbidden from doing so. He thinks it's the first time Burnham has asked him for anything. It doesn't occur to him to refuse.

Just as he expected, there was some kind of Vulcan plan organized outside of Starfleet to win the war without the help of inferior humans and

Sarek is deep in it. “Vulcans went behind Starfleet’s back because they thought they could clean up our ‘illogical’ mess? So where is the ambassador right now?”

Starfleet is assessing, they say. Figuring out what to do—if Burnham is right, Sarek will be long dead before Starfleet does anything. He doesn’t know what will happen to Burnham if Sarek dies, if the katra will just disappear from her, or be absorbed somehow, or will it kill her too?

“I’ll go get him,” he tells the Starfleet Vulcan, whatever his name is, who exclaims, “Absolutely not!”

“You can tell the Vulcans they’re welcome – I’m happy to clean up their mess.” Lorca ends the transmission with some satisfaction as the Vulcan is still protesting. Then he picks up a fortune cookie, smashes it between two hands, and eats a fragment. They don’t contain fortunes anymore, the ones he has—and anyway, he knows what the universe has to offer him.

Sarek himself doesn’t matter to him—one more Vulcan from a planet full of them. Sarek as an ambassador who could help end the war—more important. The sooner the war ends, the sooner Starfleet stops hand-wringing about the risk of the Klingons capturing Discovery and gives him truly free rein. But he would be lying to himself if he said that he was about to embark on this unsanctioned mission for any reason other than that Sarek is Burnham’s father and Burnham said please and—well, the honest list ends there.

They jump to the nebula where Sarek is drifting. A small part of him wonders what Burnham would have done if they were still slowly killing the tardigrade for each jump—whether she would have delayed to search for a solution, as she’d tried to delay his rescue, or stolen a shuttle and tried to do it all herself. It doesn’t really matter.

The nebula is beautiful the way that all deadly things are and painful to see. Burnham walks onto the bridge, still in obvious pain—it must be terrible, for her to show it—and he asks, “How are you feeling?”

“I still sense Sarek, but it’s growing erratic. I think he’s getting worse.” Not an answer to his question, but hard to imagine she’d admit to anything else.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get him back,” he says, and she actually seems to believe him.

Of course Saru says that the nebula has killed their sensors. Of course. “Send out probes,” he tells Saru. “Scan sector by sector.” Saru protests that it could take months, and he asks, “Any other options?”

“Me,” Burnham says. Of course.

\* \* \*

Stamets is excited about the idea, of course. “You’re talking about building a synthetic mind-meld augment. Groovy!”

“Clearly, your trip down the mycelium path has lightened your mood, lieutenant.” It almost makes him miss Stamets from a month ago, who would have come up with fifteen different technical reasons not to try it.

“Once you’re past getting stabbed by needles, it’s pretty great.” Then he describes a technical plan that includes the phrase “sure, why not?” and babbles about the wonders of kattras until Lorca stops him. Of course, it’s only after Stamets has said it’s all wonderful and possible and like a hit of speed that he adds, “Radioactive interference from the nebula is going to diffuse your signal. You’ll never be able to maintain a strong enough connection with Sarek from out here.”

Lorca is very tired of this. “So we take the Discovery inside the nebula and get closer to him.”

No, Stamets has a reason that that won’t work too. Of course it comes down to Burnham saying, “So we go in with a shuttle.”

“You’d have to fly into that soup with nothing but hope and a prayer,” Stamets says. “Are you really that crazy?”

She raises an eyebrow. Of course she is. She tells him that the shuttle shields will protect her and that she wants Tilly—Cadet Tilly!—there with her to work the machine and provide moral support. The request for moral support alone tells him how desperate this mission is.

“You’ll get it. And you need a pilot who can fly you through that storm and, more importantly, get you out alive. Luckily, I know a guy.”

They’re loading up the equipment in the shuttle when Lorca walks on. He nods to Cadet Tilly, who responds with the appropriate “Sir!” He walks past Burnham without a word, straight up to Tyler, and tells him, “Bring her back in one piece.”

Tyler nods and assures him, “Not a scratch.” He puts a confident hand on the shuttle.

“I’m talking about her.” He lets Tyler follow his gaze to Burnham and waits for it to sink in. “Or don’t come back at all.” He pats Tyler on the shoulder and then walks back out past Burnham without a word. He’s not sure what he’d say to her if he did speak, and he doubts that it would matter to her; all he can do is impress upon Tyler that he, personally, expects Tyler to put Burnham’s safety above all other priorities.

Then, while he’s trying to distract himself, Cornwell decides to arrive. He’s barely stepped into the ready room when she says, “What the hell do you think you’re doing? I thought Terral was going to throw a fit, and he’s a damn Vulcan!”

“I did what I thought was best.” He can’t explain why to her, though. Let her think it’s because Sarek is so important to peace.

Cornwell doesn’t think his opinion is good enough. “You launched an unauthorized rescue mission using a convicted mutineer! Not to mention a P.O.W. who has barely had time to recover. Can you even trust this guy?”

He resorts to the proprieties they love so much. “Yes, Admiral, I checked him out. Lieutenant Tyler graduated with honors from the Academy

before he saved my life.” And Lorca saved his life in turn, which means that Tyler is his now.

“You are captain of the most advanced ship in the fleet, the cornerstone of our defense against the Klingons! You cannot treat Discovery like it’s your own fiefdom!” She tells him to stop making enemies on his own side—but there’s no side beyond this ship that’s behind him. Discovery and his crew are the only ones he can depend on, and that’s truer every day.

“What are you doing here? What’s really going on?” They’ve diverted her entire ship here, away from battle, to—scold him? Knock him down a peg?

“I came to see my friend.” And there’s the danger, when she steps outside of the relationship he can read in the files and wants to talk to Lorca, not Captain Lorca.

“Okay. Why don’t we stop talking like Starfleet officers, Kat, and start talking like friends?” Kat, he thinks, is appropriate to whoever she believes Gabriel Lorca is. He pulls out a bottle of Scotch and offers it. The Lorca she thinks she knows seems like the kind of man who would have drunk Scotch with an admiral friend.

But she’s digging for something. They toast, and she reminisces about finishing a bottle together watching the Perseids meteor shower, asks if he remembers, and he tries to smooth past it. Cornwell is someone from this Lorca’s past and every time they step outside rank, he has to watch for traps.

“We were so young, with grand plans for the future.” She’s a little misty. He wants to believe she’s sincere.

“Well, some of us still have.”

“I know.” She waits, then says, “I worry about you, Gabriel. Some of the decisions you’ve been making recently have been...troubling.”

He tries to deflect. “Well, war doesn’t provide too many opportunities for niceties.” He’s not paying as much attention to this conversation as he should be, waiting to hear something from Saru that the mission has succeeded, that Burnham is home safe.

“You’re pushing this crew. You’re putting the ship in harm’s way. You’ve been ignoring orders.”

“I’m in the front line, Kat. You’ve got to make decisions in a second, sometimes less.”

She’s unconvinced. She tells him he hasn’t been the same since the Buran—truer and truer. He can’t even say he’s the same Lorca who stumbled into this universe off his Buran. She brushes off the successful psych evals and asks how he’s feeling, after being tortured.

Lorca can’t help but laugh at that. “Are we in session? Because I didn’t know you were practicing again.” She smiles. “If I have your undivided attention for fifty minutes...” He sets down his glass and leans in. “I can think of a whole bunch of other things we could be doing.” Of course it’s not in any records, but he can read a person well enough to be pretty sure of this history between them. He lays a hand on her knee and he’s right, of course. She stands up and takes off her pin.

The funny thing is that it almost does feel familiar, even though they’ve never done this. She’s generous, affectionate, stroking his face and sliding her hands over his shoulders, his chest, smiling almost sadly as they move together. Lorca regrets momentarily whatever he’ll have to do to her to keep his ship.

It’s a testament to how this universe has softened him that he falls asleep with another person in his bed and wakes up with his hand around her throat and a phaser to her head. “I’m sorry,” he says, and he knows it’s too late to salvage the situation. “I’m sorry, I’m not used to having anyone in my bed.” He shouldn’t have let himself drop his guard, shouldn’t have let Burnham’s absence distract him from caution—she’s a tool, she’s supposed to be a tool, but he’s rapidly losing control of that.

Cornwell shoves him off. “You sleep with a phaser in your bed, and you say nothing’s wrong?” He tries to stop her, but she says, “All these months, I have ignored the signs, but I can’t anymore. The truth is you are not the man I used to know.”

“Of course I am,” he says.

She knows he isn’t, though. She tells him that he lied on his psych evals, he’s blinded everyone else, and that this, tonight, showed it. “Now I see that it’s even worse than I thought. Your behavior is pathological. That’s what tonight was, right? Trying to get me to back off? Because it sure wasn’t what it was like before.” He wonders what it was like, with her Lorca, as she zips her uniform back on and replaces the pin. He’d tried to play whoever that man had been, but clearly he hadn’t succeeded. “This is bigger than us. You said it yourself, we’re at war. I can’t leave Starfleet’s most powerful weapon in the hands of a broken man.”

“Don’t take my ship away from me. She’s all I’ve got.” He’s been still, trying not to spook her, but now he leaps off the bed and follows her to the door. “Please, I’m begging you.” He can’t let himself panic. He tries to tell her what she wants to hear--“You’re right, it’s been harder on me than I let on, and I lied about everything, and I need help.”

“I hate that I can’t tell if this is really you,” she says, and he never should have done it, never should have tried to slip into whatever familiarity she had with her Lorca, because it’s falling apart faster than it would have otherwise. She walks out the door. He’s still reeling from it when Saru comms to tell him that they have Lieutenant Tyler, they have Sarek—says nothing about Burnham but she must be all right, Saru would have said it she was injured—and he’s on his way to sickbay.

Burnham is safe. And, standing outside of sickbay, she presents the solution to all his problems. “He’ll live,” she says, watching Sarek, “but Dr. Culber says he can’t meet the Klingons in his condition. The window for the talks closes in a few hours. Even if the Federation wanted to step in, they couldn’t get there in time.”

But Cornwell can, and Lorca sees how it will go now—she’ll take any chance, however obvious a trap it is, and she’ll leave this ship before

she can take it from him. Burnham turns to face him as he talks it through. “You did well, Burnham,” he says. “You should be proud.”

She looks at Sarek through the glass. “As much as it would displease my Vulcan mentor, I’m feeling a lot of emotions right now.” And willing to admit it—she must be drowning in them. “I’m not sure pride is one of them.” She turns back to him and says, “But I do want to thank you. Sir, you didn’t have to mount this rescue mission for Sarek.”

“I didn’t do it for him,” he says. It’s the most obvious thing in the world—he moved heaven and earth and Starfleet’s most powerful ship to rescue her father, not to save an ambassador—but she looks surprised somehow at the implication. He’s caught off-guard and waits too long before trying to change course, saying, “I need a team around me that’s going to help me carry the day, and that includes you. So I’d like to make it official. There’s a post waiting for you on the bridge—science specialist. Don’t even think about saying no.”

Lorca expects her to try to decline the way she has every other thing he’s offered, but she says “I accept” on the heels of his offer. He turns to walk away and her voice catches him. “I’m grateful to serve under a captain like you.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that. Finally, all he can manage is a half-smile and a nod. He didn’t do it for Sarek. She’s grateful to serve under a captain like him. He didn’t do it for Sarek.

Cornwell agrees to the summit like he knew she would. As she leaves, she tells him, “I don’t want to ruin your career. When I return, we’ll talk about how you step down. And after you get some help, maybe we’ll talk about how you get back in that chair.”

He doesn’t bother to argue. Instead he tells her, “May fortune favor the bold, Admiral. Good luck with your negotiation.” He knows it’s probably a trap, and he has to want it to be a trap to save himself, but he genuinely regrets that she’s the one who has to be caught in it. If she weren’t such a threat, he might have tried to persuade her not to go—to send someone less important, someone who hadn’t stroked his cheek in the dark and said “Gabriel” softly, kindly.

\* \* \*

It is a trap. Was there really ever any doubt? Even if the Klingons would have negotiated with the Vulcans, they would never have talked terms with a Starfleet admiral. (He admits that this belief is primarily based on his experience of Vulcans and Klingons in his own universe, but it seems likely here too.)

Saru brings him the news, clearly expecting a black alert and an immediate rescue mission. After all, they just used the spore drive for an expressly forbidden rescue and used experimental mental augmentation to locate someone who wasn’t even a member of Starfleet, and before that used illegal genetic manipulation to effect another rescue in Klingon space. Their directive might as well be search and rescue, at this point.

“Notify Starfleet Command. Ask for orders.” At Saru’s shocked expression, Lorca adds, “Is there a problem?”

His threat ganglia must be fully raised by now. Saru has made clear that he would prefer a different captain, one less inclined to violate orders and bring on mutineers—not aloud, of course, because he would never say such a thing, but in every gesture and response and tone of disapproval when Lorca gives orders. “In the past…we have engaged in alternative thinking in these matters.”

Lorca needs him to believe that this new hesitance is based on Starfleet’s most recent attempt to rein him in, not that there’s some reason he wants to leave Cornwell in Klingon hands. “What if we go after her and it’s another trap, Mr. Saru? Did you consider that? Starfleet can’t afford to lose the Discovery—she’s bigger than all of us.” There, that was the party line, the explanation that should satisfy Saru’s lingering fears by hewing to Starfleet Command’s instructions. “If so ordered, we will try and rescue the admiral, but not without authorization.” And Starfleet probably won’t authorize it—it’s one thing to send the Discovery after him, her captain, when he has intimate knowledge of her workings, and Cornwell is important, but she isn’t in charge of the cornerstone of their defense.

“I will hail Starfleet now, sir,” Saru says. Who would he take his concerns to, anyway? He wouldn’t trust Burnham the mutineer with unease about the captain, not when he seems to think she’s always on the verge of mutiny. And not the new chief of security, who is Lorca’s creature through and through. Stamets is too high on the mycelial network and Lorca is the one who keeps him on it. Everyone else is too afraid of Lorca to question him. No, he’s safe here—his own fiefdom, his own universe. Discovery is safe from Starfleet as long as he’s on board.

After Saru leaves, Lorca stares at the stars through the windows in his quarters. He doesn’t fear danger on this ship, but the phaser is comforting at the small of his back. This universe may be softening him, but he would have done the same thing even to Burnham if she’d touched him in the middle of the night. Michael had liked to wake him sometimes, if he’d fallen asleep in her bed, for the adrenaline rush of it. He doesn’t fall asleep in beds that aren’t his own anymore.

Lorca can admit—to himself alone, never aloud—that he’d loved Michael, for however he’d defined love in his universe. She’d been ablaze, an ion storm, a warp core on the verge of overload, bloody lips and burning hands, laughing easily, feelings always clear. They’d used each other as tools, of course, but he’d always thought it was far more than that.

He doesn’t know what it would be like in this universe.

## magic to make the sanest man go mad

### Chapter Summary

Stamets tells him, with an inappropriate level of relish, about all the different ways that Mudd killed him. “And those are only the ones I know about,” he adds. “He killed you in most of the other time loops too, but I wasn’t right there to see those deaths.”

Starfleet doesn’t send them after Cornwell, as he knew they wouldn’t. The days blur.

Jump. Kill Klingons.

Jump. Approve Stamets’ experiments.

Jump. Practice killing Klingons.

Jump. Kill Klingons.

Jump. Watch Burnham on the bridge.

Jump. Watch Tyler for risk.

Tyler is not a security risk. He’s careful, obedient, dedicated to whatever Lorca asks of him. He has less spine than Landry did, but otherwise is an adequate replacement.

Tyler also makes Burnham smile. Lorca discovered this while monitoring him to make sure he really isn’t a security risk; he and Burnham eat lunch together, and when Tyler grins, all dimples and tousled dark hair, she smiles back. She doesn’t smile at Lorca.

They’re winning the war. Burnham is steady on the bridge, creative when things go wrong, clear-headed when Detmer loses navigation control or Rhys accidentally fires a torpedo in the wrong direction. She and Cadet Tilly keep Stamets grounded as he begins to float off into the mycelium network. She watches Tyler on the bridge and sometimes half-smiles when he looks at her. Lorca preferred it when he was grim and bloody and beating Klingons to death.

But there’s nothing to be done about that. Lorca doesn’t think of himself as a jealous man; Michael slept with others while they were together, just as he did. Plenty of them made her smile. He brought Tyler on board to protect himself, and Tyler is protecting Burnham too, which protects Lorca in turn. Burnham is a tool. She’s not Michael.

Lorca allows the crew to throw a party. Cornwell wasn’t wrong that he pushes the crew hard, and they have victories to celebrate; there are enough capable people to rotate through so that everyone has the chance to go. He doesn’t, of course. As Tyler leaves the bridge, already giddy, he asks, “Captain, are you coming?”

There’s a long silence, until someone—Lieutenant Rhys, it sounds like—chokes back a laugh. Lorca doesn’t look at Burnham. “No, Lieutenant,” he says. “I’m sure you’re qualified to keep everyone safe.” Lieutenant Rhys laughs again and Lorca takes note as they file out, Tyler and Burnham and Rhys and Detmer.

“Sir,” Saru begins, “If—”

“Monitor for any incoming warp signatures,” Lorca tells him. “We don’t want a Klingon surprise.” He stands up and walks to the front of the bridge, surveying the empty space outside. He’s not interested in watching his crew fall all over each other and then into each other’s beds like drunk cadets at the academy. He’s not the kind of captain who goes to parties, or eats in the mess hall, or spends leisure hours with crew—well. He doesn’t take leisure hours. Saru has the conn when Lorca sleeps, which isn’t for very long. But he allows himself to imagine Burnham at the party. She didn’t bring civilian clothes onboard, only her prison jumpsuit, but she might not keep her uniform zipped all the way to the top in the heat of the party. He wonders what she’ll be like when she’s drinking—loose-limbed, friendly, talkative? Will she laugh easily, touch Tyler, slip away to a dark corner with him? Or fall back further into her Vulcan persona, feign confusion at silly human customs, bafflement at their drunken displays of emotion?

“Sir, I have an unknown signal on sensors,” Saru tells him. “I recommend that we recall Science Specialist Burnham and Lieutenant Tyler to the bridge.”

“If you think they’ll be sober,” Lorca says. It hasn’t been that long since they left for the party, but who knows what’s happened in the interim. It doesn’t take long for Burnham and Tyler to return. He looks both over as they take their positions. Burnham is straight-backed and serious as ever, and he wonders if she didn’t drink at all. He’d assumed that Cadet Tilly would at least feed her a shot of liquor or two as soon as she arrived. Did Vulcans drink? Or was she just unwilling to risk her self-control? Tyler is different—calmer, slower—and maybe he should have called a different security officer to the bridge, but it’s too late now.

“Captain, the unidentified signal I monitored is directly ahead,” Saru says, and he turns away from the viewscreen and walks back to his chair.

“All right, yellow alert, Mr. Saru. Shields up, phasers to standby.” Maybe he’ll have some excitement tonight after all, something to occupy his thoughts.

“Copy that, sir. Topping up,” Tyler says, and he’s fast enough, at least.

“Scanners identify the object as biological, xenologic classification: gormagander.” If Burnham is remotely affected, he can’t hear it. “Its health appears to be compromised.” Tyler stares at her dumbly.

“Cancel the yellow alert, Mr. Saru.” Not exactly birds of prey. “Thought those things had been hunted to extinction.” In his universe, at least, there were no wild gormaganders; even farmed gormagander was a delicacy.

“Hunting isn’t the cause of its reduced numbers,” she says, and looks at him. “It’s primarily due to their mating practices,” and he can’t tell if he’s imagining the extra emphasis on the last two words, but he turns his chair to face her fully. “Or lack thereof. They spend their lives feeding on alpha particles in solar winds. They’re often so consumed by this task that they ignore all other instincts.” Tyler is gaping at her.

“That’s as depressing a trait as I’ve ever heard,” Lorca says, and turns his chair back to face front. He shifts a little in the chair. He doesn’t need to hear about the mating practices of gormaganders, or Burnham’s thoughts on the issue, or see Tyler’s reaction. Mudd saves him from that misery.

The ship explodes. Lorca dies.

Mudd shoots him. Lorca dies.

Mudd stabs him. Lorca dies.

Mudd transports him into space. Lorca dies gasping.

Mudd tells Lorca to beg and he’ll spare the crew. The words stick in his throat. Mudd cuts it.

Mudd tells Lorca to beg and he’ll spare Burnham. Lorca begs. Mudd burns him from the inside out.

Mudd disintegrates every person on the bridge in front of Lorca, Burnham last—it takes up almost all of that time loop—and then kills him with dark matter. Lorca dies screaming.

In the time he knows, though, Tyler and Burnham come to the bridge. Burnham says, “Sir, you have to listen to me, we’re in a time loop and we have to act quickly.” She leans down and whispers, so quietly that it’s barely more than a hot breath, “You said you would believe me if I told you that you should remember the Emperor’s daughter.” She moves so quickly that her lips brush the shell of his ear before she steps back.

Lorca jerks away from her words and slams one hand down on the armrest of his chair. She smells like sweat and sweet liquor from the party and there’s a fleck of glitter at the corner of one eyes. Things must have been desperate for him to risk mentioning Michael. “Go ahead,” he says. “Do whatever you need to.” He must have believed they were all going to die anyway to have told her.

Tyler programs something into his chair and retakes control of the computer. Lorca has to swallow the bitter taste of turning the ship over to Mudd, however temporarily. He has to tell Mudd that he’ll trade the lives of the rest of his crew for Burnham, the ship, and Stamets, that he can’t have a repeat of the Buran—that they’ll do whatever their new masters want, as long as the crew goes free. He assumes that Mudd plans to kill him before it’s over, and he holds out his hand for Mudd to shake. This is the plan, he tells himself. This is finesse, not what he wants, which is to grip the man’s hand, pull him in close, and then, with one hand on Mudd’s chin and the other on his shoulder, snap his neck. Throw his body to the floor, shoot him just to be sure. Maybe even twice.

Lorca fights himself. He lets his arm go limp as Mudd shakes it, and then steps back, the picture of defeat, as Mudd gloats, “This is your last chance to stop me... You’ve only got about 30 seconds before we rejoin the time stream and there’s no going back.”

The time expires and a ship appears. He starts to follow Mudd, Burnham, and Stamets to the transporter, but Mudd tells him, “Not you, old man. Lorca, I’m really going to miss killing you.” Letting him take Burnham and Stamets alone wasn’t the plan—Lorca was supposed to be there, be the easy target—but he can’t fight it now without ruining everything.

\* \* \*

Once Mudd has been sent on his way and they’re all safe, Stamets seems to forget the horror of it, or at least covers well by gleefully telling everyone what happened to them in the previous timelines. Down in Engineering, while Burnham does something with a spore drive, Stamets tells him, with an inappropriate level of relish, about all the different ways that Mudd killed him. “And those are only the ones I know about,” he adds. “He killed you in most of the other time loops too, but I wasn’t around to see those deaths.”

Then, like a child distracted by a sparkle, he turns to Burnham and says, “You and Tyler danced—well, I had to teach you to dance, but after that you managed!” He lowers his voice as much as he ever can and says, “And you kissed! Finally!”

Burnham has had her eyes fixed straight ahead ever since Stamets began describing Lorca’s deaths. “Lieutenant,” Lorca says. “Are we done here?”

“What? Oh, yes, yes, I’ll implement this with our next jump.” Stamets waves a hand at him. “Back to the bridge with you.”

“I’m going that way too,” Burnham says, and follows him out.

“My ready room, Burnham. This was a catastrophe and I want to hear how we make sure the next gormagander doesn’t kill us all. Computer.” In the next moment, they’re in the ready room. He walks behind his desk as the lights come up slowly. “I suppose I should ask Mr. Saru and Lieutenant Tyler to join us,” he says, though he’s not eager to do so.

“Captain,” she says, and it’s not her usual tone of assent.

“Burnham?” He realizes what’s about to happen. He can see her struggling to find the politest way to demand an answer from him; that he can

see her struggle at all is alarming.

“The Emperor’s daughter, sir?” She lifts her eyes to his and holds him there, transfixed. The lights are still rising.

To look away would be an admission. “Someone I knew. Well.” Lorca can’t hold her eyes anymore—he glances away, down, to the bowl of fortune cookies, and picks up one by the corner. He remembers handing her one, that night that he asked her to stay, the brief moment when their fingers touched.

“Before the Buran.” She’s not really asking him. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

He has to look back at her then. Burnham has never requested permission to speak freely. He nods once and sets the cookie down. Then he sets his hands carefully apart, carefully casual, on the smooth surface of the desk and nods again.

“Sometimes,” she says, and then stops, clears her throat, straightens her spine. “Captain, there are times that you look at me and appear to see...someone else. In my place.”

This is excruciating, and he can’t do it like this. He reaches down behind the desk and grasps the bottle of whiskey he’d shared with Cornwell before he sent her to her death. Burnham’s face registers mild surprise when he puts it on the desk, more when he reaches down again and sets out two glasses. But she doesn’t say anything more. She’s waiting to see what he does next.

Lorca pours a splash, and only that, into each glass while he tries to think how to answer. He passes one of the glasses to her and lifts his own to his lips, closing his eyes; he finds himself swallowing it all. When he opens his eyes, he sees that she’s finished her glass. But she doesn’t say anything more.

“Yes,” he says, and his voice sounds like gravel. “Sometimes.”

She reaches over to the bottle of whiskey and pours a little more in her own glass, drinks it down. He follows suit.

“You told me to tell you to remember the Emperor’s daughter.”

“I did.” He regrets it now, of course.

“That’s who you see.” Burnham still sounds steady, calm, because she doesn’t know how catastrophic one wrong word would be for him.

“You remind me of her. In some ways.”

“And...you cared for her.” She speaks each sentence the way she does when describing the solution to a problem, each word a dawning realization that leads to the end.

The silence holds for a long time, long enough that his answer must be apparent. “Burnham,” he says finally, “she’s dead. It was partly my fault. You remind me of her less and less every day.” All true.

“You...loved her?” She hesitates on ‘loved.’ He wonders if Vulcans even say it.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, and the anger is growing, the impatience with the tension building beneath this conversation. What is he worried about? That she’ll accuse him of being from another universe? Of all the answers, that has to be the most ludicrous. Let her think she reminds him of a dead lover who was the daughter of an emperor, it’s close enough to the truth. “Burnham, if you have a real question, ask it. We have more important things to do than discuss my past.”

“Captain,” she says. “I admit to a certain lack of personal experience with human behavior—”

“You were on the Shenzhou for seven years, you know how to interact with humans. You didn’t beam here straight from Vulcan. What is it, Burnham?”

“I asked you a question and you took out a bottle of whiskey,” she says. “That is a disproportionate response.” He hates when she does this, when she plays Vulcan to distance herself from whatever’s happening but expects the humans to explain themselves.

“Getting a bottle of whiskey would be a proportionate response to plenty of questions.” He picks up the bottle to demonstrate and refills his own glass.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He drains the glass, refills it. “Burnham, go away. I’m going to stay here and ponder my own mortality. Dismissed.”

“Sir—”

“Permission to speak freely rescinded, specialist. Dismissed.”

She finally obeys, thank god. The last thing he wants is to stand here, drinking steadily more whiskey, thinking about Stamets saying, “He told you to beg for Burnham’s life and you did. He killed her last,” with Burnham right in front of him, Burnham who’s glad to serve under a captain like him. No, worse than that would be to walk to her, to pull her to him, tilt her face up and kiss her long and slow in a way he’d never kissed the Michael he knew. Take her into the low light of his quarters, scatter the pieces of her uniform across the floor, lay her back on the bed—slide down between her legs and lick until she was shaking and gripping his hair to hold his head in place—slip two fingers inside of her, glance up to see her watching him until she came clenching down around his fingers, soft little moans from her mouth. And he would be hard, desperate, slide into her while she was still shuddering, lose all thought—



That would be worse. Remember the Emperor’s daughter. Burnham is a tool. They died eighty-seven times according to Stamets and it only takes once more to stick.

Chapter Summary

“Black alert. Get us out of here,” he says, and it takes too long but they jump away from the wreckage, the bodies tumbling out into space. For a second, he sees the last moments of the Buran, the flashes of light that burned his eyes past their ordinary sensitivity, the way it morphed from ISS to USS as the Charon and then the Klingons tore great chunks out of its hull.

They fight and jump, fight and jump, over and over. They save hundreds of lives—hundreds of souls, the Federation likes to say. He wonders, occasionally, how they tally those souls. How sentient does the Federation require a species to be before they believe it has a soul?

The Terran Empire would never talk about souls.

Lorca takes Discovery to Pahvo, the mysterious planet of light and music, to turn it into a weapon. “You’ll have to modify the electromagnetic frequency to match the Klingons,” Stamets says. He wears a dazed expression on his face lately, and his magical mushroom feel-good high has turned inward. He had better last longer than the damn tardigrade did. “It’s the only way to make the invisible Klingons appear.”

“Yes,” Burnham says, adjusting her pack. She’s already standing on the transporter pad and has been for fifteen minutes longer than planned while Stamets repeats himself.

Tyler is less patient with Stamets. “You told us already.” He is, fundamentally, a prosaically-minded soldier who feels little wonder at the magic of the spore drive. Lorca can tell that he doesn’t look at the spores floating like shining dust motes in the spore chamber and imagine the possibilities; his mind is on a concrete mission, and then an end to the war.

“I just want to make sure you get it right,” Stamets tells him. “I don’t want us broadcasting Madame Butterfly instead.” At Tyler’s apparent lack of recognition, he throws up his hands and says, “Madame Butterfly? The classic opera that culminates in the suicide of a teenage girl? Not the right mood.”

Saru clicks in concern and says, “Lieutenant Stamets, I assure you, we will perform our task properly. You need not worry about us.”

“You’re sure they can’t transport in closer?” Lorca doesn’t like how long this will take, how many variables there are. He can rely on Tyler to keep the other two on track, but still, the less time off the ship, the better.

“Captain, as I have already told you, several times”—Stamets flings emphases on whatever syllables he can—“the crystal structure’s transmitter will scramble anyone or anything that we transport down within 30 kilometers. I don’t think you want them coming back scrambled.”

“No.” Lorca trusts Stamets with the science, at least. He can feel Burnham watching him. She does it more and more, lately, head tilted minutely like she’s examining a set of results. They haven’t spoken privately since he told her to get out, and he wonders if she’s chalked the whole thing up to a very human tantrum, or if she’s still contemplating all the things he didn’t mean to say. “Finish your mission as quickly as possible and come back alive,” he says, which is the closest thing to “good luck” that he can manage right now. “Mr. Stamets, energize.”

He watches Burnham dissolve into gold light. It hurts his eyes to watch. He’s not the kind of captain to go with an away team. Oh, he can fight, he can kill, armed or bare-handed, has done it plenty of times, but he’s tethered himself to Discovery now. The last time he left, he was tortured by Klingons, and he doesn’t have time for that.

\* \* \*

Lorca hates to admit it, but they’ve gotten overconfident. While waiting for the away team, they hear the distress call from the Gagarin and jump, expecting it to be—not easy, but routine. Standard. Blow up some Klingons, save the day. “This is U.S.S. Discovery,” he says, “We’ve got your back.” Routine.

But Rhys can’t seem to fire the damn phasers and Owosekun tells him that the Klingon ships are invisible to their sensors. Everything gets worse from there. They take heavy Klingon fire and then...a Klingon destroyer appears beneath Gagarin, two battle cruisers too; Gagarin has no shields and Discovery is at 32 percent.

He can’t lend the Gagarin shield percentage, so he tells Detmer, “Get us between the Klingons and the Gagarin.” Slowly, agonizingly, the ship shifts its bulk to protect Gagarin, and Discovery takes a direct hit, bridge heaving, sparks showering. He nearly falls at the impact. Someone is unconscious and bleeding on the floor, no time to figure out who, and sirens are going off all over the ship

“Shields below ten percent!” Owosekun yells.

“Did we get both torpedoes? Did we get them both?” The only reason to take the fire at all was to take them both—

The explosion sears his eyes. One torpedo got past them.

“The Gagarin is gone.” He doesn’t know much of Discovery would have survived, if both had hit. He shouldn’t have put Discovery in the line of fire like that. “Black alert. Get us out of here,” he says, and it takes too long but they jump away from the wreckage, the bodies tumbling out into space. For a second, he sees the last moments of the Buran, the flashes of light that burned his eyes past their ordinary sensitivity, the way it morphed from ISS to USS as the Charon and then the Klingons tore great chunks out of its hull.

Lorca tells the crew that they can grieve later and goes to vent his anger on whatever member of Starfleet command will answer. It's the Vulcan admiral, Terral, who tells him that two more ships are gone, the Hoover and Muroc, all ambushed, all destroyed. Four hundred and sixty-two souls, by Starfleet standards. The mission on Pahvo is the only hope they have—Burnham is the only hope, really. She always seems to be. And all he can do is wait, maintain radio silence, and...wait.

He wants to go find another fight. It's killing him to sit here, mute, while they repair their shields bit by bit, listening for any whisper from the surface or the slightest hint of a threat in the sky. He's calculated a hundred times how long it should take the away party to reach their destination; average human walking speed of six kilometers per hour on flat ground, thirty kilometers' distance to travel would take five hours with no breaks. But they'll have to rest, at least briefly, and from the scans Pahvo is hilly, densely forested and steep. Its atmosphere has less oxygen than they're used to. They'll probably have to spend one night, if not two, to make it, and then who knows if the transmitter's new frequency will allow them to transport back or if they'll have to hike all the way back to the original transport spot...Lorca's calculations are not helpful. He's been awake for at least thirty hours now, maybe more.

Culber pages him, and, reluctantly, Lorca cedes the conn to Detmer. He arrives in the blinding white of sickbay and says, "Doctor?"

"Captain." For once, sickbay is empty; they've patched up everyone who was injured in the disastrous fight to save Gagarin. Culber beckons him through the door and then ambushes him with a tricorder.

It trills an alarm at him. Lorca swats it away. "I'm fine," he says. "What do you want, doctor?"

Culber presses a button on the tricorder and it begins flashing red. He sighs. "Sir, I know you won't appreciate this, but I have to order you to sleep."

"What?" Of all the preposterous things to say right now.

"Starfleet regulations require that no officer work for more than twenty hours without at least four hours of sleep," Culber says. "You've worked substantially longer than that."

"We're in a crisis. The regulations don't apply."

Culber is gentle, trying not to spook him. "Captain, you're well beyond the limits. We're not in a crisis—"

"We're at war!" Lorca should leave. Culber can't hold him here, not physically, and he's not going to call Starfleet just to complain that Lorca won't sleep.

"We've been at war for eight months." Culber puts a hand on his shoulder. Lorca must look terrible, for Culber to dare that. "Two hours, Captain. I'm not even asking for the full four. Close your eyes for two hours. You can trust Detmer for two hours. They'll all have orders to wake you if there's the slightest sound from the surface or any hint of an incoming warp signature."

His alarm doesn't sound. Lorca sleeps for six hours, swimming in darkness. If he dreams, they're empty. He wakes to the sound of someone saying, "Captain, they've returned," over the comm.

If Culber thought a nap was going to make him feel better, he was wrong. Lorca had already been exhausted, running on adrenaline and anger; those supposedly crucial six hours of sleep have dissipated the adrenaline and left only the anger, the impatience, the need for action. He comes to the bridge to learn that Saru had some kind of emotional meltdown on Pahvo, attacked Burnham and Tyler, tried to ruin the mission altogether.

"He's resting in sickbay now," Burnham tells him when she and Tyler report, and of course, why not.

Lorca stares out the front viewscreen at the blue planet below. Something else is wrong. He can hear a sound building. "You said the adjustment to the Pahvan transmitter was a success."

Burnham turns. "I thought it was, sir. The Pahvans repaired our signal inhibitor after Saru destroyed it...I watched it happen."

"Mr. Bryce?"

The noise is getting worse. "The signal strength has increased by a factor of ten to the twelfth power," Bryce tells him. "The music's stopped." Burnham goes to her console. "All that's being transmitted now is a massive electromagnetic wave."

Burnham looks down at her console screen. "Captain, I don't understand. I thought the Pahvans—"

Lorca can't help but hate her right now. Of all the missions to blow—

"Sir, Specialist Burnham integrated our technology exactly as ordered," Tyler says. Lorca hates him too. His eyes are burning again. "We should now be able to detect any invisible Klingon ships within range of the Pahvan signal."

"Apparently not." He stands from his chair, walks forward, tries to tamp down the rage. "The transmitter is now sending out a new signal limited to two subspace bands—ours...and the Klingons." Lorca turns on Burnham. "What you did, Burnham, was invite the enemy to join us here."

Burnham refuses to be wrong. "No." She steps in front of Tyler. "The Pahvans did that. Their entire existence is an effort to bring harmony to discord, and they know about our conflict with the Klingons. They're trying to bring us together. They think they're helping."

"Captain," Rhys says, on the heels of that revelation. "Long-range sensors have detected an incoming Klingon vessel entering the system at high warp."

It's the Ship of the Dead, answering the Pahvans' call. Burnham walks up to him at the front of the bridge, says, "We're the Pahvans' only line of defense." And then she says what he knew she would: "We have to protect them, sir. We have to fight."

Lorca wanted a fight to distract himself while they were down on the planet, but this wasn't the fight he was looking for.

He shouldn't care about Pahvo, beyond its now-abandoned strategic potential. The Pahvans, whatever creatures they are, brought their oncoming doom upon themselves. If they knew about the Klingons from Saru's mind, they should have known intimately the only possible result of calling the Klingons here. But he can't help thinking of it as blind, stupid courage, a reckless faith that they have some chance of facilitating peace, even a willingness to die for it. Lorca sent Cornwell to her death on that same absolute willingness to risk herself for the slightest possibility. Did the Pahvans believe that he would stay to save them if negotiations failed? Did they see something in what Saru or Burnham or Tyler thought of him that told them he would protect them?

It doesn't matter why. Starfleet will order him to leave. The only question is how openly he'll defy them.

## Chapter Summary

"The risk of your death was unacceptable. Whether or not it happened," he tells her.

Burnham frowns. Her bloody lip splits further. The nurse looks heavenward—upward, at least—in an apparent plea for patience and moves the dermal regenerator back to Burnham's lips. "That's highly subjective. It depends entirely on the perspective of the person determining the relative values of a particular person's life and a mission objective." Her words are slightly muffled by the device.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Starfleet's answer to the Pahvo failure is predictable. All starships ordered back behind Federation lines, including Discovery. Yes, the Klingons will destroy Pahvo, but it isn't worth the Discovery.

Lorca argues with Admiral Terral on the bridge, where everyone can see it, instead of his ready room. Lets them all watch as he tells Terral what will happen, as Terral tells him that Pahvo was a failure and he has to retreat.

"You want me to run from a fight and leave a peaceful species to face annihilation?" His lip curls as he says it. The high-minded rhetoric of the Federation doesn't mean much, it seems.

"I'm sorry, but the logic is clear. You will jump to Starbase 46. Immediately." Terral throws all the emphasis on 'will,' and Lorca knows that Terral would transport on the bridge and take control himself if he could.

Lorca waits a moment, then tells Detmer to set course, warp five. Saru speaks up, of all the times, and asks for the chance to try to persuade Terral himself. Lorca feels a slight twinge of admiration for him, a Kelpien who wants to argue with an admiral, but ignores him. "At this speed, they'll be expecting us in three hours at Starbase 46. That's why we're warping and not using the spore drive." He raises his voice to the entire bridge crew. "I have no intention of reaching our destination. But if you're planning on disobeying a direct order, best not to advertise the fact." Detmer smiles at that. "So. You all heard the panicked admiral. Starfleet is tired of fighting the Klingon cloaking devices and losing. So am I." He meets the eyes of every one of the bridge crew in turn. "We have just under three hours to find a solution. If we can, we jump back. Defend Pahvo. If we can't..." He spreads his hands. "Let's get to it!"

Detmer and Owosekun grin at each other and turn back to their stations. He calls Stamets over. "I'm going to need some reasonable explanation for Starfleet as to why we're not currently using the spore drive. I understand you've had some trouble with your interface upgrades?"

Stamets has some minimal understanding of subtlety. He unzips his sleeve, rolls it up to display one of the implants. "Now that you mention it, um, it has been a little itchy."

"That's unfortunate." Lorca would have gone with a different word, if he'd been making the excuse, but it'll be enough. "Get down to medical bay, get a full examination."

Surprisingly, Stamets balks. "Is...is that completely necessary, sir?"

His resistance makes Lorca nervous for a host of reasons. "It's obligatory." It certainly is now. "I want Dr. Culber to run every single test possible. We need the data trail." And he needs to know if Stamets is falling apart.

\* \* \*

With less than two hours left, Burnham and Saru begin explaining how the cloak works, the imperfections in the gravitational field, the algorithm that could be written using information about those imperfections. Like every scientific plan that anyone's ever told him about on this ship, there are several giant holes in it.

"We'll do it by placing sensors on board the Klingon ship to relay data back to Discovery," Saru tells him.

"On the ship? With...a boarding party? One that has to physically beam over?" It sounds like a suicide mission. "All right, how do we get our people there?"

He's heard this plan before. Tempt the ship away, and beam on board in the split-second before it has its shields up. He's lived this plan before. Sometimes it works; sometimes soldiers never re-materialize or have limbs sheared off. And, worse than that, the sensors will take days to get the data they need. But they have the spore drive to help.

The linchpin of this plan—of every plan involving Discovery—is Stamets, and Stamets is sitting in sickbay, white matter trickling through his brain, with Culber trying to persuade him that he can't jump right now. Lorca takes Stamets from his partner, puts him in the ready room alone, and reveals the plan.

"You want me to make...a hundred and thirty-three jumps?" The color has leached out of Stamets, has been leaching out of him for days now. This might kill him, and Lorca realizes he would regret that. He likes this Stamets much better than his own, though that itself isn't saying

much. “Captain, there has to be another way. You heard—”

“I wish there were.” He walks closer to Stamets, because he does mean it. “I wish I didn’t have to ask you to make this sacrifice, but the Klingons won’t stop until they’ve destroyed everything in their path, everyone. And we can’t stop them without the spore drive. Without you.”

Stamets protests on technological grounds, says the spore drive wasn’t designed to do this, but he doesn’t really mean it. He is the explorer that Lorca says he is, after all. Lorca shows him the map of the mycelial network that he’s developed, the paths into parallel universes, and Stamets says, “Captain, I didn’t know you cared.”

“We have to win this war, but then...”

Stamets laughs a little, staring at the glowing images. “Then the journey continues.” He stands up straighter and turns to Lorca. “If we can save Pahvo, defeat the Klingons, and do all this, one hundred and thirty-three jumps it is.”

Lorca hopes it doesn’t kill him.

“Lieutenant Tyler,” he says as he walks onto the bridge, “Prep a boarding party for the Klingon ship. Two people, in and out.”

“I recommend that Specialist Burnham accompany me, sir.”

Lorca speaks before he’s even registered it. “Out of the question. It’s too dangerous.”

“The effectiveness of our sensors depends on their placement, at the points closest to the Klingon vessel’s stern and bow.” Burnham follows, explaining, as though he doesn’t understand why she would be useful. “But their bridge is roughly four times the size of any Federation ship. I’ve been there. Only one location will work. Lieutenant Tyler doesn’t know how to access it. I do.” She’s so earnest as she says it.

“Then you’ll tell someone else. You’re not going.” He’s losing control of this conversation, if he ever had it. He sits in the captain’s chair, looks away.

“Sir, you offered me a place on this ship—”

“And now I’m ordering you to stay!” Other people are starting to watch openly. “Is that understood?”

“You are the captain,” she says, and she’s confident that she’ll persuade him somehow. “But you are not using the full resources to ensure the success of your mission.” Owosekun and Detmer are staring. “There is no logic to your thinking.” He shakes his head and looks away. “Unless this is about me.” There’s the barest hint of a question under her words.

Lorca’s gut clenches and he turns slowly to look at her, trying not to reveal it, trying to look as though he can’t possibly understand what she means. He sees fleeting triumph on her face.

“I’m here on borrowed time,” she says, the conviction growing in her voice. “When you asked me to stay, it was to help you win this war. Given the time I spent on that Klingon vessel, I’m the most qualified crew member to place those sensors.” She draws a deep breath. “Otherwise, I have no purpose here.”

He knows everyone is watching, wondering. It’s hardly a secret, his professional regard for Burnham, but he’s revealing far more than professional regard by arguing. He has to nod, has to grit out, “Fine. Execute the mission as ordered, and get back here safely.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she says, and he realizes that every word she said forced him into that position, checkmate in three from the moment she first spoke. It’s viscerally satisfying to understand it, to see how she placed the pieces, even as he hates that he has to let her leave.

He opens a ship-wide channel as he sees the video link from the spore chamber—Culber, already grieving, doing anything he can to save Stamets; Stamets, stepping inside like it’s an execution chamber—and says, “We are about to face the most difficult challenge we have ever attempted. Today we stare down the bow of the Ship of the Dead, the same ship that took thousands of our own at the Battle of the Binary Stars. When I took command of this vessel, you were a crew of polite scientists. Now, I look at you, and you are fierce warriors all. No other Federation vessel would have a chance of pulling this off.” No other captain would risk his crew and his ship like this. “Just us. Because, mark my words, you will look back proudly and tell the world you were there the day the USS Discovery saved Pahvo and ended the Klingon war.”

The Ship of the Dead appears on sensors. They jump out of warp and back to Pahvo. In the instant that the monstrous ship decloaks, Burnham and Tyler disappear; after a desperately long second, Saru tells him that they’ve arrived safely.

Discovery leads the ship on a merry chase—bumpy, as Detmer promised. They jolt and lights flash and alarms go off and then Saru tells him Burnham has done it, the second sensor is in place—they fire, jump, jump, jump, Stamets shudders and jerks, Culber begs him to stop, to save Stamets—

and Lorca tells him, “You do whatever you have to do, you keep him alive until he finishes the jumps. Trillions of lives are at stake here. That’s an order, doctor,” and Culber does what he has to, to keep Stamets alive.

It’s beautiful dizzying, the way the stars streak and spin as they jump. Airiam tells him that the jump sequence is complete: Saru has the data, needs five minutes to break the cloak. Owosekun suggests that they jump away until they have the power to see the Klingons.

But it’s eerily quiet for the middle of a starship battle. He stands and walks forward for a better view. “Why aren’t they firing?” He realizes. “They’re thinking of leaving—I would.” He looks to Saru, then to Detmer and Owosekun, says, “We’re not going anywhere ‘til we have Burnham and Tyler back.” They’re out there, on that invisible ship, and he can’t lose them.

It only takes a minute more before Saru tells him that they can penetrate the cloak to transport their people back home, and another minute before Saru says, “Sir, Lieutenant Tyler and Specialist Burnham are safely back on board.” Lorca barely has time to be glad and then Saru

finishes, "...along with Admiral Cornwell, who's been injured, and a Klingon prisoner, who's been taken into custody."

"An extra prize. All right." In this moment, he refuses to worry what Cornwell will do. "Load all available photon torpedoes. Target the enemy ship." He walks to the front of the bridge

"Target acquired, sir. We can see them."

He pulls out his eyedrops, injects his eyes. He wants to be able to see this.

"Fire."

The explosion, and those that follow, are brilliant, blinding. He hears the bridge doors open and turns; there's Burnham, gloriously illuminated by the flashes, bloodied face beautiful and solemn as she meets his eyes. He's never felt such satisfaction in victory.

He goes to sickbay because he knows Burnham will be there and he wants to see her again. Dr. Pollard is scanning her with a tricorder and narrating to a nurse, who's collecting various supplies. "Concussion—ruptured eardrum—numerous contusions—fractured wrist—three broken ribs—" The litany continues.

Lorca crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow at Burnham. "All that from placing sensors?"

"They started to leave before the jumps were done," Burnham says. "I...delayed them. Mission executed as ordered." There's the tiniest bit of a laugh in her voice, stifled when the nurse holds a hypospray to her neck. "And you said it would be too dangerous."

"Are you...mocking a commanding officer, Burnham?" It slips out, overly casual in the relief of victory. He's drifted closer to the bio-bed where she sits, but he keeps his arms safely crossed so that he won't be tempted to reach out and touch her to check for himself that she's healing.

She arches an eyebrow as the nurse prods her broken ribs and says, "Sir, it is logical to identify past errors in thinking to avoid them in the future." She's definitely teasing him.

"Maybe we define 'too dangerous' differently," he offers.

The nurse runs a dermal regenerator slowly over the ring of wounds around her neck. "Given Starfleet's medical advancements," Burnham says, "only a mission involving a high likelihood of a particular individual's death would qualify as 'dangerous' for that person. A mission that is 'too dangerous,' then, could only be a mission in which the acceptable risk of a person's death was greater than the value of the mission objective." It's jarring to realize that he enjoys it when she acts overly Vulcan to tease him.

"And the risk of your death was unacceptable. Whether or not it happened," he tells her.

Burnham frowns. Her bloody lip splits further. The nurse looks heavenward—upward, at least—in an apparent plea for patience and moves the dermal regenerator back to Burnham's lips. "That's highly subjective. It depends entirely on the perspective of the person determining the relative values of a particular person's life and a mission objective." Her words are slightly muffled by the device.

"Yes."

She starts to turn her head, but the nurse grabs her chin firmly and holds it in place. "So it was about me."

"Burnham." He can't tell, but he thinks she's laughing at him. He hopes she is. "Stop talking and let the nurse fix your face." He turns to leave, then remembers that he had a question for her. "I hear you brought something back from the ship."

He means the prisoner, but Burnham opens one clenched fist and stares with wonder at the battered Starfleet pin within. She's clutched it so tightly that she's cut her hand on it. "My captain," she says. Lorca doesn't take offense.

The nurse sighs heavily and turns up the setting on the dermal regenerator.

\* \* \*

The incandescence of victory lasts only a few hours before the walls begin to close in. Tyler can barely walk straight without flinching at shadows. Cornwell is in surgery at a Starfleet hospital. Terral orders him to return to Starbase 46 with Discovery; they want to give him a medal and probably take away his ship for his "unorthodox methods." Stamets will only make one more jump.

If he doesn't go now, it may be years before Starfleet figures out how to run a spore drive without Stamets' genetic manipulation, and with Cornwell alive, he may never have a ship again, certainly not this one. He has the data now. There's no reason to wait.

Lorca returns to the bridge. He tells them they're going home. He calls the black alert, the one he's been waiting to call for months now. He pulls up the navigation override on his chair and begins to enter coordinates. He can feel Burnham watching, assessing, remembers that tiny laugh beneath her words in sickbay, that she's grateful to serve under a captain like him. He fumbles the numbers he's entering, closes his eyes, and tells himself that wherever they land will be destiny. "Go," he says.

Lorca has planned what will happen next. They will jump. Eventually, someone will figure out where they are, and he'll insinuate that it was Stamets's fault, say that they have to stay there and learn to survive as they find a way home, instead of figure out what happened. They'll find someone or something to tell them what he already knows, that Michael is dead and he's a fugitive. He'll feign surprise when Burnham comes to tell him.

He knows what he'll say to her, when she reveals their own history to him. "Amazing, isn't it? Different universe, but somehow the same people had a way to find each other. The strongest argument I've ever seen for the existence of destiny."

“I don’t know if I believe in destiny,” Burnham will say.

“Is that so? Sitting in that cell all alone, facing a life sentence of solitude, a future full of misery? A little part of you had to know that wasn’t the end of your story. You were destined for something more.”

“Destiny didn’t get me out of prison, Captain,” she’ll say. “... You did that.” And that’s where the plan he’s crafted so lovingly will start to fall apart. “The Emperor’s daughter,” she’ll say. “Sir. Which emperor was that?” And she’ll start to suspect, start to wonder, how it is that he could say she reminds him of the Emperor’s daughter, when he’s never been to this universe but their fates are intertwined, when he’s the one who plucked her out of prison.

No. He’ll find a way out of it. He’ll say something that she’ll accept, at least long enough. He’ll discover the history of the Defiant, try to subtly present it as their only way out—to pose as Captain Burnham and Gabriel, let Burnham bring him in as a prisoner. Saru will argue against it, unwilling to take the risk but also unwilling to defy his captain.

They’ll find the Shenzhou, because Burnham will need a ship. She’ll cuff him, prepare to bring him out, and he’ll say, “Wait.” He won’t ask her to do it, to make him bleed so the Terrans will believe it; instead, he’ll smash his own face against the wall, once, twice, until he’s appropriately bloody. Then she’ll march him out onto the bridge, push him to his knees, drag her nails across his neck, through his hair, as she presents her prize.

Burnham will struggle to let go of herself and turn into Michael, but she’ll do it. She’ll let him be put into the agonizer. She’ll leave him to scream himself hoarse, past hoarse, until no sound issues from his lungs, until he loses all grasp of time and space. Sometimes she’ll come to him and pull him out for a few fleeting minutes under the guise of interrogation as he twitches and shudders. It’ll be all the worse for that moment of softness when she puts him back inside and leaves him. Sometimes she’ll let him drink a little water—no food, he’ll only throw it up—and suggest that they leave, and he’ll have to persuade her that they should stay and that he should suffer more, because he needs her to take him to the Charon.

Eventually, the Emperor’s ship will find them, or they’ll find the Emperor. Burnham will take him and the Emperor will call her “daughter” and Burnham will know, know, then, but it won’t matter. He’ll take the palace. Burnham will fight her way through his soldiers and the Emperor’s alike, and he’ll have to remind his soldiers over and over that they cannot touch her, that they should die before hurting her. Maybe she’ll fight him too, and there is no universe in which he kills Michael Burnham. But he’ll win, and when he’s won everything, he will try to convince her to stay.

She won’t.

## Chapter End Notes

Away from canon we go.



Chapter Summary

He meets her eyes. "I would never let Starfleet put you back in prison."

"I know," she says, almost wonderingly. "I never thought you would."

The entire ship screams and shudders, as though every fastener is trying to pull free at once. It slams so hard that the artificial gravity disengages for a second and everyone is flung sideways—his wrist breaks against his chair, Detmer is thrown over her console. He sees sparks spraying in his peripheral vision and has to close his eyes against the pain; something is on fire. It feels like they've struck something, but when he can raise his head to see out the front of the bridge, there's nothing there.

Nothing at all, in fact. Not even stars. "Owosekun," he says, and she groans in pain as she sits up; she's bleeding freely from her nose. "Something wrong with the view?"

Owosekun wipes her nose on the sleeve of her uniform and tries to steady the data flashing across her control screen. "No, Captain," she tells him. "That's what's in front of us."

"Mr. Saru!" Saru stands up slowly, favoring one leg. "Find out where we are!" Lorca looks around the bridge—Rhys is down, unconscious; Detmer is crawling back around; Airiam looks more or less functional. Tyler is fine, but he can't see Burnham.

Lorca has taken three steps over to her station before he realizes what he's doing and then sees that it's unnecessary. Tyler is helping her up. Two of her fingers are broken, at least, and her lip is bleeding, but she's more intact than a lot of the bridge crew. She sees him approaching and freezes. To deflect, he says, "If your station is working, get me a damage report!" to the group at large, then walks back to his chair. He wants to slump into it, but someone has to look like things are under control.

"Captain, there's structural damage to the ship, reports of fires on decks three through ten, a lot of casualties but no deaths reported. Hull breaches on decks two and six but emergency bulkheads are holding." Owosekun wipes a smear of blood off her screen. "Reports still coming in, but it looks like we're intact. Shields at fifty percent."

"Any vessels detected? Warp signatures?"

"No, nothing—there's nothing out there!"

"Mr. Saru, anything?"

Saru shakes his head and continues to tap at his console's screen. "I'm sorry, sir, but our navigational array is...offline. It will be some time until I can determine our location. But it does appear that there are no enemy vessels."

"Small mercies," Lorca mutters. "Engineering?" It should have been his first thought. When no one responds, he repeats, "Engineering? What's your status?"

A quavering voice says, "Sir? Captain? It's Lieutenant Stamets. He's collapsed."

Lorca grips the armrest and then regrets it when pain shoots through his wrist. "Medical, get to Engineering, get Stamets. And send someone up here to deal with the bridge crew." He doesn't want anyone collapsing, but he knows sickbay is about to be overwhelmed with every cadet and specialist and cook who bumped their head in the—crash? Was it even a crash?

The bridge doors hiss open, admitting a doctor to triage the bridge. "Take Rhys and Detmer," Lorca tells her. Detmer, who still can't stand up straight, starts to protest, so he says, "Detmer, you're going to sickbay, you're not all right and I need you at your best." The doctor gives Owosekun a hypospray to stop the bleeding, tends to the various minor injuries. Lorca watches her rearrange Burnham's fingers into the right shape. Tyler is hunched protectively next to Burnham, and he still looks uninjured, but his face has taken on a glazed, panicked look. He hasn't looked quite sane since they returned from the ship.

Lorca looks away and begins scrolling through the damage reports that continue to arrive on his PADD. His eyes are throbbing and he's beginning to lose feeling in one hand. He's just examining a preliminary report on the status of the warp engines—not good—when Burnham says, "Captain.

He turns. She's standing next to him, close enough that he has to tilt his head up to squint at her face. "Burnham."

"You need your eyedrops," she tells him. "Here, it fell near my station."

She hands him the device and then mimes putting it to his eyes like he won't know what to do. He takes it, then realizes that with only one good hand, he can't hold his eyelid open and inject his eye at the same time. "Burnham, a little help?"

"What do you want me to do?"

Lorca tries to imagine letting someone else hold the device near his eye and can't accept it. "Hold my eyelid open. Gently."

Burnham presses her lips together and nods. She crouches down, and then, so that he can see her coming, she reaches slowly toward his face. She touches his temple, then lifts his upper eyelid with the slightest pressure so he can hold the device to each eye. He hadn't realized how badly his eyes hurt until now and he closes them gratefully, just for a second. But Burnham doesn't leave. Her hands ghost over his forehead, back to his temples, down to the corner of his jaw.

"Checking for skull damage?" Lorca doesn't want to open his eyes, doesn't want to break whatever miraculous island of stillness this is amid the chaos.

"Your skull appears intact," Burnham says. She fits her hand along the side of his face, runs her thumb so gently across his lower lip that he's not sure it happened. Lorca opens his eyes and tries to lift his own hand to touch her, and then swears, because his damn wrist is broken. "Your wrist is not. Doctor—"

Burnham steps back and the doctor descends with a tricorder and an osteogenic stimulator. She blocks his view of Burnham, and by the time he can see her again, Burnham is back at her station, Tyler too close at her side. Lorca worries that Tyler is going to fall apart quickly, now that they're... wherever they are. But maybe he's wrong, maybe Tyler is just overwhelmed—not ideal, for a security chief—and just needs to rest. He hopes that's the case.

He's not sure if he brought this down upon them by entering whatever coordinates in whatever universe he did, or by pushing Stamets too hard, or both. Undoubtedly he's responsible. But until Saru can tell him where they are—what universe they're in—he won't know what to do next. "Did we get it to Starfleet Command in time?" he asks aloud. "The algorithm?"

"We transmitted all of the data necessary to calculate the algorithm," Saru tells him. "We had not completed our own calculations before the jump. It is my hope that we will be able to finish them once we have... more information about our present situation."

"All right," he says. "Computer, open a shipwide channel." He pitches his voice to carry above the murmurs, through every hallway on the ship, every place with blood smeared on the floor and sparks flashing from the conduits, and says, "I want you all to know that wherever we are, whatever's happened to us, we gave Starfleet what they needed. We gave them the power to win the war." He can hear the cheers even through the closed bridge doors. The crew turn to each other, hugging carefully, wounds protected even as they do so. Tyler has pulled Burnham close, clinging to her like a lifeline, his head bowed and shoulders slumped. A broken man, Lorca hears Cornwell say.

Burnham is watching him from Tyler's arms. He would almost say she's smiling, if not for the raging storm he can see in her eyes. Two months ago, he wouldn't have been able to see it. Of course—she's only officially on loan from Starfleet prison until the end of the war. The war ends, she goes back to prison and her lifetime of self-flagellation.

There is no universe in which any version of Lorca allows anyone to take her, let alone back to prison. She should know that by now. "Mr. Saru, Mr. Tyler, Burnham. My ready room, fifteen minutes. Get... Cadet Tilly, from Engineering." She's just a cadet, but she works most closely with Stamets. And Burnham trusted her to run the mind-meld machine and provide moral support. "Find out everything you can before then and bring it to me."

Tyler returns first, sweaty, eyes a little unfocused. Not good. Saru has forgotten to let a medic treat his leg. Tilly, Burnham, and the strangest Andorian he's ever seen arrive together, Tilly trailing. She's been crying. It's still hard to reconcile this cadet with the Tilly that he knew. Tyler has been standing tense, every muscle locked in place, but he relaxes when Burnham arrives. "Sir," she says, and occupies the space next to Tyler, Tilly so close they're almost touching.

"Reports," he says.

The lack of information is maddening. "I am running a full diagnostic on our navigational array and all other sensors," Saru tells them. "I do not know what could cause this kind of complete failure. I have reviewed Owosekun's data and I can find no explanation for the apparent lack of stars or any other celestial objects."

"So we're flying blind."

"At least we're flying at all," the Andorian says. At his obvious total lack of recognition, she says, "Specialist Chrian, sir. I'm the primary warp drive technician."

He relaxes a little. "Ah. We don't use that much."

Tilly gulps. "Captain, because of the condition of... of the spore drive," she says, and her voice wavers a little on the words, "I thought it might be helpful for Chrian to report to you about the other way we fly."

"Good," he says. "What's the current status?"

One of Chrian's antennae twitches. "Our arrival wherever we are was pretty hard on the warp drive. It hammered most of the EPS conduits one way or another, and the warp containment field is just barely hanging in there. I shouldn't stay up here for long, I've got the others working on it as fast as they can, but we need every free hand."

"Can we warp?"

She shakes her head, antennae waving slightly. "Not yet. If we can patch it all together, it'll probably hold up to warp five, but I've only got so much to work with."

"Do what you can, Specialist." Chrian twitches like she's about to walk out and then remembers that she's in front of the captain and should wait to be dismissed. He saves her from her obvious impatience to leave by saying, "Dismissed, get back to the warp drive. Mr. Tyler, can you tell me anything?" There's a long beat of silence.

“Mr. Tyler, your report?”

Tyler flinches and shakes his head. “I apologize, sir. No sign of sabotage. No indication that someone transported aboard. Main phasers are operational, torpedo tubes need repair but don’t appear to be seriously damaged.” He’s still sweating. “No significant injuries among security personnel. And there aren’t any warp signatures that we can detect.”

“So we’re blind, we don’t know where we are, we’re barely flying, and we have limited weapons.” He looks at Burnham. “Any idea how we ended up here?”

“It appears there was some kind of anomalous input when we jumped,” she says. “I believe Lieutenant Stamets received corrupted navigational data when he was about to jump, which threw us off course.” He wonders if she saw him adjusting the jump coordinates. “Combined with the negative physical impact that the spore drive has had on his body, it could have been catastrophic. I haven’t been able to reproduce the corrupted data, so I can’t tell how it might have happened.” Burnham glances sidelong at Tilly. “We’re working on it, sir. Depending on his condition...Lieutenant Stamets may be able to give us a better sense of what happened.”

Lorca nods. “Update me when anything changes. That goes for all of you. We need to develop a plan for what happens next, and I need information from you to do it.” He smiles a little. “At least we won the war, even if we don’t get to see it. Dismissed.”

As they turn to leave, he says, “Burnham. A word.” She stays, even as Tyler looks panicked at the thought of separating for more than a moment. When they’re alone, he spreads one hand on the smooth top of the desk, rubs his other thumb against the edge. There’s the tiniest imperfection there, as though he hit it with something heavy and it fractured just barely. He meets her eyes. “I would never let Starfleet put you back in prison,” he says.

“I know,” she says, almost wonderingly. “I never thought you would.”

“You’re destined for something more.”

“Destiny didn’t get me out of prison,” she says. “You did.” She almost looks like she’s smiling.

Lorca heard this in his mind, knew what she would say, but it still hits him like a truck—the satisfaction in hearing her say it, the inexorable need to be closer as she does. He walks around the desk unthinkingly, steps toward her—the last time this happened, she’d mirrored his steps, one back for every one he took forward, but this time she doesn’t move away. “Burnham,” he says, his voice grating. He reaches out and grasps her shoulder, slides his hand down her back to her waist, slips his fingers under the edge of her uniform and strokes the hot skin beneath. She gasps a little, so quiet he can barely hear it, and closes her eyes. Lorca hooks his finger in the waistband of her uniform and tugs her closer until their hips meet, her body radiating heat against his own, and she pulls his head down to kiss her. Her chapped lips catch against his own, tongue slick, and she tilts her head to pull him closer.

Somehow they move and she’s pressing him against the wall, unzipping his uniform top and pushing it off—she breaks away just long enough to pull his shirt over his head—and then she’s dragging her nails across his bare skin, biting his neck and sucking until it bruises, catching his nipple between her teeth until his brain sparks. He turns them around, pushes her against the wall and she wraps her legs around him as he thrusts raggedly. Burnham is trying to drag his pants down without letting go of him when the comm chimes and Saru says, “Captain, I believe we’ve found something.”

“Fuck,” he says against Burnham’s neck, and pulls away just an inch, holding Burnham up until she finds her feet. He’s so tempted not to answer that it frightens him. But he’s saved by Burnham sliding away, bending over to retrieve his shirt from the floor—god what she does to him—and tossing it to him. She shivers a little and he wishes he’d torn off her uniform. The bruise on his neck throbs when he zips up his uniform, and he presses two fingers against it. He hears Burnham’s breath catch.

“You should—” she says, and walks back to him, unzips his collar just enough to reveal the bruise, and kisses it, wet, open-mouthed. Then she zips his collar back up, straightens it a little, runs her palms over his shoulders and his chest like she’s smoothing his uniform.

He comms Saru—it’s already been too long—and says, “I’ll be there shortly, Mr. Saru.”

\* \* \*

More accurately, Saru has found that there’s nothing wrong with their sensors. “It appears that we have jumped beyond the known portion of our galaxy,” he says. “My best estimate is that we are...here.” He points one finger well outside Lorca’s own mycelial map that hovers, glowing, on the screen.

“But we’re in our own universe?” Lorca asks.

Saru, Burnham, Tilly, and Chrian all stare at him. Tyler continues to gaze into the middle distance.

“Lieutenant Stamets and I discussed it, before the jumps at Pahvo,” he adds. “A full enough map of the mycelial network could allow us to travel to alternate universes that are also connected to the network. He believed that the 133 jumps might fill that in.” Stamets is in no condition to say that it had been Lorca’s idea. “It seems possible that he would have unintentionally jumped to the same coordinates as Starbase 46 in a different universe.”

Saru frowns. “...I suppose it’s possible...”

“How would we know?” He doesn’t want to push this too hard, not right now, but he needs to know as quickly as possible if they’re in his own universe.

“If we come across any object, I can examine its quantum signature to see if it matches our own,” Burnham says, her voice becoming more emphatic the way that it does when she’s presented with a new problem. “That should tell us whether we’re in our own universe.” She’s

flushed with excitement still, and Lorca has to work hard to look away from her. He can almost feel her fingers on him.

“Good.” He turns to Chrian. “While we’re waiting for the spore drive to come back online”—while they wait to see if Stamets ever recovers—“how quickly can you get us back to some kind of known space?”

“With the warp drive the way it is, I wouldn’t try more than warp five,” she tells them. “But if Saru is right, and if we don’t run into anything on the way—assuming time and space are the same here, which the lack of stars makes me doubt—it could be several weeks, maybe a month.”

That’s a grim thought, out in unknown space for a month, with a weary crew and no idea what enemies exist, what technology they have, how they’ll communicate. If they’re in his own universe, it’ll been worse. In Starfleet’s universe, other ships have gone out exploring—Enterprise hasn’t even come back for the war—and Discovery’s intended purpose was always exploration and scientific discovery, but this means limping home, hoping not to run into any obstacles, hoping nothing breaks. Including the people.

Chapter Summary

“I was never the wide-eyed explorer type,” he says, and it’s too honest. Gabriel Lorca probably was a wide-eyed explorer. “I wouldn’t mind trying it.

Things get stranger when they abruptly drop out of warp and the stars suddenly reappear all around them. Saru exclaims, “This can’t be possible!”

Lorca has been standing at the front of the bridge, staring out into absolute black, and he holds up an arm to block out the sudden brightness. “Mr. Saru?” He pulls out his eyedrops.

“Captain, I—we’re suddenly reading celestial objects in every direction, even from where we’ve come. I can’t explain it.”

“Why did we drop out of warp?”

Next to him, Detmer says, “The ship automatically drops out of warp if the navigation sensors detect a massive shift in what’s around us.” Her visual implant stopped working when they jumped, and the eye has turned entirely white. “It’s a safety measure.”

He looks back at the stars, and then reluctantly walks back to the captain’s chair. “I suppose that makes sense. Well, get us back to—”

“I’m detecting a Minshara-class planet,” Burnham interrupts. “Class M,” she clarifies.

“Pre-warp or warp-capable civilization?” Saru sounds a little less outraged at the sudden appearance of a planet.

She flips through the information on her screen. “No civilization at all. Captain, I’d like permission to take a team down to the planet and investigate.”

“We don’t have time for sight-seeing,” Lorca says. He suspects Burnham is going to persuade him otherwise. He diverted an entire ship in wartime for an expressly forbidden rescue mission, because she asked him to. She’s grateful to serve under a captain like him.

“Sir, whatever we find down there could help us learn more about where we are. I can examine the quantum signature of an object on the planet’s surface to see if it matches our own. And, given that we’re out past the reaches of anything that the Federation has explored, we don’t know how long it will be until another ship comes out here. We need to take samples of the flora and fauna and bring them home with us. This is what Discovery was built for. This ship can house hundreds of scientific missions at once—we have a responsibility to investigate the planet.”

He allows himself a very small smile at her enthusiasm. “Ten hours,” he says. “It’ll give engineering time to make sure the warp drive wasn’t damaged when we dropped out of warp. Then we have to continue on.”

“Permission to accompany Specialist Burnham?” That’s Tyler, of course. Lorca would send security with her anyway, and he hasn’t taken Tyler off duty yet. He doesn’t want another argument that ends in Burnham saying “unless this is about me.”

“Granted,” he says. “Take a shuttle, I don’t want to risk a transporter malfunction if there’s some unexpected interference. We’re even more alone out here.” Then he finds himself saying, “I’ll accompany you.”

The bridge falls silent but for Airiam’s faint whirring.

“Sir, is that wise?” Saru doesn’t say what everyone must be thinking, which is that he hasn’t gone on a single away mission in his entire command of the Discovery.

Lorca stands up. “I trust you with Discovery, Mr. Saru.” Other captains go with away teams. “I’ll try not to get captured by Klingons this time.” Too late, he remembers that he acquired Tyler in that capture and that Tyler might not benefit from the reminder. “Burnham, find another scientist to bring with you too. We’ll leave in half an hour—Mr. Saru, you have the conn.”

He doesn’t trust Tyler at this point. He should remove him as chief of security. But Lorca will be there on the planet with them, and he’s a match for Tyler if anything happens. He brings a second phaser, just in case, and straps a knife to his ankle. In the confines of a shuttle, a knife will be more effective. He hesitates, then adds a second knife. In his own universe, he would consider this lightly armed. And maybe this is his own universe.

At the shuttle, he finds Tilly with her arms full of sample containers. She’s running on a kind of manic energy, eyes too bright, and she talks even faster than usual, if that’s possible. “Sir!” she says. “I can’t believe you’re coming with us! Thank you so much for choosing me!”

“Cadet,” he says.

“Sorry, sir! Michael should be along any minute, I think she wanted the good tricorder.”

Lorca wasn’t aware that they had a bad tricorder. He walks onto the shuttle and sits down in the other pilot’s seat. Tyler has one hand on the controls and is staring out the front, breathing quickly. “Lieutenant,” he says. Tyler doesn’t acknowledge him. “Lieutenant!”

“Captain!” Tyler snaps back to awareness, startled to see him there.

“When we get back,” Lorca tells him, “You’re going to take some time. See the doctor.” Tyler turns reflexively as Burnham walks on board, and Lorca lowers his voice. “Right now I can’t trust you with her safety, and if I can’t, you’re no good to me.” As he says it, he remembers what he did to Cornwell when she threatened his position. The words are already out, though.

“I think we have everything,” Burnham says. “We’re ready to go!” She looks at Lorca and she’s actually smiling.

\* \* \*

Tyler lands them in a clearing within view of a river. Cadet Tilly nearly tumbles out the back, running into the grass with reckless abandon. Lorca’s first breath of air is shocking, the smell of everything green and blue and bright red, colors brilliant despite the cloudy sky. The humidity is suffocating, and yet he doesn’t mind it. He grew up on starships; in the last years, his only time planetside was on grubby planetoids and cold dusty moon colonies to raise support for his intended coup, and then only rarely. Planets like this are more foreign to him than the inside of any alien ship.

Burnham follows Tilly with more restraint. But she trails her hand along the waving grasses, rubs a flower petal gently between two fingertips, inhales deeply, and smiles. “Does it remind you of home?” Lorca asks.

She looks around. The green grass is knee-high, dotted with shocks of waist-high blue grass that turn out to have tiny flowers at the ends. Not far away, the trees are wrapped in thin red vines like lacy snakes. The patches of dirt, where he can see it, are so dark that they’re nearly black. “No,” she says. “Not at all. We lived in New Mexico, when I was young, and then we were at the research outpost at Doctori Alpha—”

“And then you were on Vulcan.” He knows the rest of her story. He wonders if the Michael that he knew grew up in the desert before the Emperor found her.

Burnham nods. “Another hot, dry climate.” She touches the dewy tip of the blue grass. “This is a marvel. Tilly!” Tilly is still bounding around, but she turns at Burnham’s voice. “Start collecting samples, please. Air, soil, plants. We’ll make sure to get water samples as well, but stay close for now.” She’s carrying her own sample collection kit, but she doesn’t step away from Lorca’s side. “What about you?”

Lorca doesn’t recall what this version’s history was, but he doesn’t feel like lying about this. “No,” he says. “I grew up on a starbase. Not one of the green ones.” Children don’t grow up on massive training starships here. They don’t start learning to fight for the Terran Empire as soon as they can read. There’s no version of his youth that he can tell her truly, no analog in this universe that will mean the same thing.

She nods again. “I should help Tilly with the samples,” she says, but she still doesn’t move. “Are you going to collect them too?” She grants him a tiny smile.

He loves it. “I’m going to check on Lieutenant Tyler,” he says, and it’s a bad sign that Burnham looks relieved to hear it, that they both think Tyler needs watching. Lorca stays with Burnham until she finally hefts her sample kit and walks away, and then he returns to the shuttle.

Tyler is standing just outside the entry, head bowed, hand clenched around the edge of the airlock. Lorca knows better than to touch him. Instead, he just stands and watches, waits to see what Tyler will do next. Eventually, Tyler lifts his head and says, “The Klingon prisoner.”

“Yes.” Lorca suspects he knows where this is going.

“It’s her.”

He knows what Tyler means. “And you’re remembering it all again.”

Tyler hits his hand against the shuttle. “I don’t—she’s in my head. Being on the ship with her, it’s like it’s all happening again. I don’t want her in there, and I can push her out when I’m with Michael, but—”

Lorca wonders how long Tyler has been in love with Burnham. “You don’t sleep so that you won’t have nightmares.”

Tyler nods. “But I can only go for so long.” He sounds relieved to finally admit it to Lorca. “I just need something from Dr. Culber and then I’ll be all right.” It’s almost a question.

“Start by sleeping,” Lorca says. “Go from there.” He should probably just kill the Klingon. He doesn’t think Tyler will be capable of it, and they don’t need her. It would be better for everyone if she died. But Burnham would know. She would say that Starfleet doesn’t execute prisoners, and she’d be right about that. “Stay with the shuttle unless they call.”

He can hear Tilly, whose voice cuts through all another noise, but it’s not unpleasant. The quieter murmurs are Burnham responding to her. He wants to walk back to them, but he knows it would change their experience here together—a separate moment, full of wonder and discovery, tucked away from questions about whether Stamets will live or if they’ll be able to get home or where in the universe they are. Lorca wants to believe that Saru is right about where they are in relation to known space, but he’s not inspired by the fact that Saru only rediscovered the stars an hour or two ago.

He picks up a sample container and walks toward the water. He doesn’t serve much purpose down here, really, beyond his ability to kill something dangerous. It would be different if they were here without Tyler or Tilly. Lorca’s nerves are still singing from only a few hours ago, when he’d been kissing Burnham and there was nothing else, in whatever universe they were in, to pull him away. He doesn’t know what will happen when they get back, if she was just grateful in the moment and went along with what he obviously wanted, or if she’ll come to his quarters when they’re both finally off shift (whenever that will be) and they’ll start again—

Tyler is in love with her. Tyler is falling apart. Remember the Emperor’s daughter—Michael would have found it entertaining. But Burnham isn’t Michael, and he likes her more and more for it. Her Vulcan father would be disappointed to see how much she cares, how much she’ll

admit to caring, about anyone. Lorca didn't like the man when they met, and he doesn't think Sarek liked him.

The storm comes up quickly, before he's even made it to the river. Everything darkens; a moment later, the rain hits. The tall grass turns slick, the black soil to sucking mud, every step treacherous. He asks over comms, "Burnham, Tilly, are you back at the shuttle?" When there's no answer, he asks, "Tyler, do you copy?" He already knows the response he's going to get.

"They're not here, sir." He can hear the panic. "I'm going to go look for them."

Lorca doesn't want Tyler wandering around in the darkness of this storm, not when he's so fragile. "Stay with the shuttle, Lieutenant. That's an order. I'll go." The rain has become so heavy that every step takes three times as long as it should. The wind is blowing it sideways into him. His uniform is soaked through—it's a tropical storm, brutal and warm, and he hopes that Burnham and Tilly are huddled somewhere dry or already back at the shuttle by now. "Lieutenant, still there?" Tyler doesn't answer, and Lorca doesn't want to spend time calling him back to reality only to tell him to stay at the shuttle again. "Burnham? Tilly?"

"We're on our way to the shuttle, Captain," Burnham says, and he's flooded with relief. "Where are you?"

"I walked toward the river. Lieutenant Tyler is at the shuttle. Stay with him when you get there." He squints against the driving rain and turns, re-orienting himself to the shuttle, and keeps walking. So much for the planetary adventure.

The rear hatch is closed when he gets there, but Burnham opens it just enough to admit him and motions him in. He slides through, ends up pressed fully against her, face-to-face, remembers what it felt like. She meets his eyes as he slides past and her eyes are full of something, though he can't read it. Then he's fully inside the shuttle and Burnham slams the hatch closed and seals it.

Burnham and Tilly have both stripped off their uniform tops, which are hanging dripping in a corner, and are wearing only their equally damp shirts. It's very humid in the shuttle, even with Tyler running a drying routine, and he would take his own uniform off if he weren't the captain. And if it wouldn't immediately be obvious that he'd behaved inappropriately with someone on the ship, because every one of them is under his command and in Starfleet that means they're not all available. The knives chafe against his skin.

"Did you get your samples?" he asks.

Tilly beams and gestures at a rack of sample containers. "Yes, sir!"

Burnham's assent is less jubilant, but she looks pleased. "We obtained a good range, sir. It will give the biologists something to look at other than mycelium."

"Good. Glad it was worth the trip." Lorca walks to the front of the shuttle. Tyler is hunched in the pilot's seat, but he looks a little calmer, whether from having Burnham back or unburdening his soul. "Lieutenant, take us out of here before the storm gets worse."

It's a rough ride, from the surface up until they're above the masses of storm clouds, but Tyler has flown the shuttle through a nebula full of radioactive gases; he can cope with rain and wind. There's a flash of lightning that stabs Lorca's eyes and he closes his eyes against it. He brought knives, but didn't bring his eyedrops. He'd been preparing for a mission in his own universe, not one here.

When they return to the ship, Lorca comms Saru. "Everything all right, Mr. Saru?"

"Yes, Captain." He's grown accustomed to Saru's slightly fussy voice and it's almost comforting to hear. "We are glad to have you all safely back on board."

"If the warp drive is up for it, plot a course out of here. Highest warp that Specialist Chrian recommends." He, Burnham, and Tilly are all in the turbolift on their way to quarters, and how he wishes Burnham didn't have a roommate, or that she would make up an excuse and follow him to his. But she does have a roommate and she doesn't make up an excuse, and he walks to his quarters alone.

The ship goes to warp as he enters his quarters and the stars stream by. Funny, how warp looks strange to him now. He's gotten so used to jumping with the spore drive that warp looks almost dizzying—even though nine months ago, it was the only thing he'd ever seen. He peels off his wet uniform and underclothes and drops it all into the laundry processor, finds a towel in the bathroom to dry off fully, and then stands for a moment and imagines Burnham coming in. He can almost hear the sound of the door, of her entering and saying "Captain?" or, in a different world, "Gabriel?"

She doesn't, of course. Lorca grips the towel hard for a moment and then lets go and hangs it on a hook by the shower. He pulls on a shirt, underwear, a fresh uniform—even new shoes, which he wouldn't usually replicate anew. Then he walks out and back down the hallway to the turbolift. He tells himself that he's walking instead of transporting because it's good for the crew to see him present in places other than the bridge, but he knows it's because he's hoping Burnham will be there.

She is. Lorca nods at her in greeting and they both get into the turbolift. "I expect the biologists are excited by all your samples," he says. They're standing too close together. She smells like the planet.

"Yes. I should thank you—I know it delayed our trip home, but I think it will provide valuable information." She's grateful to serve under a captain like him.

"It's good to see Discovery the way she was meant to be," Lorca says. "We turned the wide-eyed explorers into soldiers, but with the war ending, they can all go back to being explorers."

"Not you, Captain?" Burnham turns and looks at him.

"I was never the wide-eyed explorer type," he says, and it's too honest. Gabriel Lorca probably was a wide-eyed explorer. "I wouldn't mind trying it."

“Oh, I meant to tell you this when we first returned to the shuttle, but it was chaotic,” she says, and he tenses suddenly. “I analyzed the quantum signatures of several things on the planet.” He’s not sure he can admit to himself what answer he wants. “It does not appear that we traveled into a parallel universe.”

Blood rushes to his head and he staggers a little, suddenly dizzy. Burnham catches his arm and her hands burn through the cloth. “All right,” he says, and his voice is too hoarse. The answer means too much to him and he doesn’t want her see it. “Thank you for checking that, Burnham.”

“It would have been fascinating,” she says. “But it’s become clear that some of the crew are struggling emotionally, and I don’t believe that now, with this crew, is the ideal time to explore an alternate universe.”

He should have a wry answer, maybe another comment about explorers, but he’s too focused on the fact that they’re not in his universe. They didn’t jump all the way there. And they’re not in a different parallel universe, where he might find a better version of himself. There is only him, and Michael Burnham, and this universe. When the silence has gone on too long and Burnham is beginning to look concerned, he asks, “What about the lack of stars when we arrived? Any theories?”

“When we first arrived, I reviewed old Starfleet logs to see if there was a record of anything like it,” she says. They step off the turbolift and walk through the doors to the bridge. She follows him to the chair, though, rather than returning to her station. “Do you know about the Xindi?”

It’s vaguely familiar, from his recollection of this universe’s history. “Some kind of attack on Earth, something involving temporal wars?” Saru looks at him from his own station, but doesn’t comment on his arrival.

“They lived in a region of space known as the Delphic Expanse.” Burnham does walk over to her own station now and pulls up a file. It projects a map onto her screen. “The area was being altered by...an alien race to meet their preferences through extensive use of technology far beyond our own abilities. The technology was destroyed almost a century ago and the Expanse returned to normal space.” She frowns a little and gives him another assessing look. He suspects that this history is something he should know better.

“You think we’re in that expanse?”

“No,” she says. “As I said, the expanse was freed a century ago and returned to normal space. But before its destruction, the expanse was an area outside our understanding. There were spatial anomalies that tore ships apart and parts where physics did not operate in the same way that we understand it. There were stories of terrible things happening to ships within the expanse. I see no indication of that level of...alteration, here. But appearing in a location apparently without stars, and being unable to detect them for some period of time, is not inconsistent with the reports of the type of anomalies there.”

“Burnham.” He looks out the front of the ship and sees only stars streaming by. “What are you saying?”

“We should be alert for any more inexplicable occurrences. It is possible that we’re in an area of space with some collection of similar anomalies. And we should take extra care when performing tasks predicated on basic scientific truths.” There’s that tiny, tiny tinge of excitement to her voice even as she cautions everyone, so faint he doesn’t know if anyone else can hear it.

Lorca finds himself glad that they’re not in his own universe. Burnham is looking forward to exploration, to adventure, even as she can recognize that not all of the crew feels the same way. How crushing she would have found it, with her Federation heart, to travel to an alternate universe and find only grim fascism, endless war on alien species instead of the cooperation she loves so much here. He nods. “Alert engineering. If we hit some kind of anomaly, they need to keep the warp drive running.” Strange how unfamiliar that word tastes.

Almost as soon as he’s said it, Discovery drops out of warp again. The floor ripples into a shape it was never meant to take and the artificial gravity fails as the ship goes into a barrel roll. Sparks spray everywhere as several consoles explode. Detmer saves them, steers hard to port and levels out the ship as the gravity returns to normal and everything slams back into place. “Everyone all right?” he calls. If the next month is going to be like this, it will be a very long one. Most people are unharmed, just a little shaky on their feet, but Rhys has managed to knock himself out again. “Good work, Detmer. Medical, come get Rhys.”

“Maybe we should all have seatbelts,” Owosekun says, and he’s glad she can find some humor in this all.

“Once we’re back at warp, do it,” he tells her. “Mr. Saru, anything to indicate why we fell out of warp?”

Saru’s voice is tremulous, but Lorca can hear frustration in it too. “No, Captain. The navigational sensor array detected a brief gravitational fluctuation, but that fluctuation has vanished.”

“Burnham? Have any planets suddenly appeared?”

Burnham shakes her head. “No, nothing.” She moves something onto her screen. “There is something odd, though. Saru, have you detected any warp signatures at all in our travels? Any indications of warp-capable civilizations?”

“I have not,” Saru says. “And I have been scanning at the highest level since we arrived. It is indeed...odd.” He frowns. “I would have expected to come across at least one sign of any such civilization during our travels.”

“I’d be happy not to meet any. We’re in no condition to fight.” Lorca doesn’t want to find out who the Klingons or Romulans of this sector are.

\* \* \*

It takes another two hours at warp five for them to hit another anomaly. They lose gravity again, longer this time, but Owosekun’s seatbelts prevent any injuries on the bridge. There’s no time to think about the rest of the ship; something strange appears in the ceiling on the bridge



and then flies through the doors, which open for it.. It looks like white smoke, curling and roiling, and Lorca says, “Lieutenant Tyler, I want security to tell me where that is at all times. Tyler!”

Tyler shakes himself out of whatever stupor he’s in. “Yes, Captain!” When this is over, Lorca tells himself, he’s taking Tyler off the bridge. Whatever ‘over’ means. Security officers report in as the smoke travels through the decks; it doesn’t go through walls, but doors open before it, and someone ends up chasing it into a turbolift and firing at it. When the turbolift doors open, the man is unconscious, as though his phaser rebounded on him, and the smoke emerges unharmed.

Then Tilly comms. “Sir! It went into the mycelium cultivation bay!”

He’s out of the chair and striding through the doors as soon as he hears ‘mycelium.’ “Burnham, with me—Mr. Saru, you have the conn,” he adds, and as soon as they’re off the bridge, orders a site-to-site transport. He’s loath to use it when all the ship’s systems are going haywire, but he doesn’t want to risk any delay. Stamets may be insensate, but the spore drive has to be protected at all costs. Almost all costs.

Tilly stands at the entry to the mycelium cultivation bay. They walk past Stamets, who is still propped up in the spore drive chamber, spores dancing lightly around him, a thin layer coating his entire body like dust. In the cultivation bay, the smoke has settled like a thick fog over the nearest patch of mycelium and is glowing brightly.

“What’s it doing?”

“It appears to be gaining energy from the mycelium spores,” Burnham says. She examines her tricorder. “But it doesn’t seem to be damaging the mycelium. If anything, they’re producing more spores than before.”

Lorca watches the smoke as it glows. “If it’s gaining energy, is there a danger of some kind of...overload? An explosion?”

Burnham looks at him and raises an eyebrow. “I don’t have sufficient data to predict that, sir. But its energy production is slowing. It may stop if it reaches an equilibrium.”

“We’re not going anywhere until we have some kind of answer to that,” Lorca says.

There’s a rumbling noise, almost like a cat purring, and the smoke’s light diminishes to a soft glow. “I suppose that’s your answer,” Burnham says. “It’s no longer producing energy.”

He has a headache. He can’t believe how long this day has been. He hasn’t slept since before the failure on Pahvo. Some of the crew have been awake just as long. They might as well all be drunk, as little sleep as they’ve gotten. “Do we have any idea if it’s...sentient? Or how we can remove it from the ship?”

Tilly clearly wants to shrug, but she just says, “No, sir. We can keep observing it.”

Lorca nods. “Get someone from beta shift to do it. You, go to sleep.” He looks around at all of them. “That applies to everyone here.” If he was on a Terran ship, they’d be passing out stimulant hyposprays, but this is Starfleet, and there are enough people to keep the ship running if he lets some of them rest.

He and Burnham walk to the turbolift. “You too, Burnham.”

She watches him. “Are you going to sleep?” He could go longer. He has gone longer. “You were going to trust Saru with the conn for ten hours when you let us go down to the planet,” she points out. “I appreciated that. You can trust it to someone else long enough to sleep.”

“The way this day has gone, we’ll fall out of warp as soon as I get to my quarters,” he says.

“We could stay here.” For an instant, he thinks she means the two of them, in this turbolift, and then realizes that’s ridiculous. The turbolift doors open and they stand just outside the doors to the bridge. “There are no warp signatures anywhere. There’s nothing to suggest danger if we don’t try to warp immediately.”

There’s nothing to suggest danger except everything around them. “Fine,” he says. He walks onto the bridge. “Detmer, Owosekun, Tyler, Saru. You’re all off for the next eight hours. Get some sleep, no excuses.”

“Captain!” Saru protests, as expected. “Given how the ship has reacted during our past attempts at warp—”

“We’re not going to proceed at warp. We’re going to sit right here and catch our breaths.” Many of the crew slept while he was on-planet, but not the four of them. “Burnham, my ready room,” he says, and walks off the bridge.

The ready room is orderly again, no sign of what almost happened hours ago. “Captain,” she says when she walks in. Her eyes flick to the wall and then back to him, so quickly that he almost doesn’t catch it and he thinks he sees that hint of a smile. He’s safely behind the desk again, now that they’re finally alone, finally in private.

“Burnham.” She raises an eyebrow. He’s about to try to behave logically. Burnham believes in Starfleet’s rules. A Starfleet captain would recognize the risk of coercing a crew member. (A Terran captain wouldn’t care.) He’s trying to act like a Starfleet captain, at least for the moment. The logical way to avoid that risk, he thinks Burnham would say, would be to tell the crew member explicitly that she doesn’t owe him anything and, after that formality, enjoy themselves. “I want to make something...clear. I appreciate your gratitude”—what a terrible way to phrase it—“but I want to be clear that you’re not obligated to do anything.”

“Obligated.” The smile is gone and her face is blank. He can’t read her well enough to know what she’s thinking now, when she’s purposely flat.

Lorca sighs shortly, sharply. “Yes. You don’t have to express it this way.” What a terrible way to say that too. He can’t think straight. He just

wants her to say that she wants it so they can move on. “You don’t need—”

Burnham is looking at him like she’s just discovered a strange new creature babbling something that the Universal Translator can’t interpret. “Captain,” she cuts in. “I understand.” Then she turns and walks out without waiting to be dismissed.

So. She’s grateful to serve under a captain like him. Nothing more. And not that grateful, apparently, says the Terran captain within. The bruise she gave him is throbbing under his collar. He should go to sickbay and get rid of it and he should go to bed and he shouldn’t have asked her at all, should have taken what she was willing to give. Angry, he unzips the uniform, pulls the collar down so it won’t rub, and steps out into the hallway. He walks directly into Tilly walking down the hallway, who says, “Sorry, sir!” She steps back, gapes, says “Sorry, sir!” again, and backs away before turning and running.

“Cadet!”

Tilly stops and turns around slowly to face him, and he gestures back to the ready room with a jerk of his head. She jogs back and says “Sorry, sir!” one more time. He walks into the ready room again and after a moment of hesitation, she follows.

“Sir—”

“Stop.” Lorca presses the heel of his hand against his forehead and winces. The day could always get worse, but this is pretty bad. “Cadet.” She’s so nervous she’s almost vibrating, face still a little puffy from crying and dark circles forming under her eyes, and he remembers that she’s been running between the spore drive and Stamets since they returned from the planet. The monster in the mycelium room is just the latest in a long sequence of crises. “Calm down.”

She starts to say it again and he holds up his hand to forestall it. Tilly takes a deep breath and stands up straighter. “I’m okay, sir.”

“All right.” He called her back reflexively, but he’s at a loss for what to say. “It’s been a difficult day for everyone,” he starts.

“Oh, I won’t tell anyone.” Tilly smiles suddenly. “I think it’s cute.” Then she realizes what she’s just said to her captain and adds, “Sir.”

“Tilly. My interactions with Specialist Burnham are not a topic of...general interest.”

Her eyes widen and he realizes that she hadn’t seen Burnham leaving moments earlier, must have just assumed the...bruise was from someone else. “Of course they aren’t, and I would never gossip to anyone,” she says. “I just think it’s really sweet, it’s been a really bad day ever since we got here and it’s nice for there to be one good thing.” She’s thinking of Stamets now, sad again, and he doesn’t see a point in trying to further explain what’s just happened.

“I appreciate your discretion,” he says instead. “Dismissed.” Tilly starts to leave and he realizes he can get the answer to another question without having to ask Burnham. “Cadet, what’s wrong with Tyler?”

Her face falls further. “I just know something bad happened to him, on the Klingon ship. He’s...really messed up, I think. And he went to see the Klingon prisoner and when he came back he was shaking. Michael’s really worried about him.” Her mouth pulls down further, like she’s about to start crying.

Lorca wonders where this Tilly and Captain Killy diverged, to produce such different people. He can’t imagine the good captain crying over the thought that another person was suffering. He finds that he likes this version better. “I want you to tell me if you see anything else that concerns you,” he tells her. So much for his trusted chief of security. “I know Burnham’s personal feelings for Tyler may make it difficult for her to share her own concerns, but it’s vital that I can rely on my chief of security, especially right now.”

It must be exhausting to contain the multitude of emotions that Tilly does. She nods and starts to leave again, and he doesn’t bother to correct her by re-dismissing her.

In his own quarters, Lorca takes off the uniform and tosses it over the back of a chair. He’s too tired to go to sickbay. He’s too angry—at himself, mostly—to sleep. He’d misread Burnham, convinced himself that she felt the same pull, but why would she? He knew Michael, but Burnham never knew another Lorca, never looks at him and wonders at all the different ways they diverged. Whatever happened earlier, when he’d told her that he would never let her go back to prison—however she’d felt, or acted, because she didn’t feel much—had been a fluke. Of course she was grateful. She told him so. It’s not her fault that she could read what he wanted and thought she should give it to him. He hasn’t been subtle, for all he’s tried.

And now, the reason he sought her out in the first place is gone. Discovery may well never jump again. He is, in all likelihood, never going to return to his own universe. The role Burnham was supposed to play no longer exists. He doesn’t even have to play his own role any longer, if he doesn’t want to. It’s a frightening thought.

## Chapter Summary

"I know who you are, Michael Burnham." He didn't, the first time he said it, but he thinks he's right this time. "You would never let me do something that you thought was wrong."

The days pass and they inch forward. Specialist Chrian tells him that hitting anomalies at warp five is damaging the warp drive, and he orders their speed dropped to warp four. If they're attacked, he wants the drive to be able to give him warp five. They strike so irregularly that he has to begin ordering regular six-hour stops to ensure that crew can sleep without being flung out of their beds. He tries to time the stops to coincide with systems that contain planets to scan them. Sometimes he allows away teams to fly down and take samples, though he never goes again himself. Burnham goes often, and he has to remind her to sleep. She's scrupulously polite to him, even as he hears her voice full of excitement talking to other people when he walks past the research labs.

Lorca removes Tyler as chief of security even as he insists that he's all right and orders him to see a doctor regularly. Lorca promotes an Andorian in his place, Elan, and finds that he enjoys her brash attitude, including her lengthy complaints about the scientists on every away mission. He likes Andorians.

After two painfully slow weeks of travel, Lorca goes down to the brig to see the Klingon—L'Rell, she's called—and brings Saru and Burnham along. Tyler he leaves safely in quarters, knocked out with whatever the doctors gave him to stop his nightmares. In front of the cell, he turns to Saru and Burnham and asks, "As my first officer, and as our resident xenoanthropologist, what do you advise we do with this prisoner?" L'Rell can hear them, but she can't speak through the containment field.

Saru looks confused at the question. "Sir? She is a prisoner of war. Protocol dictates that we return to Federation space and then, when the war is over, return her to her people."

"Burnham?" he asks.

"I agree with Mr. Saru," she says. "Federation law is clear." She looks hard at him and he feels it like a gut punch. "You didn't ask us down here for a legal lesson."

Lorca turns away from her and stares through the containment field. "And what...purpose...does she serve us here?"

"Captain, I don't believe that's part of the consideration," Saru protests.

Burnham can read him. She's too able to read him. "She can provide information about the Klingons," she says slowly.

"The war is over, or it will be soon." He lets his fingers just brush the comforting shape of the phaser at his waist. "Go on." She's silent. "Because as far as I can tell, we're feeding and sheltering a creature that tortured me, that tortured one of my crew for months"—and there, L'Rell reacts to that—"and has killed dozens of souls, if not hundreds, during the war." He tilts his head and speaks directly to the Klingon. "And Lieutenant Tyler would be better for it." The Klingon starts forward at Tyler's name, stops only an inch from the containment field. She doesn't try to speak.

Saru's threat ganglia are fluttering madly. "Sir, are you suggesting that we—"

"It would be clean," Lorca says. "Quick. Better than anything the Klingons gave our people."

"Federation law forbids the execution of prisoners of war," Burnham says. Her voice is measured, a stark contrast to Saru's increasingly strident tones.

"We're not in Federation space." He wants to do it, badly. Every instinct in him rebels at keeping her here. Tyler should do it himself, but he can't, and he'll recover when she's gone. "Explain the logic of keeping her, Burnham." He doesn't look away from L'Rell.

"The logic is in adhering to the law." Burnham stays very still as she speaks. He wonders if she can tell how very close he is to shooting the Klingon. "Federation law removes personal feelings from the treatment of prisoners of war. There is no room for moral considerations in any particular case."

"Very Vulcan of you," Lorca says. He walks closer to the containment field and consciously opens the hand that has begun to close around the phaser grip. He forces himself to cross his arms to reduce the temptation.

Burnham tells him, "I believe it was humans who put that in. The Federation knew that captains would struggle with exactly this dilemma and lifted that burden from their shoulders." She's still speaking very carefully, as though the wrong inflection or the slightest movement will make him draw and fire. "And, logically, an enemy today may be an ally in the future. Mercy leaves more opportunities."

Lorca takes a step back from the containment field. He pulls out his phaser and, even as Saru shouts in protest, fires twice. The containment field absorbs each blast, flashing green around the impact point. L'Rell never moves.

He lowers the phaser. "Don't worry, Mr. Saru. Phaser fire won't penetrate a containment field." Lorca feels some of the tension relax out of his shoulders. It felt good to shoot, even if he knew it wouldn't hit her. "Let me know if she ever does do anything useful." He turns and leaves the brig.

He walks down the hallway, turns a corner, and leans back against the wall. Burnham must have followed him, because he hears her say, “What was the purpose of that display, Captain?”

Lorca laughs. “That display?”

“It was obvious that you wanted to kill her. It was equally obvious that you weren’t going to.” She’s giving him more credit than she should. “Was your intent to frighten the prisoner?”

“No.”

“Was it for some kind of emotional gratification?” Burnham pronounces the words like they’re something distasteful.

“Have you ever wanted to kill someone, Burnham? I don’t mean destroying a ship in battle. I mean knowing that you wanted to end the life of a particular individual.” She doesn’t answer. “Then you wouldn’t understand.”

“T’Kuvma,” she says softly, unwilling to admit it. “I wanted to kill T’Kuvma.”

“And you did kill him.”

“Yes.” She sounds almost ashamed. “If I hadn’t given in to that, we could have prevented the war.” Burnham stares at the wall next to his head. She won’t meet his eyes.

Lorca scoffs at that. “You knew the war was coming before the Klingons attacked,” he reminds her. “They wanted the war. Taking T’Kuvma alive wouldn’t have changed that. You know that.”

“It could have helped.” Her voice is stronger now. “And if the algorithm alone doesn’t win the war for the Federation, bringing L’Rell back could give us a starting point for negotiations. It could even build a relationship between the Federation and the Klingon Empire when the war is over.”

“The Federation is anathema to Klingons. You should know that by now.” Strange to think he had something in common with the Klingons—but more and more it seems like the Terran Empire isn’t much different, in the ways that mattered. “Burnham,” he says, “I thought I’d been clear. As far as I’m concerned, the only thing you did wrong at the Battle of the Binaries was fail to see your mutiny through.” Too late, he realizes what’s implicit in that—that she should have done whatever was necessary to subdue her captain sufficiently.

Burnham stares directly at him. How she clings to that truth, that she started the war, that she was wrong to try to defy her captain. It must have kept her warm through those months in prison, her certainty that she deserved what she was suffering. “Captain,” she says, and can’t seem to finish it.

“I know who you are, Michael Burnham.” He didn’t, the first time he said it, but he thinks he’s right this time. “You would never let me do something that you thought was wrong.”

She doesn’t deny it, Burnham the mutineer. Oh, she won’t knock him unconscious and take control of the ship—she’s learned that lesson—but she’ll do what she always does, talk him through step-by-step until she’s cornered him with logic, checkmate in three, and then, if he still doesn’t yield, she’ll look at him with her steady dark eyes and say, “Unless this is about me,” and he will. “No,” she says finally. “I would not.”

Lorca wants her very badly in that moment, to touch her, to tell her—but she steps back, turns, and starts to walk away. “Burnham,” he says, and she stops. “Don’t let Tyler come down here again.”

Burnham doesn’t turn back to him or ask him how he knows. “Yes, Captain,” she says, and keeps walking.

\* \* \*

That same duty shift, Cadet Tilly calls him down to engineering to update him on the status of the spore drive, and of the smoke creature living in the mycelium cultivation bay. When he arrives, she says, “Sir, I don’t know if this is good or bad, but we do have some changes.”

They’ve taken Stamets into the bay itself. He stands a few feet inside—standing of his own volition is progress, since the last time Lorca saw him, he was strapped into a chair. There are sensors placed all over his body—temples, carotid, wrists, tops of his bare feet—and Culber is watching him closely a few feet away, looking back and forth from his partner to a PADD. The smoke is flowing in ribbons around Stamets, curling around his outstretched arms, his waist, his ankles, and when he moves his hands, it follows. It’s still glowing very faintly, but Lorca can see Stamets’ skin light up whenever the smoke skims across it.

Burnham and Tilly are standing further back; Tilly has set up some kind of makeshift station and is scrolling through data as Burnham holds a tricorder.

“Report,” Lorca says softly.

“The spores in the spore drive room seemed to be helping a little,” Tilly tells him, “so I thought that bringing Lieutenant Stamets into the cultivation bay might make a difference. As soon as we brought him in, this happened.” She gestures at the smoke. “It came over and sort of covered him like a blanket, and all of a sudden he walked forward on his own. His vital signs and brain function have been improving rapidly ever since.”

Stamets turns to face them at the sound of her voice and his eyes are clear for the first time since the jump. “Hi, Captain,” he says, and smiles beatifically. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Bright light blooms across his cheek.

“It is, Lieutenant Stamets.” Lorca feels almost fond of him. “We still don’t know what that thing is?”

Burnham speaks for the first time. “No. It registers very minimally on our scans and only based on its energy output. There’s no indication that it’s an organic life-form.” If she’s rattled by their earlier conversation, she doesn’t show it.

“Amazing.” He wants to walk over and touch it, but he can’t risk disrupting whatever it’s doing to Stamets. “Good work, both of you.” He watches Stamets for a little longer and then realizes something, touches the corner of his eye very lightly.

Burnham sees it. “Sir?”

“That light, where it touches Lieutenant Stamets. It should hurt my eyes. It doesn’t.”

She walks over to him with the tricorder and says, “Look at me. Keep your eyes open.” She reaches over and, with the barest pressure, touches his chin to tilt his head down. Lorca stares at her, mesmerized as she slowly scans his eyes. He remembers letting her hold his eyes open on the bridge for his eyedrops and can’t believe he allowed it. The pinprick of green light from the tricorder does hurt his eyes, but he keeps them open and fixed on her face. When she’s done, she looks up from the tricorder and their gazes lock. He hears the tiniest inhalation and then she says, “Close your eyes.”

He does.

“I’m going to touch you now,” she warns, and even knowing it’s coming, he can’t help a flinch when her hand touches his temple. She must be scanning his eyes, but he can’t tell how time is passing, can only feel the heat of her fingers and smell oil from the spore drive and sweat beneath it and Starfleet-issue soap. It feels endless, until she finally says, “You can open your eyes now,” and takes her hand away.

Lorca opens his eyes very slowly against the light of the room. Burnham has stepped back, away, and is looking at the results of the tricorder scan. “Well?”

She sends the results to Tilly’s station. “We have a massive amount of data to examine regarding the creature’s impact on both Lieutenant Stamets and the mycelium spores themselves,” she says. “I’ll ask Dr. Culber to look at these results and incorporate them into his report.”

He can almost hear the “Dismissed” in her voice—but it’s not surprising, she was Georgiou’s Number One, she would have been able to dismiss anyone but Georgiou herself. “All right. I want regular reports on Lieutenant Stamets’ condition as well.” He doesn’t know what he’ll do, when or if Stamets fully recovers. They should jump back, as quickly as possible. He doesn’t like flying half-blind out here, stumbling from anomaly to anomaly, patching the ship back together each time. Saru is working on an algorithm to predict the appearance of anomalies and allow them to navigate around them, but there’s no guarantee that it will work. Even with the regular stops, most of the crew is exhausted, sleeping poorly, jumpy.

But. They’re free of Starfleet, out here. He’s free. Some of the crew—Burnham, but others too—enjoy exploring, even weary from the war. He wonders how she’ll feel when they finally find an inhabited system. And Culber would try to kill him if he ordered Stamets to jump again. Lorca doesn’t want to have to kill Culber, and he probably would if Culber tried to kill him. Federation souls are sacrosanct here. Burnham would see deeper than he wants her to.

Stamets can’t jump right now. He doesn’t have to decide yet.

## Chapter Summary

“You’re completely gone for her, you mean,” Elan says. “We can commiserate together.”

“You can’t commiserate alone,” Lorca tells her, because it’s better than responding to what she’s said. “It’s an...English word.” He catches himself before he says Terran. “Co-miserate. It means be miserable together.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lorca tries eating in the mess hall. He hasn’t done it since he became a captain, years ago, in his own universe. But for the first time, he isn’t serving on a warship, and he finds that he does want to have some sense of the crew’s morale. They have longer and longer to go and little purpose to guide them beyond getting home. Watching a video feed of the mess doesn’t work as well as he’d like.

So, the next time he realizes that he’s hungry, he finds the mess hall. As expected, it falls silent when he enters, the only sound the scraping of chairs on the floor as people turn to look at him. He walks to the food synthesizer, and orders roasted chicken and vegetables, which is duly produced with the computer’s enthusiastic endorsement.

“Captain!” Saru leaps to his feet. “Are you looking for something?”

“Just food,” he says, with grim good humor. “My synthesizer stopped working.” Not true, but he does need some reason to give everyone for his presence.

“Sir, I can have it fixed—”

“Mr. Saru, are you trying to keep me from eating in my own mess hall?” Lorca doesn’t wait for his answer, some kind of stammered denial; he walks to an open table, where he can see the entire room and have the wall at his back, and sits down. Everyone is quiet. They seem afraid to resume talking, and just as afraid to leave and indicate some discomfort with the captain.

Cadet Tilly saves them all by standing up from her own table, walking over to his table, and plopping down her tray. She sits directly in front of him, which blocks his view of the room somewhat, and says, “What do you think of the food in here? Sir.” She’s halfway through eating some kind of egg-and-vegetable burrito. Behind her, he hears the conversations resume, albeit more restrained.

Lorca looks down at his plate and takes a bite. “It’s fine,” he says. “The same as my food synthesizer.” Just past Tilly’s head, he can see Burnham and Tyler eating together, and Tyler does look at a little better for all the drugs the doctors have been giving him.

“I would think you would have a special one,” Tilly muses. She seems to have decided that they’re friends on the strength of their awkward conversation about his relationship to Burnham and his occasional “Good work” to her, which he finds alarming. But she’s the only one saving his attempt to assess the crew’s morale, so he can’t exactly object.

“No.” He takes another bite. “Cadet,” he says, “how would you describe crew morale?”

“...it could be better?” Tilly keeps her voice low. “People were excited to get home. They were excited for peace.”

Lorca tries to scan the room inconspicuously. There’s little laughter, and there was barely more when he walked in. “What would you do?” She gapes at him and he says, “You’re on the command track, aren’t you? As captain, what would you do to raise morale?” The Terran idea of raising crew morale is to single out a few of the weakest and encourage others to pick fights with them until someone dies, which he doesn’t think will help here.

Tilly flushes and straightens up in her seat. “Well, sir, the training modules say that in times of low morale, it’s good to give crew opportunities for greater socialization.”

“A party.” When Tilly nods, he says, “The last time I allowed the crew to throw a party, our ship was held hostage by a time-traveling madman and I was killed. Frequently.”

She laughs at that and then sobers. “Oh. You were being serious.”

“I’m open to the idea,” he says. “I got the impression that the people who weren’t brutally murdered enjoyed it.”

She laughs again. “Yes, sir, we did. You should let us have another. Six hours of sleep is all well and good—well, no, it’s not really enough—but I think a lot of people would rather do something else for six hours.”

“Not enough?”

Tilly shakes her head and takes a long drink of a glass of...green juice. “Nope, we should get at least eight hours. Nine to allow people time to actually fall asleep.”

He considers that. In normal times, duty shifts are typically eight hours long; on a starship set to Terran time, that leaves ample time for crew to sleep eight hours and pursue whatever off-duty recreation they want. Here, only six hours at a time have been guaranteed to be free of

anomalies. “It’ll take us longer to get back at that rate.” This is really a conversation for his first officer, not Tilly, but she gives her opinions much more freely than Saru.

“I think most people would accept that,” she says. Captain Killy has a slight green-juice mustache. “But you should let us have another party.”

Lorca resigns himself to it. “All right. Organize it. Talk to Saru about scheduling shifts for everyone who wants to attend.”

“Thank you, sir!” She jumps to her feet.

“Dismissed,” he says, because she’s about to leave anyway. She stops briefly at Burnham and Tyler’s table to say something, then on to where Elan has just joined Owosekun and Detmer. He can’t hear what she says, but all three turn in their chairs to look at him and then rapidly turn back. The mess hall takes on a certain hum of excitement. Apparently Tilly was right.

\* \* \*

Saru, already beleaguered, once again offers that he would be happy to take the conn if the Captain would like to attend the party. Lorca does not want to attend. And, from his first appearance in the mess hall, he suspects it would ruin the party itself. The crew has grown slightly more comfortable in his presence there, but this party is meant to raise their morale.

“Mr. Saru, you’ll have the conn during the party,” he says, shocking Saru. “But I won’t be there. Comm me at the first sign of a—space fish, or another smoke creature, or a warp signature, or anything interesting.”

“Of course, sir!” Lorca wonders if Saru is as bored as he is.

When the party starts, and after he watches the exodus from the bridge—including Burnham—Lorca goes to the mess hall. No one else is there. It’s his compromise between socializing and returning to his quarters. He brings along a bottle of whiskey—why not—and sits at a table with his back to the wall and stares out the window.

He doesn’t know how much time passes before Elan arrives, announces, “Well, this is grim,” and virtually flings herself into the chair. One of her antennae quirks as though it’s scanning the room on its own. She pulls out her own bottle—Andorian ale, undoubtedly—and takes a long swig.

“You don’t want to go to the party?” he asks. “It’s to improve crew morale.”

“Well, that explains why you’re not there,” she says, and laughs at her own joke. He smiles a little. “So you’re lurking in the mess hall, hoping someone will stop to keep you company without you having to go find them.”

That’s...not wrong, he realizes. “Classic Andorian rudeness,” he tells her, and holds up his bottle for a toast.

Elan takes it instead and offers her own. “To bitter antisocial humans,” she says. He takes it and they toast. Lorca drinks from the bottle, as she does, and finds it surprisingly good. Elan smiles recklessly at his expression and says, “Only the finest made on the moons of Andoria.” She returns his whiskey.

“And my whiskey?” he asks.

“Not bad for a human-made alcohol, but nothing compared to Andorian ale.” She finds a cup and pours him a large measure. “Here. You can drink yours anytime.”

Lorca yields. “Why aren’t you at the party?” he asks.

Elan takes a long drink from her bottle. “Remember T’Lac?”

“The Vulcan biologist you complain about every time you return from a planetary visit? No respect for time, always wants to take one more sample, argues with you when you say no?” He sips the blue ale.

“Yes,” Elan says mournfully. “Yes.”

“Oh.” He realizes what she’s saying. “I thought Andorians didn’t like Vulcans.”

“In the early days. Vulcans were sneaky and they didn’t trust us.” She peers into her bottle. “But we put that aside with the founding of the Federation, mostly. And T’Lac has such adorable ears. I hear that Vulcan ears are very sensitive—”

“Thank you for that.” Lorca doesn’t need to know. “I didn’t realize there was so much...”

“Intermingling? Gabe, you’re very old-fashioned.”

“Lieutenant, that’s not an acceptable form of address—”

Elan laughs. “Have another drink. Don’t you know your girl Burnham’s family? Her brother Spock is half human.”

He ignores the reference to Burnham as his girl. “Yes,” he says. He’s only met Sarek the once, never Spock, and hadn’t thought about it much. Vulcans look mostly human, at least.

“It doesn’t matter.” Elan is maudlin again. One of her antennae curves down, as if peering into her bottle. “The problem with Vulcans is that it’s impossible to tell if they even like you. You know what I mean. Your Vulcan.”

“Yes,” Lorca says, before he thinks about it. “No.” The Andorian ale must be very strong. “I don’t have a Vulcan.”

"I know," Elan says. "We all know." She reaches over and pats his arm with one hand, refills his glass with the other.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He wonders what's happening at the party now—Burnham left for it, but did Tyler meet her? He can imagine her taking shots with Tilly, imagine her finding some junior lieutenant to bring back to her quarters.

"She's not Vulcan and you don't have her," Elan clarifies. She turns to squint at the food synthesizers. "We should eat something." Her antennae are swaying a little.

"I don't know what Tilly told you—"

"Wait, something happened?" Both Elan's antennae perk straight up. "You had to swear the cadet to secrecy?" She stands up. "I'm going to get you food. Humans are weaker than Andorians. You can't hold our liquor."

"Nothing happened." He gets lost in thought, and only snaps out of it when Elan deposits a large plate of food in front of both of them. "What is this?"

"Fried cheese sticks," Elan tells him. "I've been told that humans eat them when they drink. Here." She picks one up and holds it to his mouth. "Chomp chomp."

"You're demoted," Lorca says, but he takes a bite. It burns his mouth. "Ensign. Cadet Elan."

"You aren't subtle, Gabe." Elan bites off part of the same cheese stick and chews thoughtfully. "I've heard things. I heard you declared your love on the bridge."

"I told her a mission was too dangerous for her." He eats a cheese stick.

"I heard we were ordered not to go on that rescue mission for the Ambassador and you did it anyway because she asked you to."

"She didn't know I was disobeying orders." It seems important to emphasize that part.

"I heard you're in sickbay anytime she's been injured." He can't deny that. "Captain." Elan has returned to her bottle. "You don't have to lie to me. I'm your chief security officer." She leans back in her chair and puts her feet up on the chair next to him. "Until you demote me again. But you still don't have to lie to me." Her antennae perk up. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he says. Elan gives him skeptical look and he repeats, "Nothing!".

"You can tell me that if you want. It's a little hurtful that you're lying to me, Gabe, but I can't make you tell me the truth."

Lorca swirls his glass a little, watches the different shades of blue appear and disappear. "Unlike you with your Vulcan, I got the information I needed. Not what I wanted."

She leans over, teeteringly dangerously in her chair, and pats his arm again. "I'm sorry," she says. "You know, you could branch out. There's a whole ship full of other people to—"

"I'm trying to be a Starfleet captain. A good captain," he amends.

"You're completely gone for her, you mean." Elan doesn't comment on his strange phrasing. "We can commiserate together."

"You can't commiserate alone," Lorca tells her, because it's better than responding to what she's said. "It's an...English word." He catches himself before he says Terran. "Co-miserate. It means be miserable together."

"Commiserate with your drink and I'll commiserate with mine," she says. Lorca looks down into his glass and realizes that it's empty. He holds it out automatically. Elan empties the bottle into it. "Give me your human whiskey. I only brought the one bottle."

She's just started in on his whiskey when five people stumble into the mess hall laughing, apparently also intent on the food synthesizers. He sees Tilly immediately, an awestruck ensign on one arm and Rhys on the other. She's giggling, joyful, and when Rhys tries to kiss her, she allows it only until the computer tells her to enjoy her meal. If Lorca weren't deep in his own misery, he'd be happy to see her so happy. Then Elan hisses and kicks his chair. The other two are Burnham and a Vulcan—probably T'Lac, judging by Elan's reaction—leaning on each other, Burnham with a tray of food in one hand. All five descend on a table, apparently unaware of Elan or Lorca.

Lorca drains his glass automatically and holds it out to Elan for more. She refills it and pushes the plate of cheese sticks at him. There's no way to salvage this situation. One of them is going to look over and see—

"Captain!" Of course it's Tilly, joyful Tilly. "Lieutenant Elan! Come sit with us!" Rhys looks physically ill at the idea.

"We're fine here," Elan says. She lifts the whiskey bottle to demonstrate and drinks from it. Lorca hates to admit it, but she may be able to drink more than he can. "The Captain was just going to get us both some water." She kicks his chair again, still leaning back in her own, and he grimaces and hopes no one spotted it.

He hasn't stood up since they started drinking. He has to take a moment to gather his strength and collect himself so that he can stand up straight without wobbling. Ten steps over, one step down to the beverage synthesizer. Two tall glasses of electrolyte-enhanced water. Pick up the glasses. One step up. Ten steps back to the table. He's so focused on counting and stepping straight that he doesn't realize Elan is talking.

"I found the captain drinking alone and I had to comfort him," she says. "It was too sad."

"Lieutenant."



“Pathetic, even,” she continues. He kicks her chair and she overbalances and falls.

T'Lac starts laughing even as Elan stands up and shakes her head at Lorca. “See, I told you you would understand slapstick when you saw it,” Tilly tells T'Lac, laughing harder. “That was a perfect demonstration.”

It wasn't, really. It was casual violence, the kind of thing he would have done without thinking in his own universe to make someone stop talking, maybe with a little more malice in it. That isn't right for who he's supposed to be here.

T'Lac hurries forward and puts her hand on Elan's arm. “I apologize for laughing. Are you undamaged?” she asks, still smiling. He can't imagine what they've all been drinking, for a Vulcan and Burnham to be so freely emotional.

Elan grins widely at her, white teeth flashing. “Completely. Though I could use some help getting back to my quarters. We've drunk a lot.” Lorca admires her for that, envies her recklessness. She seems so confident as she says it, even as she just spent hours bemoaning how she couldn't tell what her Vulcan wanted.

“Of course,” T'Lac says. “Place your arm around my shoulders for stability,” she instructs, and they stroll off.

“Yeahhhhh, get it, T'Lac!” That's the ensign. Lorca doesn't know his name and doesn't care. “Sorry we drove away your drinking buddy.” No, Lorca does want to know his name and he wants to make him clean plasma conduits for a week for his disrespect. No one is appropriately scared of him anymore.

“I think you could say the captain drove her away,” Burnham says, but he can hear the laugh under it. “Will you join us now, Captain?”

He would rather have Klingons burn out his eyes than sit at a table drunk with Burnham and three junior officers falling all over each other. “No,” he says. “I'm going back to my quarters.” He tosses back the last of the electrolyte water, picks up his whiskey bottle, and stands again with monumental effort.

“Burnham, aren't you going to help him?” The ensign will be tasked with all EV repairs and will not be given a tether. “He looks drunk.”

“What's your name, Ensign?” Lorca asks, voice low as he approaches. “I'm going to find out where you come from. And when I do, I'm going to—”

“Captain.” Burnham steps forward just as the ensign is beginning to look frightened. “Let me help you.” She doesn't put her arm around his shoulders, but she shepherds him with her body away from the ensign. He makes it through the doors of the mess hall without stumbling, but he has to admit to himself that he's not as steady as he should be. Burnham too is walking freely, limbs uncoordinated, but she steers him forward. They pass a dark hallway on the way to the turbolift and he hears moaning—Elan must have been right about Vulcan ears.

In the turbolift, he allows himself to sag against the wall. “Michael,” he says, and he sees the surprise on her face. “Burnham,” he corrects himself. “Michael Burnham. You look happy tonight. Are you happy?”

She considers the question. “I'm enjoying myself.” She smiles at him and it feels like being struck between the eyes. They step off the turbolift.

“I want you to be happy,” he tells her, almost violently, as they help each other down the hallway. “I can't read you well enough to know if you are and I want you to be happy.”

Burnham stops in the middle of the hallway and he stops with her, turns to look at her. They're very close. “...I know,” she says eventually. “I never thought you didn't.”

He should stop himself. Maybe if he were a real Starfleet captain, he would. But he drops the whiskey bottle, leans down, cradles her face in his hands, and kisses her. She opens her mouth to him and pulls him close, fingers around the back of his neck, and for a moment there's nothing but this. When he has to breathe, he pulls back just enough to gasp in air and she chases his mouth, catches it, until he has to break away for another breath. He lets his forehead rest against hers. “I want you to be happy, Michael Burnham,” he says.

“I know,” she says again, and releases him. “I'm trying.”

Lorca comes back to himself enough to realize that they're standing in the middle of a hallway on the quarters deck where anyone can see them. From what Elan said, everyone already knows how he feels about Burnham. But that doesn't mean he wants them to see him like this, cracked open the way that only Michael Burnham can do. He wants to order her to tell him how to make her happy. Instead, he says, “I think I can find my way back to my quarters from here.”

If she tried to follow, he would let her. She doesn't, though. She lets him go, gives him one last smile, and walks away. He watches her go until she turns a corner and he can't see her anymore; then he turns and fumbles his way back to his own quarters.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm imaging Andorian ale as the 151 rum of the Star Trek universe.

You would not believe how hard it is to make up a Vulcan name that hasn't already been used somewhere in some Star Trek property or (as far as I know) someone else's fic.

## Chapter Summary

“Maybe I’m trying to be the better version of myself. Be a better Starfleet captain.” Belatedly, Lorca adds, “I tried to convince you to let me kill the Klingon. That’s me right there.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lorca wakes up to the computer telling him it’s 0700 hours and contemplates his own human frailty. His shoes are still on. He digs out a hypospray from the bedside table—the hangover hypo, the cadets call it, analgesic and antiemetic and electrolytes all in one—and administers it to himself. As it takes effect, he comms Elan and says, “Take yourself to the brig.”

Elan laughs. “Humans definitely can’t hold our liquor,” she tells him.

“You’re demoted to armory floor-scrubber. Cadet.”

“I’ll see you on the bridge for alpha shift in thirty minutes, Captain.”

By the time thirty minutes and a shower have passed, he can walk onto the bridge with his usual measured stride. Rhys hasn’t fared as well. “Lieutenant Rhys!” he says loudly, because he can. “Tell me, who was the ensign with you and Cadet Tilly last night?”

Detmer laughs, quietly. Owosekun glances at Detmer, laughs too, and then immediately stares intently at her station when Lorca frowns at her.

“Sir,” Rhys says, and he doesn’t look like he’ll stay upright for much longer. “Ensign Chandavarkar, sir.”

“And where is he assigned?”

“Science division, sir.”

“And where is he now?”

Rhys hesitates. “He’s on beta shift, sir, so I expect he’s asleep.”

“I want to see him in my ready room in fifteen minutes,” Lorca says, with a certain amount of vicious pleasure. He won’t need to do anything but summon the kid there to make his point, but it’s good to remind everyone, once in a while, that he’s still the captain and they should be afraid of him. Then he undermines himself by saying, “And Rhys, get yourself to sickbay and get a hypo. You look like you’re about to collapse.”

When Lorca goes to leave the bridge, he glances at Burnham. She quirks an eyebrow. He suppresses his smile, nods at her, and walks into his ready room. Ensign Chandavarkar enters the room minutes later, pale and sweating and not entirely steady on his feet. Lorca has kept the lights low, but he tells the computer to increase them once Chandavarkar is standing at attention. “Ensign,” he says. “You know why you’re here.”

“Yes, Captain.” Chandavarkar looks like he’s about to vomit.

“You were disrespectful to Officer T’Lac, to Lieutenant Elan, and to myself. Your behavior reflects poorly on your training officers and on this ship.”

Chandavarkar nods and his mouth trembles. “Yes, Captain.”

Lorca is alarmed to find that he doesn’t feel like frightening the man further. When he was a junior officer, mocking a captain would have been punished immediately by an hour or two in the agonizer, at least. But he’d let them have the party to improve morale, and he had been drunk and sitting in the mess hall, as had Elan. “You’ll report to Lieutenant Elan for whatever task she sees fit to give you for the next two gamma shifts,” he says finally.

“Sir?” Chandavarkar seems stunned by his good fortune. “Is that all?”

“Would you like more, Ensign Chandavarkar?”

“No sir! Thank you!” He starts to flee and then scrambles back to attention.

Lorca lets him stand there for a moment and then says, “Dismissed, Ensign.” He follows Chandavarkar back out onto the bridge, and on his way past Elan, tells her, “You have him for the next two gamma shifts. Find something useful for him to do.”

“Only two shifts? Captain, you’re going soft,” she says, too quietly for anyone else to hear. Except Burnham, apparently, whose mouth twitches in a stunning lack of restraint.

“I know who’s to blame for this mess.” He tries to keep his voice even lower. “Why do you think you’re the one getting him?” He walks back to his chair, sits in it, finds himself restless, and walks to the front of the bridge to watch the stars part ways in front of them. At the brightness,

he reaches for his eyedrops automatically and then realizes that his eyes don't hurt.

Lorca starts to turn and ask Burnham if Culber ever saw anything in those scans of his eyes, and then the ship tilts and he's flung away from the front and his head strikes—

\* \* \*

He wakes up in sickbay with some kind of medical nodes stuck to his head. Culber is peering down at him and frowning. He feels like a small animal is trying to claw its way out of his skull. "Oh," Culber says. "You're awake."

"Apparently." His throat burns when he tries to speak. "What happened?" He wants to tear off the nodes but knows that he shouldn't.

"We sideswiped an anomaly!" Stamets is perched on the bed next to him, scrolling rapidly through data on a PADD. "You should see the readings on these puppies."

"Shouldn't you be with your mushrooms and your new pet?" Talking feels terrible. "Since you're feeling better, maybe you can help Mr. Saru with his algorithm to avoid them."

"Oh, I am," Stamets assures him. He hops down from the bed. "I just wanted to make sure you woke up."

Lorca is surprised to hear that. "Lieutenant," he says. "I didn't know you cared."

Stamets seems caught off-guard by that, but he shakes his head and whatever it was passes. "Captain." He strolls toward the door—pauses to kiss Culber, who hisses "Paul!"—and out into the hallway. He's humming something that Lorca doesn't recognize.

"I'm sorry about that," Culber says. "He's been a little...different since he woke back up." He brings a screen forward. "I wanted to talk to you about some of your scans."

"Am I dying?" he rasps. His head is pounding.

"No, you'll be fine. Just a bad concussion," Culber tells him. "Though I would encourage you to avoid those. All of our technology doesn't stop it taking a toll on your body."

"Noted." Lorca moves his arms, legs, tentatively, checking to see how it all feels. Everything seems like it's working.

"I did see something unusual on your scans, and I was hoping you could help me understand it." Culber's tone is setting off alarms in Lorca's brain. "I compared your full-body and brain scans to your earlier scans in the Starfleet medical database. There are...quite a few signs of old injuries on these scans that first appeared after you were rescued after the Buran. Healed fractures that look like they should be at least fifteen years old, but that didn't show up until less than a year ago. A lot of scar tissue, especially on your back."

Lorca's mind races. He doesn't know what Culber is building toward or what the accusation will be. Culber hasn't said anything about his eyes. He tries, "Those old scans are from a long time ago. A lot's happened since then."

Culber frowns. He goes to apply a hypospray to Lorca's neck and he can't possibly miss the full-body flinch as he approaches. "I understand you're not a fan of doctors, either."

"You're an excellent doctor," Lorca tells him.

"Captain..." Culber steps back and sets down the hypo. "Injuries can appear older than they actually were if they've been repeatedly inflicted, healed, and inflicted again." He's not wrong. Some of Lorca's scars look older than they are. "As you know, we've been working with Lieutenant Tyler on coping with some of his own post-traumatic symptoms. If you ever want to investigate that kind of treatment, we can limit the number of people who would know about it."

Oh. Culber's worried that he's been tortured more than they all knew and is trying to be helpful. Of course he's not going to accuse him of being an alternate Lorca. "Thank you, doctor, but I don't think that's necessary." He peels the nodes off his head one by one and deposits them on the little tray by the bed. Culber's hypo did help his headache, and he stands up without pain. "Let me know if you become concerned about Stamets."

"Yes, sir." Culber lets him leave without pressing the issue.

Burnham is lurking just outside the doors to sickbay, and asks, "Captain, how are you feeling?" as soon as the doors shut behind him.

"Fine." He's surprised to see her there. "Just passing by?"

She lifts one shoulder in a very faint shrug. "You always seem to be passing by sickbay when I end up here. I thought you didn't like doctors."

"You're not a doctor," he says nonsensically.

"No." Burnham reaches up toward his face slowly, and when he doesn't recoil, touches her hand to the hair just about his forehead. "Doctor Culber missed a little blood," she tells him.

That seems unlikely. "Burnham, I don't mind you being the first person I see when I wake up—from a head injury," he adds. "Third, I suppose. Stamets was here too," he explains, and she looks mildly confused. "But it seems like you have something to say."

She walks a short way away, just across the hall, and he follows. "Captain. Permission to speak freely?"

The last time she asked that, it had ended in her asking if he'd loved the Emperor's daughter and he'd told her to get out. "Granted."

Burnham looks away, down the hallway. "It seems like you've...changed, since we left Pahvo. Since our last jump. Especially in the last two weeks."

"What do you mean?"

"You allow away teams to transport down to planets for no strategic purpose. You permitted Cadet Tilly to throw another party. You eat in the mess hall for no clear purpose. You appear to be friends with Lieutenant Elan. You disciplined Ensign Chandavarkar less severely than warranted for his insubordinate conduct and failed to discipline me at all for mine. You...seem happy, sometimes." She glances at him sidelong and then resumes looking down the hallway. It mostly feels like she's just looking away from him.

"Tilly assured me that there weren't any more madmen waiting to board my ship. You asked me to allow the away missions, which could eventually serve a strategic purpose, and I've never been foolish enough to try to discipline you for anything." Her eyes flick to his when he says it and then away again. "Your other charges are that I've...made friends and am socializing with the crew?"

He's gratified when she heaves a sigh of frustration. "You disagree with my assessment that your behavior has changed recently?" She always returns to that Vulcan charade when she's annoyed with him

"Maybe I'm trying to be the better version of myself. Be a better Starfleet captain." Belatedly, he adds, "I tried to convince you to let me kill the Klingon. That's me right there."

Burnham stares at him. "You appear to be...less driven."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It's...unsettling," she says. "Behavioral changes make it more difficult to predict the way a person will behave or react in the future, which is what facilitates logical decision-making."

"You make your decisions based on how you think I'll react?" He lets himself smile slowly at her. "All of your decisions?"

She looks actively uncomfortable. It's adorable. "When the outcome is obvious," she says stiffly.

"What was the obvious outcome of accompanying me back to my quarters last night?"

Burnham inhales sharply. "Your behavior is less predictable recently. That's the point."

"When it comes to you, Burnham, I think I'm pretty easy to predict." He itches to step closer to her. "I've been told that I'm obvious."

She raises an eyebrow and he wants to kiss it. "The point remains, Captain. This ship depends on you."

"I would never abandon Discovery." Lorca takes a deep breath, exhales. "One mission ended. We won the war, or we gave Starfleet what they needed to win the war. That was the mission." A half-truth. "The mission is different now."

"Send everyone home, safe and happy?" she says. She's watching him closely.

"Yes." Except him, of course. "But it's going to take a long time to do that, and I need the crew to keep functioning effectively. I'll use every available tool to do that. If that means allowing parties and scheduling planetary missions and...fraternizing"—he meets her eyes—"then that's what I'll do."

"You don't think we're going to get home." It's somewhere between a question and an accusation.

"We have a broken spore drive and we're in the middle of a damn minefield." It's crossed his mind. "I think this ship will get there. The question is whether it'll be us or our grandchildren."

"There is a historical record of a ship being manned by the descendants of the original crew to complete a mission—" Burnham catches herself. "Saru and Lieutenant Stamets are working on an algorithm to predict the anomalies so that we can navigate around them."

"So I've been told." He notices that she didn't say anything about Stamets ever jumping again. "Until I know it's working, we continue on as we have."

"Yes," Burnham says. She lets the silence last as she watches him. "But you *have* changed, Captain." Then she turns and walks away.

One of these days, one of these encounters, she's going to say, "Tell me your secret," and he won't be able to say no.

## Chapter End Notes

Gratuitous Enterprise reference.

Chapter Summary

Maybe it's the closeness or the heat or the dark or the isolation, but he finds himself saying into Burnham's ear, "We had a trial for youth, where I grew up. We didn't sleep under the stars." If she's looked up Gabriel Lorca, she'll know this isn't true of him. Gabriel Lorca probably went camping with his father every summer. They probably caught fish.

The combined brainpower of Saru and Stamets results in an algorithm that reduces their crashes into space anomalies to roughly once every twenty-four hours, which means that they don't need to drift in space for eight hours every day just so that crew members can sleep uninterrupted. Still, Lorca keeps to that pattern, more or less, whenever there's a Class M planet or something else that someone—Burnham—can persuade him sounds interesting enough for a survey team.

He keeps eating in the mess hall. People don't fall silent when he enters anymore, though Elan is the only one willing to share a table with him for a full meal. He suspects Stamets might, if he ever came to the mess hall. Saru certainly won't.

Case in point: "Gabe," Elan says as she drops her tray on his table in the mess hall and then sits down. This is a bad start to the conversation. "I want Chandavarkar transferred to my security team."

"Don't call me that in public." Her antennae wave suggestively and Lorca grimaces. "I gave him those shifts with you as discipline, not as an interview."

"I had him test all the practice drones to make sure they could reach the correct level of difficulty. He was very good." From Elan, that's a lot of praise.

"He belongs to science division. He's a biologist."

"You have plenty of biologists! I already don't have enough security personnel, and you took Tyler away."

"Tyler will be back." Lorca has been telling himself this for weeks now. Tyler seems to have stabilized, at least, but he doesn't really believe that Tyler is ready to carry a phaser again, let alone be trusted with protecting other people's lives.

Elan waves a dismissive hand, pokes at her food, and frowns. "Your synthesizers are weak. Somehow all our Andorian food comes out tasting terrible."

"File a complaint with Starfleet, say they need more Andorians on the calibration teams." Lorca considers. "I can give you one of the food synthesizers to have some engineers tinker with, if you want." Since he's stopped using his own most of the time, they do have a spare.

Elan stares at him. "You've had too many head injuries," she says. "It's affecting your judgment. But I'll take advantage of it when I can, so give me Chandavarkar too." She pushes her plate away and focuses on her katheka. Lorca doesn't think she needs it.

"Has he told you he wants to transfer?"

"I'm seriously worried about you." Elan holds up three fingers. "How many?"

"I'll talk to him," Lorca says. "He wasn't supposed to enjoy it." He wonders if he's growing into this universe's Gabriel Lorca, now that he's given up—at least for now—trying to return to his own universe. This universe's Gabriel was sleeping with an admiral—would he have worried at all about fraternizing with a subordinate?

"Captain to the bridge," the comm announces.

"I'll talk to him," Lorca repeats, and picks up his tray. "Give Chrian the synthesizer, see what she wants to do with it."

"She's a *warp* technician," Elan protests.

\* \* \*

"What do we have, Mr. Saru?" He walks to the front of the bridge, where a large sandy planet occupies the viewscreen.

"Sir, it's the first world we've come across inhabited by...what I suppose you would call people, since we've arrived in this part of the galaxy."

"Warp-capable?" It looks like a dust bowl, but there are cracked circles across its surface that appear almost intentional.

"No, sir," Burnham tells him from her station. "Bipedal, humanoid in appearance." She brings up an image of the planet's inhabitants, swathed in robes and head wraps; a closer view shows that they look very human, so much so that he can't see where they differ. No cranial ridges, no skin patterning, no extra appendages. "I won't know more unless we're able to get closer."

"Specialist Burnham!" Saru is aghast. "Are you suggesting that we go to the surface of this planet and make contact with a pre-warp society? The Prime Directive forbids it!"

“Not exactly.” Lorca has read enough about Starfleet’s rules to know that. “We just can’t interfere in their development. There’s nothing that forbids going down and taking a look.”

“Sir, the risk—”

“Mr. Saru, in that case I’ll leave you the conn while we go down,” he says. “Specialist Burnham, Lieutenant Elan, prepare a team.” He closes his eyes for a moment and then tells Elan, “Bring Ensign Chandavarkar.” He hears her very soft crow of delight. “I want clothing that lets us blend in. I don’t plan to have contact with the inhabitants, but we don’t want to confuse them if we do.”

Burnham looks a little stunned. “I’ll prepare the shuttle, sir.”

The team of nine scientists, two security personnel counting Ensign Chandavarkar, and himself fit into the shuttle, but it isn’t comfortable with all of their accumulated gear too. They’re all wearing robes over their uniforms, just in case they do encounter the inhabitants, and some of the scientists are floundering a little in all the extra material. One of them, another xenoanthropologist according to Burnham, has tripped twice. There’s not much room for tripping. They’re still scared of him enough to not fall in his lap. T’Lac is graceful and certain in the disguise, but they wear robes on Vulcan. Next to her, Ensign Chandavarkar keeps one hand on his phaser at all times, as though he can’t quite believe he’s been given it to carry outside a practice room

“That would be a good landing site,” Burnham tells Elan, and she points to a clear, flat area on one edge of the patterned circle, which turned out to be a massive series of slot canyons. “At least two kilometers from the nearest settlement, and it looks like there’s enough cover to hide the shuttle.” They’ve turned off all of the shuttle’s outer lights as they descend. It’s still dark on the planet’s surface, which disguises their descent.

On the ground, they split up. T’Lac and four other scientists begin setting up their sensors and collecting their soil samples, guarded by Elan and her new protégé. Lorca, Burnham, and three science specialists that Lorca doesn’t recognize proceed slowly toward the settlement, watchful for any of the planet’s humanoid inhabitants.

“Does this one remind you of home, Burnham?” Fine sand is already beginning to work its way into Lorca’s boots. One of the scientists lags behind; the sand shifts under their feet and slows their progress further than he’d like.

“Vulcan is much warmer, Captain.” She says it like it’s an old argument between them, and he likes her tone. “Due in part to the number of volcanoes.”

Another scientist snorts a laugh behind them. Lorca ignores him. When she’d told them it was a desert planet, he’d imagined that it would be hot, but it’s chilly enough that the warmth of the robes over his uniform is pleasant. “Other than that.”

“Not of Vulcan.” She’s silent for a moment. “The canyons—they remind me of the ones I played in as a child. They can be like mazes. I’ve never seen slot canyons as large as the ones we saw from orbit, though.”

They haven’t gone much further when Lorca hears a war cry and a spear nearly clips his arm. He grabs it from the ground and turns to see a group of ten people, riding some kind of giant lizards and wielding spears, bearing directly down on them. He reaches for his phaser and Burnham catches his hand, hisses “No! We can’t use phasers!” Lorca curses and hefts the spear, throws it and wings one of the lizards.

“Take cover, call Discovery, ask for immediate transport!” he yells to the three scientists. “Burnham and I will lead them away!” He looks to Burnham and they start to run—he glances behind them to make sure that the attack party is following them rather than the scientists and is gratified to see that the whole party—minus the lizard that he hurt and its rider—is in pursuit. “Burnham,” he says as they run, “if you don’t come up with a plan, I’m shooting them, directive be damned.”

“Into the canyons.” Burnham is panting. “Too big for the lizards, they’ll have to be on foot. We should be able to lose them there, give the team enough time to transport back, and if not, you can fire your phaser all you want.”

He has a moment of misgiving—the walls of the rock formation are steep and smooth and it’s hard to see more than twenty feet into it—but another spear flies past him and he says “Fine, go,” and scoops up the spear. If he can’t use his phaser he’ll damn well have another weapon.

They sprint into the canyon and he can hear their pursuers shouting, their voices echoing off the rock. They take turn after turn until Burnham nods at him and they split behind separate walls for an ambush.

Nine against two would be bad odds if the two weren’t him and Burnham. She fights like he saw her on that first day, brutal economy of motion, and they fall before her and it’s glorious. She’s trying not to kill them and so he tries too, uses the spear as a club and his own fists, has to force himself not to break necks as he does. It’s over in a few minutes. The four that are still conscious hoist their fallen comrades—they must be stronger than humans to do so, he notes dispassionately—and flee. He looks at Burnham, unbloodied, and imagines that he can see steam rising off her.

“Here,” she says, and hands him a water canteen. “I didn’t know you could fight like that.”

Lorca gulps it down. “Tyler and I broke out of Klingon prison,” he points out.

“Yes.” He passes her the canteen and she drinks. “I assumed that...”

“That Tyler did it all? What’s the logic to that?” He wipes the sweat off his face with his robe, grimaces, and discards the robe.

“You’re the captain of a science ship.”

“Georgiou could fight, couldn’t she?”

Burnham is still catching her breath. “She came on away missions with us frequently.”

“I went on that first...Minshara mission, Burnham.”

“We detected no large life-forms on the planet.” In other words, it was safe. “I apologize. My assumption was faulty.”

His knuckles are bloody and there’s grit in his mouth and adrenaline still singing through his body. He hasn’t felt this good in a long time. He grins. “Don’t be deceived. Tyler fought well, but I dragged him out of there.”

“I believe you, sir.” After they’ve both caught their breaths and passed the water canteen back and forth, Burnham examines their surroundings. They’re deep in the slot canyon; its curving walls rise red-gold high above them, almost claustrophobically so. The sun looks to be an hour or so from dipping behind the canyon wall.

“We ran too deep. This planet has a very short window of daylight in this season, and we won’t be able to find our way out in the dark.” She points to a cave partway up the canyon wall, accessible by a steep climb. “We should climb to there while we still have light. We’ll have a better sense of where we are, and it’s very dangerous to spend the night on the ground in a canyon like this. If it storms, the flood would kill us quickly.”

“Better than slowly, I suppose.” She never finds his jokes funny. “Radio Elan, and Discovery. See if they can help us out.”

The adrenaline is ebbing, and the climb to the cave drains whatever energy he had left out of him. Burnham is up several minutes before he makes it. He kneels on the flat rock of the cave floor, catching his breath again, while Burnham investigates to see how far back the cave goes. “There’s water here, sir!” Even spoken quietly, her voice echoes.

He edges back into the passageway where she’s found water. “Test it, make sure it’s drinkable. Any luck with Discovery or Lieutenant Elan?”

“Nothing.” She scoops up a cup of water, scans it with the tricorder, and then hands it to him. “It’s safe to drink.”

Lorca accepts the cup and drains it while she pulls another out of her pack. It’s cramped and dim, the light almost gone as the sun disappears, and it’s rapidly growing very cold. “You said it gets cold at night here. How cold, exactly?”

“In the lowlands, around forty degrees. Up here—our scans suggested high twenties.”

Not ideal. “All right, let’s set up camp.” She nods, absorbed in whatever the tricorder is telling her. “Burnham.”

She looks up, startled from her readings, and says, “Yes, sir. You should look at this.” She passes him the tricorder and unpacks the emergency shelter supplies.

Lorca scrolls through the readings while she lays out the tent and drives its stakes into the cave floor. “This canyon wasn’t formed naturally?”

“No, it has the hallmarks of weapons fire, not erosion. It appears that a massive energy weapon created all of the canyon.”

“What for?” He passes the tricorder back to her and pulls out two meals. “Chicken and dumplings or chicken parmesan?”

“Why did we only bring chicken options?” Burnham scrutinizes the packages. “Chicken and dumplings.” She gazes out over the canyon, almost completely dark now. The only lights are their own camp light and a stunning array of stars. “It’s possible that it wasn’t created by a weapon at all. This could be some kind of art, or a religious site.”

“Someone fired a massive but extremely precise energy weapon for as long as it would take to create all of this, and didn’t vaporize the place? It can’t have been these people.”

“No.” Burnham shivers. “No, we have yet to encounter any species or civilization capable of doing this, in this part of the galaxy or our own.” She shivers again and he realizes that she’s cold.

“Here,” he says, and motions for her to come sit next to him.

Burnham does, though she protests, “Your body heat isn’t going to help very much.” Something deep in his stomach clenches at that. He puts one arm around her and pulls her close against him as she eats her chicken and dumpling meal. When she’s finished, she extricates herself just enough to pass him the chicken parmesan; he eats it one-handed without tasting it. Every part of him is keenly aware of Burnham next to him, of the smell of old rock, of the encroaching chill and the cold bright stars above them.

Burnham adjusts slightly in the half-circle of his arm and says, “I haven’t slept under the stars in years.” He makes a noise of general encouragement to keep talking. “On Vulcan, there’s a...trial, for youth. You have to survive in the desert for ten days.” She falls silent.

“You did it?”

He feels her nod. “I was too old when I did. A Vulcan would have performed it at the age of ten. My mother wouldn’t let me go until I was fourteen.” She sounds almost sad, and she shifts a little. “That’s the last time. I didn’t have a tent then, of course.”

“Of course.” In this moment, he could tell her about the Terran trials for youth, the things he did when he was ten, when he was fourteen. She might listen to them as the practices of an alien culture, disinterested, absorb the facts without forming an opinion about him. But the Gabriel Lorca of this universe has probably never killed a human, or a Vulcan, or an Andorian. He’s probably never killed anyone outside of wartime. So he stays quiet.

He would sit there forever, but she says “We should sleep, we’ll need to climb down and hike in the morning,” and crawls into their shelter. It’s very small for two people. She hadn’t set up the other shelter in his pack, and he allows himself to see something in that choice. She’s

also combined the sleeping bags into a single large one to fit both of them. “Burnham,” he starts.

“It will be a cold night. It’s more efficient to share body heat.” She strips off her uniform and folds it neatly in the corner. Then, down to her shirt and underwear, she slides into the sleeping bag. “And skin-to-skin contact is the most effective for that.”

Lorca swears he can hear a laugh in her voice. Good. He closes his eyes for a moment, opens them again, unzips his own uniform top and discards it and his shirt, and then slides into the sleeping bag too. From there, he turns off the camp light. In the darkness, he says, “Burnham. You’re not being very consistent.” She radiates heat.

“Sorry. Sir.” She moves closer, pulls his arm around her, turns onto her side so that her back presses close against his bare chest. Automatically, he conforms to the shape of her body, hips flush, knees tucked under hers. If he weren’t exhausted, something very different would be happening.

Maybe it’s the closeness or the heat or the dark or the isolation, but he finds himself saying into Burnham’s ear, “We had a trial for youth, where I grew up. We didn’t sleep under the stars.” If she’s looked up Gabriel Lorca, she’ll know this isn’t true of him. Gabriel Lorca probably went camping with his father every summer. They probably caught fish.

She makes a sleepy noise of encouragement.

“It was a...radical sect. Violently xenophobic.” He feels her tense a little and he regrets starting down this path, but it’s too late. She must know what he’s going to say next. “Each of us had to kill someone.” And there’s the full-body flinch he expected.

“You did.” Burnham doesn’t ask who he killed, what the circumstances were.

“I’m here.”

Burnham is silent, still, for so long that he starts to wonder if she’s fallen asleep somehow. “The Emperor’s daughter?”

Lorca jerks hard at that and rolls away from her. “No,” he says, almost violently. “No.” He breathes in sharply and tries to let it out slowly, does it again. He regrets ever having told her anything about Michael. “It was my fault that she died, but I didn’t kill her, not like that.” He stares up at the blackness inside the shelter. Burnham never would have stayed in his own universe.

“Who was she?”

“Burnham,” he says, “you get to keep your own secrets and I have mine.”

“I don’t have any secrets left.” There’s a rustle of fabric as Burnham moves. “Michael Burnham the mutineer, the orphan, the failed Vulcan. Michael who’s never been in love—that’s the secret I gave Stamets, when he needed to prove to me that time was looping.”

“Fine,” he says. How can he describe Michael Burnham’s doppelganger to her? “The Emperor adopted her.”

“Your emperor?”

“Yes. M—she was—beautiful. Driven. Wickedly funny, when she wanted to be. Confident and reckless. People loved her.”

“You loved her.” This time it isn’t a question.

Lorca has never admitted it aloud. Michael would have appreciated it, but it would have been one more tool to her. It takes him a long time to say “Yes,” and the word grates in his throat. “But she wasn’t...kind. She wasn’t like you.” He doesn’t know how to say it without making them sound like monsters in this galaxy. “M—she would have let the tardigrade die without a second thought.”

“To save you?” She doesn’t ask about that second slip either.

“She would have gotten every bit of use out of it and then discarded it.” That was Michael’s attitude toward many things. “People were...tools to her. She wasn’t a scientist like you. She was a warrior. She would have let me kill L’Rell, or she would have done it herself.” It’s strange to remember how he felt about her, now. “She wanted to be the Emperor.”

“Did she love you?”

Lorca wonders if she knows how cruel the question is. He rolls onto his side to face away from Burnham. It’s much colder there. “Yes.” It tastes like a lie. “What do you want from me, Burnham? It was a long time ago.” It feels like years, not months.

“I apologize,” she says. He hears another rustle and then she tells him, “I’m going to touch you.”

He closes his eyes and rolls onto his back. Slowly, she strokes her palm across his chest and stops over his heart, which has been pounding since she asked if he’d killed Michael. Her hand is searing. She slides it lower, leaves a trail of fire, until her hand is below his waistband, ghosting over him, teasing, and he’s already hard, choking out “Burnham—Michael—” She moves her hand and tugs at the waist of his pants and he lifts his hips to help her shove them down just far enough—and then she rolls, swings her leg, straddles him, and for a moment in the darkness he thinks he can see her eyes glint. He reaches for her hips, down to her thighs, pulls her underwear to the side and slips two fingers in deep. Burnham gasps in a breath and clenches around him, rides his fingers and his thumb—he hears cloth rip and then she readjusts, lifts off his fingers and leans forward to kiss him, all tongue, and then she slides down onto him slowly and they both groan. “Fuck,” he breathes, reaches one hand down to help her and pushes the other under her shirt. It doesn’t take long for either of them—she comes first, gasping, and then he does, helplessly, thrusting up hard as she’s still shuddering.

After a long moment, she leans down to kiss him sloppily and then rolls off with a satisfied noise. “Burnham,” he says, and his voice rumbles in his throat. He’s not sure what to say next.



“Go to sleep. We’ll have a long hike out when it’s light.”

He reaches over in the dark and strokes his hand along her side. “Don’t wake me up by touching me,” he warns her. “I don’t react well.”

Chapter Summary

“I’ve been thinking about it. Neither option makes sense. That suggests a third option I hadn’t considered before.”

Lorca doesn’t want to ask, but he can’t help himself. “And what’s that?”

“That you’re not, in fact, Captain Gabriel Lorca.”

Lorca wakes up before Burnham. She, it seems, has the soldier’s gift of sleeping whenever the opportunity calls for it. He’s never been able to do that, only to stay awake hours longer than a human should. There’s very faint light outside, just enough to turn the shelter roof gray, and he slides out of the sleeping bag and reassembles his clothes. He’s grimy and a little sticky and regrets nothing.

It’s very cold when he steps outside, below freezing, but the Starfleet uniform is meant to adapt to external conditions, and after a minute he’s a little warmer. His breath steams in the air as he examines their supplies to find gloves; he finds Burnham’s pair first, tucked neatly into the proper pocket of her bag, and then unearths his own wrapped around a sheathed knife. Whether or not he’s going soft, as Elan claims, his muscles still remember what to do, how to keep safe. He still has a knife strapped flat against his calf, he realizes.

The light is pale over the slot canyon, all the colors muted. The sun hasn’t risen about its walls yet. He can hear soft cries echoing from below—some kind of animals out hunting, it sounds like, not their pursuers from the night before.

“Captain?” Burnham emerges from the shelter fully dressed and walks over to him.

Lorca reaches out and puts an arm around her shoulder, pulls her in, and kisses her, long and deep. Burnham makes a pleased noise and returns the kiss, leaning into him. When he breaks away, he says “Good morning,” mundane as it is, and smiles.

He sees a hint of a smile, but then she begins, “Sir.”

“I think you can call me Gabriel, at this point. When we’re alone,” he adds, though Burnham isn’t the type of person to forget it.

“All right,” she says. She doesn’t try it. She looks uncomfortable. “I don’t have a lot of past experience in—in this type of situation—”

“Fraternization?” Lorca wouldn’t exactly call it that, but he assumes that’s what she means.

Burnham pulls away a little further. “Yes. On the Shenzhou, it would have been inappropriate to pursue a relationship—”

It’s not lost on him that it’s equally if not more inappropriate here, on his end, by Starfleet standards. “And on Vulcan?”

“Things are different, among Vulcan youth,” Burnham says. “Vulcans are engaged when they’re very young. Liaisons with other people are... understood, even assumed, before the marriage is completed.”

“Burnham, don’t tell me you’re engaged.” He thinks he’d be jealous, if that turned out to be the case.

She coughs. “No. Vulcans are engaged to other Vulcans. I mean there was no...risk of expectations being formed. Attachments.”

Lorca doesn’t know what to say to that. “You’re concerned about someone getting attached.”

“It’s a risk,” she says stiffly. She finds her communicator. “Burnham to Discovery, come in.” There’s no response.

“Burnham. I don’t know which of us you’re worried about, but I’m not...proposing marriage.” Of course he’s attached.

She raises a suspicious eyebrow at his choice of words. “I don’t want the rest of the crew to know. It would be inappropriate.” She holds her communicator sandwiched in her bare hands to warm it up. They’re not supposed to be temperature-sensitive, but they are. “Burnham to Discovery,” she tries again.

“The crew doesn’t need to know anything. We can...*fraternize* as much as you and I want. We can do whatever we want.”

“Burnham to Discovery. Starfleet—”

“Starfleet isn’t out here,” he tells her. Before she can protest, he adds, “Yes, we’ll follow Starfleet’s rules about treatment of prisoners, prime directive, all that. But Starfleet doesn’t need to be in people’s private lives. In my private life.”

“Discovery to Burnham, come in.” Burnham answers, and Saru, because of course Saru would be intruding on this conversation, says, “My apologies, Specialist. The rock formations were giving off some kind of EM radiation during the planet’s dark period that made it impossible to communicate. We can transport you both back to Discovery when you’re ready.”

“Confirmed. We’ll pack up the shelters and let you know when we’re ready.” It’s not lost on him that she said shelters, plural.

Burnham begins to dismantle the emergency shelter, powering down the charged rods that held the shelter’s shape. Without the rods, it flutters to the ground in a heap of fabric. “If you don’t have the relevant experience, let me enlighten you. We can do whatever we want. If you don’t

know what you want, tell me.”

“Yes,” she says, “I’m excellent at that.”

“Burnham, was that sarcasm?” Her lips twitch a little.

“What I want right now is to look at all the readings we’ve taken from this planet and to take a hot shower.” Burnham finishes folding the shelter cloth and stuffs it back into its package, then inserts that into her own bag and hefts it on her shoulders.

“I’d even believe you want it in that order.” He lifts his bag. “Lorca to Discovery, two to transport.” They dissolve into golden lights.

Lorca isn’t wrong. They’ve barely stepped off the transporter pad before she’s accepting a PADD and following an ensign out into the hallway. The transport tech looks at him, a little alarmed—technically he didn’t dismiss her—but he just puts his bag down, cracks his neck, and comms Elan, “My ready room, thirty minutes.” Then he goes to his quarters to wash off the residue of the last twenty-four hours.

\* \* \*

Because he and Burnham transported out, Lorca doesn’t discover that the scientists brought back two furry pets until one of them escapes the lab and races down the hallway with T’Lac in hot pursuit. It’s at least four times the size of a tribble, dun-colored, most reminiscent of a jackrabbit, but with stubby ears and a longer snout. The thing hops into a recessed vent in the hallway. “Ensign,” he says, “what is *that*?”

Chandavarkar is only a few steps behind T’Lac with a very large net in his hands. “We brought it back from the planet, sir.” He and T’Lac spread out and attempt to corner the creature.

“Did you test it for diseases? Consider the implications of bringing something like that on board?”

T’Lac looks slightly insulted, for a Vulcan. “We did, sir. We followed all standard protocols. And cleared it with the chief of xenobiology.”

That must have been while he and Burnham were fighting off nine people in the middle of a rock trap. “Fine,” he says. “Catch it and don’t let it escape again.”

“No, sir,” Chandavarkar assures him. “We didn’t realize how high it could jump, but we’ll be ready next time.” The creature makes a break for it and Chandavarkar throws the net above it; the containment field activates and sedates it.

“Chandavarkar, weren’t you reassigned to security?”

“Yes, sir.” He lifts the net off the ground and hands it to T’Lac. “T’Lac contacted security to help retrieve the creature. I know the layout of the lab, so I responded.”

Lorca looks down at the creature. It’s already woken from the sedation and is watching him with what he thinks is too intelligent a gaze. “Send me a report when you’ve finished your preliminary analysis. I want to know what you’ve brought on board my ship.”

\* \* \*

Burnham almost laughs when he tells her about it at lunch. She’s joined him at his usual table in the mess hall, an act that leaves at least three tables talking in hushed tones, and says, “You allowed them to bring back something...sentient?”

“Ensign T’Lac assured me that they followed protocols.” He’s still suspicious.

“Vulcans don’t lie.” She glances down at her tray and he sees the smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “I’m sure the crew will appreciate having it on board. And will not treat it like a pet.”

He sighs. “They brought back two. Different sexes, as far as they can tell.” He holds up his PADD with the report. “Do Vulcans even have pets?”

“Vulcan children keep sehlat.” Burnham takes the PADD and calls up an image for him. “They’re dangerous creatures, even the domesticated ones. It teaches responsibility.” She does smile then, almost fondly. “My mother always warned us not to be late with its dinner.”

The thing is massive, with teeth meant for rending flesh. This, he really would call Ripper. “You had one?”

“No, my brother, he had one. It was our father’s, but it was very devoted to my brother. I stayed away from it.” She shakes her head. “You know it won’t take them long to name the new creatures,” she warns.

“T’Lac identified some possible taxonomies in her report, based on its similarities to known species in the Federation database.”

“No, something like Fluffy or Thumper,” she says. “My brother’s sehlat was called I-Chaya.” Burnham takes a large bite of her vegetable lasagna. “I believe Admiral Archer brought a dog with him on the first Enterprise mission. Pets can be good for crew morale.”

Lorca stares into his coffee. A month ago, they were in a battle to the death with the Klingons. He was planning the final pieces of his return home and his swift capture of the Terran throne. Burnham was—who knows what Burnham was, then. And now—well. Now the crew are bringing home pets and he has an Andorian in charge of his life and Burnham was in his bed (or he was in hers) and is at his table. “I don’t think we’ve descended so far as to need pets.”

“Captain,” she says, almost chiding. “There are some crew, myself included, that—enjoy this detour. But there are others who were eager to get back to their families, and this journey is taking a toll. If the pets are more like Fluffy than sehlat and boost morale, logic dictates that they should remain.” She’s finished her meal and she stands. “I’ll see you on the bridge, sir.” Lorca nods shortly and watches her walk away.

He enjoys a moment of peace before he sees both Elan and Tilly making a beeline for his table. He frowns at both of them, and Tilly at least has the sense to realize what she's doing and choose another table. As Elan starts to sit down, he stands up. "Lieutenant," he says.

Elan, for all her brash attitude, can tell when something is off-limits. She holds up her hands in a don't-shoot gesture. "No problem, Captain." But he can feel her eyes on him as he leaves.

\* \* \*

Days pass. Saru has to admit that his estimates about their location may have been drastically off. The ensigns name their pets Tom and Jerry and sometimes there's a line at the entrance to the biology lab of crew waiting to play with them. They still hit the odd anomaly and Chrian complains about the state of the warp drive. Stamets plays with the smoke creature in the mycelium cultivation bay, but he doesn't name it. Culber watches Lorca to see if he'll try to use the spore drive again, and he doesn't. He installs chairs in the ready room. Elan unveils the modified food synthesizer and throws an Andorian feast.

And then there's Burnham. She comes to his quarters more days than not. Sometimes they talk, but mostly they tumble into bed, and she's just as clever and creative there as on the bridge. One night, when they've just finished and are both lying flat on the bed, too sweaty for Lorca to touch more than his fingertips against her wrist, she finally says, "Gabriel."

Hearing it feels like touching a live conduit. He pulls her close, heat be damned, and kisses her long and slow and thorough. He's attached, however she feels. She returns the kiss, but eventually she pushes him off and says, "It's too hot in here."

"That's because of you."

"Hmph." The noise is quiet. "Gabriel," she tries again, and he didn't realize how much it would mean to hear her say it. Then she says something else: "I looked up Gabriel Lorca in the Starfleet database."

Lorca's entire body is suddenly numb. His hand wants a knife, but he can't move, and anyway it's Burnham. Anyone, anywhere else, he would have been able to respond correctly, would have been able to offer an explanation.

"I've been trying to understand the logic behind your actions." Burnham isn't touching him anymore. "Either your Starfleet file details a modified version of your past or you've been blatantly lying. If your file has been modified, telling me your true past would undermine whatever purpose was served by the Starfleet file, and there's no logic to that. But it would also be illogical to lie so obviously, given how easily your statements could be disproven."

"What do you think it is, then?" He keeps his voice steady. He thinks he sounds unaffected.

"I've been thinking about it. Neither option makes sense. That suggests a third option I hadn't considered before."

Lorca doesn't want to ask, but he can't help himself. "And what's that?"

"That you're not, in fact, Captain Gabriel Lorca."

He shouldn't, but he does roll away then, off the bed, to the bedside table he keeps a phaser in. He doesn't open the drawer, though. "Maybe I lied to make you sympathize with me."

"And you hoped that it would never occur to me to investigate something as drastic as a violent xenophobic imperial sect?" She's watching him carefully.

"Is that what this is, what it's all been? Trying to figure out my secret?"

Burnham stands slowly, cautiously, on the other side of the bed. "No, but learning the truth became more important to me as this continued. Am I right?"

"No. I *am* Captain Gabriel Lorca." She doesn't speak. "But...I'm not the Gabriel Lorca of this universe." It's almost unthinkable to say it, after so long.

She's silent for a long time. Then she says, "That's why you talked to Stamets about alternate universes. You wanted to go back to your own."

He should lie to her. "I wanted to know if it was possible." Truth, if incomplete. He can't make himself step away from the phaser.

"You corrupted the coordinates for our last jump."

"No." Lorca has to deny that.

"I saw you using your chair control just before we jumped."

"I didn't go back, all right? I didn't take us all there. I stayed here."

"You're responsible for what happened to Stamets." Something dawns on her. "You didn't bring me onto Discovery to work on the spore drive. I was part of some plan. Your plan to go back to your universe, or something you were going to do when you got there." She begins dressing quickly, efficiently. "The Emperor's daughter."

"No—Burnham," he says, and it feels like his throat is full of broken glass. "Michael. I—"

She must be able to tell what he's about to say, because she snaps, "No. No." She finds her shoes and slips them on, and then walks toward the door. He follows.

“Please don’t tell the crew” is all he can manage to say. He remembers, viscerally, begging Cornwell not to take his ship. “Please don’t.”

“No,” she says. “That would serve no purpose. I won’t tell unless I believe you’re endangering the ship.” Then she walks out.

He’s still numb. He tells himself that in his own universe, he wouldn’t have let her leave the room. The old Lorca would accuse her of attacking him, claim she had attempted another mutiny. That would discredit whatever she tried to say about him to the crew. He hasn’t slipped up with anyone else.

Lorca doesn’t do it. Burnham would hate him, more than she already does. The crew might not believe him, or worse, might approve. She doesn’t lie. He believes that she won’t reveal it until—unless—she thinks she has to.

He finds pants, puts them on. Takes the phaser from his bedside table and tucks it into the waistband at the small of his back, where it used to live. It feels...alien. Straps a knife to his calf, where it used to live. He gets out a bottle of whiskey—he’s down to the last few—and sits on his couch and opens it. It would be a gross dereliction of duty to drink now. He’s not on shift for hours, but Saru or Elan or whoever else has the conn will expect to be able to reach him, expect him to be functional.

He finds that he doesn’t care as much as he should. He’s not going to indulge in self-pity or self-hatred or regret after this. He’ll be the same man that he’s been; no one will look at him and suspect that anything happened tonight. When Michael died, he was—broken. It won’t be like that. But he needs this now, to wash it all clean and drain it off. So he allows himself this one indulgence.

Chapter Summary

“Yield,” he rasps, and Elan pulls him to his feet. There’s blue blood on Elan’s teeth when she bares them in a smile and some of his own red on her hands, and he can feel his eye swelling shut. He thinks his nose is broken and she may have dislocated his shoulder. It’s painful and exhilarating and exactly what he wanted—what she needed too, he thinks.

Elan wakes him. She does it from across the room, calls “Captain!” and he’s up with the phaser pointed at her before he’s fully opened his eyes. Burnham must have warned her, he realizes when thought returns. He has a splitting headache.

“Lieutenant.” His mouth tastes like something crawled into it and died. Not impossible, with the things the biologists bring back on board. “Computer, lights to half.” He lowers the phaser.

Elan has been very still, her antennae stiff, but she takes two steps in his direction after he speaks. “Drinking without me, Captain? You reek.” Her voice is strangely gentle and he doesn’t like it.

“I’m fine. Get the hypo from my bedside table.” Too late, he remembers the state of his bedroom and almost tells her to stop.

But she doesn’t comment, just retrieves the hypospray, hands it to him and waits for him to hiss in relief before she speaks. “We just arrived at a planet with what I’m told is unusual volcanic activity. Science division is asking permission to send a team.”

“Saru didn’t approve it?” He walks toward the shower, Elan trailing.

“It’s not a Class M planet.” *Minshara* class, he remembers. “The team will need significant protective gear. Mr. Saru believed he should confirm it with you, given how different it will be from previous missions.”

Lorca braces himself. “Tell Saru I’ll be on the bridge in twenty minutes. No one goes anywhere until I’m there.”

“Yes, sir,” Elan says, and she’s still speaking in that gentle tone. “Sir.”

“What is it?”

“You should put down the phaser.”

He looks at his hand and finds he’s still gripping it tightly. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Dismissed.” When she’s gone, he places the phaser on the bathroom counter, undresses again, and steps into the shower to wash off the stink of whiskey.

Fifteen minutes later, he’s on the bridge. He’s braced himself already, and Burnham is there at her station, as expected. Lorca meets her eyes briefly, nods, and walks to the front of the bridge, just as he would have the day before. “Tell me about this planet,” he orders, looking out over it.

It’s small, almost entirely black, dotted with red and gray. “The volcanic activity appears to be continuous,” Burnham says, and she sounds as even as ever. She calls up a scan of the planet and projects it onto the viewscreen, then zooms in on one of the red and gray areas. Closer up, he can see the ash clouds, the veins of lava spreading from the eruptions. “The planet’s crust is pure silicon, though. There’s no breathable atmosphere, and temperatures on the planet are a minimum of two hundred degrees. Minor radiation.”

“And the science division wants samples. Sounds like a good way to lose a science team.” That might have been too dark for the current mood.

Burnham turns off the projection so that he can see the whole planet again, and he turns. “They’re aware of the risk,” she says. “Our protective gear should keep them safe for at least three hours. At that point, they’ll have to return.”

“Are there dangers beyond the environmental factors?” The science division is only division on this ship that’s generally happy. He’s not inclined to deny them their adventure, but he doesn’t want any deaths.

Saru takes over. “Captain, it does not appear that we would be able to transport anyone off the planet’s surface if something were to happen to the shuttle or if they were unable to return to it in time.”

“And they know that?”

“They do, sir.” Saru, he can tell, thinks this mission is a very bad idea. That’s why he sent Elan to Lorca in the first place, so that he wouldn’t have to be the one refusing.

Lorca walks back to his chair and sits down. “All right, we’ll send two scientists, one security officer. They do as much as they can at the shuttle, and no one goes more than forty-five minutes from the shuttle. I want everyone off the planet in two hours, no matter what.” He can tell that everyone is a little surprised. This is the most that he’s ever restricted a scientific away mission. He adds, “Depending on what they find, we’ll reassess after they’ve returned to the ship.”

Elan doesn’t go. Lorca suspects that she’s worried about him. She’s too professional to openly watch him on the bridge, but he knows that her antennae occasionally curve toward him and away from her station. Detmer holds them in geosynchronous orbit with the planet as the team

flies down. “How’s it look down there?” he asks.

“It is as expected,” T’Lac says. She’d insisted that as a Vulcan, she was more accustomed to high temperatures and volcanic terrain, and should be one of the two scientists chosen. “We have begun the planetary scans using the shuttles sensors and I am preparing to approach the caldera.” Their destination was a safe distance from one of the calderas, well out from under the ash cloud so that they can communicate with Discovery.

It’s never been so difficult to wait for a mission to return. Lorca walks to the front of the bridge, clasps his hands behind his back so he won’t fidget, and stares out at what looks like a hellscape below. It doesn’t help that Saru is announcing time in fifteen-minute increments. At an hour, the security officer with them radios back to Discovery to confirm that everything is proceeding as planned. At an hour and a half, the caldera erupts further and the shuttle vanishes.

“Discovery to away team, report!” Elan is already trying to reach them even as the shuttle is destroyed, both antennae straining forward toward her station. “Report!”

“Discovery—” Someone coughs badly, the sound stripping their throat. “Discovery, this is Ensign T’Lac. Lieutenant Samuels and I are unharmed. Lieutenant Riley was with the shuttle. But we have no way to return.”

Lorca looks at Saru, who shakes his head. “We remain unable to transport them.”

“Captain,” Elan begins, and he knows what she’s about to ask.

“Go,” he tells her. “But take someone else with you.” He can feel Burnham watching him.

Elan rescues T’Lac and Samuels. When Saru reports that they’re back on board, Lorca goes to sickbay to see them. Riley is the first person that Discovery has lost since Landry. He takes care of Discovery’s crew. For all that he’s turned them into soldiers, they’re not supposed to die like them.

In sickbay, T’Lac and Samuels both appear physically unharmed, but their breathing is labored—Culber tells him that the smoke and ash from the eruption temporarily overwhelmed the respiratory protections on their suits. He’s given them both masks and instructed them to breathe slowly. Elan is...angry, now that her fear has dissipated. Culber is checking her vital signs and everything is elevated, even for an Andorian. When he tries to offer her a calming hypo, she glares at him until he goes back to the others.

“I told you to take someone else,” Lorca says.

Elan’s fingers flex on the edge of the bio-bed where she sits. “I didn’t want to risk anyone else.” She and Riley had been close, Lorca knows. He’d almost promoted Riley to chief of security instead, but Riley had encouraged him to choose Elan.

“I’m glad you’re all right. All three of you.” He sees Elan’s eyes flick to T’Lac quickly and then away. “We’ll debrief in an hour, if you’re all ready then.”

\* \* \*

When the debrief is over, he dismisses T’Lac and Samuels with orders to rest. “Elan,” he says. “We can organize a—memorial, for Riley.” He never thought he’d hear himself suggesting it.

“Yes, sir.” She’s still furious at herself.

Lorca can’t let her stew in that. He knows how quickly it turns to poison. “I could use a sparring partner this afternoon,” he offers. “I need to be ready in case we run across more Klingons.” He’s full of too much energy, and hitting something—someone—would help. He thinks it would help Elan too.

“Sir.” Elan’s expression might soften the tiniest bit. “I don’t pull my punches.”

“Neither do I.” He smiles at her, as much as she’ll accept. “Alpha shift is over, Lieutenant. I’ll see you in the gym.”

Lorca doesn’t usually spar. It was an offering to Elan, something he thought she would like, but he begins to regret it as soon as they’re standing on a sparring mat. When he fights, he does it to kill. It had been a struggle not to kill the natives who’d pursued him and Burnham, and he’d only held back because of her. Now, standing barefoot facing Elan, he can feel the adrenaline pumping through him and it’s all he can do to stay still. He’s never fought an Andorian before.

“Nothing permanent, everything else is fair game,” he tells her. “Try not to give me a concussion or Dr. Culber will be angry with you.”

Elan bares her teeth in an almost-grin. “I’ll be gentle,” she tells him. “Ready?”

“Go,” he says. He doesn’t realize how quick she is until he’s flat on his back tasting blood.

“Sorry, Captain.” Elan is unrepentant and it sends a warm rush through him to know that he doesn’t have to hold back, not even subconsciously. She pulls him to his feet and they retreat to separate corners. “Go,” she tells him.

This time he knows what to watch for, and he dodges, hits hard to her solar plexus, tries to sweep her feet out from under her, but she punches him twice, nose and then eye, and he breaks away swearing. They grapple again and she strikes him in the stomach, chops at his windpipe, as he punches her down—she bounces up and sweeps his own feet, then kicks him hard while he’s lying on the ground, twice, and he spares a second to be glad that they’re barefoot. He catches her foot before the third strike, rolls and pins her down, but she flips him somehow, boxes his ears and, while he’s still stunned, presses her elbow across his throat.

“Yield,” he rasps, and Elan pulls him to his feet. There’s blue blood on Elan’s teeth when she bares them in a smile and some of his own red on her hands, and he can feel his eye swelling shut. He thinks his nose is broken and she may have dislocated his shoulder. It’s painful and exhilarating and exactly what he wanted—what she needed too, he thinks.

“Not bad for a human,” she tells him.

“You’re fast. I didn’t realize how fast you’d be.”

“I’m carrying less bulk.” She jabs, hits him in his good shoulder, and even playfully he feels the force behind it.

Lorca turns to find a towel to wipe his face and discovers that the exercise room has filled, ten or fifteen people all watching them. He sees Tilly, Chandavarkar, even Tyler, all in their silly Disco workout shirts. And Burnham. He doesn’t want to look at her, but he can’t help it for a moment; their eyes catch and she scans him up and down before he forces himself to look away. Lorca wonders what she sees—danger? He turns back to Elan and says, “Lieutenant, I think that’s all for me.” She squints at him, nods, and tosses his shoes to him. As he leaves the room, he hears Elan call, “All right, who else wants a beating?”

He goes to sickbay. He must look grisly, because two different specialists scramble out of his way in the halls, then stand at attention and say “Sir!” as he passes. In sickbay, Culber and Dr. Pollard are inside a bio-field working frantically, so Lorca sits on a bio-bed to wait. The pain is annoying but certainly not incapacitating.

“Helloooo, Captain!” Stamets seems to be haunting sickbay. He strolls over to the next bed over and hops up to face Lorca. “You look terrible.”

“Sparring with Elan.” His swollen lip makes it hard to enunciate.

Stamets shakes his head. “Note to self, don’t do *that*. But I’ve been meaning to talk to you anyway.”

That same dread that he felt with Burnham trickles through Lorca. “Lieutenant?”

“Are we ever going to use the spore drive again?”

He should have been expecting the question, but it throws him anyway. “The spore drive?” he repeats.

“You know, lots of floaty sparkles in the air, needles in my arms, could probably jump all the way home?”

Lorca isn’t sure what his gestures are meant to evoke. “Not until we know this won’t happen again,” he says, and lets Stamets decide what “this” means. “Not anytime soon,” he amends.

“The crew want to get home.” Stamets sounds like he’s testing Lorca. “We have no idea how long it’s going to take us at warp.”

“Better we take months and return with you and the spore drive intact than try to jump again and end up god knows where.”

“Captain, whatever went wrong last time won’t happen again—”

It wouldn’t happen again, because Lorca wouldn’t interfere again. “It doesn’t matter. We don’t have the advanced medical facilities that we would need on board before Dr. Culber or I would be satisfied that it was safe for you to jump.”

“Hugh would never be satisfied that it was safe for me to jump.” Stamets looks over at his partner and Lorca can hear the fondness in his voice, even mixed with exasperation. “But you, Captain—” He frowns at Lorca. “One hundred and thirty-four jumps after we engaged the Klingons at Pahvo, and this is the one you’re worried about?”

“What are you looking for here, Stamets?”

Stamets tilts his head. “You asked me about alternate universes, before we jumped. Did you want to go to another one?”

“I wanted to try it, eventually.” That’s as much as he can admit to Stamets.

“Not anymore?”

“We’re wandering in an uncharted part of the galaxy and there’s some kind of incorporeal being living in the cultivation bay,” Lorca says. “We’re already pretty far beyond the norm.”

“Oh, it’s a symbiotic relationship!” Stamets gets distracted by his mention of the creature. “It promotes mycelial growth and it seems to gain strength from the mycelium. We’re still sifting through all the data we’ve gathered—”

“Captain.” Culber’s voice cuts through whatever Stamets was going to say, and Lorca turns to him. “Paul,” he adds.

Stamets rolls his eyes. He hops down off the bed and says “I’ll be in Engineering if you need me.”

“Paul isn’t physically able to jump,” Culber says, once Stamets has left. “Captain, I—”

“I’m not going to ask him to, doctor.” Lorca gestures at his own face. “A little help?”

Culber switches back into doctor mode and begins scanning with his medical tricorder. “What happened?”

“Lieutenant Elan and I decided to work off some energy.” He winces as Culber prods at his nose.



“She did a number on you. Where’s she?” Culber holds the tricorder very close to his eye, which is now swollen almost shut.

“She was...in better condition. She’s probably still sparring.”

“Hmm.” Culber is only half-listening. “You still aren’t experiencing any light-sensitivity?”

“No more than I used to.” Culber turns up the light on the tricorder and the expectation of pain is still there, but it never arrives. “Burnham!” Lorca tenses. Culber must see the spike in his vital signs. “Have you been sparring with Elan too?”

“No. She told me that I should go down to sickbay and make sure that she didn’t give the captain another concussion.” It sounds like something Elan would say, but he’s a little surprised she would send Burnham right now, given how careful she’s been around him.

“I knew she was holding back,” Lorca says. When Culber moves the tricorder from his field of vision, his eyes focus on Burnham, still in her Disco t-shirt and shorts. She’s sweating a little and Tilly is hovering just outside the doors. It looks like they went jogging and decided to stop by. “She could have done a lot more damage when I was down.”

“When Vulcans are learning *suus mahna*, it’s considered a failure if one’s opponent is injured to the point of bleeding,” Burnham says.

“You didn’t seem worried about it when you fought the other prisoners on your first day here.” Of course, as far as she knows he didn’t see that fight.

“*Suus mahna* involves precise control of the body. Vulcans have the control that’s needed to not use the same amount of force when sparring as in an actual fight. And I’m human.” Burnham’s spine is straight when she talks to him, her face devoid of expression. He wonders if she would argue if he pushed it further.

“Lieutenant Elan and I agreed on the amount of force before we sparred,” he says. He doesn’t want to admit that he’d been worried before the match that one of them might kill the other. “In a real fight, she could have broken my neck.”

“And you couldn’t have stopped her?” Burnham is watching him so closely, looking for any sign of—danger? What does she want to see?

Lorca considers his words carefully until Culber tells him “Brace” and pops his shoulder back into place. He chokes the gasp of pain in his throat before it can escape.

“I want a chief of security who fights better than I do.” His own words echo back at him from months earlier. “Elan does.” He doesn’t know if he could have fought back harder without trying to kill her. He doesn’t know if he could have, and he doesn’t want to find out.

“I see. Sir.” He wonders if she’s thinking of Tyler. “I’ll tell Lieutenant Elan that you’re...undamaged.”

When she turns to go, he can’t stop himself from saying “Burnham” in a strangled voice. She stops, but she doesn’t look back. “Dismissed.” It’s the only thing he can say in front of Culber and Tilly and the sedated patient further away.

Burnham and Tilly jog away. Lorca realizes that Culber is looking at him with an expression that could almost be called pity. He hates it. “Are we finished here?”

“A few more minutes,” Culber says, and gives him a hypospray.

### Chapter Summary

He loves her. It shouldn't be a surprise, and it's as badly timed as it possibly could be, but he loves her. He doesn't say it, of course. Instead, he says, "Bring the PADD and come with me. Computer, two for site-to-site transport, captain's ready room to brig."

Lorca does plan a memorial for Riley because Elan is still alternately grieving and angry and has no outlet for it. He tasks Tilly with identifying the appropriate form for an Irishman—"This is the kind of thing you'd have to do if you were captain," he tells her—and stands up in front of the crew to say, "Lieutenant Riley was a devoted officer who put the safety of each member of this crew above his own. We were lucky to serve with him," while Burnham stares at Lorca like she's never met him. Tyler stands up too and talks about how Riley had supported him when he first became chief of security. Elan follows, but only to say, "We're holding a wake for Riley."

There's a synthesized photo of Riley on one of the tables. People begin setting out casseroles—they're too big to have come from the food synthesizers, which means someone synthesized the ingredients and then cooked them by hand. There's a messiness to them that food synthesizers can't reproduce. Someone starts playing music. Tilly assured him (and he verified) that alcohol played a significant role too, and it flows freely. Maybe too freely. All of the security personnel except Chandavarkar rapidly get drunk; as the newest member of the team, he has to stay sober.

Elan comes over to him and yells over the music, "Thank you, this is a lot like an Andorian funeral!" She has a bottle of Andorian ale and she thrusts it at him and says, "One drink to remember Riley!"

Lorca takes one drink. He remembers what happened the last time. "I'm glad you appreciate it." He gives her back the bottle and then, with only the slightest hesitation, pats her on the back. He scans the room for T'Lac, who isn't as drunk as Elan, and catches her eye; T'Lac nods and begins to weave her way through the crowd. Lorca doesn't even know if they're...together, but Elan went all the way down to the planet to rescue her after Riley died.

Once T'Lac has taken over responsibility for her, Lorca moves away. He can't leave, but he doesn't want to be here. It's bringing back too many memories, too much awareness of things left undone. He'd mourned Michael, but he never had the chance to grieve the crew of the Buran, his own Buran—the flaming wreckage, the bodies of people who trusted him drifting out into space, only to find himself on a hellish second version of the Buran, people running screaming and the Klingons about to dock. He still doesn't remember how he escaped. And Landry, there was no memorial like this for this universe's Landry. He'd been busy being scolded by Starfleet and then tortured by Klingons, and by the time he returned it had felt too late.

He stands in a corner and drinks slowly and watches everyone. There's a kind of frenzied attempt at happiness, celebration of Riley's life, with a dark undercurrent to it all. Tyler finds him and says, "Thank you, sir. It means a lot to all of us."

Lorca doesn't want to acknowledge that. "You seem better, Lieutenant."

Tyler nods, raises his glass, and Lorca toasts him gingerly. "Yes, sir. Almost my old self."

He doesn't know whether Tyler means his pre-war self or his pre-Pahvo self, and he isn't sure which would be better. "Glad to hear it," he says, and they both drink. Lorca has to remind himself to remain measured. This could almost be a Terran funeral, but for the homemade food and the limited number of weapons. His phaser is still comforting at the small of his back.

"Sir," Tyler begins, and Lorca knows what he's about to say. "I'm ready to rejoin the security team."

"Are you." He can see Burnham across the room talking to Chandavarkar. It doesn't look like she's drinking, but she's watching either him or Tyler or both, intently.

"Security is down a member." His voice catches a little. "I'm not a scientist or a technician, and I'm no use just wandering the ship. Let me help."

The thought of it makes Lorca uneasy, but nothing Tyler says is wrong. At the very least he can fly shuttles to and from planets, when they're ready to resume away missions. It might be comforting to the other security officers to have a familiar face back among them. "All right," he says. "Let Lieutenant Elan know. Not tonight."

"Thank you, sir!" For the first time in a long time, Tyler sounds hopeful. "I'll do that."

Lorca gets another drink. Burnham walks over to him and he braces himself. "I gave Tyler permission to rejoin security," he tells her, in the hope of forestalling a longer conversation.

"This is nice," Burnham says, looking around.

"It isn't." Lorca's voice is rough. "He never should have died. None of them."

"None of them?"

"Riley. Landry. Kowski." He has to take a deep breath. He shouldn't say it. "My crew."

“Your crew?”

He would be frustrated by her echo if he weren't already struggling to control himself. “The Buran.”

“You had it there.” She's very still. She can do that, not just stand quietly, but almost freeze herself in place.

“Yes,” he says, and hates the way he sounds as he says it. “The Emperor destroyed it.” It's too loud for anyone else to hear. “And then I was here and had to see the Klingons do it too.” He takes another drink to stop himself from talking. He wishes he'd never been honest about his history. He wants to touch her, so badly that he has to clench his free hand into a fist, wants her to touch him, even just lightly.

Burnham doesn't. She hasn't moved at all, only watches him, examining him. “I saw my crewmates die on the Shenzhou,” she says finally. “I saw T'Kuvma kill my captain. They held a memorial, but I was in prison by then.” She recites it like a textbook passage, absent any emotion. He remembers the way she laughed after the party, when she was drunk and happy and he'd kissed her in the hallway. Now she's almost back to the Burnham he first met, at least around him.

“Well, you're practically Vulcan.” He can't make himself say, *and Vulcans don't feel*, even though it's what he wants to do. He wants to hurt her, make her angry, make her reveal any emotion at all beyond her façade. She must be able to tell what he means, but she doesn't react.

Finally, Burnham says, “I'm sure the crew appreciates this. Captain.” She walks away and he feels like he's been gutted. It's much easier to behave normally on the bridge, even in sickbay, even alone together in the light. Even in his ready room. This, this emotional place, where everyone is laughing or crying or arguing or drunk or all at the same time, he should've known would be unsafe. The lights are at full and he still feels like they were whispering in the dark.

Then the yelling starts. It's Elan, and he can't hear what she's saying over the music, but he knows her tone. He moves quickly through the crowd and finds her with T'Lac, who's trying to calm her; when she sees him, she whirls on him. “I never should have sent him down,” she snarls. “I should've gone myself.” Her antennae curve forward like horns. “You should have made him chief instead.”

“Elan,” he says. “Stop. I know how you feel, but you have to stop.”

“What do you know about how I feel? Captain of the Buran who blew up his ship?”

It feels like a physical blow and he can't argue with her, can't say what he wants, not when everything is already so close to the surface. She wants to strike him, he can see it, and if he doesn't stop her it'll look dangerous to the crew that anyone can attack the captain. He hears Tilly yell frantically, “A fight is a traditional part of a wake” even as Elan comes at him. She outmatches him, even drunk. She had been holding back, the last time. He moves defensively, tries to block and never strike, but she's too fast for him. No blood this time, only body blows, and then in a breathless moment she grasps his chin and bares his neck and he knows she'll snap it, can almost feel it—and is stunned when she stops herself.

It takes her a long time to release him. When his vision clears, he sees Tyler and Chandavarkar moving toward Elan. They must have been afraid she would kill him if they tried to stop the fight. “Escort Lieutenant Elan to the brig,” he orders. Only then can he look around at the crowd. Somehow Tilly has made them all look away, toward her—plausible deniability, at least. A few have turned back to look, but when he meets their eyes, they snap back around to Tilly.

In the Terran universe, Elan kills him here. Or Saru kills him in the turbolift on the way to the bridge. Or Burnham kills him in the hallway, or Stamets in Engineering, or, or, or. A Terran commander, once his weakness is shown, is as good as dead. Here, he thinks it might not be the case. He needs to reclaim some control over the situation, so he walks around to where Tilly is...leading the crew in a raucous Irish mourning song, loudly and off-key, claps her on the back, and joins in full-throated. Only when the song ends does he say, “Thank you, Cadet Tilly,” and allow himself to leave.

Lorca walks out of the room on autopilot. The adrenaline wears off only a minute later and he has to press his back against the hallway wall, let it hold him straight and tall as he tries to breathe deeply. His vision is a little grayed out and he can't seem to hear anything, because when a person touches his arm, he has her against the wall with a knife to her throat before he can act consciously. It's worst possible person to have attacked, of course. He lowers the knife from Burnham's throat and sheaths it again.

“I apologize,” she says. “I thought you'd heard me speak.”

“No.” Lorca allows himself to turn back, to lean against the wall again. “No. I expected—”

“Another attack?” She raises an eyebrow, but there's none of the humor that he used to see in it. “You should go to sickbay and let the doctor examine you. You may have internal injuries.”

“No.” He doesn't know who's on duty in sickbay. Culber is at the wake. He's tired of going there to lick his wounds. He can't talk to Burnham now. “Computer, site-to-site transport,” he says, and the hallway disappears in front of him.

\* \* \*

Lorca goes to see Elan after they've both had a chance to recover. Tyler is standing outside the brig—the last person that Lorca would have assigned to that duty—and Lorca tells him, “Dismissed.”

“Sir—” Tyler thinks better of his protest and leaves.

Inside the brig, the Klingon's cell containment field is opaque. When he checks, the sound is muted on both sides. He walks to Elan's cell. “If I lower the containment field, will you attack me?”

Elan shakes her head. She's sitting on the bed, hunched, her antennae drooping. “No, Captain.”

Lorca lowers the field and walks into the cell. He feels a strange impulse to sit on the bed next to her, but he takes a chair instead and faces her. “You tried to kill me.”

“I didn’t,” she says. She won’t look at him.

“You didn’t try?”

“I didn’t kill you.”

“Elan. Look at me.” He’s never tried to speak kindly to someone in one of his cells before. It’s surreal. “What was that?”

She meets his eyes, shifts, looks at the wall just next to his head. “My people are...very passionate. It’s one reason we didn’t used to get along with Vulcans. We have difficulty suppressing our emotions.”

“You’re telling me that would be tolerated in the Imperial Guard?” Even among Andorians, he doubts it.

“No, Captain.”

He hates this. He’s come to consider her a friend, beyond his chief of security. “Do you have a problem serving under the former captain of the Buran?”

Elan meets his eyes again, and her face is full of guilt. “No, Captain. I wasn’t myself when I said that.”

Lorca wanted to be dispassionate, even gentle, but he’s suddenly angry at her. “I trusted you completely.” How strange, to realize that. “How am I supposed to keep you as my chief of security after that? How am I supposed to justify doing anything but keeping you here in the brig for the foreseeable future? And it’s a long foreseeable future, Elan.”

Her antennae twitch sharply and she looks down at the ground. “Yes, Captain.”

He leans back in the chair, closes his eyes. “I can’t think of a way around this,” he says. “There’s no one I trust more than you and I don’t want to keep you here and I don’t want to demote you.”

“I’m sorry, Captain.”

Lorca stands up and does allow himself to walk to the bed and sit next to her. “Assault on a captain is a serious crime.” He doesn’t tell her that in the Terran universe, she would be dead. She would never have been chief of security in the first place there, and now she would be dead. “Think of a defense,” he does tell her. He puts a hand on her back, and she leans into it.

“Yes, Captain,” she says. She doesn’t sound confident.

He has to raise the containment field when he leaves. He does set the computer so that she can tell it when she wants the field to be opaque. Anyone outside can override it, but at least she can have some measure of privacy.

“Burnham to captain’s ready room,” he comms.

Burnham meets him there, standing at attention, and he gestures to one of the chairs. “At ease. Sit down.” She hesitates for a second, but is more unwilling to disobey than uncomfortable at the idea of sitting. “Burnham, I need your help.”

“Sir.” Her back is steel-straight.

He offers her a PADD. “Am I right in thinking that you know Starfleet regulations better than anyone else on this ship?”

Burnham accepts it. “I know them well. How can I help?”

“It’s about Lieutenant Elan.” He takes a deep breath. “I need you to find a justification for her behavior so that I don’t have to remove her from duty or demote her.”

If Burnham is shocked at his request, she doesn’t show it. She looks down at the PADD. “These are the Starfleet regulations regarding assault on an officer.”

“I looked it up. It seemed like a starting point,” he says. “As you can imagine, I’m not—” He stops himself.

“Familiar with Starfleet regulations?”

He can hardly be unhappy with her for reminding him of what they both know. “Yes.”

Burnham scrolls slightly. “Captain. You understand that she did violate regulations.”

“No,” he says. “I want you to figure out why she didn’t.” He has to admit it to himself, and he might as well admit it to Burnham. “I knew that Elan...cared very deeply about Riley. I shouldn’t have tried to distract her with sparring when she first returned and I should have known that she would be grieving and would drink too much at the wake. I showed her that I wasn’t off-limits when we sparred and I knew that Andorian ale is very strong.”

Something sparks in Burnham’s eyes. “Did she care deeply enough to be emotionally compromised by his death?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Burnham scrolls quickly on the PADD. “Starfleet Regulation 619 requires an officer to remove themselves from duty if a mission renders them emotionally compromised and unable to act rationally.”

“So she violated another regulation in addition to trying to kill me?”

“Starfleet Medical Protocol 121, section A, gives the Chief Medical Officer to relieve any officer of duties if the CMO believes that they are medically unfit for duty. If I were Lieutenant Elan’s advocate in a legal proceeding, I would argue that the CMO should have relieved her of duty when she first returned from the planet and that she did violate Regulation 619 by failing to remove herself from duty, but that the same violation of 619 renders her not responsible for her own subsequent actions because she was unable to act rationally. Striking a fellow officer requires court-martial. Violation of Regulation 619 does not. When an officer is no longer emotionally compromised, they may return to duty.”

He loves her. It shouldn’t be a surprise, and it’s as badly timed as it possibly could be, but he loves her. He doesn’t say it, of course. Instead, he says, “Bring the PADD and come with me. Computer, two for site-to-site transport, captain’s ready room to brig.”

They materialize just outside the brig. Tyler is there again, and he looks surprised and a little guilty to see Burnham. Lorca suspects that Burnham didn’t know he’d been assigned to guard the brig. “Dismissed,” Lorca tells him again, and Tyler nods and leaves.

They enter the brig. The containment field is clear. Elan is doing push-ups in the cell. He can’t imagine how bored she must be already. “Lieutenant Elan,” he says.

She jumps up. “Captain.”

“Computer, lower containment field.” Burnham doesn’t protest, but he still says, “I don’t want to talk with her through that thing.” Elan doesn’t step out when the field disappears, and they don’t step in. “Burnham, tell her what you’ve told me.”

Silently, Elan looks to Burnham. “The captain asked me to review Starfleet regulations to determine which would apply to this situation,” Burnham begins. Elan frowns, but Lorca shakes his head slightly at her. “I understand that, when you returned from the planet, you were deeply emotionally affected by Lieutenant Riley’s death.” Elan flinches. “You may have been emotionally compromised and unable to act rationally. Starfleet Regulation 619 requires an officer who is emotionally compromised to remove themselves from duty, but if they fail to do so, they can’t be held responsible for their actions if they’re unable to act rationally.” Elan stares at her. “Because you were emotionally compromised by Lieutenant Riley’s death, you can’t be prosecuted for any actions that you took during that time.”

“What.” Elan is gaping at Burnham now. Her antennae twitch uncertainly.

“All that remains is for a medical officer to examine you and confirm that you’re no longer emotionally compromised, and then you can be released and returned to duty,” Burnham finishes. She’s the most beautiful thing Lorca has ever seen.

Elan turns from Burnham to Lorca. “Gabe,” she says. “Captain. *Thank you.*”

“Thank Burnham.” His voice is rough. “I’m going to get medical down here to confirm it.” He leaves the brig and walks to sickbay, slowly. Brilliant, clever Burnham saved Elan. Saved him from losing his chief security officer or blatantly violating regulations and making the crew doubt him. It’ll be delicate, awkward, of course, but it will work.

An hour and a half later, the ship’s counselor has confirmed that Elan is no longer emotionally compromised and she’s been released. Lorca tells Saru to announce the outcome of the investigation to the ship in whatever way is appropriate, because he doesn’t trust himself. Elan steps out of the cell, hugs Lorca tight, then hugs Burnham, who looks deeply uncomfortable, then says, “I desperately need a shower” and walks out of the brig. Tyler falls in behind her after a guilty look at the counselor.

Lorca and Burnham walk slowly out of the brig. “Thank you,” Lorca says. “You didn’t have to do that for Elan.”

“You asked for my help.”

He never knows what she’s thinking. “It wasn’t part of your duties as science specialist.”

Burnham stops then and turns to face him, looks directly into his eyes. “When I was court-martialed for mutiny,” she says, “I wouldn’t have accepted it, but I would’ve been grateful if someone had tried to do that for me.”

“I’m not losing any more of my crew.” Then he can’t stop himself from saying, “I would have done it for you. Too.”

She raises an eyebrow the tiniest bit. “I know.”

He’s caught, mesmerized, until he remembers to say, “Elan going free doesn’t endanger the ship.”

“Elan was emotionally compromised. She isn’t anymore. Logically, she presents no danger.” Burnham holds him there, transfixed. “I would never let you do something that I thought was wrong. Captain.” She breaks eye contact and walks away.

## Chapter Summary

“I don’t know how I got off the Buran,” Lorca admits it quietly. “I blew it up. But I don’t know how I got onto that shuttle.” He smiles without humor. “I like to think that the crew loved Captain Gabriel Lorca so much that they hit him over the head and dumped him into an escape pod so that he wouldn’t have to die with them.”

“That’s some kind of love,” Burnham says. It’s jarring to hear her sound so human.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It’s been six weeks since they jumped here. In the ready room, Saru tells them that the navigational sensors now suggest that they’re another six weeks away from known space traveling at warp five. Specialist Chrian starts shaking her head before Lorca turns to her. “No,” she says. “The anomaly we hit two days ago nearly blew out the whole warp drive, and that was at warp four. Unless you want your grandchildren arriving home on impulse power, we’re not going any faster. The only time we can make up is if we stop going on these little planetary excursions.”

“Out of the question,” Lorca says it with a force that surprises him.

“It’s the only thing keeping some of the crew from...extreme difficulty,” Burnham says. “That last planet was a good idea.” It had been a planet with a wide sandy beach and a gentle ocean, and they’d lingered there for almost forty-eight hours, taking readings to make sure it was safe and then rotating the crew through for shore leave. He’d stayed on the ship, but almost everyone else took a turn going. Tilly, his unofficial morale advisor, was the one to suggest it, and she reported to him that it was successful in improving mood. From the next few meals he’d eaten in the mess hall, he agreed.

“I’m not telling you how to keep morale up, I’m just telling you how fast the warp drive can sustain and you can do whatever you want with that information.” Chrian tends to be in a bad mood anytime she’s away from the warp drive. She even sleeps in Engineering, he’s learned.

“Lieutenant Elan?” Lorca asks.

“No change to security,” she reports. “The phasers and torpedoes remain fully functional. We have yet to detect any warp signatures, including any warp-capable civilizations. We’ve only come across two planets inhabited by...people, which we’ve designated P3X-524 and P3X-709.”

“Yes, I remember how P3X-524 went.” Viscerally. Heat runs through him and he doesn’t let himself look at Burnham. It’s been harder to maintain equilibrium since she saved Elan. His head is full of her. “Anything else?” Elan shakes her head.

“Specialist Burnham?”

“We have several projects underway,” she says. “I’ve sent reports to your PADDs. The...thumpers retrieved from P3X-524 have reproduced. There are eight pups. Multiple crew members have asked permission to adopt one.” Lorca winces at the idea of that. “The original specimens are in good condition.”

“Tell me these aren’t going to be tribbles all over again.” Lorca knows better than to ask if they’re edible, given how the crew is reacting.

“No, Captain. Several scientists have been assigned to make sure that doesn’t happen.” He thinks he sees the tiniest hint of a smile, just at the corner of her mouth, but he might be wishing it into existence. “Ensign T’Lac continues to lead an analysis of the specimens retrieved on her last mission. She reports no significant findings yet.” Elan tenses just slightly but locks down whatever she’s feeling. “And Lieutenant Stamets continues his work on the symbiosis between the mycelium and the smoke creature that appeared on the ship when we struck one of our first anomalies.”

“What about the anomalies? Do we know anything more about why they appear?”

Saru cuts in. “Captain, the algorithm that Lieutenant Stamets and I created—”

“I know it predicts them, Mr. Saru. That’s not what I’m asking. Burnham.” She looks up from the PADD. “In the Delphic Expanse, the anomalies appeared as part of some kind of...galactic terraforming, didn’t they?”

“That’s true.” Burnham sets the PADD down and looks from Lorca to Elan to Saru to Chrian. “We have yet to encounter anything that would suggest we’re in a similar situation.”

“We’re hitting anomalies left and right.”

“Yes,” Burnham says. “But there are no other indicators. We have repeatedly encountered anomalies that produce temporary failures in our gravitic technology. The anomalies in the Expanse were much more varied. One...turned a ship of Klingons inside out.” At their blank expressions, she clarifies, “Each of the Klingons had been...anatomically inverted. But was still alive.” She watches the collective shudder run through the group. “They didn’t stay alive long outside of the Expanse. As I said, there were areas in which the laws of physics did not apply. The Expanse contained numerous highly-advanced sentient species possessing warp-capable starships, including many that were well beyond the capabilities of Starfleet. And, most significantly, the Enterprise encountered the technology actually generating the anomalies—the galactic

terraforming, as you put it—routinely while in the Expanse.”

“Maybe they learned to be more subtle. Picked a part of the galaxy that wasn’t so crowded.”

She raises an eyebrow. “We will continue to watch for indicators beyond the anomalies we have already encountered, Captain.”

“All right,” he says. “Keep me posted. Dismissed. Lieutenant Elan, a moment.”

Elan stays behind. After the first rush of gratitude, she’s been cagey over the last week. More like an ordinary officer, less like the person he chose. “Captain?”

He almost wishes she would go back to calling him Gabe, offensive as it was. “How’s Tyler settling in, Elan?”

Her antennae twitch. “He’s still settling. I’m being gentle with him.”

“I’m sure you are,” Lorca says. “But I don’t want him guarding the brig. Or anywhere near it.”

Elan frowns at that. “I’ve never assigned him to guard the brig, Captain.”

“He was guarding it while you were inside.”

That wound is still fresh. “As you may recall, I wasn’t handing out duty assignments then.” She’s uncharacteristically silent for a moment. “He didn’t come back on duty until after I’d been declared emotionally uncompromised.” That’s not good. Lorca stands up, paces from the chairs where they sit to his desk and then back. “Should I remove him from duty now?”

Lorca walks back to his desk again. He has a headache. “No,” he says finally. Everything is too delicate. “We were lucky to find that beach planet so soon...after. It distracted everyone. I don’t want to make anything more unsettled than it already is by taking him off duty again. Just—don’t let him go down to the brig again. And I don’t want him anywhere near that Klingon.”

“Burnham still won’t let you get rid of it?” There’s the tiniest teasing note in Elan’s voice.

Lorca wants to reciprocate, but the topic of Burnham is too...tender. Elan must know that they were sleeping together, and she must have gathered that they aren’t anymore, and he doesn’t want to talk about why that is. He’d deluded himself, briefly, into thinking that maybe he could trust Elan with his secret. She’s Starfleet, but she’s Andorian, and she doesn’t have the same blind faith in the truth and justice of the Federation that Burnham does. She might not care.

*Captain of the Buran, who blew up his ship?*

No. There’s no room to risk it. Burnham is already one person too many. “Federation law continues to prohibit it,” he says, and it comes out sounding like he’s scolding her.

Elan looks like he’s slapped her. “Of course, Captain. May I return to the bridge?”

“Elan,” he starts, and then stops. “Yes, dismissed.” She leaves and he finds himself angry at her again.

\* \* \*

In the mess hall, Lorca sits at his defensible table with his back to the wall and...he’s not brooding. He eats. He contemplates. He watches Burnham and Tyler walk in, Tyler all smiles and dimples—if not for his lurking at the brig, Lorca would think he really was all right—and sit together. He likes to think that he does this inconspicuously. He sees Tilly carrying her tray, catches her glance, and beckons her over with two fingers.

“Hi, sir!” She sits down at his table, which wasn’t exactly what he’d intended. “How are you doing?” She still has a sunburn from the beach.

Lorca sighs internally and says “Fine.” He can see why it is that Burnham, unfathomable, turns to Tilly for moral support, even as he’s given up trying to find any hint of Captain Killy. “I take it the crew’s morale remains improved?”

“Everyone really wants a thumper.” She takes a spoonful of frozen yogurt, considers it. “But—yes, things are all right.”

“Tyler?” Lorca keeps his voice low.

Tilly tries to swallow back her words, but ends up saying, “He’s pretty much glued to Michael when he’s not on duty.”

“Thank you, Cadet. That’s not what I was asking.” Not the answer he would have wanted, either. “I mean his—fitness. For duty. I don’t want to push him too hard.”

Tilly puts down her spoonful of frozen yogurt without eating it. “I’m not really qualified to say.”

“In command, Cadet, you need to be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of everyone around you, as quickly as possible.” It’s not lost on him that his command lessons to Tilly are generally in service of getting something from her. Another good lesson he should teach her. “I’m asking you as a cadet on the command track, not as...his friend.”

She grimaces. “It’s hard to tell. He seems fine, but you know how Michael seems fine and sometimes isn’t? I don’t know if that’s true of him too.”

“Is something wrong with Burnham?” He asks it and then realizes he has no legitimate reason for doing so. Tilly is unlikely to be willing to reveal anything about her friend.

Tilly frowns deeper. “That was a general comparison. Not a comment on Michael.” She stands and picks up her tray. “I should get back to Engineering, Lieutenant Stamets needs my help with a simulation.”

“I want to know if anything changes. With crew morale,” he clarifies. “Dismissed.” For the second time that day, Lorca watches a person hurry to escape his presence. It’s almost like the old days.

\* \* \*

Lorca calls Burnham to the ready room, out of some masochistic desire to have her remind him of his failings, or because she’s the only one he can tell about the Terran universe. Maybe he wants a third person to run from him. He turns the lights up to full, now that they don’t bother him. He wonders if this universe is gradually rewriting his body, if his scars will start to disappear too.

“Captain,” she says when she walks in, and he gestures to the chair across from him. He’s not sure the chairs were a good idea anymore, but his officers have gotten used to them.

“Burnham.” He watches her sit down, so rigid that the chair could vanish and she’d still be sitting in the same position. “You heard Lieutenant Elan. At Lieutenant Riley’s wake.”

“I did.”

This is weakness. He thought he had Elan to protect him, but he doesn’t, not really. Burnham may hate him, but he trusts her. Of course he trusts her. “She expressed—well. You heard her.”

“I did,” Burnham says again.

“I don’t know how I got off the Buran.” Lorca admits it quietly. “I blew it up. But I don’t know how I got onto that shuttle.” He smiles without humor. “I like to think that the crew loved Captain Gabriel Lorca so much that they hit him over the head and dumped him into an escape pod so that he wouldn’t have to die with them.”

“That’s some kind of love,” Burnham says. It’s jarring to hear her sound so human.

“I remember fighting Klingons that were boarding. I’d never fought a Klingon hand-to-hand before. I don’t know if I’d ever breathed the same air as one.”

“I had never met a Klingon until the Battle of the Binary Stars. I killed the first Klingon I ever met.” Burnham looks sorry about it. He’s not.

“Everything was on fire.” Lorca says it slowly. He can almost feel the heat again whenever he remembers it. “There were hull breaches on every deck. Half the ship had lost atmosphere. Sickbay was gone. There was a lot of screaming. A lot of bodies inside and out.” He stares out toward the stars. “I don’t know when I went from my Buran to the USS Buran. I didn’t know I had until I saw the Klingons.” Burnham doesn’t say anything, just watches his face. “Most of the security team was already dead when I—got there. We fought our way to the bridge, and I know I ordered whoever was there to arm the self-destruct and whoever was left in Engineering to overload the warp core.” He closes his eyes. “And ordered a collision course with the Klingon destroyer.” Lorca opens his eyes again, back to the stars. “They told me afterward that our explosion destroyed it too. I don’t know how many of the crew were still alive when the Buran went. There were a lot of bodies down.” The words drag out of his throat.

“Would you have done it if you’d still been on your own ship? If it had been your crew?” Burnham’s voice doesn’t betray whatever she’s thinking.

He turns his answer over in his mouth before he says it. “Yes. Before I let the Emperor take my people? Yes.” The words are bitter on his tongue. “I can’t imagine that any of them survived her laying waste to my ship. If they did, they’re insane by now.” Burnham makes a slight noise and he says, “They would have been tortured for days or months, constantly. Killed only when they’d broken.” Lorca grips the arm of his chair very tightly. “No one thinks I did the wrong thing by destroying my ship, Burnham.” That’s been made very clear to him. “The only thing they think I did wrong was not die with it.”

“Do you?” She asks him all the worst questions, the ones he doesn’t want to think about, let alone answer.

“Well. I don’t want to be dead.” His body feels very heavy, but he shrugs and lies, “I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about whether the things I’ve done are wrong.”

Burnham lets him have the lie. “Elan was distraught when she said it. That doesn’t mean she feels that way.”

“She’s Andorian. She says what she feels.” That’s what stings the most, he realizes. He’d thought Elan had no hidden depths to fear, that he could trust whatever he saw on the surface.

“When I was younger,” Burnham begins, and visibly struggles to continue. “After the learning center was bombed by renegade Vulcans. Logic dictated that I leave my parents and my...brother. Spock was already a target for being half-human. My presence put them all at risk.” Her mouth has been wavering a little, and she firms it before continuing. “Spock tried to stop me. He said he would come with me. He was young and it was too dangerous for him.”

“How old were you?” He doesn’t want her to stop, but he finds himself asking.

Burnham shakes her head like it doesn’t matter. “Ten. Spock was six. I had to stop him from coming. I said...cruel things to him. Effective things. I chose the things that I knew would hurt him the most, and I told him that they were true.” Her face is a little bleak. She draws in a deep breath, focuses her eyes on him. “Lieutenant Elan was in pain. Your attempt to comfort her was—dangerous. She reacted as I did to Spock.”



Lorca's voice catches when he tries to speak, then rasps as he says, "Burnham."

"I damaged my relationship with Spock, perhaps irreparably, by my actions. I'm sorry that that happened. Lieutenant Elan almost certainly feels the same way." She shifts the slightest bit in her chair. "Is that all, Captain?"

No, he wants to say. Stay here and tell me who you are. "Yes. Thank you."

\* \* \*

Lorca waits for Elan to go to the mess hall and then follows her there. She sits at a different table than usual and he walks over to her. "Captain," she says, and she looks mystified. "Do you need something?"

"Dinner." Lorca gestures with his tray. "And sarcastic conversation." He attempts a smile.

Elan squints at him, and her antennae wave back and forth a little. She pushes out a chair with her boot and Lorca takes it, even though it puts his back to the room at large. She can see that he doesn't like it. "Don't worry," she tells him. "I'll watch for threats." Then she looks at his tray. "That looks disgusting."

"It's a nutrient beverage. It's efficient. Yours doesn't look much better."

"*Impararay Redbat* and *hari*? You don't know how long it took to make the synthesizer get it right." She breaks off what looks like a wing and offers it to him.

"No," he says. She shrugs and takes a large, crunchy bite.

Lorca takes the nutrient beverage off his tray and subtly angles the tray up, like a mirror. It's not polished enough to show him a clear reflection, but he can at least see the fuzzy shapes behind him.

Elan heaves an exaggerated sigh and scoots her chair over so he can sit with his back to the wall. "Paranoid," she says.

Lorca slides his chair around to sit next to her, bringing his beverage. The smell of the redbat is unfortunate. "Cautious." He's accepted that in this universe, it's unlikely that any of the crew will try to kill him. Except Elan, of course. But his body knows something different, that an attack can come at any moment, that he shouldn't stay at rest in a vulnerable position.

The downside of moving is that now he can see the table where Burnham, Tyler, Tilly, Chandavarkar, and T'Lac sit, arguing cheerfully about something, and Elan can see him seeing that table. Burnham catches his eye and nods almost imperceptibly, then goes back to the argument. He likes to think that he doesn't give anything away, but he sees Elan's antennae swaying gently from the corner of his eye. "My Vulcan is ignoring me," she says gloomily, very quietly.

"Maybe she's just being Vulcan. You know how they are." The nutrient beverage isn't very good, when he thinks about it. Usually he doesn't pay attention to the taste. He watches Elan tear off a piece of *hari* and use it to mop up redbat juices. "Maybe it's the smell of the redbat."

Elan doesn't quite roll her eyes. "I doubt it."

"Vulcans have a very good sense of smell." He learned this from their species profile in the Federation database. Captain Gabriel Lorca would know that, he thinks.

"Shut up, Gabe," she says, and it feels almost all right.

## Chapter End Notes

A few notes:

- According to the Memory Beta wiki, the Star Trek Online game has more information about the fate of the Buran and its crew. I'm opting to ignore it.
- Yes, I'm naming the planets according to Stargate SG-1 naming conventions.
- The note about the Vulcan sense of smell comes from T'Pol on *Enterprise*.
- I cannot believe how difficult it is to find anything about Andorian cuisine.

## Chapter Summary

“I tried to kill him,” Lorca says. The mycelium seem to absorb the sound, soften it. “I would have, if I’d gotten into the cell.” He can’t seem to stop saying it.

“We all know you have a...flexible attitude toward Federation law, Captain.” Stamets touches his own arm lightly where the spore drive interface sits. “It’s not always a bad thing.” He hurries to add, “But it’s probably good you didn’t kill him.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The calm lasts only a few days, until Tyler breaks. Tilly comms Lorca, yelling, “He’s going to kill Michael!” and Lorca calls security, then transports himself, to find that Tilly has already saved Burnham.

Tyler’s body is flung over one of the beds. The room is destroyed, the chairs bent and broken, photo frames and knick-knacks and a PADD smashed on the floor. Security is already there, securing Tyler. Burnham is slowly getting to her knees; she stares at his body as she presses a hand to her throat and gasps for breath, blood on her face and her knuckles. And Tilly, Tilly is still crouched in the corner of the room, with a phaser steady in her hands. Lorca decides to promote her.

“What happened?” Security removes Tyler. He’s so much dead weight as they heave him up, cuff him, and half-carry, half-drag him away, but he’s breathing. Lorca catches a glimpse of his face and he looks much older than he did when they first met in that Klingon cell.

“He...” Burnham seems to realize that there are people in the room and tries to stand straight. She’s still gasping in each breath and she can’t put any weight on her right leg. “He started talking about L’Rell, saying he had to listen to her.” Her voice rasps. “He said it was beyond brainwashing, that they had turned a Klingon into a human. That he didn’t think he was Ash Tyler.” She shudders for a moment and then says, “He said there was someone else inside him, and that he’d tried to be human for me”—voice cracking—“and then he changed.” Tilly crosses the room, puts a hand on Burnham’s shoulder. “He said I’d killed his lord, T’Kuvma, and he couldn’t kill me on the bridge that day but that he would kill me now.” Burnham rubs her neck. “We fought.”

“I heard Klingon.” Tilly sounds almost surprised at herself. “And I ran inside. I shot him. I had to shoot him three times before he fell.” She looks at the phaser in her hand, but she doesn’t put it down.

“Get Burnham to sickbay,” Lorca says. “Cadet—good work.” He looks around and adds, “Someone get down to the brig and tell me when Tyler wakes up.” Burnham puts an arm over Tilly’s shoulders and limps to the door. He moves out of the way, but Burnham assumes that he’s offering to help and leans on his arm too; he and Tilly walk her slowly, excruciatingly to the turbolift. Lorca could carry her himself, but he’s certain that she wouldn’t want it. He could transport them all, but he thinks that she wants the time to compose herself, lock down whatever emotions are threatening to spill out. No one speaks, not even Tilly.

Dr. Culber points them immediately to a bio-bed. He takes Lorca’s place and helps Burnham up, helps her shift until she’s lying down and he can start scanning her. Then he looks from Burnham to Tilly to Lorca and says, “It would be better if you came back after I’ve had a chance to treat her.” Lorca would ignore him, but Burnham’s gaze has become almost vacant, like she’s stepped outside of herself. Tilly grabs him by the elbow and actually tries to drag him out of sickbay; finally, he decides to let her do it.

Outside of sickbay, Tilly starts to hyperventilate and Lorca has to say, “Cadet.”

Automatically, she snaps to attention. “Sir.” She takes a deep breath. “Did I kill him?”

“No,” Lorca says. He misjudged Tyler badly and he’ll kill Tyler himself, whatever Starfleet law says, but Tilly won’t be responsible. He closes his eyes, rubs his temples. The persistent headache is worse now. “Let me know when Culber is done.”

He walks back to his ready room slowly. He brought Tyler on board, trusted him entirely, on the mistaken belief that Tyler would slot into the empty place that Landry used to fill. He’d done it quickly, confident in his own evaluation of the situation, and he remembers with some bitterness Cornwell questioning that decision. He’d known Tyler had nearly broken before, and he’d told Elan to put him back onto the security team anyway, then left him on for some misguided concerns over...morale. In the ready room, he says, “Computer, access security recordings.”

“Protected,” the computer replies.

“Captain’s override,” he tells it. The computer records security footage in individual quarters only when it detects a substantial physical altercation. It’s gotten better at discerning the appropriate times. “Play most recent recording.”

“Protected,” the computer says. “Confirm override.”

“Override, Lorca,” he tells it. The recording begins to play, and the light of it burns his eyes for the first time in weeks.

It starts mid-fight. Tyler charges at Burnham, grabs her by her neck before she can react and throws her against the table. She fights back, the same brutal, efficient strikes that he saw the first day in the mess hall, but he’s much stronger. Burnham catches him off-guard, slams his head against the wall once, twice, before he throws her off and she falls into the bedframe. She throws a metal picture frame at his face, scrambles

up as Tilly runs in with a phaser already out in front of her. Burnham kicks him once, tries again; on the second kick, Tyler grabs her by the ankle and twists, throwing her down, and that's when Tilly shoots him twice. He falls and Tilly shoots him again. The recording ends.

Lorca tries to take a deep breath. "You know how to fight like a Klingon," he remembers telling Tyler. No wonder. How blind, how stupidly overconfident, not to see it, to believe that every moment of desperation on Tyler's face was to revenge himself on the Klingons, to think that Tyler's intense focus on Burnham was love and nothing more insidious.

When Culber comms him and says, "You can speak to her now," Lorca forces himself to walk slowly through the hall to sickbay. Tilly is standing next to Burnham's bed, her back turned to him. When he walks in, she turns, says "Sir," and ducks away to a safe distance.

But for the fact that Burnham is lying in a bed with one leg stuck in some kind of treatment chamber, she would look completely normal—flat, even. The way she looked when they first met, like a statue of a human, eyes as Vulcan as any he's ever met. Like Sarek, when he was lying in this bed. The way she's looked most of the time since she guessed his secret. Her hands are arrayed neatly, carefully, one on each leg. She meets his eyes with nothing behind her own. "Captain," she says. Culber hasn't fixed the rasp in her voice. Not a muscle moves.

Lorca takes Tilly's place beside her bed. He can't keep from standing pressed against the bed, as close as he can get, but he keeps his arms crossed. "Michael." He catches himself. "Burnham. Are you all right?"

"I saw Sarek," she says. "Through the katra." She doesn't comment on his slip. "He was...concerned."

"So am I."

Burnham's expression doesn't change. "Dr. Culber repaired the damage," she says. "My leg is still healing, but it shouldn't take long."

"And your voice?"

If he hadn't spent so much time watching her, he wouldn't have seen the tiny flinch. "He suggested that I wait until my body has recovered more to deal with my vocal cords." She moves her hands from her thighs to lie at her sides. "In a day or so."

He can't help it—he uncrosses his arms and reaches the scant inches to grip her hand. "I'm sorry," he says.

Burnham's hand flexes, and then she wraps her fingers around his own. She doesn't say anything, just squeezes so tightly that it hurts. After a long moment, she releases his hand and says, "Dr. Culber said that I should rest."

"Of course." He wants to stay. She doesn't want him to. As he's leaving sickbay, Lorca beckons Tilly over. "I'm promoting you to lieutenant, effective immediately," he says.

Her eyes widen, but she maintains her composure. "Thank you, sir," she says, and runs her fingers gently over her cadet badge. She doesn't point out that she should be an ensign first, a fact of which he is well aware.

"Dismissed," he says. "Computer, site to site transport, sickbay to brig."

He re-materializes just inside the brig. Ensign Chandavarkar is stationed immediately outside Tyler's cell. Tyler is still unconscious. Two cells down, the containment field on the Klingon's cell remains completely opaque.

"He hasn't woken up yet, sir," Chandavarkar tells him unnecessarily. "I'll alert you as soon as he does."

Lorca is wearing three knives. He doesn't remember when he put them on. "Lower the containment field."

Chandavarkar braces himself. "I can't do that, sir."

It takes Lorca a minute to process, intent as he is on Tyler. "Ensign?"

"I was ordered not to lower the containment field without at least three other security personnel on hand. Due to the danger."

"You were never under his command." Chandavarkar is the only person transferred into security since Lorca removed Tyler as chief. He wonders if that was intentional on Elan's part.

"No, sir."

"I put you on security. And now I'm ordering you to lower the field." Lorca knows how to kill Tyler, no matter what he is, or what he was. A carotid artery; a femoral artery too, if necessary. He's going to do it, and he's going to watch Tyler bleed out until he knows that the man is dead, and then he'll deal with whatever consequences come from that. "I can handle him."

"Captain!" Elan enters, a little too quickly. Chandavarkar must have alerted her somehow, or Tilly did it when he transported. "I'll let you know when Tyler is awake." She slows her steps, edging between him and the containment field.

Lorca keeps his eyes on Tyler. "Why."

"That's what you asked me to do."

"He almost killed her." Phaser at the small of his back, knives up his sleeves.

Elan keeps her distance, but she's still moving into his field of vision, blocking his view of Tyler. "Gabe," she says. "You don't want to do this."

"I do." He can incapacitate her. He can get around Chandavarkar. They can't stop him once he gets into the cell.

“We need him to wake up. We need information from him.” She’s standing just in the way. “I’ll tell you when he’s awake.” There’ll be more security personnel then. He won’t be able to get to Tyler. “Killing him would violate Federation law.”

“I don’t care,” Lorca says. He never swore an oath to defend and uphold Federation law like the rest of them did, never really believed in it. He can hear what Elan is really saying. Burnham believes in Federation law above all else. He loves Burnham. He wants to kill Tyler.

“She won’t forgive you,” Elan says.

“I don’t care,” he repeats. “Are you going to snap my neck to stop me, Lieutenant?”

She and Chandavarkar are suddenly both aiming phasers at him—how did he let that happen?—as Elan says, “You’re not acting rationally.”

“Then no one can hold me responsible for what I do.” He throws it back at her. It’ll be harder to get into the cell now. He’ll probably have to kill one of them. He doesn’t want to do that.

“Gabe,” she says. “Are you really going to make the kid shoot you to stop you from murdering a prisoner?”

The anger he feels is almost incapacitating. He’d killed the overzealous lieutenant who’d decided to put a bomb in Michael’s shuttle. Didn’t even take the time to torture him, the way that a good detached Terran would have. It had been blind rage and grief and a terrifying loss of control, and no one would ever have tried to stop him.

But Burnham would, if she were here. He turns away from the cell. He tries to breathe normally. It doesn’t work. “You should get me out of here,” he says.

Elan holsters her phaser and approaches him from the side. “Come on, Captain.” She moves slowly so he can see her and puts a very light hand on his back. She says nothing about the shape of the phaser tucked there.

She takes him to the mycelium cultivation bay. Maybe it’s the most calming place she can think of. He hasn’t been here for a long time, not since the smoke creature first healed Stamets and he realized that his vision was changing. Not since they stopped jumping. It’s always been beautiful, lush, even humid. He catches glimpses of the glowing smoke winding its way through the fungus, blooming brighter when it touches them, like they’re showering it with sparkling raindrops. The noise in the bay is like thousands of tiny bells. “Stay here,” Elan says. “Until I come to get you.” She beckons Stamets over and says, “Don’t let him leave. Not to sickbay, not to the brig, not anywhere.” Then she walks away.

Stamets regards him uneasily. “...Captain.”

Lorca stares out into the bay, keeping Stamets in the corner of his eye. “You know.”

“Yes.” He doesn’t blame Stamets for not wanting him there.

“I tried to kill him,” Lorca says. The mycelium seem to absorb the sound, soften it. “I would have, if I’d gotten into the cell.” He can’t seem to stop saying it.

“We all know you have a...flexible attitude toward Federation law, Captain.” Stamets touches his own arm lightly where the spore drive interface sits. “It’s not always a bad thing.” He hurries to add, “But it’s probably good you didn’t kill him.”

Lorca is silent for a long time, trying to find what Stamets finds here, let his consciousness...relax. It’s not something that he does naturally. He’s always on guard, or at least aware. He stays awake to the point of exhaustion and beyond, to be able to fall asleep. The thought of—disconnecting from himself is anathema. He wonders, momentarily, if the Gabriel Lorca born in this universe was like him in that way. He steps out on the path through the mycelium, spores drifting and eddying around him as he disturbs them. The smoke creature flows toward him and twines around his ankles, his waist, his shoulders, absorbing the spores and flaring bright as they fall.

“Captain.” He hears Elan calling. He turns and walks back to the door. “You can come with me now,” she says.

His face itches slightly and he draws his hand across it and comes away with a dusting of spores. “How long has it been?” More than it feels like, he suspects.

Elan confirms it. “Four hours. I never thought Stamets would be able to keep you here that long.”

“You thought he would attack me to escape?” Stamets sounds faintly outraged. He’s in the spore chamber, tweaking something.

“I’m sure the lieutenant had confidence in both of to behave as we normally would,” Lorca tells him. “I appreciate the tour.” He follows Elan out of Engineering.

She doesn’t say anything at first. He doesn’t know where she’s taking him. Finally, she stops and says, “We’re in a delicate situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saru and Dr. Pollard are in the brig with Tyler now. He’s...sometimes he’s Tyler and sometimes he yells in Klingon. His brainwave patterns are incomprehensible. Saru...has spoken to the Klingon prisoner L’Rell.”

“You should have gotten me sooner,” Lorca says. “As soon as he woke up.”

Elan just leads him to the brig. Dr. Pollard is outside Tyler’s cell, examining scans. Lorca hears screaming from inside Tyler’s cell, sometimes in his own voice, begging, and sometimes in a deeper, stranger voice in Klingon. He throws himself at the containment field over and over; sometimes he stumbles back for a moment, gasping for breath, and then he flings himself back at it again.

“Why isn’t he sedated?” Lorca still wants to kill him, but he can contain it in front of these people.

“We’ve been pumping sedatives into the cell,” Dr. Pollard tells him. “They barely have an effect. His brain scans look like those of two different people.”

“They are,” Saru says. “L’Rell told me that much. They made a sleeper agent. The—original Ash Tyler was captured. They somehow grafted his consciousness, his mind, his DNA, onto a Klingon. They surgically altered the Klingon to match Tyler’s body.” Even he can’t hide his horror at the idea. “He is both Ash Tyler and Voq, the Klingon they altered. He was not awakened to Voq until he spoke with L’Rell most recently.”

Lorca can see where Tyler—Voq—whoever he is has tried to claw his own chest open. His ordinary human fingers can’t do it. “So we put him down.” The horrified silence that follows is disturbed only by Tyler’s muffled screams and the impacts of his body. That wasn’t the right answer.

“Captain,” Saru says, voice delicate. “I have another idea. L’Rell has refused to help. But it is clear that she cares very much for this man. If we place him into her cell and she experiences his condition firsthand, her opinion may...change.”

“Or she might kill him,” Elan says. She doesn’t offer an opinion as to whether that would be a good thing.

“This is beyond what we know how to treat.” Dr. Pollard gestures to the scans. “She may be the only one who can help.”

“Do it.” Lorca hopes she kills Tyler.

Elan turns the containment field of L’Rell’s cell clear and unmutes it from both sides. “Ready, sir.”

“L’Rell,” Saru says. “You are the only person who may be able to help him.” As she begins to refuse, Elan transports Tyler into the Klingon’s cell.

Tyler staggers forward in L’Rell’s arms and collapses, seizing. She cradles him, stroking his head and murmuring gently in Klingon as he shudders. When it ends, he’s still for a moment, and then tries to struggle away from her, moaning. Lorca remembers him saying that he was L’Rell’s...favorite, the look in his eyes when he’d said it. How much of that was Tyler, unwilling, and how much was Voq? L’Rell looks up from Tyler, and Lorca sees...grief? in her eyes. He remembers the way she tortured him, the agony of the light, the brutality. That’s all gone now. Tyler subsides, at least for the moment, and she strokes his hair again. “I will help him,” she says at last. “But it must be my hands.”

They transport the necessary equipment from sickbay to the brig. Burnham must still be in sickbay, or they would be doing this there. Lorca would rather be in there with her than watching this last-ditch attempt to save the man who tried to kill her, but she doesn’t need him there—doesn’t want him there—and he would question a captain who didn’t participate in something like this. Elan and Chandavarkar stand with their phasers pointed. L’Rell slides her fingers into the device controls, holds her hands above his head, and begins to do...something. Tyler’s brain illuminates red on the scanner screen, points flaring brighter as L’Rell touches them, and he moans and fights his restraints and cries out in Klingon, in English, what sounds like a prayer. When L’Rell finishes, she *wails*, a terrifying noise of grief like nothing he’s ever heard. Tyler falls limp, unconscious, and L’Rell says, “It is done.”

“We need to get him to sickbay,” Dr. Pollard says. “We can’t monitor him adequately down here. And I don’t think it would be a good idea for him to regain consciousness...close to L’Rell. If he regains consciousness.”

“Is Burnham still in sickbay?”

“She is. She should be discharged in the next few hours.”

“He stays here until she’s discharged.” Lorca looks sharply at Elan to forestall any objection.

“Captain—” Dr. Pollard protests.

“I don’t want him waking up next to the person he tried to kill. That’s final. When she’s out of sickbay, move him there.” If he had his way, Tyler would stay in the brig. He could have his way. He could keep Tyler here. But he knows that would be vengeance, not logic.

Lorca goes to sickbay before Burnham is released. He tells himself that he wants to be certain she’s well away from sickbay before they beam Tyler in, but it isn’t. He just wants to be sure she’s well, full stop. She’s sitting up on the bed when he gets there, leg freed from the regenerator, and Culber hands her a case of hypos. “One every day before you sleep,” he says. “For a week. That took a lot out of your body.” He looks up and sees Lorca, says, “Captain, how can I help you?”

“Just checking on Specialist Burnham. I’d like to talk to her once you’ve released her.”

“You’re free to go,” Culber tells her.

Burnham nods once, sharply, and steps down from the bed. She steps forward gingerly at first, then puts her full weight on her leg. “Sir?”

“Walk with me.” They step into the hallway and he leads them toward quarters. He assumes she should sleep next.

There’s the slightest hitch in her gait, like she doesn’t quite trust that her leg has been repaired. After walking quietly for a moment, Burnham says, “I can give a statement, sir.”

“No,” he tells her, without thinking, and then amends it. “That’s not necessary, Burnham. Tilly gave a statement. We have everything we need. You should rest. Quarters,” he tells the turbolift.

She doesn’t say anything, and they ride the turbolift in silence. Everything Lorca can think to say just comes back around to Tyler. When they

step off, Burnham hesitates. She's rigid. "Captain." Lorca waits, and she says, "I'm...feeling a lot of emotions related to sleeping in my quarters. Is there an alternate location where I could rest?"

Of course. It hadn't even occurred to him. "I'm on gamma shift soon," he says. "You can sleep in my quarters, if you'd be comfortable." Undoubtedly there are other open rooms, probably even with beds, but it's his first thought.

"That...would be all right." He steps in the direction of his quarters and Burnham says, "I know the way. Captain."

"Yes," he says. "But I'd like to make sure you get there anyway." When they arrive, she goes directly to the couch. "You can sleep in the bed, if you want," he says. "I won't be in it."

"No." Burnham sits on the couch. "I'm fine, sir."

Lorca stands helplessly in the doorway for a minute. She's obviously waiting for him to leave before she'll lie down. "Comm me if you need anything," he says finally, and goes back to the bridge.

\* \* \*

Lorca told Burnham that he'd be on gamma shift, which isn't really true except inasmuch as he's the captain and can be on the bridge whether or not someone else is designated to sit in the chair. Prefers to be. He's been awake for a while now, actually. It's always a bad sign when he can't remember exactly the last time he slept. But he doesn't think Burnham would have agreed to sleep in his quarters if he'd been there, and he wanted to know where she was, wanted to know she was somewhere that she felt—safe? Does she feel safe there?

The point remains. He didn't realize how exhausted he was until he promised her that he would be on duty the next shift. He sits in the chair and tries not to yawn, which would be an appalling loss of control. Watching the stars fly by at warp is hypnotic. "Owosekun," he says. "How's the ship?"

She humors him. "Shields at one hundred percent, sir. Full hull integrity." What a strange thing to hear after all these months at war. No one bothers to say when the shields are at one hundred percent, only when they start dropping.

"Detmer?"

"Full maneuverability, sir."

"Anything out there on scanners?"

"No, sir," Rhys says.

"Detmer, find the nearest planet, or asteroid, or comet, or anything, and drop us out of warp."

"Sir?"

He's come to enjoy the look that she and Owosekun share whenever he does something out of the ordinary. "Some of the scientists must want to do *something* outside the labs. Pick something good for them." Detmer and Owosekun think he's lost his mind, but they comply. Rhys, who's still appropriately afraid of him, doesn't object. Detmer finds a comet and, once the geologists get excited, he lets a team go. He needs something to distract him from the idea of Tyler lying unconscious in sickbay.

Lorca makes it through the end of gamma shift. The geologists are back with their samples. The security officer has finished complaining about the geologists. They're back at warp. "Airiam," he says, "You have the conn," and goes to his quarters to sleep.

He enters quietly. Burnham is asleep on the couch, the lights low. A part of him wants to pick her up, carry her to the bed, and let her sleep there while he sleeps on the couch. But he knows Burnham well enough to know that she wouldn't want that. Lorca settles for laying a blanket over her, very lightly, and walks back into the bedroom. He closes the bathroom door to minimize the noise, then strips off his clothes and showers, lets the water run over his face until he realizes he's starting to fall asleep. Finds sleep pants, trudges to bed, and collapses.

It's been a long time since he dreamed. His mind is uncomplicated. Tyler stands in sickbay with Burnham. Tyler kills Burnham. Lorca breaks his chest open barehanded and pulls out his heart. Tyler dies.

Tyler lies in bed in sickbay. Burnham bends down to kiss him. Tyler kills Burnham. Lorca kills Tyler again. He doesn't like how this dream is going.

Burnham lies in bed in sickbay. Lorca bends down to kiss her. Tyler kills him. He wakes up gasping. He likes it better when he doesn't dream.

The computer tells him it's been four hours since he lay down. He gets up to check on Burnham, just in case. When he leaves his bedroom, he finds that the lights are on in the living space—he winces reflexively, then remembers it doesn't hurt—but Burnham is still curled up on the couch. She's reading a paper book, and she looks up when he enters. "I just wanted to make sure you were...all right," he says. His voice is still rough from sleep.

"Yes," she says. "I woke up and felt more like reading than sleeping."

"All right," he repeats. He wonders where she got the book. He wants to stay out here with her, but she looks at him and he's acutely aware that he's shirtless—not that it should matter, they've seen each other naked, but it still feels different. "What are you reading?" She holds up the book so he can see it. "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," he says. It doesn't hold meaning for him.

"It's a children's book. My mother—Amanda, she used to read it to me and Spock. When I came to live with them. And I read from it to Spock a few times."

“Oh.” Before she said whatever she’d said to Spock to drive him away. “We didn’t have children’s books.”

Burnham curls up a little more on the couch, until there’s space enough for him to sit. “Do you want to hear it?”

He’s sitting on the couch before he can exactly register what’s happening. “I may fall asleep,” he tells her. He’s not entirely sure that he’s not dreaming now.

She raises an eyebrow. “I won’t be offended.” She lets her bare feet rest against his thigh and begins to read. “Once more she found herself in the long hall, and close to the little glass table. ‘Now, I’ll manage better this time,’ she said to herself, and began by taking the little golden key, and unlocking the door that led into the garden.”

Lorca feels himself beginning to sag against the couch. Her feet are warm against his leg and her voice is still raspy and he loves her.

“Then she went to work nibbling at the mushroom (she had kept a piece of it in her pocket) till she was about a foot high: then she walked down the little passage: and then—she found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright flower-beds and the cool fountains.”

Lorca falls asleep. He doesn’t dream.

## Chapter End Notes

Quote is from the end of Chapter VII of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

Chapter Summary

“I *did* try to kill Tyler,” Lorca corrects. He remembers the blind rage. “Elan—Elan and Chandavarkar stopped me.”

“Would you have killed him if they hadn’t?” Burnham’s eyes are steady.

There’s no point lying to her about things like this anymore. “Yes,” he says. “I killed the officer who killed the Emperor’s daughter on the spot.”

“It’s against Federation law.” She’s watching him carefully, body still.

“Elan reminded me.” He might as well admit it. “I told her I didn’t care.”

When Lorca wakes up, his neck is killing him and Burnham is gone. He can’t believe her movement didn’t wake him.

“Captain, are you awake?” Elan’s voice is a little ominous. He’s only barely said yes when she adds, “Are you decent?” and then walks into his quarters.

“Elan!” Andorians have less strict ideas about personal privacy, but they’ve had this talk before.

She takes him in for a moment—obviously just awake, halfway on and halfway off a couch too small for him to sleep on—and then clearly discards whatever she might want to say. “I wanted to tell you privately. Tyler is awake.”

Lorca is up and finding clothes as soon as she says it. “Which Tyler?” Elan hisses in a breath and he realizes she’s seen the constellation of scars across his shoulders and back, long lines and ragged triangles and clumsy circles, from people who didn’t have agonizers and didn’t use light for torture. “No time, Lieutenant, is it Tyler or Voq?”

“As far as we can tell, it’s Tyler. Dr. Pollard has run every scan on him she could think of. No sign of any second person in there, brain patterns completely back to normal.”

He goes into his bedroom and pulls on pants, his uniform top, his Starfleet pin. “Why are you telling me this instead of Saru?”

“Saru is in sickbay with Tyler. Since you both tried to kill Tyler and suggested ‘putting him down,’ Saru sent a security officer to escort you to sickbay to make sure you don’t try again.” Blunt as ever. “How’s Burnham?”

“She’s fine.” It’s obvious she spent the night in his quarters. “All right, let’s go.”

Tyler is sitting up on a bed, unrestrained. “Mr. Saru, what’s going on? Dr. Pollard? Why isn’t he tied down?”

Tyler doesn’t look at him. Saru says, “Captain, after Dr. Pollard conducted her tests and I spoke with Mr. Tyler, we determined that restraints were unnecessary.”

The blind trust of these people, to make that decision so blithely on the strength of a few tests and an undoubtedly heartfelt and emotional conversation with a lot of crying. “Everyone, get out,” he says. “That’s an order. Lieutenant Elan, you too. I won’t harm him,” he adds, when Elan refuses to move. She goes, frowning at him, and closes the doors to sickbay. He can see her face at the window outside.

“Captain,” Tyler says. He’s screamed himself hoarse. “Captain, I’m so sorry.”

“Look at me.” Tyler looks up, and his eyes are red-rimmed, his face pale. The red welts where he’d tried to claw his chest open are still there. “You were planted in the cell for me to find.” Tyler nods. “We were allowed to escape so you could get to the Discovery.” Tyler nods again. “You must have been proud of yourself, when I made you my chief of security. You must have laughed at it.”

“No, sir,” Tyler says. “I didn’t know about—him, then. Voq. The other.” He swallows. “Is she all right?”

“The Klingon?”

“Michael.” He can barely say her name. “Mr. Saru told me she’s alive.” His voice breaks on ‘alive.’ “But I know I must have hurt her. Can you tell me?”

“You did hurt her. I was going to kill you.” Lorca should probably stop saying that, now that they aren’t going to kill him.

“Is she all right?” Tyler keeps repeating it like it’s a talisman, like if Lorca says yes then everything is fine.

“You should ask her that, if she’ll speak to you.” Lorca draws in a deep breath. “You’re telling me you had no idea you were a Klingon until you tried to kill her.”

Tyler shakes his head. “After Pahvo, when I saw L’Reil—I started to get flashes. Of being cut apart. I remember it all now. They broke my Klingon body into pieces to cut it down to a human body. I thought I was just having flashbacks. PTSD, Admiral Cornwell told me. Then it started to get worse. I would lose time, just fifteen seconds, thirty seconds. Not long enough to do anything.” He gulps. “You took me off duty.



I thought it had gotten better than. Being around Michael helped. I could focus on her. But then I kept going to the brig. I didn't talk to L'Rell for a long time. But—then I did, and this happened.”

“Here I thought I'd saved your life,” Lorca says.

Tyler looks at him, beseeching. “You did, Captain. You didn't have to come back for me, on the Klingon ship. I was wounded. I would have died there if you hadn't.”

He remembers the stench of the ship, the feeling of the disruptor in his hand, the way it jumped when he fired. “I trusted you with my life. The crew's lives. Burnham's life.” Tyler, of all people, should understand the significance of Burnham's life.

“I'm so sorry,” Tyler says again. “Captain, I'm so sorry. I don't have the words, but—”

“You're sorry. I got it.” He believes Pollard and Saru that Tyler is just a human now. Not a very useful one anymore. “What am I going to do with you?”

There's the tiniest bit of hope on Tyler's face. “It sounds like you're not going to kill me, sir?”

“People keep telling me I shouldn't. I can't keep you in the brig. The Klingon is down there and anyway, I suppose I don't think you're a danger anymore.” He looks at the door, beckons Saru and Pollard and Elan back in. “What do we do with him?”

They decide to...release him, for lack of a better word. Limit his access to anything important, put a monitor on him just in case. Tyler doesn't chafe at any of it. Lorca knows that what he wants is to see Burnham. He doesn't know if Burnham wants to see Tyler. But she will, it's inevitable, and there's nothing he can realistically do but let her know what's happening.

He means to find her and tell her as soon as they let Tyler go. But, on the bridge: they discover another Class M planet. Another tropical one. Lorca would call it boring, if he didn't think they could all use a bit of that right now. This part of the galaxy may be quiet, save the occasional anomaly, but the ship itself has been...difficult lately. “Begin scanning,” he tells Burnham. “Let's see if it's time for more shore leave.” It hasn't been that long since the last time, but it would be good to get some of the crew off the ship before too much gossip circulates about Tyler. Better to distract everyone with sandy beaches and cool blue water and cocktails made with the different kinds of moonshine the cadets have been brewing down in an unused science lab. They're very proud of it. “If it's safe, I want every one of you to take a turn down there,” he says to the bridge crew. “No exceptions. We don't know how long it'll be until we find another one and you all deserve a rest.”

“Preliminary scans suggest that the planet would be hospitable for crew visits,” Burnham says. Detmer and Owosekun are listening closely, he sees. “The only large life-forms are in the highlands. With adequate security, the beach should be safe.” Adequate security, ha. They're down another member, without Tyler, and he's not putting a phaser in Tyler's hands unless they're under attack. He may have to let Elan poach from another division again. “The average temperature is eighty degrees on the beach, with estimated nighttime lows around sixty-five and daytime highs up to ninety. Seawater appears to be eighty degrees with minimal variation predicted.” She looks up from her station. “With a day's sensor readings to ensure no unexpected temperature fluctuations or incursions by dangerous wildlife, we should be able to determine the safety of a leisure visit within acceptable parameters.”

“Good,” Lorca says. “Mr. Saru, draw up lists. We'll keep a rotating skeleton crew on the ship, but I want everyone to take a turn down there for at least thirty-six hours.”

“Yes, sir. Would you like to be in the first rotation on the beach?”

“No.” He isn't planning to go down at all. “Consult with Lieutenant Tilly on the distribution of crew.”

“Captain?” Saru is...flabbergasted. “I beg your pardon?”

“She's been promoted.”

“Captain!” Saru is almost certainly about to tell him something about proper procedures for advancing up the ranks in Starfleet and the proper order of those ranks.

“We'll have this discussion later, Mr. Saru,” he says. “For now, let's get to work. And yes,” he tells Burnham, “If the scientists want to spend their leisure time collecting specimens or running experiments, they can do that. As long as it's on the planet.” She quirks her eyebrow and he smiles.

He doesn't get around to telling her about Tyler, but it doesn't matter. He's keeping an eye on Tyler, when he's not on duty. He hears them talking in a quiet corner and stays just close enough to be able to intervene if needed.

“Michael,” Tyler says. “I'm so, so sorry. Words can't express—”

“I know, Ash.” Lorca can hear the hurt in her voice. “I know it wasn't you.”

“I didn't—I could see what I was doing but I couldn't stop—”

“I understand.” She's a lot more understanding than Lorca was. “How are you doing?”

“The Klingon—L'Rell—she fixed me. Took him out of my head. I still have his memories, but they're completely—separate. Another person lived them.” There's a long silence. “I'm trying to put myself back together.”

“You will,” Burnham says. “It'll take time.”

“Michael—Ash Tyler, he loved—I love you. It's what kept me from breaking for so long. I need you. I can't do this alone.” In the shadows,

Lorca sees Tyler reach out to touch her face.

Burnham flinches away. “It can’t be me,” she says softly. “I care about you, Ash. I probably could have loved you, with time. But I can still feel your hands around my throat.” She puts her hand to her neck. “I looked into your eyes and I saw how much you wanted to kill me. No matter how much I try, when I look in your eyes, I see his eyes.”

Tyler shakes his head. “Michael—”

“You have to put your own self back together,” she says. “I know. After the Battle of the Binary Stars, I was so lost. I had to sit with myself. I had to work through it. I had to crawl my way back. I’m still not there, but I’m trying. That kind of work—reclaiming life—it’s punishing, and it’s relentless. And it’s solitary.”

“Michael—” He tries again.

“I’m your friend, Ash. I’ll always be your friend, and I’ll support you. Don’t ask me for something different.”

She walks away then, leaves Tyler in shadow with his head bowed. Lorca tries to slip away, leave Tyler some semblance of privacy in this moment, but Tyler must hear him. He lifts his head, laughs bitterly. “Checking up on me, sir?”

“Yes,” Lorca says. He’s not going to lie about it.

“We choose our own pain—right, sir?”

“Do you think,” Lorca asks slowly, “that after the Buran, I was—?” He doesn’t know exactly what he’s trying to say to Tyler. “I lost my ship. I lost my *crew*. I had to find a way to live with causing the deaths of men and women who believed in me, who trusted me, to keep them safe. A way to live with surviving myself. I have to,” he says, and he’ll be that honest only this moment. “I understand, Tyler.”

Tyler is quiet for a long time. “Thank you, sir,” he says finally.

\* \* \*

They’re still scanning the planet, making sure it isn’t going to rain fire overnight or produce dinosaurs from underground or something. In his ready room, Lorca is looking at the reports and contemplating going to his quarters and trying to sleep in a horizontal position. Burnham enters. “Captain,” she says, brusque. “It would be helpful to me if I could sleep on your couch again tonight.”

“You can stay for as many nights as you need,” Lorca says. “You can stay forever if you want.” He means it as hyperbole, not a marriage proposal, doesn’t realize how much it reveals until Burnham looks at him like a startled gazelle. “You’re a valuable member of the crew. Your health is important.” He wants her to be happy.

“Thank you, Captain. A few more nights should be enough.”

She turns to leave. “You should really take the bed, though,” he tells her.

“You don’t fit on the couch.” They could both sleep in the bed. He’s not going to suggest it. “I do. Logically, I should take the couch.”

“You can’t just slap ‘logically’ onto the beginning of a sentence and win the argument,” he tells her.

Burnham raises an eyebrow. He thinks she might be laughing at him. “Do you disagree with the logic of my conclusion?”

He doesn’t. “I disagree with your use of the word ‘logically’ as a rhetorical technique.”

“Logic is my rhetorical technique. *Logos*. Use of the word ‘logically’ indicates that my reasoning is based on logic rather than pathos or ethos.”

“I would never insult you by accusing you of making a pathos-based argument, Burnham,” he assures her. She smiles a little at that and he can’t stop the answering grin, doesn’t really want to. “I’ll see you later in my quarters.”

It feels almost...domestic, planning it like that. Even during the brief time that they’d been sleeping together, he’d never been certain that she was going to come by; it was when their schedules overlapped, when he wasn’t lingering on the bridge or she wasn’t absorbed in some project, when they both felt like it. This is...knowing she’ll be there. That he’ll see her, unguarded—well, less guarded.

“What is wrong with your face,” Elan says flatly. They’re in the mess hall, because he hasn’t eaten anything for a while and he wants to see how the crew are taking the possibility of more shore leave. Fairly well, generally.

“Lieutenant?” He’s skipped the nutrient beverage, now that he’s noticed the taste, and is eating the club sandwich that the synthesizer provided when he requested a sandwich.

“You look happy.” She’s grumpy. At least she isn’t eating redbat today. “You’re mooning over your Vulcan.”

His gaze keeps landing on Burnham’s table, he realizes. “You’re moping over yours.”

“Is she spending the night again? Kicking you out to your couch?”

“No.” He takes a bite of his sandwich and chews, ignoring Elan’s doubtful antennae. Technically, he’s not lying. Burnham is sleeping on the couch.

“Gabe,” Elan says, and he hears both sympathy and warning in her voice. “Don’t be stupid. You know how this ends.”

He does. “Nothing’s happening,” he tells her.

“You’re lying to me!” She sounds hurt. “We don’t lie to each other. Is this because I stopped you from killing Tyler?”

“Elan. Drop it.”

“Of course. Sir.” Burnham gets up to leave. She meets his eyes as she picks up her tray, and he could swear she raises an eyebrow just a little, like a challenge. Then she glances away, turns to Tilly, says something, starts walking. “You’re fucked,” Elan tells him, and he doesn’t bother arguing.

Burnham is already in his quarters when he arrives—there’s a bag next to the couch, her PADD on the table, her shoes by the door. She comes out of the bathroom in a soft shirt and sleep pants, shoulders bare and straight as they always are. His hands remember the heat of her skin. “Make yourself comfortable,” he says, and tosses her last night’s blanket.

She catches it with both hands. “Yes, Captain.” Her eyes sparkle a little and he wants to push her down on the couch, slide her shirt up over her head and kiss her until neither of them can breathe.

That’s not what she’s here for. “If you get cold,” he says, and stops. She’s not going to get cold.

“I appreciate it.” Burnham sits cross-legged on the couch and draws the blanket up. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Yes,” he says. He’s forgotten that she doesn’t usually speak freely. She’s left two of the cushions empty, and he walks to the couch and sits down at the other end so he isn’t looming while she talks.

“You wanted to kill Ash.”

Lorca wasn’t expecting that, of all things. He’s not ashamed of it, but he wishes she didn’t know. “I *did* try to kill Tyler,” he corrects. He remembers the blind rage. “Elan—Elan and Chandavarkar stopped me.”

“Would you have killed him if they hadn’t?”

There’s no point lying to her about things like this anymore. “Yes,” he says. “I killed the officer who killed the Emperor’s daughter on the spot.”

“It’s against Federation law.” She’s watching him carefully, body still.

“Elan reminded me.” He might as well admit it. “I told her I didn’t care.”

Burnham shifts the slightest bit. “You didn’t kill him, though.”

“No.” He closes his eyes. He can hear her breathing very lightly. “Elan told me you’d never forgive me.” Her breath stops momentarily. “I told her I didn’t care.” Burnham breathes in again, then out slowly.

“I don’t know if I would,” she said.

“You weren’t there to tell me it was wrong.”

“That shouldn’t—”

“Don’t,” Lorca says. “You know it does.” He opens his eyes again and looks at Burnham. “You know why I wanted to kill him.”

“Yes.” She’s silent. “I’ll tell you when I think it’s wrong, but you can’t make me your moral compass, Lorca.” Not Captain, but not Gabriel either. “You can’t put it all on me. Why didn’t you kill him, if you didn’t care whether I would forgive you?”

“I would’ve had to kill one of them to get to him. Elan, or Chandavarkar. I suppose that’s progress.” Lorca laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “You may not think it means much. But I didn’t kill him because I would’ve had to kill one of them and I couldn’t do that.” He doesn’t say, not again, but she can hear it.

Burnham lets her head fall back to rest against the arm of the couch and takes in another long, even breath. “I don’t know what to do,” she admits. “You said you know me, I hate to be wrong. And I hate to be uncertain. You make me...uncertain.”

“Burnham,” he says, and stops. The coward’s way out is to leave this conversation. Nothing she says next is going to make anything better. “You must know—”

She lifts her head, shakes it. “I trust you with my life, Captain. But I can’t trust you...beyond that.”

“No,” he says. He stands up. “I know.” He leaves the room. When he goes to the bathroom to shower, her toothbrush is set on the sink, neatly capped, and seeing it feels like a pinched nerve. His whole body is uncomfortable, feels put together wrong, his muscles jumpy. His head, his mind, are exhausted, but it takes him hours to fall asleep.

In the morning, he walks into the living room and says, “Good morning, Burnham,” like nothing ever happened.

She’s fully dressed in uniform, sitting up straight on the couch, blanket folded neatly beside her. “Good morning, Captain. We’ve confirmed that the planet is appropriate for crew recreation.”

“Good,” he says. “Have Saru and Tilly drawn up the lists?” He wants to make himself coffee but he gave the Andorians his food synthesizer to reprogram. He has a headache again.

“I have them here.” Burnham holds up the PADD. “It looks like Tilly put you on the list. Should I remove you?”

“No, I suppose I should go,” he says. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been off the ship.” They both know when that was.

He goes down to the planet. The cadets load large water jugs full of their liquor onto the last shuttle. Everyone drinks. When night falls, everyone drinks more and wades into the water and stares up at the achingly bright stars they don’t recognize. Lorca walks along the waterline and drinks and doesn’t think about anything. On his way back, he meets someone—she tells him she’s a specialist in engineering, but that she heard they need someone in security, and he says, “Talk to Lieutenant Elan, she picks her team,” and she smiles and says, “Well, now that that’s out of the way,” and kisses him. She has very short magenta hair and ridges along her cheekbones and jawline and she laughs and the sex is good, easy, fun, like being a captain in the Terran universe again, but without the edge beneath it. When they’re done she grins and says “Thanks” and wanders away, around the edge of the cove and back to where everyone else is still drinking and someone has started to sing too poorly to be understood.

“Lorca to Discovery.”

“Is everything all right, Captain?” Saru is supposed to go down with the second group, though he’s hesitant to leave his post.

“Yes,” he says. “But I need to transport back.” It was a bad idea to come down. He needs to sober up and he needs to take a shower and he needs to figure out what he just did.

“Yes, sir.”

The cove dissolves in front of him and the transport room appears. The transporter technician stares at him and Lorca says, “Computer, site-to-site transport,” and is back in his quarters.

He’s forgotten, though. Burnham is sleeping here again. He’d told her she could, that he would be gone. She’s curled up on the couch anyway—not the bed—and she wakes and says, “Captain?” sleepily.

Lorca can’t deal with it. “No,” he says, and walks back to the bathroom. He doesn’t know what he looks like, but from the way the technician stared at him, it must be...outrageous. He avoids the mirror and gets into the shower and lets his head fall back against the wall, water streaming down. Going to the planet was a mistake. He’d only done it because it seemed like a good idea to get away from Burnham, but it hasn’t made anything better. He hopes the engineer...isn’t going to mention it to anyone. Especially Elan, who will either be judgmental or pleased and either one would be bad.

He brushes his teeth to get the tastes out of his mouth, pulls on sleep pants because he can’t walk around naked with Burnham around, and opens the door. Burnham is there, waiting. “Captain,” she says again.

His throat is painful. “You must...know,” he says.

She stares at him wide-eyed for a long time. “I know,” she says, almost wonderingly, like she’s realizing it for the first time. She must be the last person on the ship to know.

“And you’ve never been in love.”

“No.”

He wants to pull her tight against him and bury his face in her hair and feel the shape of her bones under his hands, the heat of her skin. He wants her to stay here, in his quarters, in his room, in his bed, while the ship wanders through space and her quick mind works out all the galaxy’s secrets. He wants her to lie to him. He’s drunk. He hopes he doesn’t remember this. “As long as we’re clear,” he says. “Go back to sleep.”

He doesn’t remember it. Burnham isn’t there when he wakes up.

Chapter Summary

After a few minutes, it becomes clear that no one can speak. REPORTED SHIPWIDE. CROSS-SPECIES, Burnham types. THUMPERS ALSO UNABLE TO VOCALIZE.

IS THAT BAD? he types.

“You found me a new recruit on the island?” Elan is back from her own tropical vacation and is too cheerful. “How?”

“She asked me. It was easy. I told her you had final say.”

Elan shakes her head. “You don’t want to give her a few shifts in the armory first?”

“Elan,” he says. “I don’t care. Pick someone else if you don’t like her.”

She’s momentarily thrown. “No, she seems fine.” She searches his face. “What’s wrong with you? You’re even more taciturn than usual.” Elan hisses in a breath. “You didn’t. Gabe.”

“I don’t know what you’re referring to,” he tells her.

“The engineer? Really? More than a year on this ship, and now’s the time...?”

“It was fine,” he says. “I don’t enjoy this game where you tell me about your romantic woes and then speculate about mine.” Burnham walks into the mess hall and he can’t stop a full-body flinch, just for a second, just long enough that Elan sees it

“Oh *no*.” For once, Elan can’t think of anything else to say. She pushes her mug of katheka to him and they sit in silence as he drinks it.

Minutes after jumping to warp from P3X-696, they hit a new kind of anomaly. The world is suddenly utterly without sound. No alarms, no comms. He knocks a hand against his chair—nothing. Detmer turns and tries to say something, but he can tell from her face that neither of them can hear it. He looks to Burnham and she shakes her head, taps at her station, and text appears on the bridge’s viewscreen.

UNCLEAR IF SOUND-DAMPENING FIELD OR TOTAL HEARING LOSS, she types. INSTRUCTIONS CAN BE TRANSMITTED TO ALL STATIONS AND PADDs.

He nods once. Of all the things to go wrong, at least this means no one can try to talk to him. It may have started as a sound-dampening field, but after a few minutes in which the alarms return, it becomes clear that no one can speak. REPORTED SHIPWIDE. CROSS-SPECIES, Burnham types. THUMPERS ALSO UNABLE TO VOCALIZE.

IS THAT BAD? he asks and regrets it when the words appear on the viewscreen. It comes across differently in text. Burnham looks at him and shakes her head, though he thinks it’s more of a “who knows?” than anything else.

Culber and Pollard scan members of the crew of each race on board, point tricorders at their vocal cords, frown at PADDs. They have no idea what’s wrong. The cook—a generous term for the person in charge of maintaining the food synthesizers—passes out mugs of hot tea with honey, as though they’re experiencing a collective bout of laryngitis and don’t have access to hyposprays. T’Lac conducts a series of tests on the various sub-sentient lifeforms that they’ve brought on board to see if any can emit noise. There’s nothing physically wrong with anyone—vocally or aurally—and the scientists are baffled.

And then, as quickly as it came, it disappears. There’s a heartrending scream that pierces the entire ship and the air takes on an almost shattering quality, as though they’ve all been encased in glass and it’s suddenly fracturing—and Owosekun declares, “Fucking finally.”

“Figure out what that was and how we keep it from happening again,” Lorca orders the bridge at large. “Mr. Saru, plot a course out of here.”

\* \* \*

“Elan,” he says in his quarters later. He almost wishes they all couldn’t speak again. “I...made some mistakes.”

“Like what?”

Lorca reaches into the cupboard—he can just grasp the neck of the last bottle of whiskey inside. He opens it and takes a mouthful, then passes it to Elan. “That kind of mistake,” she says.

“I told Burnham something last night,” he says. “And I can’t remember what I told her.”

Elan passes the bottle back to him. “You told her you love her, I assume.”

It feels dangerous to hear her say it. He takes a long drink. This whiskey is supposed to be drunk slowly, from a nice glass with a single ice cube. He’s never drunk it that way. “Or she might have...guessed.”

“You were sleeping together,” Elan points out. “Some people would see that as a sign that she might be interested in you.”

“And then it ended. She ended it,” he clarifies, as though it isn’t obvious.

“Why?” There are nicer ways Elan could have asked that question, but she doesn’t have a lot of patience for soft-pedaling.

Lorca clears his throat. “She realized...something about me.” He doesn’t know how to explain what happened without revealing all of it, and he doesn’t want to tell Elan all of it. “My real history.”

“That you didn’t grow up in cornfields? No shit. I assumed you were Section 31, or used to be. Given your...alternative understanding of the rules. And the state of your body.” She leers without intent.

He grimaces. That would have been the ideal answer when Burnham accused him. The problem with secrets was that if you kept them long enough, you started to want to tell. Wait long enough and any prisoner would whisper his secret to someone, just to have it out of his own heart. “Something like that. She was...upset.”

“Why?” Elan’s understanding of relationships is very straightforward. People tell the truth. Sometimes that upsets someone. They’re mad and then they move on. “I assume you said you were sorry, etcetera etcetera.”

“Humans are more complicated emotionally than Andorians.”

“I’m in a non-relationship with a Vulcan, Gabe. I have to feel all the feelings for both of us.”

He has to give her that. “She was already uncertain. And she never liked my—flexible morality. She wasn’t happy to discover it was even more flexible than she thought.”

Elan shakes her head. “Sorry,” she says, and she does sound it. “I wish I knew what to tell you.”

“Maybe you should tell me to get over it,” he suggests. He drinks more whiskey.

“All right, get over it. But maybe try to be a little subtler as you’re getting over it with other people.”

Dread hits him. “What are you saying?”

“I saw that engineer go find you, and I saw when she came back to the beach,” Elan says. “Everyone else did too. You must have been rolling around in the sand or something pretty fierce. She wasn’t very subtle about it afterward either.”

“You’re telling me,” he says, “that everyone on the ship knows how I feel about Burnham and everyone on the ship knows that I had sex with one of the engineers.”

“Well. Most of *them* also know her name,” Elan points out.

And then, because things can’t get worse—it turns out that they can—the doors hiss open and Burnham walks in and Lorca catches a little bit of whiskey in his throat, which burns up through his sinuses. “Burnham,” he says.

“Captain.”

He and Elan are standing in what was a kitchen area, before he gave away his food synthesizer, leaning against the counter and drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. If he were Burnham, it would look a little pathetic. “What can I do for you?”

Elan takes the bottle from him and gulps some of it down.

“I left my toothbrush,” Burnham says. “I came to get it.”

This is truly agonizing. “I’m going to go,” Elan announces. She presses the bottle back into his hands. “Captain. Specialist.”

“Lieutenant,” Burnham says by way of farewell.

“It’s in the bathroom,” he tells her, once Elan is gone. It looks worse for him to be standing here alone with an open bottle of whiskey in his hand. He sets the bottle down on the counter and gestures to indicate that it’s fine for her to go to the bathroom and get it herself.

When she returns, toothbrush in hand, she says, “Thank you, Captain,” and goes straight for the door.

“Burnham.” He wipes his hand over his face and she turns around. “Forget it, please.”

“Forget what?”

“Whatever I said last night. I was drunk. I didn’t mean it.”

Her hand clenches on her toothbrush a little. “All right. Gabriel,” she says experimentally.

“*Captain.*” His voice is rough.

“I apologize, sir,” she says. There’s the subtlest shift from her usual straight posture to the ramrod way she stands at attention when addressing a superior officer, like there’s a string that’s suddenly pulled her upward. “Will there be anything else?”

“Did you leave anything else here?” He remembers that feeling of anticipation, when she asked to stay another night. He doesn’t feel...good about this. He won’t be able to confess to her about life in the Terran universe, won’t be able to fall asleep next to her, won’t be able to argue with her for fun, try to get that quirked eyebrow, that tiny smile. She won’t tell him about her childhood on Vulcan. She won’t call him Gabriel

again. She certainly won't touch him again. But he's in love with her, whether or not he told her last night, and it's dangerous to let it go on. He should have learned that from Michael.

"No, sir."

"Dismissed."

Burnham walks out, toothbrush still clenched in her hand like a knife. She doesn't look back.

\* \* \*

The problem with trying to get over Burnham is that she's always there. She's on the bridge when he's there, because he's almost always there and she tends to work past the end of her shift and they work the same duty shifts anyway. Because they work the same shifts, she tends to be in the mess hall when he's there. It would be strange to change his schedule and he's certainly not going to change hers because of his weakness. She's still clever, creative, but he tries to focus on her at her most Vulcan, whenever she says something that could be understood as cold or logic-bound or cruel. Her only rhetorical technique is *logos*, he reminds himself. She doesn't say "Unless this is about me" again when he tells her that she can't go on a particular away mission and he truly tries to ensure that it isn't.

He slips sometimes, like when she says that logically, she should go on a particular mission, and he tells her, "No, you're the smartest person on the ship and it doesn't make sense to risk you when it's unnecessary." When it's too dangerous. She doesn't—regress, exactly, but she does turn more Vulcan, until one day he snaps at her, "If all I wanted to hear was logic, I'd have a real Vulcan on the bridge!" Detmer and Owosekun both turn to stare and Saru makes himself busy and Elan's antennae scrunch down in horror. He remembers the days when he could yell at officers on the bridge and no one gave it a second thought. "Never mind," he says. "I appreciate your perspective, Burnham," and he doesn't do it again.

Lorca sleeps with the magenta-haired engineer-now-security-officer a few more times. Better than finding someone new for everyone to gossip about, and she doesn't seem to care very much that he's the captain, doesn't even call him captain, so he doesn't worry about it. She does, once, sit up and say, "I'm grateful you asked Elan to switch me," and he pulls her back down and carefully doesn't hear anyone else saying those words. She doesn't stay with him and he doesn't have to warn her against waking him.

One day, during the regular briefing in his ready room, while Chrian is complaining about the effect of the anomalies on the warp engines again, Lorca interrupts her to say, "We're never getting home, are we." Burnham looks at him sharply.

"Captain!" Saru is appalled, though Lorca thinks it's more likely because he dared to say it than because Saru has never considered the idea.

"We are long past when we expected to be...somewhere previously charted," Burnham confirms.

"Are we even going in the right direction?" Lorca looks from Saru to Burnham. "If you were wrong about where we are, in relation to what we know, how do we know that we're traveling in the correct direction?"

"At this point, Captain, I would say that the most likely way for us to return 'home' would be for Lieutenant Stamets to jump." Burnham watches him carefully as she says it.

"Out of the question," Lorca says immediately. "It's too dangerous."

"Lieutenant Stamets might be able to access the mycelial network without jumping," she suggests. "At least tell us where we are in the universe so that we know whether we're...going in the right direction."

He's resistant to that too, and he knows that it's because he doesn't really want to go back to the Federation. He'll lose Discovery as soon as they return, and with it the last vestiges of any purpose. The crew will scatter. He's never going back to the Terran universe, at this point, and he finds he doesn't really want to do that either. For now, as personally uncomfortable—painful—and sometimes boring as it is, he wants to stay captain of Discovery, with this crew, wandering around wherever they are and bumping into whatever they find, letting the crew adopt their pet thumpers and the cadets distill their moonshine, and probably some of the crew will start producing babies from all the falling-into-bed-with-each-other that everyone seems to do. Occasionally people will die, of course, and there will be more memorials, and maybe no one else will try to kill him there.

"If he and Dr. Culber think it's safe," Lorca says finally. He stands up. "Dismissed."

Burnham stays behind when everyone else has filed out. It's been weeks since they've been alone together. "Captain, permission to speak freely?" He doesn't want to grant it, but he nods anyway. "I believe you're being overly protective of Stamets. His health and safety are important, but so is that of the rest of the crew."

"Needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?"

"That's one precept among many, Captain. Stamets is not the only person on this ship who may suffer negative effects from whatever choice you make about jumping."

"So, logically, I should let him risk death because other people are unhappy." He has a headache. He always seems to have a headache these days.

"You should examine the reasons that you're so concerned about letting him jump when you've been entirely willing to risk his safety in the past."

"Oh?" Lorca takes up a fortune cookie and crushes it between two hands, then picks up a piece and inspects it.

“You don’t want to go back.”

“You do?” He looks up from his empty fortune cookie. “I told you, I would never let Starfleet put you back in prison, but that doesn’t mean a world of opportunities will be out there for you. Not like this.”

Burnham cocks her head. “I could go back to Vulcan.”

“And be told you’re not good enough over and over because you’re human? Be disregarded?” He shakes his head. “That would be a waste.” After a beat, he adds, “This crew, everyone on this crew, is—Discovery is the best of her kind. I won’t let someone waste Elan, or Stamets, or Tilly, or Culber. Or Saru,” he remembers to add. He does like Saru, for all his fussiness.

“Or Specialist Pheen?”

“Who?” He remembers, too late, that that’s the name of the magenta-haired security officer. “Ah, no, not her either.” They don’t talk much. He assumes she’s good at her job or Elan would have dumped her back in Engineering. “It’s a good crew. They’ll take my crew away.”

“Not everyone wants to stay out here,” she says.

He manages to keep from saying that he doesn’t care. “I said that Stamets could try.”

Burnham frowns. “You feel guilty for what happened to him.” What Lorca did to him and still won’t confess to her, even if she knows it.

“They’ll take him too,” Lorca says. “He performed illegal genetic manipulation on himself. They’ll take his blood and study him, and they’ll keep him until they can replicate him without using a human.” He grips the edge of his desk. He doesn’t like the thought of that, for more than one reason. He and Stamets spent the five months between him taking command and Burnham’s arrival fighting with each other, with Stamets refusing to accept that they were at war. Stamets in the Terran universe was...terrible, a sniveling lackey. But he’s grown to like Stamets here, his exaggerated reactions to everything and his dreamy love of the mycelium, and he can respect Stamets’ obsession with his work. He clears his throat. “No, Burnham, I don’t want to go back.” He grinds one of the smaller pieces of cookie into powder on his desk.

“I would’ve liked to have the chance to fix things with Spock,” Burnham says slowly. “But...I suppose I’d be all right otherwise.” She seems to catch herself and takes a deep breath. “Thank you, Captain.”

He nods.

\* \* \*

“No,” Culber says. “Captain, you promised me that you wouldn’t ask.”

Burnham shifts to the side just a little, just in front of where Lorca stands. “Dr. Culber. I was the one that suggested asking you about his condition. The Captain isn’t asking Lieutenant Stamets to do anything.”

“Hello, standing right here? I can take a look,” Stamets says.

“Paul.” Lorca watches the two of them argue without speaking, only in glances and facial expressions. They’ve been together a long time, he knows. He envies them that familiarity. He wonders if Culber has also followed his own train of thought, consciously, or if there’s only a suspicion deep in his heart that bad things will happen to Stamets when they return.

“The white matter in his brain hasn’t returned to normal,” Culber says finally. “He’s not even back to post-Pahvo levels. And even then, as you know, the plan was for him to be examined in a medical facility beyond what we have on board.”

“I completely understand, Doctor,” Lorca says.

Stamets cuts in. “Hello, again, it’s my brain. I can sit in the chair and plug into the network without initiating a black alert.”

“I’m keeping sensors on you at all times.” Culber is clearly unhappy. “And I want Dr. Pollard there too.”

“Agreed,” Lorca says. “We should minimize the risk of anything going wrong. Burnham, Lieutenant Tilly.” The smile flickers across her face—she’ll probably never get tired of being called Lieutenant. “I want you both there too. You know more about the spore drive than anyone but Lieutenant Stamets.”

They convene in thirty minutes in the spore lab. Culber places sensor node after sensor node on Stamets’ head and face until he swats at Culber and says, “Enough, Hugh, I feel like I’m developing warts all over my head.” Culber adds a wrist cuff and then smooths his hand affectionately from Stamets’ wrist to his shoulder. Lorca’s throat tightens a little and he looks away. He remembers Culber saying they had to stop, remembers ordering Culber to do whatever it took to keep Stamets alive. Burnham sees him—Burnham sees everything—but she doesn’t say anything.

“All right,” Culber says. “You’re ready, or as ready as I can make you.” He looks to Dr. Pollard, who nods. “Remember, you’re not jumping.”

“Yes, I know, no jumping, don’t worry.” Stamets walks into the spore drive chamber and sits. He holds his arms out for insertion and says “Ready,” and Tilly hits the button. His entire body goes rigid when the connection begins; Pollard catches Culber by the arm and holds him in place. In a great rush, the smoke creature flies from the cultivation bay, slips into the spore chamber, and curls around Stamets, who settles back and breathes in deeply. He opens his eyes and they’re shining. “It’s so beautiful,” he says. “I’ve missed it.” Then he closes his eyes and frowns; Lorca can see his eyes flicking back and forth behind his eyelids like he’s dreaming.

After three tense minutes for the rest of them, Stamets says, “I’m home, you can let me out now.” Tilly disconnects him and he steps out of the chamber; the smoke creature flees back to the cultivation bay.



“How are you feeling?” Culber asks immediately. Dr. Pollard watches them both but doesn’t intervene.

Stamets begins peeling the sensor nodes off of his forehead and his temples absent-mindedly. “Something very strange is happening,” he says. “It’s like we’re in a bubble.”

“A bubble?” Lorca isn’t sure what he’d expected, but that wasn’t it.

“Or a—a concave mirror.” He spreads his fingers out and then pulls his hands apart, trying to demonstrate branching. “The mycelial network shouldn’t look like that. It’s like tree roots, like branches—it extends far beyond what any consciousness we know of, including mine, can grasp. But here—it’s like it hit a barrier and grew back on itself. The branches have curved along the walls.” He looks frustrated at his inability to explain it. “There’s no path—outside. I went as far along as I could, in every direction. It’s all tangled back in on itself. I wouldn’t begin to know how to jump out of here.”

It’s what Lorca wanted to hear, maybe, but the weight of it is still hard to absorb. They’re trapped in some kind of galactic bubble that the mycelial network can’t penetrate. He can’t fathom it.

“Can we pop it?” Tilly shrugs when they all turn to her. “You can pop bubbles. We got in here somehow. There must be a way out.”

“Lieutenant Stamets, can you tell me where we are inside this—bubble? How we would get to one edge of it?”

“Yes,” Stamets says. “But we’ll have to get there the old-fashioned way. Warp, I mean, not the old-old-fashioned way. The network here is so tangled that one wrong jump would probably send us to an alternate universe, and if we do manage to pop the bubble, as Lieutenant Tilly so charmingly phrased it, and get out, I want to be able to jump without worrying about whatever other variables are at play.”

Lorca doesn’t react to the mention of an alternate universe, and he certainly doesn’t look at Burnham. For all he knows, this is some kind of... pocket universe that he sent them to. “Lieutenant Stamets, work with Mr. Saru to figure out a course, and when you’ve done that, I want an estimate as to exactly how long it’s going to take us to get to the edge of the bubble.”

“The anomalies,” Burnham says. “Could they be some kind of weakness in this bubble? Lieutenant, would you be able to map the locations of the anomalies that we’ve encountered onto your view of the mycelial network here and see if there’s any connection?”

“It doesn’t really fit the metaphor, but yes,” Stamets says. “They might be places where the network folds back into itself. Once we’ve got the course set, Tilly and I can work on that.” He doesn’t call her Lieutenant but respects her promotion enough not to call her Cadet, which means that now he mostly just says “Tilly.” He gives Culber the handful of nodes that he’s removed. “We should get to work.”

Dr. Pollard watches Culber and Stamets leave the spore chamber. “Sounds like it’ll be a little longer,” she comments.

“Sorry about that, Doc,” Lorca says.

“Oh, no rush,” she tells him. “All I have waiting on Earth is a storage locker and an ex-husband. He got tired of coming second to Starfleet,” she adds. “Everyone knows that when you get on a starship, you might not come back. Your partner either accepts it or they don’t stick around.”

“Right.” He presses a palm to his forehead. His head is aching again. It occurs to him that it might have to do with wherever they are. “Doctor, I want you to let me know if there’s any increase in...physical ailments, on this ship. People coming to you with headaches, dizziness, that kind of thing.”

“There hasn’t been,” she says. She looks at him curiously. “Are you experiencing headaches or dizziness, Captain?”

“Headaches.” The ‘obviously’ is implicit. They walk out of Engineering together. “You all never figured out why my light sensitivity went away.” He wonders if that, like these headaches, are a side effect of overstaying his welcome in this universe. Entropic cascade failure, something like that.

“Are you sleeping well?” Pollard looks at him by the light of the turbolift and amends her question. “Are you sleeping?”

Lorca hadn’t meant for this to turn into a doctor’s visit for himself. “I sleep fine,” he says. He does, generally, once he’s exhausted enough to fall asleep. He just doesn’t sleep very much.

“Hmm.” Pollard is unimpressed. She’s never been intimidated by him. “I can give you a hypo for the headache, but it’s not going to do anything if they’re recurring. I’d like you to try to sleep at least eight hours out of every twenty-four and see what that does.” At his expression, she says, “We’re not at war right now, Captain. Six hours.”

“You should give me a different hypo for that.”

Pollard purses her lips. “One, for tonight,” she says. “After that, we’ll talk more.”

## Chapter Summary

“Dr. Culber and Dr. Pollard both told me that you might know something about Vulcan neuro-pressure as a sleep aid.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pollard comms him later and tells him, “Captain, it’s time.”

Lorca turns the conn over to Detmer and leaves the bridge. In his quarters, he gives himself the hypo and then...lies there. Waits for it to work. Stares at the ceiling, rolls onto one side, finds his leg twitching with impatience. It would be one thing if he was on the tail end of a good adrenaline rush. He fell asleep next to Burnham just fine down on the planet. He could comm Pheen, but he’s pretty sure that she’s gotten bored with him, and that isn’t how things usually go anyway.

When he checks the time, it’s been an hour already. The hypo should have kicked in by now. It should’ve kicked in within five minutes. Lorca gets out of bed and dresses again, then walks down to sickbay in a tearing bad mood. Pollard isn’t there. Culber is.

“Captain,” he says. “Is something wrong?”

Lorca holds out the empty hypo. “Dr. Pollard gave me something for sleep. It isn’t working. I need something else.”

Culber takes it and frowns. “Have you taken many sedatives before? This was a substantial dose.”

“Yes.” He doesn’t elaborate. He’s surprised that much of anything works on him. Agonizers have a way of fracturing the nervous system and altering neurochemistry, if a person spends long enough in one. “Can you give me something else?”

“Yes,” Culber says, “but it’ll be a one-time deal.” He sighs and reaches for a PADD. “These aren’t a long-term solution. I’ve done some research into alternative sleep aids—”

“I’m not seeing a therapist.” Not since he sent the last one into the hands of the Klingons, anyway. He doesn’t need anyone else prying into his head, especially not right now. But maybe it was revealing too much to jump to the idea of therapy.

“No, I didn’t think that would be effective.” Culber holds up the PADD. “I have a list of various traditional herbal remedies used on some of the newer Federation worlds...” At Lorca’s face, he says, “Or you might ask Burnham about Vulcan neuro-pressure.”

Lorca doesn’t take that bait. “Give me whatever you’ve got. I’ll deal with the rest of it when I wake up.” His head is pounding.

Culver gives him the hypo and says, “You should probably transport directly to your quarters, it’s heavy stuff.” He obeys. It still takes what feels like hours to fall asleep.

Lorca goes to sickbay again after his allotted six hours. He hates this place. Dr. Pollard sees him and says, “I hear it didn’t go well.”

“No.” He closes his eyes as Pollard scans him with a tricorder. “Whatever Culber gave me afterward took a long time to work.” And his head is pounding now.

“Yes,” she says absently as she looks at the results of her scan. “Barring using the kind of tranquilizers we would use on extremely large life-forms, which I will not prescribe for use on a human, you may need to consider alternatives.”

“Staying awake for long periods of time was an effective alternative.”

“And how is your head feeling?”

He grimaces. “Culber said some things about traditional herbal remedies and then said something else about Vulcan neuro-pressure.” Pollard stops swiping through the scans. “I don’t think he was serious about the herbal remedies.”

“No,” she says. “...If Specialist Burnham is willing to assist you with neuro-pressure, that would certainly be the best option.” The way she says it sounds ominous.

\* \* \*

Near the end of their duty shift, Lorca says, “Burnham, my ready room. I want to know how the anomaly research is progressing,” and she follows, though she looks slightly mystified.

“Captain, I believe that Lieutenant Stamets and Lieutenant Tilly are the best people to update you,” she says. “I’m happy to offer—”

“No. This is a separate issue.” He suspects this conversation is going to be unpleasant. “Dr. Culber and Dr. Pollard both told me that you might know something about Vulcan neuro-pressure as a sleep aid.”

She raises an eyebrow and waits. She looks her most Vulcan when she does it, which is appropriate.

“Burnham?” He’s not inclined to admit to needing it.

She seems almost...uneasy? “Yes, Vulcan neuro-pressure is...a technique for relaxation. A treatment. The person administering the treatment stimulates neural nodes and pressure points in the recipient, which improves sleep.” She’s reciting it like a data entry, which means she must be uncomfortable.

“For Vulcans.” He’s not sure what the doctors are trying to do here.

She stares fixedly past him. “Not exactly. Vulcans have treated humans successfully. The first recorded case was over a century ago and involved two Starfleet officers. But there are certain risks of side effects.”

One of them is going to have to stop talking around it. “Burnham. Do you know how to do this or not?” He doesn’t know what this entails, but he has a suspicion. He hasn’t touched Burnham—Burnham hasn’t touched him—since that night on the couch.

Her eyes snap to meet his. “I do, sir. I apologize—Vulcans are very private about their customs and practices. I was surprised that you’ve heard of it.”

“Culber and Pollard both recommended it. For me.”

“Oh.” He’s never seen her look so uncomfortable. “You should know, it’s not without danger. Done wrong, it can result in paralysis.”

“Hell of a side effect. I’ll assume you’ll do it right. Anything else?”

“There have been cases of...psychic transference. Bonding. When practiced by a Vulcan on a human.”

“Like your Vulcan soul?” He doesn’t want part of Sarek’s soul attached to his own.

“No, different than a katra, but still powerful. I believe that in the first recorded instance of the performance of neuro-pressure on a human, a Vulcan Starfleet officer, Subcommander T’Pol, was able to protect the human, Commander Tucker, from the effects of Orion pheromones through their bond.”

The names don’t mean anything to him, though the way she says them, maybe they should. He’ll look them up later. “Is that going to happen if you do it?”

She stands straighter. “No, it wouldn’t. I don’t have the psychic abilities of a Vulcan. I couldn’t initiate a bond even if I wanted to.”

He wonders if he should be insulted by that. “Burnham, I’d like to get rid of my headaches, and Pollard insists that sleeping is the only way. The doctors won’t give me more drugs.” Maybe too blunt. “If you can perform this neuro-pressure, I want you to do it.”

“Yes, sir,” she tells him. “It would typically be done shortly before you want to sleep.”

“I’d rather not spend more time in sickbay than I have to.”

“No, it wouldn’t be done in sickbay. Let me know when you need it and I’ll come to your quarters.” Somehow it hadn’t occurred to him that something done shortly before sleeping would happen in his quarters. This feels like a worse and worse idea by the minute.

When he goes to his quarters, he pulls up the files on T’Pol and Tucker, skims through the confidential information and then past it into what his above-top-secret clearance will allow. She’s understated the impact of the bond, if their children are any indication. He wonders if she knew them on Vulcan, if that’s how she knows about this bond. The idea seems even worse now.

The door hisses open. “Captain,” Burnham says. She’s carrying a mat and a candle. He deeply hopes that no one saw her come into his quarters with that.

“You can call me Lorca while you do this,” he tells her. He’s not going to suggest Gabriel. He remembers correcting her while she stood just there, reprimanding her for not calling him captain. “So what do I do to get this Vulcan miracle cure?”

Burnham hands him the mat. “Spread this out and sit down. And take your shirt off.” She sets the candle down on the table and lights it.

He spreads the mat out and stands for just a moment, steeling himself. “Is the candle necessary?”

“It’s how I learned to do it,” she tells him. “I don’t think we should deviate.”

An unfortunate choice of words. “What is this going to involve?” Lorca shrugs out of his uniform and pulls his shirt off over his head, then settles cross-legged on the mat. It’s not the most comfortable position. The air is cold on his skin, but he doesn’t think that’s going to be his primary problem.

“The neuro-pressure?” Burnham pauses. “It involves physical contact. Pressure points. I need to start with your spine before we proceed to anything more complicated—your chest, your feet.”

“Right. I don’t know if it matters, but some of my nerves are—fried. Damaged,” he clarifies.

“I’ll be careful.” She sits cross-legged behind him, warmth radiating. “I’m going to touch you now,” she warns, and she must see the flinch when her fingers first land on his skin, but she doesn’t comment. He remembers what this feels like, when she touches him with intent. Burnham runs two fingers along either side of his spinal column, from the base of his spine all the way up to his hairline, and he can’t suppress the shiver. She traces out his shoulder blades, sometimes gentle, sometimes firm, and then begins walking her fingers down his vertebrae.

“No Vulcan chant?” he asks, because the silence gives him too much time to think about what exactly is happening.

“You’re welcome to chant if you’d like,” and it almost sounds like a joke. “I’m counting vertebrae to find the right spot—there.”

She presses firmly then, just below his left shoulder, and he can’t help the grunt of pain, has to fight the urge to jerk away. “Don’t paralyze me, Burnham. I can have you court-martialed.”

“I should have warned you about the pain,” she says. “Take deep breaths. It’ll decrease as we go.” She never finds his jokes funny.

Her hands are hot on his back, even more when she pushes her forearms hard against his back and tells him, “Move a little, see if you can find the right spot.” He twists, rolls his spine, keeps his own hands wrapped safely around his knees. Burnham’s hands roam forward, over his shoulders, to the hollow at the base of his throat, up his neck, card through his hair and down to where his skull meets his spine. She’s leaned into him, the soft fabric of her shirt rubbing against the bare skin of his back, and he can picture it so clearly—

“Burnham,” he croaks, “are you telling me this is standard Vulcan medical treatment?”

He doesn’t hear her laugh but he can feel it where she’s pressed against him. “It’s well-recognized as effective. I don’t know that I would say it’s standard.” Her voice vibrates in his ear and it’s all he can do to keep from turning—

Her hands are working again and she finds a knot of scar tissue, draws her fingers over it lightly, then press harder around it and it flares with pain. He can’t help a small noise of protest. “How did you learn it?”

“A friend taught me. On Vulcan.” He can imagine that too well, one of those Vulcans who wouldn’t bond with a human but was happy to tell her to take her clothes off, pressed against her back like she’s pressed against his, reaching down to cup her breast, draw a thumb over her nipple and claim it was all part of the neuro-pressure even though they both knew it wasn’t, as she could feel him hard against her— “And then, because he’d done it poorly, I was sent to someone who taught me to do it properly.”

This is catastrophic. He’s been so careful, these past weeks. She’s destroying him in this moment and he’s asked her to do it, urged her, told her how important it was to help him sleep. “Good,” he says, because it’s the only word his mind can come up with.

“Focus on the candle if it hurts,” Burnham tells him. “Breathe in a steady pattern.” He stares at the candle and tries to distract himself by remembering the terrible pain of a burn, but her hands are blistering, the heel of one hand pressed hard under his shoulder blade, the other one so gently stroking the line of his throat.

“This should qualify as a form of torture,” he says.

Burnham, to her credit, doesn’t pretend that she doesn’t know what he’s talking about. “It’s very…intimate. That’s one reason Vulcans wouldn’t talk about it to a human. If you’d asked Ensign T’Lac, she would have refused to say anything.”

“In no universe would I have asked her instead of you.” He feels drunk on the sensation of her hands. He lets his head fall forward and finds himself suddenly frozen and gasping for breath.

Burnham pulls his shoulders back and lifts his chin up and he can breathe again. “I’m sorry, I should have told you. It’s important to keep your head up and continue breathing.”

“How much longer will it take?” There’s a limit to how long he can maintain his own distance while she’s stroking his body.

“Take a deep breath,” she says, and he feels sharp pressure where his neck meets his shoulder. His vision grays out for a moment. When his brain can process information again, the first thing it registers is the sudden cold—she’s not touching him anymore. “I think that’s enough for tonight,” she says, and stands up.

Lorca stands too. When he faces her, she’s flushed and breathing just a little faster than usual. He almost thinks she’s sweating. “How quickly am I supposed to fall asleep after this?” He’s just a little lightheaded and can’t stop himself from putting a hand on Burnham’s shoulder to steady himself. She shivers—he can feel tiny goosebumps forming under his fingertips.

“It shouldn’t take more than thirty minutes,” Burnham tells him. “The neuro-pressure will have released the tension and prompted your body to resume its natural patterns.” She frowns a little. “Where’s your food synthesizer?”

He doesn’t take his hand off her shoulder. “Gave it to Elan to reprogram for Andorian food.”

“Oh.” Burnham looks startled. “Usually you would drink tea afterward, but water will do. I can bring tea next time.” She slides out from under his hand, but catches it in her own and then leads him to the sink. He releases her hand, but instead of finding a glass, he turns the water on and splashes it on his face, then drinks from his cupped hands.

“Thank you.” He wipes his dripping mouth. He does feel a strange kind of weight running through his body, as though all his blood has become very heavy, the way he usually feels only after staying awake long enough that Culber or some other doctor orders him to sleep. It’s hard to think.

Burnham says, “I’m going to touch you now” again and puts her hand at the small of his back to steer him toward his bed. He has a vivid flash of the last time she was in here with him, when she’d called him Gabriel for the first time and then everything had fallen apart. At his bed, she lifts her hand away from his back and he turns to face her; she’s very close, a few inches away, and he knows he’s breathing too fast but everything in him wants to kiss her. She would go along with it, he thinks, from the way she looks back at him—not just go along with it, but run it. She would kiss him, push him down onto the bed and follow him down, and for an hour, maybe two, maybe the whole night, everything would be glorious.

And then. When they were done, he'd still want her to stay forever, and she still wouldn't want that. So he just says, "I'm grateful, Burnham," and sits down on the bed. She gives him one last look, nods, and leaves.

\* \* \*

He sleeps eight hours. His head doesn't hurt when he wakes up. Nevertheless, he goes to sickbay and sees Culber and then realizes he doesn't have anything to say except "What the fuck was that." Instead, he says, "Doctor, I'm curious about the remedy that you recommended."

Culber looks at him with the most innocent expression imaginable and says, "Considering your history, neuro-pressure seemed like the likeliest option to succeed." Lorca doesn't know how to say what he's really thinking, which is 'Why did you put me in a situation to be minimally clothed with Burnham?' "Was it helpful?" Culber asks.

"Yes." Lorca has to admit it. "But I'd appreciate you investigating other options too. I don't want to get dependent on one particular thing."

At breakfast, Elan doesn't laugh at him, but she does say "Gabe," in the most affectionate and warning tone possible. "Let me get this straight. The only way for you to sleep is for your Vulcan to come put her hands all over you but not anywhere you really want."

"That's right," Lorca says. He's been trying not to think about it that way. "Both Culber and Pollard recommended it."

"They're fucking with you," Elan says confidently. "That's just cruel."

Lorca doesn't know how to say "I'm trying to be careful" or "I'm trying not to get hurt" any way that doesn't sound pathetic. "It's fine," he says instead. "It's not a problem."

That's a lie. It's a problem. It's an even bigger problem when Burnham come to his quarters that sleep cycle and says, "Traditionally, Vulcan neuro-pressure involves reciprocal treatment," and he thinks that she should just kill him now.

"What d'you mean?" he asks. He's taken off his shirt before she arrives, and his skin feels tight all over, anticipatory. "I'm supposed to give it to you too?" He doesn't think about how that sounds.

"Yes." At least Burnham looks a little uncomfortable. "That's the way I was taught. The act of performing neuro-pressure also stimulates the pressure points that help with sleep. I can talk you through it." She sits cross-legged on the mat and says, "Sit behind me." Once he's kneeling behind her, she pulls her shirt over her head and he's confronted with the naked expanse of her back. He can see the knobs of her spine and he wants to lick each one. "Find the fifth vertebrae," she tells him, and he strokes his hands down her back, counting down. "Move your fingers along gently when you do," and he obeys, until she makes a noise somewhere between pain and relief. He runs his fingers up, over her shoulder blades, to her clavicle, and doesn't let his hands wander lower the way he'd like. He knows what it would feel like if he did, the soft skin, the way she would shift, pulls his mouth down, grip her fingers in his hair and hold him in place while she moved.

But no. "Is this right?" he asks, and he moves his hands the way that she did, barest pressure on her throat, then back around to her back, and he doesn't press against her, doesn't let her feel that he's hard and wanting.

"Yes," Burnham says, and her own voice is rough. "Under the shoulder blade—ahh! there." Her spine stiffens when he touches it.

He's human. He's human and he lets his forehead fall against her hair, breathes hot against her neck, for just a second before he pulls away. "This is going to help me sleep?"

She shifts, turns around to face him, ignores the obvious. "The reciprocal nature of the neuro-pressure increases its effectiveness for you. That's what I was taught." He wonders if it was her own Vulcan who taught her that, the one who took the liberties that Lorca wishes he would let himself take, or if it was the teacher later who fixed it all for her.

"All right," he says. "What now?"

"Sit back and extend your foot," Burnham says.

He obeys. They're both sitting now, facing each other, his leg awkwardly extended to her. The great irony of the neuro-pressure is that the pressure itself is often unpleasant, however overwhelming the physical contact that precedes it. Burnham takes his bare foot—what a strange thought—and digs her thumbs into the vulnerable tendon, and it feels like he's been electrocuted, all up his spine. Not in a good way. "Fuck," he says, almost involuntarily, and tries to pull his foot away, but Burnham holds on.

She says something in Vulcan, which of course he can't understand, and presses again, and this time he lights up everywhere, ears roaring.

## Chapter End Notes

According to the Romulan War novels (ending in To Brave the Storm), Trip didn't actually die as depicted in the finale of Enterprise. He and T'Pol lived on Vulcan and had two children, T'Mir and Lorian (named after the alternate timeline Lorian). My fangirl heart will take it. (He also apparently went by the alias Michael Kenmore in a nice nod to SGA)

## Chapter Summary

Two years ago he was plotting to take over the entire Terran empire, and now he's on a ship overrun by bunnies with his crew asking permission to watch movies.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"This has to be the stupidest fucking decision a person has ever made," Elan says.

Lorca regrets having ever started to eat in the mess hall. "I didn't ask for your opinion."

"No one ever does." Elan pokes dubiously at her pancakes. "You're getting half-naked with...your Vulcan...and touching each other all over, in the privacy of your room, and then letting her put you to bed every night."

"It's not every night," Lorca says, "and it's a Vulcan medical treatment for sleep problems. Stop playing with your food."

Elan tears a piece off of her pancake and pinches it between two fingers. "Look, we both know that Vulcans are all repressed and kinky, so I'm not surprised they came up with something like that and call it medical treatment. You know what's a really good Andorian treatment for sleep problems? Getting *completely* naked and—"

"Lieutenant Tilly!" Lorca spots her walking by with a tray and calls her over for no reason other than to redirect Elan's attention.

"Captain?" Too late, he realizes that she's flanked by Owosekun and Detmer, who always seem to be laughing at him silently these days.

"I'd like a report on the status of the anomaly research after you've finished breakfast," Lorca tells her.

"Yes, sir." Tilly looks suspicious, which isn't surprising given that she reported yesterday. "Oh, sir, Keyla had a request."

He raises an eyebrow at Detmer. "Captain, I've done some research into the experiences of other ships on long-term missions," she says. "The...techniques used to maintain morale."

"Detmer, if this is a request for another party—"

"No, Captain. Something a little smaller. On some of the earliest missions, they used to hold movie nights."

Two years ago he was plotting to take over the entire Terran empire, and now he's on a ship overrun by bunnies with his crew asking permission to watch movies. "You need my authorization for that?"

Owosekun and Detmer are definitely laughing at him. "Noooo," Detmer says carefully. "We've been holding them for a few weeks now. We take turns choosing movies, and Owo suggested that we ask if you'd like to choose the movie tonight."

Now the only fear he inspires in his crew is, apparently, that he might be insulted they didn't ask for his opinion on movies earlier. "I don't watch a lot of movies, Lieutenant." And the ones he's seen in Terran society probably never existed in this universe.

"Of course not, sir." Owosekun gives Detmer a kind of told-you-so look that he resents.

"I'll come tonight," Lorca finds himself saying. "You can tell whoever's choosing to pick something that I'll like." He has to take his moments to inspire fear where he can find them these days.

After Tilly's report, which is as routine as he expected, and an away mission during which the team identifies a new set of fluffy animals that they want to bring home—a request he denies, and feels vindicated when the fluffy animals turn out to have very strong scent glands—and an inspection of the security team, during which Specialist Phreen seems amused by his presence but not remotely concerned, and after dinner, where Elan makes more faces at him and Lorca ignores her...after all that, he allows Detmer and Owosekun to shepherd him to the shuttle bay, where crew are setting up their own chairs in front of a large screen.

"It was Rhys's turn to choose," someone says in his ear, and he knows it's Burnham without turning his head. "He was very intimidated."

"At least someone is still intimidated." Lorca doesn't look at her. He likes this, this tacit acknowledgement of each other's presence, the fact that she didn't start by calling him Captain. "People used to fear me."

"I'm sure they still do," Burnham assures him, voice low, and he thinks of the way she sounds when they're alone, when her fingers are tracing out every damaged cluster of nerves, when last night she'd begun working on his chest while he'd stared up at her until he had to close his eyes to stay sane. "You didn't have any requests?"

"Movies didn't play a big role in my childhood," he murmurs. Even without looking, he knows she's standing very close to him. He keeps his eyes forward, on the collection of people who are laughing and good-naturedly arguing about how low the lights should go. "There were... training holograms. Recordings of simulations."

“Nor mine,” Burnham tells him. He wonders what she would do if he did close the gap, if he put a friendly hand on her shoulder or a light hand at the small of her back, a little more affectionate. “You should find a seat.”

“And you?” He doesn’t know if it would be better to sit through the movie alone, whether or not it’s enjoyable, or sit through it with Burnham at his elbow and spend it thinking of her.

“I’m sitting at the back with Ash and Tilly,” she says, and that answers that. “Enjoy.” She moves away as Detmer and Owosekun approach to guide him to a seat.

Lorca isn’t sure what [Rhys’s movie choice](#) says about his view of Lorca. It’s black-and-white, silent with some placards of text, and culminates in the hero frantically climbing the façade of a building, slipping and nearly falling and nearly being knocked off over and over again. Lorca finds himself gripping the seat of his chair, muscles tensed in sympathy with the climber even as he can see the slapstick humor in it when the man has finally made it to the top and then trips over the rope and falls again...only to somehow swing up and into the arms of his girlfriend. Everyone has been laughing and sighing and cheering around him, but even when it’s over, all he feels is the tension, the fear, the desperation in that climb. In the dark of the shuttle bay, he’s mentally plotted his escape route, and even when the lights come on he’s finding the path out.

“Captain!” Rhys has ventured close enough to catch his attention and Lorca holds every muscle in place, against every instinct. “Sir!” Rhys wants him to say that it was the right choice but doesn’t want to ask.

“Good,” he says, and it sounds forced even to his ears because he’s trying so hard to stay still. “Seems classic.”

“Thank you, sir, I hoped you would enjoy it. I thought something from the early years, not too much talking, simple but catchy—”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I appreciate the thought that went into it.” He nods shortly at Rhys and does make his escape, out a side door to the shuttle bay and down into a dark alcove, and discovers that it’s already occupied.

“Captain.” Tyler is there, breathing hard, and Lorca sees his own feelings there. “Sorry, sir,” Tyler says, and twitches like he’s going to move.

Lorca shakes his head. “At ease.” Tyler might be the only person on this ship who can grasp something of what he’s feeling. They don’t speak more, only stand a safe distance from each other, each breathing in deeply, trying to lock it down, for whatever value of it. The movie should have been funny. He knows that. Everything leading up to that desperate climb had been flimsy, amusing, no weight to it. But he can still feel the agony of wanting to climb himself, having to hold his arms and legs still as he watched because it wasn’t real, he wasn’t the one trying to climb, the one whose hands slipped on the arms of the clock, who dangled out over the street with only a hand on the sheer wall or a windowsill, and that overwhelms any memory of the rest of the movie, floods past the unreality of the final kiss, and he’s still swamped with it.

“Ash,” he hears Burnham say, and then she realizes that they’re both there. She abandons whatever she’d been planning to say to Tyler. “Captain.”

“Burnham,” he says and it’s barely a coherent word, he’s trying so hard to contain this desperate need to run further—his animal brain doesn’t care that he could transport to the safety of his quarters, it wants to steal a shuttle and get away away away—he doesn’t even have a real weapon on him, only a little knife at his ankle—

He doesn’t know what she says to Tyler. He’s barely conscious of Tyler at all. He sees her shape approaching in his peripheral vision, slowly, and she must say his name repeatedly because finally she says “*Gabriel*” and he looks at her and the panic—because that’s what it is—lessens slightly, enough that he can control it again, more or less.

“Yes,” he says slowly. He shouldn’t have reacted that way to a silly movie. If Rhys had chosen a war movie, maybe, or one of those torture movies that people used to watch, his reaction would make more sense. She reaches toward him slowly again, so that he can see her coming, and takes his hand and holds it clasped between her own, and he grips her hand so tightly that he sees pain cross her face briefly and he releases it. Burnham doesn’t take her own hands away, though.

Lorca breathes in, out, tries to match the breathing she’s taught him in the neuro-pressure sessions, tries to slow his heart down. “I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I’m fine.” He can read her expressions well enough now, even under the Vulcan façade, to know that she doesn’t believe him. “I’m fine,” he repeats.

“No one ever means that when they say it,” she tells him. “Come on.” She keeps his hand clasped in one of her own as though he’ll run away if she lets go and leads him along the hallway until they come to the cargo bay, one end open to the vastness of space with only the forcefield to keep the air in. Lorca goes willingly as she walks almost to the open end. There’s a line of crates there and Burnham hops up on one, helps him up onto the next.

“You told me that no matter how deep in space you are, you can always see home.”

“Burnham, I was lying,” he says, and she laughs a little at that.

“Yes, and about your eyes, and about being mysterious. I realized that, eventually.”

They’re silent for a little while, watching those unfamiliar stars. The urge to run is starting to subside. “Elan thought I’d been Section 31,” he says. “I didn’t correct her. Would you have liked it better, if I’d told you that?”

“No.” Burnham’s answer follows right on the heels of his question. “No. I would rather know the truth, even if it’s worse.”

“Would that have been a better truth?” He’s not quite asking her, but working it through himself. “If whatever terrible things I’ve done and whatever flexible morality I have was in service of the Federation? Or is it better that the Federation’s hands are clean of all that, at least when

it comes to me?"

Burnham jostles his knee with her own, almost casually affectionate. "I'm not blind to the...darker parts of the Federation, of Starfleet. I can believe in the principles and in the laws without believing that everything the Federation does is meritorious." She looks out at the stars. "And I don't know. It's difficult to compare you as I know you to whoever you would be if you'd grown up here and then become part of Section 31."

"Do kids here grow up wanting to be spies?" He turns away from the stars and looks at her. "What did you want to be when you grew up, when you were a kid?"

"I wanted to join the Vulcan Expeditionary Group," she says automatically.

"Why didn't you?"

Some emotion flashes across her face. "Admission was...selective."

"I have trouble imagining that you weren't the best." He doesn't want to re-open old wounds, but he wants to know, if she'll tell him.

"I thought I wasn't, for a long time," Burnham tells him. "I thought I'd failed. Until we rescued Sarek and I saw inside his mind. He was given a choice, to choose which of his not-quite-Vulcans would be accepted."

He can see where this is going. "He chose his son."

"My brother. Spock." She shakes her head. "I was ashamed for years, when I thought I'd failed him, and more ashamed to be experiencing such a human emotion. And then I learned what he had done and I thought I should be angry."

"You should be." He's angry on her behalf.

Burnham sighs and looks away from him, out into space. "I think I used up the energy for those feelings with all the time I spent suppressing them. I'm not angry that he didn't choose me. I understand why he didn't. I know that Spock came first, for him. I was...angry that he never told me. That he allowed me to believe that I had failed him." She laughs shortly, quietly. "His own emotional failing, that he was afraid of how I might react. I doubt he's ever told my mother."

"You don't have to be Vulcan here," he says. "You're allowed to have feelings."

"Oh, I do." Burnham smiles a little at that, a private kind of smile. "I would say that since arriving here, I've experienced, and displayed, more emotions than in the twenty years before. But it can be—comforting, not to feel them, or to try not to, sometimes." She raises an eyebrow at him. "I would think that in your universe, people would have emotional control closer to Vulcans."

"No," he says, and surprises himself with the vehemence of it. "No. In the Terran universe, there were certain acceptable emotions. Pride, anger. Desire. It would be strange to find a Terran soldier who didn't show those openly. Happiness, of a certain kind. And everyone felt fear, too—it was almost the animating principle—but you couldn't show that." He remembers that constant thrum of fear, that inability to trust anyone, ever. "And unacceptable emotions. Sorrow."

"Love," she says, and she's not wrong.

"The longer it's been, the more I realize how terrible it was." It's strange to say it aloud. "Even happiness—no one was happy the way that Tilly is."

"*No one* is happy the way Tilly is," Burnham tells him, and he hears the affection in her voice.

"I want you to be happy too," he says, and from the way Burnham stiffens, it was the wrong thing to say.

"You keep saying that," Burnham says. "What if I'm not happy? Am I supposed to smile and tell you that I am so that you feel good?"

Lorca flounders. "No, of course not. It's—a request to the universe, not an instruction to you. I want good things to happen to you," he tries. "You're important." None of what he says is exactly right because none of it is quite what he means but won't say, which is: I love you.

She settles a little. "I want good things to happen to you too," she says.

"I'm happier than I've ever been, I think." He's surprised as he says it, but it's true. This conversation has grown too heavy, too introspective, for him. He shifts, jumps down from the crate, and turns to look up at Burnham. "Burnham," he says, "tell me you've adopted one of the thumpers by now."

She grimaces and starts to move, and he offers his arms; he catches her when she jumps down. She meets his eyes and—grins? and he smiles back even as he wonders what she sees when she looks at him. "They weren't supposed to be pets. I told the biology division not to allow it."

"Tilly brought one home, didn't she." Burnham's long-suffering expression tells him that he's right. He realizes that they're walking more or less in the direction of quarters. "Is it secretly dangerous? Are you taking me to be mauled?"

"Captain," she says, and he realizes with some delight that she's teasing him. "They have very dull teeth. It would only be a light mauling."

When she opens the doors to her quarters, there's a creature curled up on her bed. It's nearly half the length of the bed and is covered in thick, curly fur. "Burnham. That doesn't look like what they brought back." The animal glares at him.

Burnham clears her throat. "It turns out that the small size and thin coat were a function of living in a desert environment. They appear to be..."



thriving here.” She gestures to the thumper. “This is Agatha.”

“...Agatha.”

“Off the bed,” Burnham tells it. “Go on, go to Tilly’s bed.” Agatha crouches and then leaps, propelling itself to land on Tilly’s bed. “Yes. Tilly named it.” She sits down on her bed and, after a moment, gestures to a nearby chair. “Sit.”

He does, and even stretches his legs out to prop them on the bedside table. Elan would approve. Burnham quirks an eyebrow. “How many of these things are running around the ship by now?”

“Something like forty,” Burnham says, and he chokes. “They learn very quickly, so xenobiology is working with linguistics to see if they can identify common markers. For now, they appear to understand basic English, but haven’t communicated in response.”

“Well, now it feels strange to talk in front of Agatha,” Lorca complains. Agatha makes a sort of disgruntled chirping noise and walks to the doors, which open. After a disdainful glance back, she walks out. “Terrifying,” he amends.

“I’m surprised you let them bring the thumpers on board.” Burnham sits cross-legged on her bed, leaning against the wall. He hasn’t been in here since Tyler attacked her.

“I didn’t,” he says. “Ensign T’Lac told me it had been approved by the head of xenobiology while you and I were...out of radio contact.”

“I suppose you told me that, and Vulcans don’t lie, as a general rule.” Burnham brushes some fur off her blanket.

“T’Lac doesn’t seem like a very good Vulcan,” Lorca says. “The first time I met her she was practically hysterical with laughter.”

“Tilly and Chandavarkar had concocted something special for her.” She smiles a little at the memory, and he remembers kissing her in the hallway that night. “She is much more reserved, usually.”

“Of course. And she doesn’t lie.” Lorca shakes his head. “Is anyone on this ship afraid of me anymore, Burnham?”

She quirks an eyebrow. “‘Afraid’ is a subjective term, Captain. Please elucidate.” He sees the smile playing on her lips.

“Intimidated. Acting out of anticipation of consequences rather than according to hierarchy.”

“That’s difficult to quantify. But I would hypothesize, based on the interactions I’ve observed, that the crew are...less afraid of you.” Burnham’s voice loses some of its performative tone and turns sincere. “Is that a bad thing?”

He thinks of Elan, of Chandavarkar refusing to let him kill Tyler, Tilly sitting at his table, Detmer and Owosekun’s laughing eyes, Stamets and his own smoke pet—“No,” he says. “I suppose not.”

Burnham’s gaze locks with his, and—

And then Tilly walks in with T’Lac and Chandavarkar, Agatha twining between their legs. Silence falls. It’s excruciating. He can’t think of a good reason for being here, a reason other than having come here because he likes talking to Burnham and she likes talking to him.

He stands. “Burnham,” he says, and nods at the rest of them in general acknowledgement. “Enjoy your night.”

Lorca has made it almost halfway to his own quarters when he hears Burnham call “Captain!” from behind him. She’s followed him from her room. “I don’t think I’m up for a neuro-pressure session tonight.”

He tilts his head to look at her. She followed him to tell him something that’s abundantly obvious? He reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. “There,” he says. “Neuro-pressure complete.”

Burnham actually laughs at that, and he never wants her to stop. “I appreciate it.” She takes his hand and squeezes it briefly. “Neuro-pressure complete. Sleep well. Sir.” She walks away and he walks to his own quarters with the sound of her laugh in his ears.

\* \* \*

Minimal neuro-pressure notwithstanding, he sleeps poorly that night. He dreams of fleeing down a hallway as it narrows in front of him, Michael ahead of him and the Emperor’s soldier’s at his back, and he knows she won’t come back if he falls. He wakes before they catch him and dreams of that instant on the Buran when he saw the Starfleet symbols and knew that something was terribly wrong, and then it’s Cornwell, staring unmoved as he begs her not to take Discovery away from him.

When he wakes up for the third time, he gives up on sleeping. It’s been four hours and that’s enough, at least for now. In another thirty minutes he’s back on the bridge with the last few hours of gamma shift, and he finds himself feeling a little guilty (guilty!) that he hasn’t consulted with Saru recently beyond asking, yet again, whether they’ve discovered anything about the anomalies that they still hit occasionally. “Mr. Saru,” he says. “Good to see you.”

“Captain?” The question in Saru’s voice says that he thinks Lorca must have a head injury. Again. “It is...good to see you as well, sir.”

“What’s the galaxy looking like out there?” They’re crawling along at warp four, but at least they have a destination now. “Anything interesting?”

“Sir, I don’t know if this would qualify as interesting, but there is a planet along our current course that scans suggest may be at some level of technological development beyond those we’ve previously encountered.”

Lorca keeps from jumping out of his chair, but only just. “Excellent! Set course for that planet,” he says. “When we drop out of warp, scan from a safe distance until we have a better sense of what we’re dealing with.” He’s almost—exhilarated at the thought of an inhabited planet with people who are something more than desert scavengers. Burnham will be excited too, when she hears about it.

Elan arrives on the bridge on the dot for the beginning of alpha shift and gives him a tall cup in which she appears to have combined coffee and a nutrient beverage. It’s already separating. “Captain. What’s this I hear about a new planet?” Burnham walks in a step behind her, smiles at Lorca—he’s too surprised to smile back—and goes to her own station.

“Scans indicate a civilization that has advanced to...early industrialization,” Saru says. “Steam power. No warp signatures.”

“Another excellent opportunity to violate the Prime Directive!” Elan declares cheerfully.

Burnham hides another smile—Lorca sees it—and scrolls through the information at her station. “It appears to be another humanoid species. There’s nothing about their appearance that we can’t synthesize, if we want to take a look without making official contact.”

“Put together a team,” he says. “Once our scans are finished, if there’s nothing strange, you can transport down to the planet. Lieutenant Elan, coordinate with Burnham on the team.”

## Chapter End Notes

The film is *Safety Last* and [the climbing scene](#) is very intense.

Chapter Summary

“I don’t have a lot of experience with this either, Burnham.”

“Logically,” she starts, and he smiles, “it would be better if one of us did.”

It turns out that when Lorca told Burnham that “*you* can transport down to the planet,” what he really meant was *we*. Not because he expects a repeat of P3X-524 with Burnham, and not (or not only) because Dr. Pollard has told Elan that her antennae and skin tone can’t be adequately camouflaged to remain inconspicuous on the planet, meaning that Chandavarkar and Phreen will be the primary security team. Lorca finds himself wishing that Tyler could be put back onto security when he learns that.

No, if he admits it to himself, he’s joining the away team because he wants to be that wide-eyed explorer, at least a little, and he wants to see things closer than on the bridge in orbit. He tries to sit patiently as Pollard applies the synthesized ridges to his cheekbones and around his eye sockets and lengthens his eyebrows. On the next bed, Burnham is receiving the same treatment from Culber; Chandavarkar, Phreen, and the other scientists have already been made up.

Elan, who has been lurking and watching, holds out a flat black square of metal with some kind of engraving, smaller than his fingernail. She grins. “Ever wanted to have pierced ears?”

“No,” he says.

“Too bad.”

Pollard sighs and takes the engraved square from Elan, places it against the tragus of his ear, and pinches sharply. It hurts more than it should, and when he touches it gingerly, he discovers that it’s a solid plug through the cartilage. “What’s this?” he asks, and his voice may betray some slight indicator of lingering pain.

“A beacon,” Elan tells him. She reaches over and flicks it with her fingernail—gently—and Lorca swats her hand away. Burnham has accepted her new jewelry with her usual stoicism. “Even if you’re captured and searched, we’ll be able to beam you out.”

“The people of P4X-019 appear to wear similar types of decoration,” Burnham explains. “These will help us blend in and ensure our safety. Specialist Phreen designed them.”

He supposes it makes sense that an engineer-turned-security specialist would be able to do something like that. “Are we ready now?” His cheek ridges are already starting to itch. The ear piercing is a nagging presence that his body refuses to accept.

Chandavarkar leads them to the transporter room, where Phreen is waiting with their gear. There are only six of them—himself and Burnham, Chandavarkar and Phreen, T’Lac, and a xenanthropologist, Harding. Phreen hands out their packs, which have been modified externally to resemble the bags that the locals carry. After a final review, they step onto the transport pads.

\* \* \*

The first thing Lorca thinks, when they arrive on the planet, is that the sky looks impossibly *big*. There’s probably a scientific word for the phenomenon, but whatever it is, it’s somehow both oppressive and a little terrifying. It’s cold, and it should be bleak, but everything around them is very green. When the wind shifts, a choking reek of sulfur blows across them.

“Hot springs,” Burnham says as Harding retches. “Volcanic hot springs. The nearest town appears to be powered entirely by geothermal energy.”

“That’s sulfur,” Phreen adds. “Try not to breathe in through your mouth, Harding.” She inhales deeply and doesn’t appear bothered by the smell. At Lorca’s look, she says, “I grew up in a sulfur-mining colony. Smells like home.” He didn’t know that. He doesn’t actually even know if she’s entirely alien or a human-alien hybrid. It’s a little embarrassing to realize.

“There is a town .25 kilometers away.” T’Lac almost sounds impatient. “If we wish to investigate this civilization, I suggest that we proceed in that direction.”

Chandavarkar pats his thigh almost unconsciously, and Lorca knows he’s checking for the shape of his phaser underneath his clothes. “All right,” he says. “Let’s go.”

At first, the ground is rocky, uneven, and it’s slow going. Phreen takes the lead with Harding, leaving Burnham and Lorca more or less in the middle and Chandavarkar watching with the rear with T’Lac—every scientist with a guard. Chandavarkar and T’Lac chat quietly, cheerfully, a little breathlessly, and Lorca catches Burnham smiling at them.

“They’re very...young,” she says. “They’re sweet.”

“She’s the oldest person on the ship.” Lorca keeps his voice down as he says it. He knows that it’s rude to ask a Vulcan their age, but he has reviewed all of the crew’s files, not just Burnham’s.

Burnham huffs a breathless laugh. Then she slips sideways on wet rock and grabs Lorca's arm to keep from falling, which throws him off-balance, and they both flail for a moment before Burnham manages to regain her balance. "They're only a few years from cadets," she says. "We always had a lot of cadets on *Shenzhou*. Captain Georgiou liked training them."

"Did you?"

They've reached the top of the rise. In the valley below, there's a sprawling town; on the other side of the valley a waterfall thunders down, the spray blinding in the afternoon light. Phreen points to a road along the ridge that goes down into the valley and beckons them along it. It's paved in huge obsidian tiles, jointed with white mud. "Cadets were—unnerving to me," Burnham admits as she and Lorca start down the road. "They tended to be very emotional and they showed everything. They behaved illogically, even the ones who knew better. I found that it took more mental discipline to maintain my equilibrium around them."

"It must have been a shock, to go from Vulcan to all the human illogic of Starfleet." He adds, even more quietly, "It was a shock for me."

There's a herd of strange-looking cows on one side of the road, watching as they pass. A calf—for lack of a better term—is cavorting on the road, but it turns to regard them suspiciously as they get closer. It's covered in long, thick fur, with big eyes and a rack of horns like a moose. He thinks he sees tusks too. Phreen holds up a hand and they all halt. Harding is trying to surreptitiously record video footage without startling the creature.

After a long, tense moment, the calf turns and walks off the road. Harding makes a stifled noise of joy as it walks and they see that it has six legs and a body that flows like a snake as it moves. Phreen looks around and beckons them all closer. "We're getting close to the town," she says softly. "Is everyone comfortable with the story?"

"Passing through on our way north to a wedding, just hoping to stay for a night," Chandavarkar reminds them. T'Lac had come up with the wedding part of it, saying that "events to celebrate such rituals of union often bring together disparate individuals," which would help to explain why they all looked different from each other.

"I have the forged currency," T'Lac said, her mouth turned down in disapproval. "And I have ensured that our translators are functional and programmed with this town's language, though I suspect there may be some difficulties"

When Burnham looks at him, her eyes are almost dancing. "All right then," she says.

"Go," he confirms, though it doesn't seem like anyone was really waiting for it. Chandavarkar is in charge of security and Burnham is in charge of the scientists and he is...superfluous.

There's a hum as they walk into town, like the sound of a great engine. "They must be drawing power from the waterfall," Burnham says quietly. Another road branches off, lined by what look like strange mounds. When he touches his elbow to Burnham's and gestures toward them, she says, "When we scanned the planet, we saw a lot of large spaces just below the surface, but the shape was man-made. I think these are...homes. Dug into the earth, to take advantage of the geothermal heating. I don't think it gets much warmer than this during the year."

Past the homes, the town is very busy. The road is full of people and strange vehicles alike—some of the people dressed like they are, in quilted cloth jackets and pants, but others in layer upon layer of furs. One woman wears a dress that appears to be entirely made of the long tails of some furry animal stitched together into thick vertical stripes, coupled with a fur headwrap, her elegant neck exposed to the air. The vehicles are unfamiliar, three-wheeled with steaming engines and only enough space enough for the driver and a cramped passenger. Sometimes larger wagons come rumbling through, pulled by the six-legged creatures they'd seen. Wires hang heavy from poles everywhere, criss-crossing between roofs and balconies.

"Pardon me," a man says as he nearly bumps into Harding, and then stops and stares at all of them.

"Are you all right?" Harding asks.

"Steady earth and steady water to you, my friend," he says. "You're travelling?"

"Yes, we are, to attend a marriage ceremony in the north," Harding says. "It's obvious that we're travelers?" Lorca hears that strange medley of native language and English that happens sometimes when the universal translator is still learning a new language.

The man nods. "You should outfit yourselves better, if you want to spend time in town," he warns. "There, go now." He points at a store up the road, whose windows are full of bright clothing beneath a sign flashing in neon. "You'll have better luck finding a place to stay if you do."

"Thank you. Steady earth and steady water to you as well," Harding says.

"He's right." Chandavarkar looks around. "We must be dressed as...laborers or something. The people dressed like us get out of the way when the other people walk past."

"I suppose we'll find out if the money's any good." Phreen raises her eyebrows. "Well? Shall we go shopping?"

'Steady earth and steady water' appears to be the customary greeting here. The shopkeeper looks askance at their outfits when they enter, but T'Lac manages to flash a large handful of their distasteful forged currency and the man becomes much more accommodating.

They emerge transformed. Soft cloth is only for the poor, Lorca discovers. He ends up all in black leather, the kind of thing he might have worn in the Terran universe, though his coat is lined with some kind of fur. Burnham is wearing black leather too, and for all that she's dressed the way Michael used to, she doesn't look a thing like Michael. The others opt for fur—it allows both Phreen and Chandavarkar to hide their weapons easily—except T'Lac, their vegetarian Vulcan. Harding speaks to the shopkeeper on her behalf and she emerges in a billowy suit of some kind of iridescent material. They have to keep their packs, incongruous now but worse to risk losing.

Out on the street again, Harding points one street over. “The keeper told me that we’d find acceptable lodgings on the next street,” he says. “He said that they’d be better quality than those available on this street.”

The next street over is quieter, free of the loud steam-cars and rattling wagons. The wires above the street are strung neatly, orderly. The street are lined with lampposts that are topped with large bulbs made of some kind of smoky crystals. “That one seems fine,” Lorca says, gesturing to the nearest building. It’s faced in obsidian and has a very small sign that says *gistiþús*, which Harding assures them means hotel. He looks to the others for any kind of disagreement, but no one speaks up to object.

It’s almost surprising how similar it is to the hotels he’s seen depicted in advertisements for travel destinations on Earth. The entry room, for lack of a better word, is very quiet. There’s a sign that he can’t read on one of the doors, but when a man opens it, steam billows out. At a round central desk, a man dressed entirely in white fur looks at them and says, “Three rooms?”

Lorca looks at them too. Of course they’re still more or less paired off the way that they were when walking into town. The man is already handing them three keys that look hand-forged. “I recommend our outdoor baths,” he says, and then points them toward their rooms.

Lorca meets Burnham’s eyes. There are ways to do this. Women in one room, men in the other, Lorca in the third. Or security team, science team, Lorca in the third. “It would look strange for us to split off in a different way than we are now,” Chandavarkar says.

“I am in agreement.” T’Lac doesn’t smile, but he suddenly has a flash of suspicion that Elan has put T’Lac up to something. “Based on my observations of the local population, I believe that the group configurations least likely to catch attention are those in which we already stand. Our dissimilar physical appearances do not suggest a biological family group. The next logical interpretation of our group would be romantic. I see nothing to indicate that romantic groupings of more than two individuals are acceptable in this society. That requires us to perform as pairs. I have observed only heterosexual pairings. Logically, we should proceed in these pairs until some other disguise becomes more useful.” T’Lac gestures to Burnham. “Captain, you should share a room with Burnham.”

He knew it was coming and he still can’t keep himself from looking over at Burnham to see how she’ll react. When she catches him looking, she quirks her eyebrow and smiles and he thinks briefly that if the local population decides to chase them down and kill them tomorrow, at least he’ll have spent the night with Burnham again. “All right,” he says. “Take what you need most, leave the packs in the room. Let’s find somewhere to eat, if it’s safe to eat...?”

Harding nods. “Yes, sir,” he says. “Based on the readings I’ve taken so far, our biology is sufficiently similar to digest the local food. I can’t promise it’ll taste good, though.”

“Digestion in a place where we can continue observing is all that I ask,”

\* \* \*

Harding proves his usefulness by talking to enough locals to find an eating-house that’s meant to be good but not the kind of place where they’ll have to perform too much. It’s back on the busy street—*aðalverslunargata*, Harding tells them, and Lorca isn’t willing to try to pronounce that even in his head—and it has a neon sign advertising *MATUR*, which Harding tells them means “food.” Lorca supposes it’s good that xenolinguists like him still exist for when the universal translator struggles to keep up.

Inside, the walls are mosaics, some abstract—though for all he knows, they’re of deep religious significance—and some more clearly representative of the town, the people, great clouds of steam rising from the ground. It’s dim but not dark, with long corkscrewing pipes of patterned glass set into the ceiling and full of light. They find an empty table that seats eight and fill it. Harding picks up what must be a menu and says, “I’ll order for all of us unless you want to guess what it says.”

“No,” Lorca says, in case someone is about to disagree. “You’re our best chance of eating something better than just digestible.” When a server comes to their table with mugs of...something, Harding reads out a string of words that the universal translator doesn’t even try to translate.

T’Lac takes a very small sip of the beverage. “I believe you will find it acceptable,” she says. “It appears to be a mildly alcoholic beverage.”

Lorca finds himself lifting his own mug to toast. “Here’s to my crew,” he says. “And the wedding.” He gets some strange looks, but everyone lifts their mugs and drinks. It’s hot and sweet and barely tastes of alcohol, which probably means that it’s dangerous.

Two people in somewhat more worn furs approach their table. The man (Lorca is guessing) asks, “May we join you?”

“Steady earth and steady water,” Lorca remembers to say. “Please do.”

They introduce themselves as Guðmundur and Ketill. The restaurant is loud and the two men is seated far enough away that he can’t quite hear what they’re saying to Harding and Chandavarkar, but he does hear when one asks, “Where are you traveling?”

“To a marriage ceremony, further north,” Lorca tells them. He hears the translator stutter and provide the word “*brúðkaupsveisla*” for “marriage ceremony” and is very glad that he let Harding order for them.

“Congratulations!” Ketill says. “Who is getting married?”

There is, for a moment, an alarming silence at their table. Apparently no one thought that they might be asked for any more information about the alleged wedding. “My sister,” Lorca says, when no one else comes up with an answer quickly enough. “My sister. Erin.”

“Wonderful!” Ketill drinks his own drink quickly and takes Guðmundur’s for himself. “Wonderful, to have a sister married. Did you approve of her husband-to-be?”

“It’s been a long time since I saw her. I don’t know the man, but if she chose him, I’m sure he’s good.”

“You allowed her to choose her own?” Ketill sounds shocked. Apparently that’s not the normal custom.

“In our town, that’s how it’s done,” he says. “The woman chooses the man.” He wonders if Burnham can tell whether he’s telling the truth about Erin. “Everyone is happy that way.”

“Except the man who isn’t chosen!” Ketill chortles. He’s finished Guðmundur’s drink and is signaling to the server for another one.

“His name is John.” Lorca doesn’t know why he’s saying this when the men clearly don’t care. “He—he studies the stars.” It’s the best way he can think of describe a scientist.

That must have translated in a way that he didn’t intend, because Ketill bursts out laughing again and says something that sounds like an insult. “I apologize for him,” Guðmundur says. “It’s been a long day.”

\* \* \*

The restaurant’s proprietor directs them to the popular public hot springs. It isn’t quite the muddy reeking hole that Lorca had anticipated, based on those first sulfuric breaths on the planet. The spring itself is the size of a small lake, dotted throughout with small islands, some lit by the strange crystal lights. It’s open to the stars, though the sky is cloudy now. The cloudy water glows faintly, an unnatural shade of blue, some areas brighter than others. There are people throughout, some talking in groups, some resting or standing in silent contemplation, some in the shadows.

“The water is piped in,” T’Lac says. She’s gotten a stack of towels from a man selling them out of a booth near the entrance. “From another hot spring that is dangerously hot. They keep a temperature gauge in the water and a pipe of cooler water, and the gauge triggers a switch in pipes depending on the temperature of the water. And the steam from the excessively hot water is routed to the central boiler that lights the city.”

“So there *is* a massive engine running,” Chandavarkar says.

“Several. They divert water from the waterfall and use the natural geothermal energy to heat it to produce steam. They’re not far from a geyser, which suggests that their ‘steady earth and steady water’ greeting is related to past natural phenomena.” T’Lac passes out what he’d thought were towels, but they’re lengths of silky cloth. “I was informed that these are the only thing to be worn while in the hot spring.”

“...Worn where?” Chandavarkar asks. In the reflected glow of the spring, it looks like he’s blushing.

“Wrapped around the waist.” She sounds impatient. “To hide the genitals. It appears that on this planet there is no distinction between genders regarding clothing expectations.”

Lorca is too dismayed to notice how the others are reacting. Now that he looks harder, yes, everyone appears to be topless in the spring. It shouldn’t be an issue. He’s not the kind of captain—of man—to be leering at any of his team members, whatever their gender and whether or not he’s had sex with them.

But it’s an issue. When they’ve all changed—separately—and re-emerge, his entire awareness is centered on Burnham. The glow of the spring, coupled with those smoky crystal lights, casts strange shadows everywhere. They step down into the spring and the others scatter, Phreen and Harding off to find more locals to talk to, T’Lac undoubtedly to inspect the water itself under Chandavarkar’s guard. He expects, or assumes, that Burnham will go with them. But she stays close to him as he steps slowly forward. Beneath his feet is soft silty mud, and the water itself has a strange texture to it, almost heavy and thick. He can only see maybe an inch below the surface. A faint hint of sulfur pervades everything, but he’s grown accustomed to it.

They wander through the spring, avoiding the small knots of people talking and laughing together. He sees more piercings than were on display at the restaurant—tags and rings and plugs in nipples, any fold of skin, even some that appear set into the bone. “Maybe we should’ve asked Doctor Pollard for more metal,” he says softly.

Burnham hmms in response. “I’m sure Elan would have enjoyed helping install that too.” There’s a hint of a laugh deep in her voice. “Here,” she says, and they’ve reached one edge of the spring. He runs his hand over the edge and finds that it’s some kind of concrete. Burnham sits on what must be some kind of bench in the water, and he imagines stepping forward—

He doesn’t step forward. When she sits, the water comes just to the tops of her shoulders. He doesn’t sit beside her either, but he crouches down just a little in the water, so that it laps at his shoulders the same way it does hers. “Burnham,” he says. Light flashes off her ear tag and he asks, “Are we sure the water won’t damage these?”

She reaches out and strokes her fingers over his own tag and he *feels* it deep in his body. The sense of anticipation is almost suffocating. “They were tested,” she assures him, and it’s hard for him to do anything but look at her lips, at the curves of her breasts just below the water, but he nods.

Someone runs into him and then laughs and says “Sorry!” and when he turns in annoyance, it’s Phreen, laughing at him. “I’m watching Harding,” she says. She points at the kid, who’s maintaining a surprising amount of composure while talking to three different people at once.

It’s hard for him to form words beyond incoherent frustration. “I assumed, Specialist. Keep watching him.”

“Yessir,” she says and swims away toward Harding.

“That was unnecessary.”

“Her interruption or my order?”

“Both,” Burnham says. She begins to stretch her arms above her head, then seems to think better of it and leans back against the wall, head resting on the side and face tilted upward.

They’re silent for too long, the weight of it increasing, and Lorca casts about for anything to say that isn’t a complete abdication of good sense. He finally finds something and says, “You’ve mentioned Tucker and T’Pol a few times, doing the neuro-pressure. Quite a few, considering that as far as history’s concerned, Tucker died not too long after Enterprise’s mission ended.”

Burnham lifts her head, looks at him, raises an eyebrow. She’s not fooled. “Yes, as far as history is concerned, he did.” He can see the steam rising off her shoulders, and it must be from his own too, from the way that she runs her eyes over his body.

“There’s some extremely classified information that suggests something else might have happened.”

Her mouth twitches into a smile, something a little more ordinary than whatever has been going on. “Do you have a question, Captain?”

“Did you know them on Vulcan somehow?”

She spreads her arms behind her against the wall of the hot spring. It’s started to rain a little. “My mother Amanda—she knew Trip well. He was the only other human living on Vulcan when she moved there with Sarek. She sought him out and she realized very quickly that he was more than T’Pol’s...gardener. I believe they bonded over the experience of being a human married to a Vulcan.”

“Not many people do that, I’m guessing.”

Burnham blinks and brushes away the raindrops clinging to her eyelashes. “No, not at all. I believe my mother and Sarek may have been only the second. And she saw quickly after that that their children were—well, their children. The first human-Vulcan hybrids. Trip was...like a grandfather to her, I think.”

He looks away from Burnham and draws his hand through the water to watch it swirl. “And to you?”

“I think he wanted to be a grandfather to me too. A human grandfather, not a forefather. But within a year or so of my arrival on Vulcan, I was trying to be a Vulcan. I remember that my parents took Spock and me to their home to celebrate Christmas, when I was thirteen. He was very old by then, but he and my mother were enjoying themselves so much, putting ugly decorations onto the wrong kind of tree. Sarek and T’Pol were at the other end of the room, talking to each other, and T’Mir and Lorian and Spock were all over there with them, and you could tell that all of them were sort of resigned to the whole thing, but almost affectionately. My mother and Trip kept trying to beckon me over to help them decorate the tree, and I remember wanting to go to them, and being angry at myself for it and then angry at myself for being angry, but I didn’t feel like I could go to stand with the Vulcans either.”

Lorca pretends that it’s the current of the hot springs that pushes him forward enough for his knee to press briefly against Burnham’s. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“I went to my mother eventually, of course.” She blinks a few times, quickly.

“Of course you did. She’s your mother. She read human books to you to make you feel better about being lost.” Maybe it isn’t obvious to Burnham. “It was the logical choice,” he tells her, and offers a half-smile.

Burnham kicks him underwater, and the heavy water slows her foot until it lands as soft pressure against Lorca’s thigh. “My choice wasn’t based on a logical analysis of the situation.”

He sees Chandavarkar and T’Lac making their way through the spring toward them. “Can’t it be the logical choice even if you don’t use logic to make it in the moment?” They both know he’s not talking about her decision at her childhood Christmas.

“I don’t know,” Burnham says. She steps off the bench and stands in the water. Then she asks, “T’Lac, can a choice later be determined to be the logical choice if one does not employ logic in making it?” Her voice takes on that Vulcan cadence.

T’Lac considers. “Such an assessment involves seeking a post-hoc justification for an action driven by something other than logic. If the choice is not made in the first instance using logic, one has not made ‘the logical choice.’ One could accurately describe it afterwards as ‘the choice that would have been logical,’ but a conditional phrasing should be used to make clear that it was not logical in its inception.” She relents. “If you are asking whether the phrase ‘the logical choice’ can fairly be applied to a choice made that *would* have been logical, I believe that is a matter of the speaker and the audience. To a human—” and she’s clearly addressing Lorca when she says it “—it might appear that the phrase ‘a logical choice’ denotes both such choices and choices actually made using logic. To a Vulcan, such a descriptor would be imprecise at best and incorrect at worst.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” he says. “Have you learned anything interesting?”

“Yes.”

After a moment of silence, Chandavarkar says, “We’ve learned a lot, but I think we can wait to report on it. We just wanted to make sure everything was fine over here before we went to explore further.”

Lorca would like a way to answer that beyond “Yes, go away and don’t come back,” but he settles for “I appreciate your diligence. Don’t leave the hot spring enclosure.” They melt back into the crowd.

“You can sit on the bench,” Burnham tells him. “I know you prefer to have the wall at your back.”

“I’m trying to grow as a person,” he says, but he does take the spot that she had occupied. They’re in something of a dark alcove, if a lake could have alcoves, and he realizes that he’s calmer as soon as he can see what’s coming, who’s looking at them—no one, at the moment.

Burnham stands in front of him now, close enough that her knees brush his own, and his legs fall open almost automatically. The water feels even heavier now as she edges closer, until she's pressed against his inner thighs, and he doesn't know what she's doing but he's never going to stop her. "Gabriel," she says softly, like it's a secret. She reaches out and brushes her fingers against the metal tag again and he wants to turn his head and suck her fingers into his mouth.

"Michael Burnham." Under the water, he lets his hands find her hips, but he doesn't pull her that last inch to where he's desperately hard now.

It's raining harder now and she blinks water from her eyes again and smiles at him. He wonders if there was some kind of parasite in the food that's made her heedless, but there's no one near them and anyway he's beginning to lose situational awareness. Her own hands glide up his inner thighs but don't creep below the wrap; instead, she strokes the backs of her knuckles across the thin layer of cloth stretched tight across him and he can't prevent the strangled groan that escapes him, the way his hands clench tighter on her hips. She doesn't stop, and his own hips jerk forward almost involuntarily, seeking more pressure. Lorca slides his hands up her torso to find her breasts, pinches her nipple until she closes her eyes and bucks against him and moans, and he loses all reason, grips her hips and lifts her up until she's kneeling on the bench straddling him.

Burnham settles exactly where he wants her and grinds down against him. He holds her there with one hand slid down beneath the back of the wrap and she groans, digs her hand into his hair and pulls his head forward to lick the rainwater off that same nipple, lets him lick over and over again but pulls him back by the hair if he tries to do anything else. He slides his hand further down and presses her tight against him, and she makes a quiet little noise as she grinds down harder, hips searching for friction in the buoyancy of the water. She finds it, or enough of it to rock back and forth, breath coming faster and faster, until he bites her nipple and feels her spasm against him. He's dizzy by now and he says, "You're trying to kill me."

She smiles again and she starts to work her fingers down under the fabric of his wrap. For a single blinding moment he has a vision of her ducking underwater to take him in her mouth and letting him thrust helplessly, mindlessly, until he comes down her throat—

Someone coughs loudly, as though they've done it several times to try to catch his attention, and he sees clearly enough to realize that Chandavarkar is standing some distance away, steadfastly facing in the other direction. "I'm sorry, sir," he says, still facing away. "But it appears there's a curfew in effect. Everyone who entered without showing a resident's pass has to leave now."

There may be words to describe Lorca's first thoughts in response, but English isn't filthy enough to capture them. Burnham seems to have heard Chandavarkar at the same time that he did and has slid off him. He feels like he's dying. He probably is dying.

But his only option is to try to brazen through it and so he stands painfully and thanks god that the water is too cloudy for anyone to see his situation. "All right," he says, and he barely recognizes his own voice. He sounds...wrecked. He looks at Burnham and she raises an eyebrow in—challenge? They're about to spend the night together. She looks around, letting her gaze rest meaningfully on the other darkened areas of the hot spring, and he follows her gaze, sees the movement, hears the soft and not-so-soft noises, wonders how many couples Chandavarkar accidentally disturbed before he found them. T'Lac, Harding, and Phreen join them on their way to the exit—Phreen must have been babysitting the two scientists. By the time they make it there, Lorca can climb out of the water with the rest of them.

He doesn't know how he makes it from the booths where they wash off the mineral water to putting his clothes back on to walking back to their lodgings to parting with the others. His brain skips ahead to when he walks into the room behind Burnham and closes the door and then she pushes him up against the wall and drops to her knees and drags his pants down far enough to suck him into her mouth.

Lorca hits his own head against the door and puts his hand on the back of her head as gently as he can manage. Her mouth is even hotter than the rest of her body and she hums a little and he says "Fuck, fuck, *Burnham*" and "god the things I want to do with you."

Burnham pulls off just enough so that she can look up at him through her eyelashes and say, "What things?" against the head before taking him down even deeper and he can barely form thoughts.

"Everything," he says. "Everything," and he means it. He moves his hand to her cheek, feels the way her lips are stretched tight, and then he comes and his vision whites out. As a way to die, it wouldn't be the worst.

\* \* \*

When he can think again, he's sitting on the floor leaning against the door. Burnham offers him a glass of water and sits down next to him. "Everything," she says.

Lorca drinks the full glass, water spilling from the edges of his mouth, and then struggles his way out of his jacket. "Burnham," he says, "Don't tell me it's a surprise." He turns his head and finds her face very close to his own.

"No." Her dark eyes are fixed on him.

It's hard to say it. "Don't—do this, and then decide to find out something else about me, and then stop." His voice rasps. "Don't do that again."

Burnham leans in and kisses him very gently. Then she rests her forehead against his own. "No," she says. "I won't." Then she adds, "We don't need to spend the night on the floor."

He laughs at that a little and they stand up together. They help each other out of their clothes—maybe more hindrance than help sometimes, struggling with unfamiliarly-shaped buttons, peeling the leather away from damp skin—and lay the clothes by the heating vents, and then they're in bed together on strangely slippery sheets, legs tangled together, and it's nothing they haven't done before but it all feels new somehow. Burnham kisses him with no particular intent but affection as they lie there, his mouth, the tip of his nose, touches him like she's been waiting for months just to have her hands on him. He doesn't think he's smiled so much since...ever, really.

"I don't have a lot of experience with this." She tells him like she's confiding a secret, but she smiles as she says it.



“Yes,” he says, “I think you’ve told me. Quite a few times.” She arches her eyebrow and he leans in to kiss it. “You seem to imagine that I do.”

“You’ve been in love,” she says, and that knocks him breathless for a moment, the implication.

“It wasn’t—the same.” How to explain it? “I told you, nothing was safe there. There was no—no kindness. I couldn’t trust—her.” He finally settles on, “Love was different there,” and it might be the first time he’s ever said the word aloud.

“I trust you,” Burnham says, and he feels the weight behind it. “I trust you.” She doesn’t qualify it this time.

He kisses her eyebrow again. “I’ve trusted you since the beginning,” he says against her forehead. “I don’t have a lot of experience with this either, Burnham.”

“Logically,” she starts, and he smiles, “it would be better if one of us did.”

## Chapter Summary

“Hvað heitir þú? Hvert ertu að fara?” The guard barks the words and points the gun at Lorca as he says them.

Lorca doesn't know what the words mean, but he knows what he'd be saying if he were in the guard's position.

## Chapter Notes

Contains more detailed description of character's experience during torture (bastinado) than usual. You can safely skip this chapter if you need to.

Lorca goes to sleep happy, which means that of course he wakes up in a cell. It takes him a moment to realize that the reason he's so hot is not that Burnham has draped herself over him while sleeping. He's lying on the floor in a very small windowless room, and it's so hot that he's sweated through the rough clothing that someone has forced his limbs into. The air is full of the smell of sulfur.

There's a cup within arm's reach. When he brings it to his mouth, it's full of warm water that tastes of grit and stone; it might be drugged, but with how much he's sweated, drinking water is more important. After he's finished the water—and that was reckless, he doesn't know when he'll be given more—he takes stock of the situation.

He's been searched—very thoroughly—but his ear tag is still in place. He's a little bruised, but not severely enough to think that he was beaten. More likely incidental to being carried or dragged from the lodging room to this cell. Lorca tries not to think about what might have happened to Burnham. His face hurts and he realizes that whoever captured him has ripped off the synthesized alien features. When he touches his head, there's no sign of a head injury. Culber will be pleased. He's not shackled or restrained in any way, beyond being trapped in this hellhole. Klingon prison was more comfortable.

When he trusts his legs to support him, Lorca stands and walks to the cell door. It's constructed of five horizontal bars, and when he makes the mistake of touching it, he hisses and yanks his burned hand back. The pipes are full of scalding-hot water. Even if there were room to wedge himself through one of the openings between the bars, he'd burn himself too badly to make it all the way through, and the clothes he's wearing are too thin to provide any meaningful protection. He can't hear any voices, only a deafening hum of what must be one of the engines T'Lac told them about. The sound seems to be above him, which is ominous. It's unlikely that Discovery can transport him out when he's down this deep.

There are two options: wait for a guard to come get him, feign sleep, and attempt to escape then, or try to speed things up by attracting attention now. Given the heat, the lack of water, and the barely-breathable air, waiting to die of heatstroke or suffocation isn't an option. He opts for yelling “Hey! Who's there? What the fuck is this?” Too late, he realizes that stripped of everything but the ear tag, he has no universal translator to help him.

Someone does respond to the sound of his voice, at least. The guard who responds is wearing some kind of breathing mask and an outfit of the same iridescent material as T'Lac's new suit. He carries a firearm with a short barrel and a long, thick grip made of metal. It looks heavy. Lorca suspects that could kill a man if the guard struck him with it.

“Hvað heitir þú? Hvert ertu að fara?” He barks the words and points the firearm at Lorca as he says them.

Lorca doesn't know what the words mean, but he knows what he'd be saying if he were in the guard's position. He tries, “My name is Gabriel. I'm travelling north.”

The guard shows no sign of comprehension. Lorca wishes he would point the gun somewhere else; in his current agitated state, the guard might slip and fire it and Lorca would be blasted into pieces. Instead, the guard does something to the wall next to the cell door and it swings open enough that Lorca could walk through it.

Lorca moves out of the line of fire, but he doesn't walk out of the cell. The guard yells, “Hreyfa sig!” and Lorca yells it back at him. If the guard is stupid enough to walk in to get him—

He is. The guard walks in gun-first and Lorca grabs it by the barrel, yanks it from the guard's hands and kicks the back of his knee, sending him to the ground. Lorca swings the heavy metal grip into his head and hears a crack; the guard stays down. He tears the mask off the guard's face and puts it on his own and suddenly he can breathe again. He's not going to try to dress himself as the guard—pointless when he can't even speak or understand the language—but he shoves the guard's body into a corner of the cell not visible from the hallway. Outside of the cell, he sees the metal switch that the guard had flipped to open the door and flips it the other direction, and the door slams shut again.

He's at the dead-end of a long hallway. There are more cells as he walks toward the other end, and he opens the cells as he goes. Burnham isn't in any of them. He doesn't know or care who these other people are, but the more people that the guards are chasing as he tries to escape, the better. They're slow to emerge from their cells, but they follow him down the hall. When he opens the door at the end of that hall, they emerge onto a stone platform in a giant engine room full of pumps and furnaces, with two great turbines churning. The ceiling is low, but he sees a series of ladders leading upward into shafts; he hopes they're exits rather than steam vent shafts, but needs must.

The other escapees flood into the chamber behind him, yelling, and the guards turn on them. It isn't a fair fight—Lorca kept his own gun—and he makes a break for one of the ladders. Metal pellets blast just past his head and he knows he's been spotted. A ladder is a bad place to be trapped when people are firing at you, but he doesn't see another way out. He tucks the gun under one arm and climbs as fast as he can.

He almost makes it. He emerges into the air aboveground to discover four guards waiting for him. Lorca fights hard, takes down two, but one of the others strikes his knee with the metal bar and the last hits him in the ribs and then kicks him in the head when he goes down. In the split-second before he blacks out, he thinks Culber will be angry at him for another head injury.

\* \* \*

This time, he wakes up with both arms and legs shackled to the wall. He can already feel that his left knee is useless, and when he forgets and breathes deeply, his ribs are agony even before he chokes on the sulfuric air and starts coughing. He feels liquid trickling in his ear—it's hard to isolate that pain from everything else—and realizes they've torn out the tag. That's bad.

"Impressive," someone says, and he realizes that he's not alone in the room. It must be someone higher-ranking, because he sees pins on the same iridescent uniform. "Water!"

Someone else tilts his head back and pours water from above into his mouth, and Lorca isn't proud—stupid—enough to spit it out. He thinks he's stopped sweating, which is a very bad sign. Only after he's swallowed the water does he realize that he understood what the person was saying.

"We found this among your possessions," the person says. She comes into the light and he sees a very tall, very thin woman, holding his communicator with its universal translator. "It seems to make it possible to understand other languages, which is how I know that you understand me now." She puts the communicator into a pouch at her waist. In her other hand she carries a thin cane and Lorca's stomach clenches because apparently it's been too long since he was last tortured. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gabriel. I'm traveling north."

She looks unimpressed and tells the other guard, "Lift his right foot." Lorca braces himself in the instant before she brings the cane down across the bottom of his bare foot and he yells out in pain—*this is a new one*, his brain provides—at the blows. It's ten or fifteen, he loses count, and then she asks again, "Who are you?"

The great irony is that both of those things are true. "Gabriel Lorca," he repeats, and as she starts to bring the cane down again, he adds, "What do you want?"

She strikes again anyway, and the guard forces his leg into place as he struggles and tries to recoil. He curses, doesn't even know what he's swearing. "I want to know what you're doing here," she says. "Traveling north to your sister's wedding? Where in the north?"

"Small village," he gasps, when he can breathe again. She nods to the guard, who lifts his left leg and he nearly blacks out from the pain in his knee. He hopes someone is going to rescue him before he loses the use of his left leg. "It's a small—Terra," he says, and the translator must make it sound like it means something other than "Earth," because she allows the guard to release his leg. "A few hundred people. My sister Erin—makes jewelry." Thank god he hadn't made up Erin. "She made me the earring." He gestures to the hole in his ear. His hands are chained down too tightly to actually touch his ear.

"And this device?" The woman pats the pouch that holds his communicator.

"I'm an inventor," he says.

"Inventor of lies, maybe," she hisses, and brings the cane down on his feet again. He yells out again and she says, "This device is beyond anything we have. Beyond anything we have imagined. The men thought it was *galdur*," and the translator struggles there but he takes her meaning.

He says "not in the south," because this is the only thing he can say unless he's going to admit to being either a starship captain or a witch.

It goes on like that. He doesn't know how long. Eventually he finds himself telling the interrogator, "You're going to kill me if you don't stop." It's a struggle to get the words out. The dizziness is almost overwhelming the pain now. He's stopped sweating despite the intense heat. His pulse is hammering in his ears.

"Shouldn't you be trying to get me to kill you already?" She sounds almost amused.

"Not yet," he mumbles. His mouth isn't working right. "Sooner or later I'll convince you that I'm...who I'm saying I am...and you'll let me go." He's not going to be able to escape, so he needs to give Burnham more time to find him.

It sounds like she laughs at that, but there's a line of blinding pain across his face. Blood drips into his eyes. He blacks out.

Lorca only remembers flashes of what happens next. He's still alive. The guards are dragging him somewhere. Men in different uniforms begin yelling at them. Chandavarkar is with them, and Phreen, and Burnham. Then a guard attacks Burnham and she grabs his gun and hits him in the throat with the metal bar and Lorca knows what it means when someone goes down like that. There's screaming—he hopes it isn't him, but it might be—the guards dragging him away from the fight—he's dumped somewhere cold and he's drenched in rain and he lies there on his back in the mud with his mouth open, desperate to drink something.

Chapter Summary

"T'Lac and I...explained the situation."

"The situation?"

Burnham looks a little ashamed. "That we had a weapon in the sky. And that if he didn't help retrieve you, we would destroy the town."

Lorca wakes up in sickbay. He's strangely disconnected from his body—there's still some pain, and a vague cold sensation throughout, as though his blood itself is cold, but it feels like he's floating. He can see that his knee and both feet are in some kind of healing device, but he can't feel them at all.

When he can turn his head, Burnham is there, looking at something on her PADD. "Burn—" he croaks, and can't get it all out.

Her head snaps up and she says, "Don't try to talk. You almost died." Not a surprise. Her hand finds his as she calls Culber to his bed.

"How," he manages before Culber makes him drink something with a vile texture. "How did I get here?" The gel is slimy but he's a little less thirsty.

"You and I were both drugged." Burnham's hand tightens a little on his. "They only took you, though. T'Lac saw them carrying you away and she and Chandavarkar followed to see where they went. They came back and Phreen found me. Discovery couldn't beam you out." He hears a catch in her voice. He would rather be anywhere else than in sickbay right now. "T'Lac and Harding found the magistrate. And the police. Harding bribed the police to find out how to get in. He tried to bribe the magistrate, but the man wouldn't take it. So T'Lac and I...explained the situation."

"The situation?"

Burnham looks a little ashamed. "That we had a weapon in the sky. And that if he didn't help retrieve you, we would destroy the town. Phreen demonstrated her phaser. He believed us. He ordered the police to help—there was some rivalry, between the town police and the intelligence agents who had you, and once they had his permission, they wanted to help us."

His eyes have fallen closed and he's only tracking about fifty percent of this, but it doesn't matter. She's safe and she's talking to him and he can feel her hand. "What then?"

"The agents...resisted releasing you." That's Chandavarkar speaking, and he opens his eyes to see that Chandavarkar, T'Lac, and Elan are all standing on the other side of the bed. He'd overlooked them when he saw Burnham.

"There was violence," T'Lac adds. He sees that Elan is standing very close to her, just barely not touching. They're all still in their alien disguises. "The agents did not wish to allow the police to take their prize. They dragged you away. I suspect their goal was to dispose of you. We pursued."

"They dumped you." Burnham's voice is very even. "Outside, on the surface. One of them shot you. I think they would have done it again, but Discovery beamed you away just after it happened, and the rest of us."

"You violated the Prime Directive to save me?" He's feeling very strange. "Doctor, what'd you give me?"

"You didn't respond well enough to our standard pain medication," Culber says. "We had to use something stronger. It may have certain side effects, similar to that of narcotics."

"When can I leave?" He's still clear-headed enough to ask that, at least.

"We were able to remove the bullet and repair the damage from the gunshot wound," Culber says, "but your knee was very badly injured. It's going to take time to heal."

"I'm not going to spend it all in here." Lorca tries to sit up but discovers that both Elan and Burnham have pushed him back down.

"You're spending at least another night here," Elan tells him. Her antennae are rigid. "Even if we have to strap you down." She winces. "Poor choice of words. You're going to have to submit to some medical attention."

"Most likely I can release you tomorrow, Captain." Culber consults his PADD. "You'll have to return for daily treatment, but as long as you don't over-exert yourself, you won't have to stay here overnight. If you overdo it, though, you may permanently damage your knee."

The pain is intensifying. One of the screens starts beeping and Culber says, "I need to give you more medication now. It's going to make you sleep."

"Could've done that instead of neuro-pressure," Lorca says. Burnham looks sharply at him and then almost smiles.

"Captain." Elan shoos T'Lac and Chandavarkar out of sickbay. Culber gives him the hypo and then turns away.

Burnham leans down. She looks like she wants to say something, but he might be imagining it—he's already dreamy again, losing track of his surroundings. She kisses him and he has just enough awareness to bring his hand up to the back of her neck and pull her further into the kiss before he's off floating again.

He dreams, or hallucinates, or both.

He's back in the cell and Michael is the interrogator this time and she asks him over and over again, "Where is Gabriel Lorca?" and every time he tries to speak, she strikes—

He's wearing the stolen mask and watching the guard choke on the sulfuric air in front of him and the mask itself is tightening on his face until he can't breathe—

He's in the hot spring with Burnham again but the water is getting hotter and hotter until it's scalding, his skin is blistering—

He's in bed with Burnham and her skin is very cold—

He wakes up in sickbay. It's dark but for the lights on the bio-bed and no one is there. His leg is held fast in a machine that's radiating something and he thinks he can feel bone and muscle and tendon slowly grinding back into place. "Computer, lights to half," he says. When the lights come up, he's still alone and there's a cup of the same disgusting gel that Culber made him drink before. Lorca reaches over and picks it up, lifts it to his mouth, and forces himself to swallow it all. Again he feels a little better. He touches his ear; the hole left when they tore out the piercing is gone, the new skin tender where it used to be.

"Computer, where is Specialist Burnham?" He asks the question before he thinks about it. Is he going to ask her to come here, if she's awake? Or—and he thinks this might be it—does he just want to know she's here, on the ship, safe?

"Specialist Burnham is in your quarters," the computer tells him, and it takes every bit of sense that he has not to tell the computer to transport him there now. "Contact via comms?"

"No." If she's there, she's there for a reason. Maybe she feels safer there. Maybe she's asleep. If she wanted to be here in sickbay, she would, and he doesn't want to disturb her.

He loses track of time—the drugs are really something, he didn't know they made drugs like this anymore—and when he comes back to consciousness, Pollard and Culber are both there inspecting a scan of his knee. The first thing he says is "Can I leave?"

They wear identical expressions of concern. "I don't want you to walk on that knee," Culber says. "It really needs at least another cycle in the repair chamber."

"What would you do if you had to release me?"

Pollard and Culber both frown at him. "Put your leg in an immobilizer and give you an ambulatory aid device. A crutch," Culber clarifies. "But, sir—"

"Do it," Lorca orders. "Unless you're going to override that, Dr. Pollard?"

"I don't see the point." She shakes her head. "You're not to walk on it beyond what's necessary to get from here to your quarters and back, Captain. Do you understand?"

At least his CMO knows better than to try to keep him here against his will. "Yes, doctor," he assures her. "Do what you need to do to my leg."

\* \* \*

When he returns to his quarters, Burnham is there. He transports directly inside and finds her sprawled lengthwise on the couch in shorts and a tank top, doing something on her PADD. As he re-materializes, she leaps up, and he wishes that she hadn't. He likes the way she looked there, like she belonged. "Captain!"

"Burnham." He laughs a little even as he hobbles toward the couch. The immobilizer makes it feel like his entire leg is a single solid piece of rock and he has to lean hard on the crutch. "You don't need to call me captain here."

"No, I suppose not." She helps him ease down onto the couch. It's the first time she's touched him meaningfully—beyond the grasp of a hand, a brush of a kiss—since he was captured, and he leans into it, pulls her down with him until she's tucked against his side. He's startled when she hugs him, almost convulsively. "It would be better if you didn't do that again," she tells him. "Dr. Culber wasn't sure he'd be able to bring you back."

"It was bad?" He turns his head, speaks against her cheek. "I told them they were going to kill me if they didn't give me water."

"The doctors couldn't repair the gunshot wound until they cooled you down. Your body was too weak from the heat stroke to respond to healing devices. They stopped the bleeding and then coated you in...some kind of gel, all over." Burnham sounds like she's very far away as she says it. "When the gel dried up, your core temperature was finally down enough to work on the gunshot wound, but by then you'd lost a lot of blood." She turns her head too and rests her forehead against his own. "That's why your knee is so bad now. They had to fix the heat stroke and then the gunshot, and only then did the doctors have time to start on your knee."

"I tried to escape," Lorca says. "They caught me. After that I knew I had to wait for you."

Burnham shakes her head just a little against his. "That was foolish."

“Yes,” he says. “I should have waited for you from the beginning.” When she starts to argue, he kisses her—a hard kiss, a little desperate, and she makes a little noise in the back of her throat and kisses him back, pulls him closer with a hand on the back of his neck, bites his lower lip, licks into his mouth and brings her hand up to touch the mostly-healed place on his ear where the piercing used to be. When he finally pulls back to look at her, they’re both breathing hard.

“I killed a guard,” she tells him, and he sobers.

“I remember.” She looks discomfited that he saw it. “Is it the first time you’ve killed a person?” At her expression, he amends, “Is it the first time you’ve killed a non-Klingon?”

“Yes.”

Lorca tightens his arm around her. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to.”

“I violated Federation law to save you.”

“Making up for the time you tried to leave me to die in Klingon prison,” he tries to tease. He feels her laugh a little at that.

“I violated the Prime Directive.”

“Burnham, I think we did that when you jumped me in a hot spring.” He feels her laugh at that too. “We all knew it was a self-indulgent choice to go down to the planet with very little justification. We all accepted the risk.”

“Yes,” she says, extricating herself a little. “But I knew better.”

“I must be rubbing off on you.”

She doesn’t laugh at that. “I don’t want to lose who I am, out here. Starfleet, the Federation—they still matter to me. Their laws still matter.”

“Burnham,” he says, “I would never let you do anything I thought was wrong.” When she begins to protest, he adds, “And I learned my morality from someone who’s very serious about these things.”

Chapter Summary

Elan punches him in the arm, hard. “You were dead, you idiot. You went down to the planet for a sexy vacation and came back dead.”

“That’s not an accurate description,” he protests.

“You turned your away mission into a sexy vacation and came back dead.”

Lorca takes two large swallows of coffee. “Please stop using that phrase.”

Burnham spends the night there, of course. She’s awake when he falls asleep and she’s awake when he wakes up. Whatever the drugs are, they’re pretty strong; he knows they should talk more, but it’s hard to dig deeper in his brain beyond the desire to squeeze even closer to the warmth of her body and a certain animal satisfaction at having her there with him. His leg is so much useless meat even as the rest of his body is coming back to life. All he can think about is Burnham—breathing in her same breaths, listening to the sound of her heart pounding, feeling the heat of her soft skin, getting so close that he can climb inside her entirely. It’s like he’s drunk on her, and every time he catches her gazing at him, he thinks she might feel the same way.

She doesn’t let him out of her sight. Lorca isn’t sure that she’s aware she’s doing it. She takes him to sickbay for his knee treatment, and they stare at each other until Stamets, who’s been eating lunch with Culber, says “I’m embarrassed for both of you, I think I’m going to go throw up,” and leaves. Lorca spares a brief glance for him and then finds himself entranced by Burnham again. This is—different than it was before. More tangible. She knows his secrets now.

Elan applauds the first time that he walks into the mess hall again and he contemplates demoting her as she leads the ten other sleepy people present through a pathetic minute of applause. “*Cadet* Elan,” he says, and sits down at her table. “Go get me breakfast.” It’s alarming that she actually gets up and does it without arguing beyond a sarcastic wave of her antennae. When she returns with coffee and a plate of pancakes, he says, “I must have looked pretty terrible when they brought me in if you’re being this nice to me.”

She punches him in the arm, hard. “You were dead, you idiot. You went down to the planet for a sexy vacation and came back dead.”

“That’s not an accurate description,” he protests.

“You turned your away mission into a sexy vacation and came back dead.”

Lorca takes two large swallows of coffee. “Please stop using that phrase.”

“You scarred poor Chandavarkar for life, with what he saw!” Elan is clearly happier to talk about this aspect of his away mission. “Phreen found Burnham naked in your room!”

“I see their reports were very thorough.” Her hand flashes out and she steals a forkful of his pancakes before he can stop her. “You don’t even like pancakes!”

“True,” she says, and scrapes the pancake off her fork onto the side of her tray. “Come on, I’m happy for you two.”

He doesn’t want to discuss it in the mess hall. “Remember how I almost died?” he says instead. “That should earn me at least another day of peace.”

Elan sobers almost instantly. “Gabe. You died. From multiple causes.”

“And I didn’t even get any new scars.” Burnham walks into the mess hall with Tilly. He can’t help himself from watching, and when their eyes meet across the mess hall, she smiles and he finds himself breaking into a smile too.

“Almost lost your knee,” Elan offers. When he breaks eye contact with Burnham, he discovers that Elan is watching with a knowing grin. “I’m not saying anything!” she assures him.

The same thing happens—just for a moment!—in the daily briefing. “At our current speed, we should reach the edge of the…bubble in just over 24 hours,” Saru says. Lorca looks to Burnham and smiles and she smiles back and he thinks to himself, who needs to escape, we could do this forever.

The moment must last too long because Stamets coughs loudly and says “We need to have a plan when we get there. The closer we get, the more it seems like the bubble has formed from a single seed point.”

Lorca makes himself break eye contact—did he just get Burnham to blush?—and says, “This metaphor isn’t working for me, Lieutenant.”

Stamets rolls his eyes exaggeratedly. “The balloon? The shell? The dome? The orb?” He looks to Burnham, who can’t quite hide her smile. “The point is, our cage, whatever you want to call it, appears to have developed from a single point. That’s where we’re headed. Once we get there, we’ll need to find a way to destroy whatever created the cage.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Torpedoes are always a good start,” Elan volunteers. “We’ve been improving ours during this little pleasure jaunt—”

“Probably a combination of things,” Burnham interrupts, before Elan can begin detailing exactly what improvements were made. “We’ve detected a very faint warp signature at the destination, almost as though there’s a warp-capable entity—not a planet, it’s far too small for that—that hasn’t ever used its warp engines. If there’s sentient life at that point, it may not realize that it’s created this cage and we may be able to persuade it to...turn off.”

“If not, we probably need to torpedo it at the same time that Lieutenant Stamets attacks it from the mycelial network,” Tilly says. “We’ll blow up the physical object and then he’ll try to force this mycelial network to reconnect with the outside one.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Things will change when they escape, Lorca knows. He’s on the bridge with Burnham trying hard to behave like a normal adult instead of staring at her, memorizing the shape of her neck, of her mouth as she speaks. There isn’t much happening, just the sky at warp rippling past, Burnham skimming through reports from various science experiments—the thumpers are reproducing again, it’s tribbles all over again—Detmer and Owosekun occasionally exchanging glances and smiling, Rhys being Rhys at his station. A man with less self-control and less to lose would tell Burnham to come to the ready room with him and they’d emerge half an hour later, rumpled and happy, and everyone on the bridge would know exactly what had just happened and would smirk...but Burnham wouldn’t leave her station like that, he tells himself.

At the end of shift, Burnham follows him back to his quarters and the doors have barely closed before they’re kissing, shedding clothing left and right as she walks him backward toward the bed. “You can’t look at me like that all the time,” she says just before she kisses him again and they both crawl back on the bed, until he’s sitting up against the headboard, bad leg outstretched. “It’s very distracting.”

He catches her earlobe between his teeth, enjoys the noise she makes, and tells her, “You were looking at me.” She’s already planted one knee on either side of him—he remembers vividly the hot spring—and he says “You know, I can participate more here—”

Burnham cuts him off with another long kiss, long enough that he’s dazed when she breaks away and says “Noted for the future, but right now —” She kisses his nose, each eyelid when he closes his eyes, the corners of his mouth, and then kisses him hot and wet when he starts to speak. When she slides down onto his cock—he’s been on the edge of hard for what feels like days now, waiting for this—he does get a hand between them, even as she stares into his eyes in a way that should be unnerving, and it takes far less time than it should for both of them to come, gasping into each other’s mouths, and he says “Burnham—” but he can’t make himself say the rest of it.



Chapter Summary

The sky all around them turns blinding white, like a flash of lightning, and it doesn't change back.

"Lieutenant?" Lorca turns toward Stamets and sees him enrobed in the smoke creature. "Lieutenant!"

When they arrive at the seed-point, Lorca expects to see a black hole, or a vast anomaly, or a strange world, or anything but what they do see: a shuttle pod, utterly still in space. It should be drifting, but instead it's a fixed point, as though held there by some invisible force.

"That's it," Stamets says. He's standing at the front of the bridge with Lorca, gazing out with the half-dazed look he sometimes gets when he's trying to look at the mycelial network and the real world at the same time. "The shell, whatever's keeping the network separated—it all comes from the shuttle pod. Captain, we have to destroy it."

"Sir, we're read two life signs on board that shuttle," Burnham interrupts. "I suggest beaming them out before we destroy the pod."

There's something hot and seething in Lorca's stomach, radiating out into all his limbs—not quite anxiety, but the certainty that something is *wrong*. The shuttle is devoid of markings, but the shape of it could be any Starfleet—any Terran—pod. He doesn't want to know who's on board. He doesn't want to bring them onto Discovery. He thinks they should destroy the shuttle now, before anyone tries to send another shuttle to investigate—

"Transporter room has a lock," Saru says. "Shall we beam them over, Captain?"

How can he say no and still seem like their rational captain? He looks to Elan. "Lieutenant? They might pose a security risk. They may be the actual source of this cage rather than the shuttle pod."

"They read as human," Burnham tells him, and as much as he loves the sound of her voice, he wishes she would stop arguing for this. He feels with absolute certainty that bad things will happen if they bring those people on board. "Life signs are faint. They may need medical attention. Sir—"

"I know what Starfleet regulations say." He doesn't, but he knows she's about to tell him that Starfleet won't let them destroy a defenseless shuttle pod with two living humans in it when they're entirely capable of beaming the humans out.

"Sir?" Saru would never act without instruction from him.

"Do it," he says, and what he really means is *kill them* but everyone interprets it as it should be under Starfleet regulations and Saru tells the transporter room, "Energize." Saru waits a beat and says, "Captain, they're safely on board, but—"

"Launch torpedoes," Lorca orders. He's not going to wait any longer for someone to suggest that maybe they should send a team over to investigate. As happy as he is here in this place with Burnham, the last thing he wants is to form any kind of—link, with that shuttle.

Elan is always trigger-happy and today is no exception. She sends a full battery of torpedoes at the shuttle pod and it vaporizes even as Saru protests, "There could be scientific equipment..."

The Discovery doesn't rock, but the sky all around them turns blinding white, like a flash of lightning, and it doesn't change back. "Lieutenant?" Lorca turns toward Stamets and sees him enrobed in the smoke creature. "Lieutenant!"

"I can see the rest of the network again," Stamets says, voice dreamlike. "We're not connected, but I can see it. The walls fell down! I need to get to the spore chamber."

No one can quite look out the front viewscreen and Lorca orders, "Polarize viewscreen." Even with the polarization, it's painfully bright.

"Captain Lorca, Specialist Burnham, security team—you're needed in the transporter room urgently." The voice comes over the comms and Lorca knew it, he knew something bad would happen, even if he couldn't have said what.

When they reach the transporter room and see the life-signs that they've transported over, the gravity of the catastrophe becomes clear. Had Lorca been asked to name the two people who least wanted to see in the galaxy, he wouldn't have named either of them, but only because it wouldn't have occurred to him that it was possible.

Michael Burnham and Gabriel Lorca lie unconscious on the transporter pads.

## Chapter Summary

“Imagine,” he says, “that you were the captain of a starship in an imperial fleet. And that you were in love with the Emperor’s daughter, and that she was beautiful and cruel and you were plotting a revolution together. And she was killed by one of your lieutenants and your ship was being destroyed in retaliation. And then, between one blast and the next, you were on that same starship that was being destroyed, but in this universe. And you went looking for the Emperor’s daughter here and you found the person you thought was her and brought her onto your ship and she was so different, she was perfect, and you...” He can’t say it anymore. “And then the Emperor’s daughter wasn’t dead.”

“You would be the saddest stupidest son of a bitch ever to have lived,” Elan says.

## Chapter Notes

CW at end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It’s his Michael. He would know it from the shape of her shoulders, the twist of her mouth, the angry set of her jaw, even if she weren’t wearing a Terran uniform. He’s kneeling next to her body before he realizes what he’s done, checking for a pulse even though he knows she registered as a life sign. Her breathing is even, chest rising and falling slowly, and he touches her face, her shoulder, her knee, just to try to convince himself that she’s real. Her shuttle exploded. They never found her body.

Next to him, Burnham is examining the other Lorca with considerably more restraint. Of course—she never knew him. She doesn’t have seven years of memories with him, and she never watched him die. The other Lorca looks different, bearded, his face softer, and Lorca is having his own uncanny valley moment seeing the man whose life he stole, however unintentionally.

“Sir,” Elan says. She and Chandavarkar are there watching this bizarre situation play out, but her voice is steady. “Should we get them to sickbay for evaluation?”

“Yes. But have them restrained. All we know is that they were in a shuttle that kept us prisoner and they have our faces. They may be dangerous.” He can’t meet Burnham’s eyes. Michael is one of the most dangerous people that he knows. And he knows nothing at all about Lorca.

“Transport me with them to sickbay,” Elan tells the transporter technician, who obeys. When Burnham and Lorca leave the room for the turbolift, Chandavarkar has the sense to hang back.

In the turbolift, Lorca says “Bridge” and doesn’t recognize his own voice. He’s numb again, the way he was when Burnham accused him of not being Gabriel Lorca.

“Halt turbolift,” Burnham says, and the emotion in her voice terrifies him. She’s supposed to be...unflappable. He’d never thought this day would come, but if he’d thought about it, he would have hoped that her Vulcan training would keep her...restrained. Then he meets her eyes and realizes that’s even worse. For all that her eyes are flashing, for all the emotion in her voice, she’s preternaturally still.

“Burnham,” he starts, and can’t continue.

“You didn’t think I should know that the Emperor’s daughter, the woman you loved and the woman whose death you supposedly caused, was my doppelganger? Not just that I reminded you of her, but that she’s your universe’s version of me?” She should be attacking him. If she were Michael—what an unfortunate thought to have now—she would be.

“How would I expect that you would ever learn that?” That’s the wrong thing to say, he should be telling Burnham how very different she is from Michael, not arguing that she shouldn’t have found out.

“That’s why you call me Burnham, isn’t it,” she says. The emotion has leached from her voice. “Except when you’re very emotional. It’s to distinguish me from her.”

“Yes,” he says helplessly. “But—” How to explain that it started that way, and then he grew to see them as two completely different people?

“You must have thought I would be just like her, when you first brought me on this ship. That’s why you brought me on board.” Her voice is so flat now that she could be the computer reading a history lesson. *Captain Gabriel Lorca located Michael Burnham and arranged to have her transferred to the Discovery for his own purposes.*

“Burnham—you know how I feel—”

“Logically, you must have been disappointed,” she says. “To have your expectations go unmet. Except in a few ways, of course.” He knows she’s talking about every kiss, every touch, every time he acted like a fool over her.

“No, you’re so different, you don’t understand—”

“But now you have your Michael back.”

“*Burnham*,” he snaps, and she looks up at him and says “Sir” and he knows it’s too late but he can’t help trying. “Yes, initially I thought that I would just find my—a version of the Michael that I knew in this universe. That was my goal. But I met you, and I came to know you, and I fell in love with you!” It’s the worst time to say it.

“Again,” Burnham says. She’s vanished. The only thing that remains in her place is a Vulcan, a Vulcan who finds the human in front of her bizarre. “It is illogical to pursue the replacement when the original has become available to you again,” she says. “Computer, cancel bridge. Sickbay.”

“Don’t do this. We just figured things out. Don’t let this…”

She raises an eyebrow and the words die in his throat. Don’t let the reappearance of his supposedly dead ex-lover from another universe, who looks exactly the same as she does, interfere with the beginnings of their relationship, when she’s never been in love (before?) and he’s only ever loved a sociopath. It’s preposterous beyond all description.

They get off the turbolift and walk side by side to sickbay. Lorca can feel her next to him—can feel where she would be, if not for the Vulcan in her place—and twenty-four hours ago she would have felt him too, might have brushed her knuckles against his own as they walked, might have caught his eye with a hidden smile.

“Get off me!” he hears someone—Michael—yell in the infirmary, and runs toward her, pulling his phaser as he goes.

Michael is free of the restraints. She’s used a bedpan to reflect a phaser blast back at Culber, who’s slumped but breathing in a corner. Elan is ready to fight but waiting for Michael to make the first move. Then Michael sees him. She says “Gabriel,” almost hungrily, and reaches for him; when he tries to subdue her she’s ready, and they grapple until she catches him off-guard, wraps one arm around his neck and starts to squeeze until he’s struggling for breath. “Remember when you liked this?” She whispers it hotly into one ear, undulates her hips a little, puts her other hand on his chest and begins to slide it lower as he gasps for breath, hopes he’ll pass out before this goes where she’s taking it because his body does remember, too well. Then he hears the hiss of a hypospray and she collapses to the ground. No one catches her. Elan is still holding the empty hypospray as she stares at him. Burnham has turned away to the bed where the other Lorca is beginning to wake up.

“Put her in the brig,” Lorca orders, rubbing his throat. “Stick a tricorder in with her if you’re worried, but keep her there and don’t let her out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elan comes to his ready room when he’s alone and says, “Gabe, what the fuck is happening?”

He tilts his head back and stares up at the ceiling. Wordlessly, he offers Elan the bottle of whiskey that he’s rapidly working his way through. “I’m going to tell you a story, and I need you not to interrupt or to kill me until the end.”

Elan takes the bottle away and doesn’t give it back. That’s probably a bad sign. “Go ahead.”

“Imagine,” he says, “that you were the captain of a starship in an imperial fleet. And that you were in love with the Emperor’s daughter, and that she was beautiful and cruel and you were plotting a revolution together. And she was killed by one of your lieutenants and your ship was being destroyed in retaliation. And then, between one blast and the next, you were on that same starship that was being destroyed, but in this universe.” He knows Elan wants to ask, but she doesn’t.

“And once you realized you were in a different universe, you went looking for the Emperor’s daughter here and you found the person you thought was her and brought her onto your ship and she was so different, she was perfect, and you…” He can’t say it anymore. “And then the Emperor’s daughter wasn’t dead.”

“You would be the saddest stupidest son of a bitch ever to have lived.” He looks over and sees Elan staring at him. “And the man in sickbay wearing your face?”

“He must belong to this universe.” Lorca takes the whiskey bottle out of her hands and gulps down a few ungraceful swallows, so quickly that it burns his throat and he starts coughing. “I don’t know why he hasn’t woken up yet.”

“Maybe he’s as brain-damaged as you clearly are.” Elan shakes her head. “Not Section 31, then.”

“Hm? Oh.” He shrugs. “I don’t know if that Lorca is. I never was. But, Elan—we’re not good people. Our universe is bad. This version of Michael is—very bad. She shouldn’t be here.”

“And you?” Elan is deceptively still, but he knows she’s ready if he makes a move. “Should you be here?”

“I’m not the one was sitting in a shuttle that was creating a space cage in the mycelial network,” he says. “I wanted to destroy it with them aboard. I would have, if you and Burnham hadn’t been there. We would have been safe from them then.”

“What do you want here?” She hasn’t had any of the whiskey, he sees.

“When I first came, I wanted to find Michael and win the war and go home,” he says. “Then I…met Burnham. And I didn’t want to go back to the Terran universe at all.” It hurts to say it aloud now that he’s lost Burnham entirely.

Elan frowns. Her antennae have been stiff the entire time, but they relax a little. “Are you sorry?”

He doesn’t want to ask “about what?” because that’s usually the wrong response. “I’m sorry Burnham ever found out. She’d already figured

out that I'm from another universe. I told her everything, except the part that's killed everything."

\* \* \* \* \*

While they wait for his doppelganger to wake up, he goes to see Michael in the brig, alone. He probably shouldn't. The best thing would be for him to stay far away from her. But he's always been drawn to her—like a magnet, like a moth to an inferno—and he walks into the brig and tells Chandavarkar to go away, walks into her cell and sets the containment screen to opaque.

She has him pinned against the wall almost immediately. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" She's pressed tight against him, and he remembers the way she'd caught him in sickbay, the way her hand had stroked lower, how Elan had saved him from humiliation.

"I was in my shuttle headed to the Charon. There was an explosion."

"Glyph," Lorca tells her. She's so close that he barely has to whisper. "He set off a bomb. I killed him when I heard." This isn't the way to interrogate a prisoner, but she isn't really a prisoner and he would never be able to interrogate her.

"Too upset to take the time to torture him?" She leans in and kisses the corner of his jaw where it meets his neck. "I'm touched. I never liked that asshole."

"This is another universe," he tells her. She's kissing down his neck now and he can't help arching his neck into her touch. "There's no empire here. Humans rule in cooperation with other species."

She pauses long enough to make a small noise of disgust. "Seems like some things are still the same." She pulls back, puts one hand experimentally on his throat. "That's how it felt in sickbay, anyway." This time she doesn't hesitate, plunges one hand beneath the waistband of his pants and squeezes a little with her other hand and he sees her wide grin as he hardens, shifts his legs apart just enough to give her better access. "What's the plan?"

"The plan?" It's hard for him to think when she's half-choking him and stroking his cock at the same time.

She releases him, pulls them around until he's the one pinning her against the wall, works his pants down enough to free his cock and smiles in delight when he shudders. "Yes. What are you doing here?" She's in a hospital gown and she pulls his hand underneath it to feel how wet she is.

All he can think of is Burnham, Burnham smiling and then Burnham's sudden Vulcan face, Burnham saying, "It is illogical to pursue the replacement when the original has become available to you again," Burnham who will never forgive him no matter what he does, and he thrusts inside, hears Michael's delighted moan as he does, grabs her thighs and fucks her against the wall while she throws back her head and laughs and pulls him down into a biting kiss. She knows there's no plan, knows that she's the grenade that's just been thrown into his life, and he presses his face into her shoulder as he groans and comes and tells himself one last time that Burnham will never forgive him anyway.

"She definitely won't forgive you now," Michael whispers into his ear, and he realizes that he's said the last words aloud. The light has changed and he turns his head slowly, still buried deep in Michael, to see Elan, Dr. Pollard, and Burnham outside the cell, which is very much no longer opaque.

Amidst the despair, there's some measure of satisfaction in the clean break, in severing the last threads of hope there. Michael shifts, pulls him deeper into her, and he could ignore everything, turn back and lose himself in her again, but he still has a ship to run. It isn't like before, when they'd be on the run or holed up for long periods of time with nothing to do but each other. So he steps back, tries to put himself back into some kind of order, and then turns around again.

"The tricorder was setting off an alarm," Burnham says. There's nothing in her voice, not even hurt or anger; if this didn't provoke it, he can't think of anything that will. "Elan located you in the brig and believed that you might be in danger."

Elan, who's staring at him with some combination of bafflement and disgust. "Captain," she says, and there's a certain amount of almost—loathing in her voice. Rage, maybe. Her antennae are flat back against her head, like a dog about to bite. She waits to yell at him until they're alone, until Pollard has heavily sedated Michael and is running more tests on her. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"It's not that easy!" He's desperate for Elan, at least, to understand. "I didn't—we didn't end things! I loved her as much as I knew how, and I hated her too, and I thought one of my soldiers had killed her, and I killed him for it! And then I came here and fucking fell in love with Burnham—" Elan looks like she can't believe he's said the words aloud "—and it would've been perfect, she finally wanted me back, and now Burnham is gone forever and all I have left is...Michael." He collapses down onto the couch, dizzy.

Elan remains standing at attention in front of him. "I could kill her," she offers.

"No," he blurts out, and then "*fuck*." Lorca buries his head in his hands so that he won't have to meet Elan's eyes. "I wish we'd never found her but I can't be responsible for her death, not again."

"Are you still in love with her? Michael?"

He hesitates a fraction too long, and then says, "I didn't—I thought it was love, then. I was obsessed with her. But I was never *in love*, not the way I feel about Burnham." It's starting to hurt to say her name. "Who knows what she feels. Michael was never big on feelings." She has two modes, sex and violence, and often they overlap.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's too risky to keep Michael in the brig, not when it's vital that as few people as possible know of her existence. The other Lorca doesn't appear to be violent and can be gently confined to guest quarters, but Michael is a problem. Eventually they decide to confine her to Lorca's quarters. Not many people go there anyway, which minimizes the risk of someone mistaking her for Burnham in the hallways. "I'll be good for him, I promise," Michael tells Elan as she attaches a security monitor to Michael's ankle. Her distaste for Elan is palpable.

"It'll inject you with a high dose of sedatives if you leave the captain's quarters," Elan says. "And every five minutes after until one of us disarms it. Even if you're awake after the first dose, the second one will probably kill you." She doesn't sound sorry about the idea.

Over the next week, Michael destroys his quarters. They fight and she throws him into furniture, against walls. He can't make himself fight as hard as he should and so she always wins, ends up laughing above him before she leans down for brutal kisses and he remembers this, he remembers loving it; it's easy to slip back. He stops spending more than his designated shift on the bridge, and sometimes even delegates those to Saru. They'll call if they need him and it's all the worse to come across Burnham now, when she's everything he wants and Michael knows it. He misses Burnham like a lost limb and it's worse than every other time that she's cut things off, worse because she's right and because she's only halfway there anymore and because if he didn't miss her so badly he would send Michael back to the brig, but Michael is the next best thing, and there's the terrible irony.

He and Michael fuck. A lot. There isn't much else for them to do with each other, with no common purpose anymore. She prowls around his quarters endlessly; he thinks she'd rather be dead than trapped here much longer. They're rough with each other and she tastes like the Terran universe and he desperately wishes for the softness, the kindness, that Burnham has. His body enjoys it, of course, the way it always has. But neither of them sleep well, Michael because she has nothing to do and Lorca because he can't fall asleep with her in his bed. After a week, he finds himself wishing that she would die—not that he would be responsible again, just that she would disappear. He wishes that she had never come here. He wishes that this problem would be erased because he's losing his mind.

He doesn't know what's happened to his own doppelganger, to the Lorca who actually belongs to this universe, until one of the few times that he's in his ready room and the doors hiss open to reveal Burnham. "Specialist," he says, and the words grate in his throat. He's suddenly very conscious that he hasn't shaved or showered recently, that there are teeth marks on his neck he hasn't bothered to fix, that his clothes probably smell like liquor even though he's sober. He hasn't synthesized a new uniform recently.

"Captain." She steps to the side and he sees his own ersatz mirror, Captain Gabriel Lorca in the flesh. "The—other Captain Lorca expressed a desire to speak with you."

Lorca lets his eyes linger on the curve of her lips, watches a little too long for the raised eyebrow, even as he knows it won't happen. "All right," he says. "Come in, Captain." He wants Burnham to stay, wants her to leave, wants her to say or do anything—he remembers that first day here, when he spoke and spoke and waited for the slightest hint of a response. "Dismissed, Burnham." No, it's supposed to be Specialist all the time now, never Burnham. It doesn't matter. She leaves.

He pulls himself together. "Welcome to the Discovery, Captain," he says. "I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to speak with you earlier. Please, have a seat."

"Call me Gabriel," the other man says, and sits. "No ship anymore." He sounds the same, of course. Lorca wouldn't have been able to pull this off for so long if he hadn't matched Gabriel.

"I'm sure you've already been debriefed by my officers." Lorca offers him a glass of water, and when he refuses, drinks it himself. "The last thing you remember is the Buran?"

"Yes." Gabriel doesn't hold himself as stiffly as Lorca used to. "They told me it's gone. And somehow you were on it."

"Did they tell you how I got there?" Burnham and Elan are the only ones who know, now.

"Something ridiculous about an alternate universe? I don't see how that got me here, though."

"No." It's too strange to sit staring at the face of a man who could almost be him. He has to stand up, as strange as it feels to turn his back on a person he doesn't know. With Michael here, all of his old instincts are starting to come flooding back. "No, we don't know how that could've happened. The woman you were found with, she was believed to be dead, in an alternate universe." Lorca stops and stares out the window. He remembers what he would've told Burnham if they'd made it to his own universe, strange how in every universe the same two people found each other—everything reminds him of Burnham. "We don't really know what to do with either of you," he admits.

"I'm the Gabriel Lorca from this universe," Gabriel says carefully.

"You were." Lorca doesn't want Elan to kill Michael, but he doesn't really care about keeping Gabriel alive beyond the disturbing implications of killing a man with his own face. He remembers his conversation with Burnham, out under the stars above the cold slot canyon. "Did your father ever take you fishing when you were young?"

"Sometimes." Gabriel sounds a little surprised. "Trout-fishing, mostly." He pauses for a moment. "Did yours?"

"Bass." He's fairly sure that's a similar kind of fish. "What would you like us to do with you, Gabriel?"

"I suppose it's too much to ask for my own life back."

"You'd be dead, if it's any consolation," Lorca tells him. "The Buran went down in the battle you remember. I escaped, but you seem like the kind of man who would have gone down with his ship."

Gabriel doesn't answer, probably because it doesn't matter. "I'd still like to be useful. I have some sense of how...alone you are out here."

He's exhausted. He feels very old. Of course there's been no neuro-pressure since Michael appeared. "We're down a man in Engineering," he

says. “Had to poach to refill Security. Depending where your talents lie, I could assign you to either team. If you let the doctors make a new face for you, come up with some kind of new identity.”

Gabriel grimaces. “And so there’ll only be one Gabriel Lorca in this universe again.”

“My former chief of security was a brainwashed Klingon that was taken apart and re-formed into a human body,” Lorca tells him.

“A new face seems like a less drastic step,” Gabriel agrees.

They don’t waste time after that. Chrian is told that he’s transferred a new man, Isaac, to Engineering. Isaac is generic, unremarkable. Stamets doesn’t even glance at him, too busy restoring the mycelial network one painstaking connection at a time. Miraculously, no one asks where he came from or if he has anything to do with the shuttle pod and the still-white sky around them. The story would be too absurd for anyone to believe anyway.

If only Michael were such an easy problem to solve. That night, she pins him down with one of his knives in her hand, kneeling on his wrists in bed, and says, “You won’t be able to keep me here forever.”

He laughs against the blade at his neck. “You can go whenever you want, Michael. Happy to drop you at the next Minshara-class planet.”

“*Minshara*?” She says it like a filthy word. She doesn’t speak Vulcan.

“Habitable. I don’t know if you’ve looked out the window lately—” he nods as much as he can to gesture “—but we don’t exactly know where we are. You probably couldn’t have picked a worse ship to begin retaking the galaxy.”

She shrugs, scraping the knife very gently across his neck, and sways her hips a little. The pain in his wrists is excruciating but he can feel himself hardening as she moves. He thinks he hears a noise behind her, but he can’t see anything but her. “No Empire, no Emperor to overthrow. I could do anything--*we* could do anything. Be assassins. Bounty hunters. Latinum smugglers. We’d be good at it. We were always good together.”

Lorca can’t stop the noise in his throat, the way his hips twitch in response. “Not in my ship,” he says.

Michael laughs a little, without much humor. “You wouldn’t come with me anyway, would you. You’re not the same at all.” She sits back a little, releases his wrists even as he groans at the new sensation. “You went looking for my twin when you got here.”

“She’s not your twin,” he tells her. “Burnham is—completely different.”

“And you’re *in love* with her,” Michael mocks. She tosses the knife away, then uses one hand to guide him inside her and thrusts her own hips down hard. “You went and fell in love with her and...forgot to tell her about me?”

“You’re—not the same—person,” he says, even as his hands grip her hips tightly so he can push deeper inside. “But I should’ve—”

“You wish I’d never come back,” she says. They’re both panting.

“Yes,” he admits, finally. “I’m in love with her—” a terrible thing to say, now or any other time “—I’m drowning without her—and she’ll never forgive me—whether you’re here or not—” He flips them over, leans down to bite her nipple as their hips roll together, and she makes a noise somewhere between a shriek and a moan, grabs his ass and pulls him in harder.

Afterward, when he’s lying there sweaty and gasping in deep breaths, Michael is already up and prowling his quarters again, pacing out the length and width and the distance from counter to couch to bathroom to bed. “Someone was in here,” she says. “If you didn’t notice. They probably have surveillance on your quarters, with me in here. Sent someone down when they saw I had a knife. Maybe it was your *Burnham* getting a good look.”

The thought that anyone else saw or heard what just happened is unbearable. “I’m going to take a shower,” he tells her. “We’ll figure out—something for you.” In the shower, he scrubs his skin clean, takes strange comfort in the generic smell of Starfleet soap—remembers it on Burnham’s skin—and lets the hot water run over his face until he starts to wonder why he hasn’t heard Michael doing anything.

Lorca can’t find it in himself to be surprised when Elan comms him as he gets out of the shower and says, “She stole a shuttle and jumped to warp.” He doesn’t ask how it’s possible, why the ankle monitor didn’t stop her as soon as she stepped outside. If there’s any surprise, it’s that she waited this long to escape. He never really thought anything would hold her, once she decided to leave.

“I’ll be on the bridge in ten minutes. Don’t pursue,” he says, in case it wasn’t obvious. “She’s unimportant, and we need to find our way home.”

## Chapter End Notes

I wouldn't call this dubcon in the normal sense, more like super unsafe D/s, but be aware.

The trout/bass reference comes from Farscape.

Chapter Summary

Tilly speaks again with a certain amount of forced cheer. “My friends at the Academy used to tell me, there are three options: you can wallow, you can get past it and take him back, or you can get him out of your system and move on.”

He imagines Burnham re-assembling her composure, raising an eyebrow. “I’m unwilling to wallow and I’m too *emotional* to get past it.” She spits the word like a curse.

“Well then.” Boots scrape the floor—Tilly must be standing up. “We’ll get you drunk so you can cry once—crying is healthy, Michael, you have to do it—and then you find someone else to get the taste of him out of your mouth. Metaphorically.”

So, just like that, Michael is gone again. Elan meets him in his ready room to demand, “How did she escape?”

“I was in the shower—you were the one who set up that ankle device! Why didn’t it stop her?” This has all gone in the absolute worst way possible—Michael showed up just long enough to destroy everything good in his life and prove to him that no, he wasn’t the good captain that he wanted to pretend that he was, but no, he wasn’t his old self either, and she hadn’t been there long enough to make herself useful in any way, unlike Gabriel-now-Isaac down in Engineering. “Weren’t you in my quarters just before she escaped?”

Elan stares at him. “No...I know how to use comms if I want to reach you.” His stomach drops at that. He can only think of one other person who might walk into his quarters. “As for the ankle device, who knows—maybe sickbay screwed up the dosage, maybe she managed to disarm it, maybe it didn’t kick in fast enough and she’s dying on a shuttle at warp right now. We can only hope,” and she mutters the last bit under her breath, but he hears it. Even now, after everything, he can’t bring himself to agree.

“We’re not going after her,” he repeats. “It’s not worth it. Even if she lands on an inhabited planet, she doesn’t have the technical skills to—”

“You don’t have to convince me.” Elan shakes her head. “I’ll talk to sickbay anyway, see if there was something in the dosage that was off.”

He nods, remembers to say “Dismissed” as she’s on her way out the doors. There’s something he has to know, and he hates what he’s about to have to do. “Specialist Burnham to ready room,” he comms, and Burnham walks in only a minute later. She’s at her most Vulcan, posture perfect and eyes steady; he searches for any hint of emotion and finds none.

“Yes, sir,” she says, standing at attention.

Lorca is safely behind his desk. “I assume you heard about the escape?”

“You are correct.”

“Before she escaped, she told me that someone had just been in my quarters while she and I were—talking.” Technically, they had also been talking.

“Is that a question, sir?”

“Were you in my quarters, just before—she escaped?” He wonders how long he can get away with not using “Michael.”

“I was.” She doesn’t look ashamed, or worried, or upset.

It hits him like a punch in the stomach to think that she heard that, that she saw it—saw him talking about how he loved her while having sex with Michael. Even worse, that she doesn’t seem to care. He’s glad there are no mirrors in here so that he can’t see whatever horror or embarrassment must be showing on his face. “*Why?*”

“The pattern of your behavior has been erratic. Based on your public encounters, it was apparent that your sexual relationship with Michael included consensual violence. It was logical to believe that at some point she might use that element to overpower you and escape.” His stomach is turning over and she still looks totally unaffected.

“So you came into my quarters without announcing yourself and watched—” The words are sour in his mouth.

“My intent was not to watch. She was highly vigilant and prepared for any attack.” How does Burnham make this all sound reasonable? “The only way to catch her off-guard would be to do so while her attention was entirely focused on something—someone—else. You had just found a solution to the question of...Isaac. Given the length of time that the Discovery has been at rest in this position, I calculated—correctly—that she might have grown impatient enough to attempt an escape.”

“You came in and saw that she had a knife at my throat and didn’t do anything—”

“Based on your physical reaction to the encounter, I judged that it was not out of the ordinary. Had she attacked, I would have intervened.”

It’s another nail in the coffin of his hope that she hasn’t killed off whatever she felt for him. She’s standing here telling him that she stood in his bedroom and saw him having sex with another woman and she has no feelings about it whatsoever. If she cared at all, she wouldn’t be able to say it like this. There would be *something*, the tiniest hitch in her voice, the twitch of her mouth, anything at all, to show that she was

affected. “How long did you stay?” he asks, and his voice comes out very rough. His throat hurts.

“As long as was necessary to confirm that she did not intend to kill you that night.”

There’s bile in his throat. “Until she tossed the knife away?” He does come out from behind the desk now, but he doesn’t let himself advance further. “Until I told her how I felt—about you?” Even then, Burnham doesn’t flinch. “Until she was screaming?”

“As long as was necessary to ensure that she did not kill you,” Burnham repeats. “Unfortunately, it was not as long as was necessary to ensure that she did not escape. My error was in thinking that she would kill you when she began her escape plan.” She’s so still, like something frozen out of time. The rest of the world moves around her, but she might as well be an inanimate object issuing recorded statements.

He laughs. “Michael wouldn’t kill me, not like that.” He’s finding it hard to stop laughing. “Why would she bother, when she knew I couldn’t kill her?”

“An error on my part. That dynamic in your relationship was not apparent.” She’s gone beyond the original Vulcan-style speech that maddened (and later amused) him when they first met, well into the manner of the hardline Vulcans he’s met once or twice who find Vulcan participation in Starfleet to be an unacceptably emotional decision.

He stops laughing. “Burnham,” he says, and his throat closes. “I’m so sorry,” he tries. “I should have—explained it better, should’ve made it clearer to you that I didn’t think of you as her—”

Burnham’s face displays nothing but a mild lack of interest. “Your intentions ultimately became clear. Our...relationship has reached its natural end point. I am gratified that she did not kill you in her escape.”

He supposes that’s the best he can hope for, right now.

\* \* \* \*

The ship has been working just fine without his focus, and it’s uncomfortable to try to fit himself back into place. When Lorca visits the spore chamber, Stamets, with his usual sensitivity, says, “Oh, you care again? Well, I’m still re-connecting us to the mycelial network, which is very time-consuming and tedious work, by the way, and unless you and Hugh let me jump, it’s still going to take us a decade to get back to Federation space. Now go away.”

He goes to the rest of Engineering, where he re-meets ‘Isaac’ and says “I hope you’ve settled in well,” and the other man tells him, “It’s a work in progress” and doesn’t call him sir, which is fair enough. Chrian makes faces at him and tells him to leave her alone with the warp engine, she’ll send techs up to him if he needs them, and then he’s summarily ejected from Engineering.

In the biology lab, T’Lac is downright warm and friendly compared to the way Burnham talks to him now. “I understand that humans find the close company of mammals to be emotionally sustaining. One of the thumpers is scheduled for birth in the next week. Should I designate one of the pups for you?”

“Are there more thumpers than humans—than people on this ship now?” He’s seen them around in the halls, but at least none of them are wearing uniforms or walking upright. Yet.

“Their reproductive cycle has slowed. We have hypothesized that it is in response to ongoing changes in environmental conditions.”

He doesn’t reserve a thumper pup. He wonders if Agatha has outgrown Tilly’s bed by now. He wonders if Burnham adopted one,

When he visits the security training area, Elan is watching as Tyler puts the rest of the security officers through drill after drill with some nearly indestructible drones. When Lorca walks up to stand next to her, she says, “Gabe” quietly, and he can’t tell if she’s angry or sad or pitying or just disappointed. Her antennae face forward, toward the training exercises. At least she’ll still call him Gabe, and in the mess hall she sits at his table and they talk about nothing but at least they talk.

Tilly’s parties have become a weekly occurrence, while he was occupied with Michael. The staff rotations are already scheduled, Detmer explains. He doesn’t need to do anything. It’s for morale. The sky outside isn’t white anymore, but neither are the stars familiar. When he asks Saru where Tilly is so that they can discuss this latest upcoming party, Saru sniffs. “I believe she is in the shuttle bay. Captain.” The pauses between Saru’s sentences and the word ‘captain’ have been getting longer and longer.

In the shuttle bay, he hears Tilly’s voice and approaches, and then stops approaching when he hears Burnham’s. “Tilly,” she says, and she sounds—like he imagines she’d sound with a sucking chest wound, with an injury beyond even her capacity to suppress the pain. “I don’t know how to keep doing this. Whenever I look at him—” Electricity jolts up his spine.

“I know it was awful, seeing him with another woman—”

Burnham laughs, almost a sob. He wishes he could touch her, but all he can do is skulk in the shadow of the shuttle to hear whatever bit of emotion she’ll share. “I wish it *had* been another woman,” she says. “Any other person. Phreen again, or someone new, or—anyone. That, I could have handled. But he’s not—all the time, all the time I thought he wanted me and I was trying to be so careful, I was worried it wouldn’t be fair to *him* to start something if I didn’t feel the same way—and it wasn’t ever really me. He was just in love with a dead woman and he brought me to this ship because he wanted her back.” There’s a clanging noise like she’s hit something.

“You said he didn’t seem...very good, when she was around. You told me you heard him saying that he loved you.” Tilly’s voice is soft, gentle, in a way that scares him to imagine that Burnham needs.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “How would you feel if you found out that Rhys had only ever approached you in the first place because he had a dead girlfriend back home and he thought you were her? So what if he stuck around afterward because he liked you too?”



After a long silence, Tilly says, “Devastated. And I don’t even like Rhys that much.”

Burnham laughs miserably. “You know what the worst part is? The worst part is that I had started to think I was in love with him. After what happened on the planet with us, and then when he died, and after—I thought it. I’ve never been in love, and I thought it.”

They’re both silent for a long time. Lorca is numb again, his ears ringing. Finally, Tilly speaks again with a certain amount of forced cheer. “My friends at the Academy used to tell me, there are three options: you can wallow, you can get past it and take him back, or you can get him out of your system and move on.”

He imagines Burnham re-assembling her composure, raising an eyebrow. “I’m unwilling to wallow and I’m too *emotional* to get past it.” She spits the word like a curse.

“Well then.” Boots scrape the floor—Tilly must be standing up. “We’ll get you drunk so you can cry once—crying is healthy, Michael, you have to do it—and then you find someone else to get the taste of him out of your mouth. Metaphorically.”

“Why not!” Burnham sounds almost manic, like Michael used to when she was angry and had found a way to use it, and he should erase those thoughts, the comparisons between the two of them. At least Tyler won’t try to kill Burnham this time when she turns to him to get the taste of Lorca out of her mouth—and he remembers how she tastes, in every way, and he grips that memory tight.

\* \* \* \* \*

He knows better than to go to the party, but he can’t stand to be in his quarters anymore—he’s started sleeping in Riley’s old room, which is only a few doors down and has the advantage of the fact that he’d never been in it before this nightmare. So he goes to the mess hall again to drink, and Elan gamely goes along with him. She tells the synthesizer, “Bloodwine, hot,” and picks up two hot glasses of something that looks very much like blood and that he’s never seen before.

At their traditional table, she lifts her glass, waiting for him to come up with a toast. When he can’t think of anything, she says, “To mistakes!” and crashes her glass too hard against his own.

His first long gulp of bloodwine nearly comes right back up. After he’s choked it down, he says, “What the hell is this?”

“It’s Klingon alcohol.” Elan’s voice is as newly hoarse as his own. “Worse than Andorian ale for humans. I got the recipe out of L’Rell in exchange for getting *gagh* programmed in too.”

“Why the hell not.” He takes a more cautious sip this time and regrets tasting it. “Do people on board actually drink this?”

“No, not really. Most don’t even know it’s in there. But at this point Klingon culture is the only source of anything new that we’re going to get for a while, and it seemed like synthesizing their favorite alcohol was the best place to start. It certainly loosened up L’Rell for more discussions.”

The heat of the bloodwine is already blooming down his spine. “Don’t tell me we’re going to be letting her out of the brig and assigning her quarters.” When she doesn’t immediately laugh it off, he says, “Elan!”

“There’s no plan to do it,” Elan says. Every time she takes a drink of bloodwine, her antennae jerk like she’s received a mild electric shock. “No, we just keep an able body that poses no apparent threat locked up in the brig like an animal.”

“The last able body that we let out of the brig ended up stealing a shuttle and escaping!” and too late he realizes that he walked into that.

“You’re so stupid,” she tells him for the hundredth time.

“Why? What was I supposed to do differently, beyond make sure that Burnham never found out?” His glass is already empty. “What am I supposed to be doing now to make it better?”

“Probably start by not fucking her right in front of Burnham within half an hour of finding her,” Elan points out, and he hates how reasonable she sounds.

“It was too late by then. Burnham had already realized. She wasn’t going to get over it.”

Elan snorts. “And you sure made it more real for her then, and for the last two weeks.”

He shoves his empty glass at her. “Give me another glass of this garbage, and it doesn’t matter now, I heard her talking to Tilly. She’s not going to forgive me, and even if she forgave me, we’ll never be able to back to what we were.”

For once, she doesn’t argue with him. She comes back with a steaming pitcher and two glasses of water. “If we finish this, we’re both going to die,” she tells him. “You were eavesdropping?”

Lorca refills his glass and drinks mechanically. It’s very fast-acting, he’s realizing. He should probably slow down. “I went to find Tilly to talk about these infernal weekly parties. You’re security, you can’t think it’s a good idea.” It sounds weak, even to him.

“Anything that keeps crew morale up is good for security. It’s like having a bar on board once a week. It’s not like the first few parties.”

He downs the second glass of bloodwine. “Fine, show me,” he says. The heat of the bloodwine is mixing with something reckless and terrible in his chest. The irony isn’t lost on him, that he feels most like the Lorca that Michael knew now, trying to dig himself out from under the havoc she wreaked.

“The only havoc she wreaked was on your relationship with Burnham,” Elan tells him, and he’s said the last part out loud again. “The rest of

us were repairing the ship and waiting for the stars to reappear while you were holed up with Michael in your quarters.”

“It feels less real now. All of it. Now that she’s gone.” The surge of energy hasn’t dissipated, even as he makes himself drink the water that Elan carried over. It’s tepid from sitting next to the hot pitcher of bloodwine. “I’m going to see this party, with or without you.” He thinks, but carefully does not say, that the last thing he attended that was anything like a party was Riley’s wake, where she’d tried to kill him.

“You’re going to regret everything you do from this minute until you wake up half-dead tomorrow,” Elan tells him. She picks up her own glass and the pitcher of bloodwine. “Lay on, Macduff,” she mutters as they stand.

“And damned be him that first cries ‘Hold, enough!’”

It’s not hard to find their way to the party. He should probably be concerned about the fact that Elan periodically steadies him as they walk, or that he’s drunk another half-glass of the bloodwine by the time they make it inside. But there’s something comforting in knowing that Elan can take him down if he does anything too stupid. “You said that out loud,” Elan tells him. “Pay better attention to that.”

When they enter, it feels like everything and everyone freezes for a second. The music doesn’t stop, the voices don’t quiet or even pause, but there’s still something that shifts in the air. Neither Lorca nor Elan is in uniform. “We’ve brought a cultural exchange!” Elan declares. She walks straight to the bar and holds up the pitcher. “No more than one shot apiece, this stuff is lethal,” she warns when Tilly approaches, and pointedly does not look at Lorca’s half-empty glass. He’s not sure how many he’s had. All he wants—as Elan well knows—is to see Burnham, though.

He feels a strange chill and turns to see ‘Isaac’ standing at the bar next to him. “So,” the man says. “You get drunk with your crew too.”

It startles him, how angry that makes him. “Fraternization by a captain is—frowned upon,” he starts to tell Isaac, and it’s a wonder he can speak so clearly.

Isaac shrugs. “No harm in it. Space travel is long and cold without it,” he says.

Lorca knew that he was sleeping with Cornwell, but it sounds like he kept his other options open. “You’re supposed to be the *better* one—”

Elan cuts him off before he can say anything more damaging. “Isaac, isn’t it? Here, have a drink.” She shoves a shot of bloodwine into his hand and he tosses it back without flinching.

“See you around, Captain.” He upends the shot glass on the bar top and melts away into the crowd.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this again but don’t be stupid,” Elan warns him.

The doctors did a good job giving Isaac a new face. There are little changes everywhere, enough that he still looks something like Lorca but only as though they might be cousins. With his beard, thinner face, and easier posture—and the fact that no one in their right mind would guess the truth—the secret is safe. Until he turns out to be a threat and Lorca has to kill him, of course.

He and Elan sit in a corner and drink and she makes him eat an entirely tasteless sandwich. It’s just as it would have been in the mess hall except that there are happy people everywhere and loud music. He sees Stamets and Culber, standing very close together, foreheads touching—Culber says something soft to Stamets, who laughs freely. Lorca’s gut clenches with how badly he wants that.

When his eyes finally find Burnham, he immediately looks away before she can catch him watching, then cautiously back. She’s with Tilly, talking to Tyler and…Isaac. Tilly wants her to get Lorca out of her system, and she’s standing there with Tyler and with his own doppelganger. She knows who Isaac is—doesn’t she? Or at least, she knows that the original Lorca came aboard this ship with Michael, and that he isn’t wandering around, and that a new man showed up in Engineering who looks like he could be Lorca’s cousin.

Chandavarkar pulls Tilly away and it’s only the two men with Burnham now. She’s laughing too, not the way that Stamets laughed—not the way that she laughed a few times with him—but enough that both men are leaning in. “Don’t do it, Gabe,” Elan says, and he finds that he’s stood up and she has a firm but friendly arm around his shoulders. “There’s no way this ends well.”

“She’s not—” Everything he wants to say goes sour in his mouth. “She can’t.” But Burnham wouldn’t have sex with Tyler on a whim, not with everything that happened between the two of them. There are so many other people on this ship she could choose instead of Isaac. “Tilly won’t think it’s a good idea.”

“What’s not a good idea?” Tilly appears by their table with Chandavarkar in tow. “Lieutenant Elan, we were hoping for another round of bloodwine.” She doesn’t look at Lorca.

“You won’t think that’s a good idea,” Lorca says, somewhat nonsensically. She follows his gaze to Burnham. Tyler is gone. Isaac has a hand on her shoulder and has leaned down to say something in her ear. This is what it feels like to be shut into an agonizer, to hear a torturer say “I’ll be back in a few hours” and leave, and to be too incoherent with screaming in pain to count the seconds as he waits.

“I don’t—I’ve never heard of that,” Tilly says, and she’s very pale. Chandavarkar looks a little nauseated.

“He’s had a lot to drink.” Elan grips his shoulder very hard and he realizes that he’s spoken aloud again. It’s hard to keep track of which thoughts he’s allowing to escape.

Isaac kisses Burnham and they walk away. He wrenches out of Elan’s grasp but there’s nothing to do, only to fall back into his chair and pound more bloodwine, and the next thing he knows he’s being half-dragged out of the party by Elan and Chandavarkar, Tilly anxiously leading the way.

“Not—m’ quarters,” he manages to say. His feet can’t find the floor and he can’t feel his hands. He just wants to get inside a room before the

bile surges.

“You’re not going to her quarters,” Tilly says, her voice vicious.

“No.” He swallows hard against the dizziness. “I’m sleeping in—Riley’s old quarters. Not mine.” Even in his stupor he feels Elan’s full-body flinch—he never wanted to tell her that, was going to go back to his own as soon as he could stand it—but it’s too late.

“This way,” she tells the others, and it feels like they change course.

He’s barely in the room before he’s on his knees in front of the toilet and he can’t remember a time—outside of literal torture—that he’s felt worse. “Please kill me,” he says to the room at large. “Knock me out at least.”

“I think we’ll give you space instead,” someone—Tilly—says. Elan would do it if they weren’t in Riley’s quarters. It’s an old wound, but it’s still there.

He wakes up shivering on the bathroom floor. Someone has put a towel under his head as a pillow. He feels wretched as he strips off his clothes and shoves it all into the recycler, stumbles into the bedroom and finds a hypospray on the bed. He assumes it’s from Elan and will make things a little less terrible, but maybe it’s from Tilly and it’s poison, or maybe it’s from Elan and it’s poison.

It’s not poison. He wakes up again feeling physically better and the humiliation is in full force. Elan would have stopped him from saying anything dangerous, but he just got falling-down drunk in front of all of alpha shift. At least Burnham was gone—with Isaac, and there’s that stab of pain—before the worst of it. He wonders if they kissed in the hallway on their way to his quarters, if he snuck his hand up the back of her shirt like a teenager as they walked and she laughed and pinned him against the wall of the turbolift and told him to be patient—if she could tell that he shared Lorca’s body but without all the scar tissue and the nerve damage, if she tested whether they liked the same things—

The irony isn’t lost on him.

## Chapter Summary

Rhys says, “We thought—we should hold something to help people burn off energy.” Lorca wonders who this ‘we’ is. “A tournament.”

“What kind of tournament?”

Rhys shifts slightly under Lorca’s gaze. “Boxing, sir. Federation-rules boxing.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

All of Alpha shift is struggling that morning. Elan’s introduction of bloodwine hit even the heavy drinkers hard, and the ones who didn’t partake still have to sit there and listen to the soft moans of their compatriots.

His entire range of focus has narrowed to one point—Burnham’s presence at the science station to his left. He finds it in himself to nod politely when she walks in precisely on time, and if she’s surprised she doesn’t show it, only nods back. Then Lorca realizes that this could be it, the entire future of his interactions with Burnham, polite nods and the occasional report, and it’s so bleak that he gets up and walks to the front of the bridge, where he stands between Detmer and Owosekun’s stations and stares out at the sky. It’s easier to resist the temptation to look at Burnham—to look for any signs of what happened last night—if his back is to her.

Detmer smiles encouragingly at him and says, “Good morning, Captain,” and he wonders if she’s just that nice in this universe or if he…got her in the breakup somehow.

“How does it look out there, Detmer? Anything on the horizon?”

“We’re up to warp six,” she tells him, gesturing out the front windows. “Saru promised he’d let us know if there’s anything along our course that’s more interesting than your average…space.”

“Don’t get jaded about space,” he says. “You may be flying us through a lot of it on our way home.”

“Of course, sir.” Detmer isn’t cowed. “Still, maybe we’ll run into a planet or two—not literally, obviously.” To his right, Owosekun snickers. “Starting to give up hope on warp-capable civilizations, at this point, but I’d take another beach.”

“You should order her to wear sunburn prevention this time,” Owosekun says, “sir.” They haven’t been afraid of him for a long time, but he wonders if he did something last night that’s made him particularly approachable—or pitiable. “Shields and hull integrity at 100%,” she adds, in case he was expecting her to do her job.

“Maintain present course and speed.” The words come mechanically. The pull to turn around is too strong to resist now and he yields. When he looks at her, Burnham meets his eyes squarely, the slightest hint of puzzlement showing in one eyebrow. It’s as though she can’t understand why he’s staring at her, what possible reason he could have for it.

He veers from his path back to the chair. “I’ll be in my ready room if needed. Detmer, you have the conn.” Then he can’t stop himself from saying “Specialist Burnham, a word.”

Burnham follows him without comment into the ready room. She stands silently at attention as he tries to find where to start. “Do you know who Isaac is?” He wanted to be more appropriate about it, but the words escape him.

“A specialist in Engineering,” she says. “What is the purpose of your question?”

“You know he’s *me*. The other me.”

“The version of you that belongs in this universe?”

“Not the version that belongs on Discovery,” he snaps before he can stop himself. Then—“Yes. The Lorca from this universe.”

“I am aware,” Burnham says. She’s perfectly still but for the quizzical tilt to her head, like she doesn’t understand the strange human emotions he’s having.

“Burnham, he’s—you should be careful. I don’t think he’s that different from me,” he admits, and it’s a terrible thought. “Apparently I’m the same in every universe.” His throat burns.

“Identity is the result of a combination of life experiences and biological circumstances. Logically, a person who experienced a similar combination in each universe would have a very similar identity and pattern of behavior.” There’s the tiniest hint of something in her eyes, just for a second. “I thought that was your purpose in locating me.” Before he can respond, she says, “I accept your warning. My experience of each of you suggests…that you are not the same.”

His throat closes before he can ask her what exactly that experience is. They stand in silence until he manages to choke out, “Dismissed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At dinner, Elan tries to steer him into a different seat than usual until he snaps, “I don’t care how much I trust them, I’m not sitting with my back to the entire mess hall,” and sits in his usual seat, where he is treated to twenty minutes of Burnham and Isaac eating together, heads bent close so they can talk without anyone else hearing.

“Stop watching them,” Elan hisses, and then stabs his arm with a fork when he ignores her. “You’re being the worst version of yourself, the way you’re acting.”

That hurts more than the fork, especially because it’s true. Before, he’d tried not to pressure her, tried not to punish her for his own messy feelings. Now, all he’s done is apologize and loom and mope and try to tell her that Isaac is dangerous, all in service of—if he’s honest—persuading her to come back to him. It isn’t who he wants to be. For all his lapses with Michael, he can’t go back to the Lorca that enjoyed being Terran. He doesn’t want his crew to be afraid of him. He doesn’t want to start drunken fights or punish people or take his misery out on the people around him, as satisfying as it might seem in his own mind.

“No,” he says, and looks down at his plate. “No, I killed the worst version of myself.” Elan twitches and he quickly adds, “Figuratively!” He looks around the mess hall, everywhere but at Burnham and Isaac. Tilly and Chandavarkar are watching them with identical expressions of concern. Maybe he isn’t the only one who thinks Isaac is dangerous. “But I don’t like him. He accepted everything too easily.”

“I’m watching him,” Elan assures him. She says it softly, so casually that anyone overhearing might think it was a joke, but he knows it isn’t. It’s comforting.

\* \* \* \* \*

It’s been two weeks now. He’s the good captain again, truly. He’s on the bridge for Alpha and Beta and sometimes into Gamma, depending on whether there’s somewhere else to be. He eats in the mess hall at his usual table with Elan and tries not to focus on whether Burnham is eating with Isaac or with Tilly.

Tyler gets onto the turbolift with him one day and Lorca says, “Seems like you’re doing all right.”

“Still human, anyway.” But Tyler flashes a smile, the genuine one with dimples that Lorca used to hate when it was directed at Burnham. “I am, sir. Thank you for asking.” They ride the turbolift in silence the rest of the way, and Lorca feels strangely proud of himself.

Rhys, of all people, approaches him in the mess hall and says, “Sir, we’ve been discussing the…morale events, and thought it might be a good idea to try something new.”

“Something without alcohol?” Elan sounds vaguely amused. “How would that help morale?”

“We thought—something to help people burn off energy.” Lorca wonders who this ‘we’ is. “A tournament.”

“What kind of tournament? Poker?” That’s not the kind of energy people need to burn off.

Rhys shifts slightly under Lorca’s gaze. “Boxing, sir. Federation-rules boxing.”

“And you’d like permission to beat each other up? As long as everyone is healthy enough to fire a phaser by the time they’re on shift, punch away.”

“Well, Captain, we were wondering if you’d like to take part.” Rhys seems so determined for Lorca to be part of the ship’s social life too. Maybe Lorca wasn’t appreciative enough of his movie choice.

Lorca meets Elan’s eyes and then surveys the rest of the mess hall. “If I’d like to knock out one of the sorry souls under my command?”

“There’ll be weight classes, of course, sir.” Rhys says something else, but as Lorca looks around the mess hall, he sees Burnham walk in with Isaac, sees Isaac pull her chair out for her, a ridiculous thing to do.

“All right,” he says. Elan makes a horrified noise and kicks him under the table. He doesn’t react. “Go ahead and put me down, Lieutenant.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, everyone but Gamma shift is packed into one of the cargo bays, which Rhys and some of his cadet hangers-on have converted into a makeshift auditorium. They’ve also replicated large photos of each of the combatants from their Starfleet files and hung them on the walls—even Isaac, whose Starfleet file didn’t exist until a few weeks ago. There’s a thrum of excitement beneath everything, crew chattering to one another, passing snacks and wagering whatever they can think of.

Lorca and Isaac are the first fight. He supposes it makes sense to have them as the opener, two big men who’ll probably beat the hell out of each other, give everyone an exciting knock-out instead of anything too technical. They stand on opposite sides of the ring—built somehow, Lorca doesn’t want to know where the parts were stolen from. Rhys has replicated silky boxing robes for all the competitors to wear over their shorts until the fight. When Lorca and Isaac take off the robes and put on their gloves, the entire room goes silent.

Lorca knows what he looks like—solid chest, broad shoulders, things that anyone around him can see from their very tight uniforms. Isaac has the same body structure, of course, but slimmer, every muscle just a little softer, and he carries himself more loosely. The obvious base similarities between them aren’t why the crowd is silent. Lorca knows why: the scars. Long ragged lines across his shoulders and back, knots and starbursts of scar tissue, patches where the skin was simply cut away. A history of violence and suffering writ large on his body.

Isaac doesn’t look like that. His skin is clean, unbroken, save for a few moles that used to exist on Lorca’s back too. When Lorca meets his eyes, a little of Isaac’s cockiness has vanished, and he feels some grim satisfaction at that. He adjusts the gloves on his hands and scans the

crowd until he finds Burnham. She's watching them both. If he didn't know better, he'd think her eyes were almost hungry as her eyes roam over his body—his, not Isaac's, he tells himself, though he can't be certain.

He faces off with Isaac in the ring. Elan, chosen as ringmaster because no one could beat her, stands between them and says, "All right, make it a clean fight." They tap gloves hard and begin.

It's not a clean fight and neither of them want it to be. Later, Lorca can only remember the adrenaline of it, the way the blood tasted when Isaac split his lip, the choked-off noise of pain Isaac made when Lorca headbutted him after Isaac got him in a chokehold and whispered, "Word is you *like* this," the satisfaction of punching him down to the ground, and then the delight of getting behind Isaac and digging one elbow into the pressure point that knocks him out. His ears are roaring and he realizes he's set one foot against Isaac's neck. He can't do that here. He's a Starfleet captain now.

The crowd fell silent when he put his foot on Isaac's neck, but when he steps back they scream in approval and Elan hurriedly declares him the winner. He finds Burnham in the crowd again and this time she's watching *him*, her eyes hot. There's blood or sweat or both dripping down his face, his nose is probably broken and maybe a couple fingers and his eye is swelling shut, everything hurts, and all he can think in this moment is how much he *wants* Burnham, wants her to come down to ringside while Culber patches him back together.

She doesn't leave the stands, but neither does she look away from him as he climbs down from the ring, as Culber pulls off his gloves and scans him with the tricorder and says things that Lorca can't hear because every bit of his attention is focused on Burnham, on her dark eyes and the way she's turned entirely toward him. Culber must get impatient because he physically turns Lorca's head to look at him and says, "I'm pulling you from the fight list." Normally, Lorca would argue as Culber says something more about another concussion, but he can't now, can't think of anything but Burnham.

Sitting there in his seat, watching the fights continue, he imagines it. He'll walk out into the hallway, still bloody and tender even where Culber has healed him. Burnham will follow him and say "Gabriel" and her voice won't be flat, it'll be full of the hunger he thinks he saw when he was in the ring—but when she reaches out to touch him, her hands will be gentle, so gentle on his skin. "That was too dangerous," she'll tell him, and tilt his head down just enough to kiss him very softly.

"What about Isaac?" he'll ask, because he's stupid.

"Why would I want the replacement when I can have the original?" She'll stroke his cheek with one hand, kiss the tip of his nose, and the words spark a warning in his mind, enough to bring him back—

—to himself, in his seat, as Chandavarkar fells Rhys with his first punch.

## Chapter End Notes

There is no such thing as Federation-rules boxing, but I sure don't know the rules of normal boxing.

Poker always makes me think of this *Good Omens* quote,: "God does not play dice with the universe; He plays an ineffable game of His own devising, which might be compared, from the perspective of any of the other players [i.e. everybody], to being involved in an obscure and complex variant of poker in a pitch-dark room, with blank cards, for infinite stakes, with a Dealer who won't tell you the rules, and who smiles all the time."

“You came up through the Academy together, didn’t you?” Lorca looks at Isaac. “Even before that?”

Isaac doesn’t answer him.

“That night, the Perseids, you were so young? Grand plans for your futures? Was that when you fell in love with her?” He wonders if Isaac feels the same numbness about Cornwell that spreads through him when he thinks of losing Burnham. “But she had bigger plans for the future than you did, didn’t she? She must have been the one who wanted to join Starfleet. You would’ve been happy with a small life, wouldn’t you? But you knew she wouldn’t.” He lets that marinate for a moment. “She might be able to walk again by now. We didn’t stick around to find out how the surgery went, after we eventually got her off that Klingon ship.”

Culber brings Rhys around in time for him to declare the first annual Discovery boxing tournament a success and tell everyone that the house gets ten percent of whatever they’ve wagered, which is mostly scut and paperwork. He’s been watching too many movies. Lorca feels some inexplicable fondness for him, though, and even though his body is already stiffening, bruising, he finds himself clapping Rhys on the shoulder on his way out and saying, “Good idea, Lieutenant.” Rhys goes starry-eyed, or has a concussion.

“Well. That was something.” Elan falls in step with him as he walks toward a shower. The robe is tacky with sweat. “Some display you and Isaac put on.”

“It felt good.” He can admit it to Elan. “Sorry you didn’t get to take part.”

She snorts, and her antennae wave in the wide circle that means she’d like to roll her eyes. “We all know I could’ve taken down any of them. Even Tyler, if he’d fought.”

He was a conspicuous absence, given how the rest of the security division had dominated the fights. “Not ready to fight for fun yet?” The hallways are full of giddy crew, probably off to some afterparty in the cadet moonshine lab. He doesn’t want to know.

“I’m not sure he’ll ever be,” Elan says softly. “To lose control of your body like that—you don’t just get over that.”

“No.” He remembers how he killed Glyph reflexively, no conscious thought, no calculated punishment. “I could’ve killed Isaac tonight. But I didn’t.”

“Believe me, I know.” Elan looks at him sidelong as they walk—she’s guiding them toward the mess hall, it seems, rather than the shower he so desperately wants. “You could maybe stop doing that, almost killing people. You might regret it if you killed Isaac.”

Lorca doesn’t think that needs an answer. “I don’t want food,” he tells her. “I want a shower.”

She marches him through the line for the food synthesizers anyway, right behind Chandavarkar, who’s similarly sweated through his robe and is being guided by Tilly. “Here,” she says, and gives him a tray with things he doesn’t even recognize on it.

He ends up at a table with Elan and Chandavarkar and Tilly, which is a strange and uncomfortable grouping. “Good fight, Ensign,” he says, still surprised by his newfound desire to compliment his crew. “Lieutenant Rhys never stood a chance.”

Chandavarkar grins. “Thanks, Captain. Rhys is good, but he doesn’t know the edges of the rules, sticks to what’s definitely allowed.”

“It’s not like anyone was watching for fouls while the Captain was fighting,” Tilly says, with the tiniest edge beneath her smile. He’s surprised she’s not down with the cadets, celebrating—though she’s not a cadet anymore, of course.

Lorca shrugs it off. “We fought in our weight class.” He recalls the satisfaction of beating Isaac down. “You didn’t want to fight, Lieutenant Tilly?”

She does laugh at that, her joyful Tilly laugh that is, somehow, one of the anchor points of this universe. “I don’t fight with my fists.”

Chandavarkar does something under the table that makes her squeak and says, “You have too many other ways to win,” and Tilly grins goofily back at him and there, see how happy they are, and Lorca doesn’t think they’re even together that way. That first night he met Chandavarkar, when the man was insubordinate enough to result in Burnham walking Lorca home—they were young and happy and silly, and they still are, despite this extended sojourn that may well still have years left on it.

“I agree. Lieutenant Tilly, no boxing, you’re strictly limited to phasers and photon torpedoes,” he says, and Tilly laughs at that too.

Burnham walks into the mess hall—he’s too aware of her presence at all times not to notice—and Tilly waves her over and then says “whoops” in a very quiet voice. He believes she did it accidentally. But Burnham must see him, and she sits down with them anyway. Isaac isn’t with her.

“What a night!” Chandavarkar says loudly, a little awkwardly, in greeting. “Burnham, why weren’t you out there?”

She smiles. He misses seeing her smile at him. “T’Lac is the only other person who knows *suus mahna*, and she didn’t feel like fighting. It

wouldn't have been fair with someone else."

"That was some Vulcan shit you did at the end, Captain, wasn't it? Elbow to the pressure point?" Chandavarkar drains his cup of electrolyte water and pours himself another from the pitcher on his tray.

Lorca is about to answer when Burnham says, "It certainly looked like it," and meets his eyes again, and he can't look away—has never really been able to look away.

Elan elbows him in the side, hard, and he coughs. "Reflex," he says. "I don't know if it was in the rules." Burnham taught it to him, exactly where each of the pressure points were that would drop a human; he had only turned it into violence instead of...sleep therapy.

He's very aware of the fact that his robe is hanging open, his chest and abdomen bare above the table, and it would be too obvious if he wrapped it tight around himself now. Chandavarkar has long since shrugged off his own robe, letting it hang off the back of his chair, and Lorca thinks, why not, and peels himself out of his robe. The mess hall air is blessedly cool on his sweaty skin, even as he hears the other voices in the room quiet momentarily before resuming their chatter.

Chandavarkar, who must be the most innocent ensign on a security team in the entirety of Starfleet, says, "You've got some wicked scars, Captain." Tilly stares at him. If he didn't know Burnham better, he would have missed her flinch. Elan says, "*Ensign*" in a warning tone

"Sometimes you don't get to the dermal regenerator in time." Lorca is proud of this answer, of the casual way he says it. He's glad he never met the Terran version of Chandavarkar. It would make him strangely sad to see the inevitable difference. "Believe me, you don't want to know how I got some of these." He doesn't want to think about most of them.

"Le-matya racing, I bet." Chandavarkar has decided to try to brazen his way through. "I know you say it's not a thing, Burnham, but it must be, look at him. Clearly the marks of a le-matya jockey. Don't worry, Captain, your secret is safe." His expression tells Lorca that he knows he's overstepped, that this is his way of trying to walk it back.

Lorca lets him. "A closely-guarded secret, Ensign. I don't want to hear speculation about my victories in the halls."

Tilly giggles, and Burnham relaxes minutely, and the conversation flows from there—mostly Elan and Tilly and Chandavarkar, Tilly narrating the course of the fights, Elan commenting on poor form and good tactics, and Lorca tries to keep himself from staring at Burnham. If not for Michael, and for Isaac, he would be looking forward to going back to his quarters—to her coming back with him, beckoning him into the shower, tasting the salt of the sweat on his neck as she kissed him there, his adrenaline still running high. She meets his eyes as he's thinking about it and she breathes a little faster, breaks their gaze, turns and asks Tilly something meaningless.

He goes back to his quarters alone. He resumed sleeping here, even with the ghost of Michael everywhere, once he saw Elan's reaction to him sleeping in Riley's old quarters. He steps into the shower, rubs soap on his skin and he can almost feel Burnham's hands on him everywhere, hot and soft and slick, and he's barely gotten a hand on himself before he comes.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, he and Stamets are arguing—yet again—about whether Stamets can try to jump again. Isaac is fixing something in the spore cultivation bay, something to do with the humidity controls, as they argue.

"I don't care if you think you're ready." The spores are falling like rain all around them. "Until you get approval from the CMO, we're not having any more black alerts."

"You're prepared to spend ten more years on this ship, like this? Warp five or six all the way back? Do you know how many thumpers there will be by then?" Stamets' smoke creature is draped around him, extended like a cobra's hood above him.

Lorca blinks spores off his eyelashes. Even in the calm of the cultivation chamber, Stamets is maddening. "Better to spend ten years getting back than to jump into another space bubble, Lieutenant. Maybe we'll find out that the thumpers are good to eat."

Stamets playacts at being appalled. "Captain! Don't let Agatha hear you say that!" Lorca doesn't bother asking why Tilly's thumper is apparently in charge of the pack. "And you know very well that Paul will never tell Dr. Pollard that I'm all right to jump."

"That's what you get for marrying a doctor," Lorca tells him. "So sorry that the people who care about you don't want you to get hurt." That's too honest. "No, Lieutenant, we're going to bring this ship back to Federation space fully intact. No taking risks."

"Maybe Admiral Cornwell will be waiting with a medal," Stamets says. "If we make it back with the spore drive still working, that is."

There's a clang of metal on metal. Isaac has dropped something. He stands up and walks toward them both, and he looks intensely interested for the first time since he got his new face. "Kat? She's all right?"

"...Admiral Cornwell?" Stamets glances between Lorca and Isaac and suddenly looks very uncomfortable.

Whatever calming effect the mycelium have on Lorca, they can't calm this. "Oh, she and I had a good long talk, the last time I saw her," Lorca says, and the adrenaline surges in him. "*Kat* and I. You know, she was worried about me. Kept saying I'd changed. Especially when she woke up to my phaser pointed at her head." He's always been good at finding tender spots. He'd started to think that Isaac didn't have any. From the corner of his eye, he sees Stamets hastily retreat and thinks it was the right choice.

Isaac doesn't lunge at Lorca but wants to, he can see it—every impulse straining against his better judgment, hand clenched on his repair tool. "If you hurt her—"

"Don't be stupid," Lorca says. "She wanted to take the ship away from me, get me into counseling. She knew I'd manipulated the psych



evaluations to pass.”

Isaac is very pale. The alterations to his face don’t change color in quite the same way, and he’s turned blotchy. “She wouldn’t have backed down from that, once she’d decided. What did you do to her?”

“Told her about a chance at peace.” It feels good to bait Isaac this way, good in a way that he hates himself for. “A secret mission to meet with the Klingons.” He shrugs. “She knew it was probably a trap.”

He almost does hit Lorca at that. Maybe he remembers their last fight, or maybe it wouldn’t matter to him. “You fucking sent her—”

“You came up through the Academy together, didn’t you?” Lorca looks him over. “Even before that?” Isaac doesn’t answer him. “That night, the Perseids, you were so young? Grand plans for your futures? Was that when you fell in love with her?” He wonders if Isaac feels the same numbness about Cornwell that spreads through him when he thinks of losing Burnham. “But she had bigger plans for the future than you did, didn’t she? She must have been the one who wanted to join Starfleet. You would’ve been happy with a small life, wouldn’t you? But you knew she wouldn’t.” He lets that marinate for a moment. “She might be able to walk again by now. We didn’t stick around to find out how the surgery went, after we eventually got her off that Klingon ship.”

“You left her to be tortured by Klingons?” Isaac chokes on the anger, the fear. “For how long?”

“We were busy winning the war,” Lorca tells him. “I didn’t realize you cared so much. She got you the Buran, I assume?”

Isaac touches the wall like it’s the only thing anchoring him in place. “You shut your mouth. That was never why—”

“Maybe we can tell her the truth, if we ever make it back,” Lorca says. “Or just see if she likes you as Isaac as much as she liked me as Lorca.” What irony, that he felt terrible sending Cornwell to her death, without ever realizing that she’s apparently the only thing that this other selfish, small version of himself cares about.

“Don’t—” Isaac starts, and Lorca suddenly hates him for the softness that appears when he talks about Cornwell. “Whatever happens here, Kat isn’t part of it. She can’t be.”

“Isaac—*Gabriel*,” Lorca says, with all the loathing he can muster for a man whose greatest fear is becoming manifest. “I don’t care about her. I don’t want to hurt her.” He could point out—but doesn’t—that he doesn’t have any ability to hurt Cornwell either. “All I want is my ship and my crew. Safe and happy.”

Isaac only nods, pulls himself together, turns back to the pipe that he’s repairing. If it’s a détente, Lorca will take it.

\* \* \* \*

Burnham comes to his quarters that evening, after shift. When the doors chime, he says, “Elan, now isn’t a good time—” and then turns and sees Burnham standing there in the doorway, spine so impossibly straight. “Come in,” he amends, and gestures at the couch.

She walks inside. She doesn’t sit, only comes to a stop a few feet away from him. He draws in a deep breath and holds it for a second, feels his body adjust like he’s preparing to take a punch. Someone must have told her about the argument in the cultivation bay.

“Do you remember,” Burnham asks, “when I told you that I would always rather know the truth about something, even if it was terrible?”

Something clenches in his gut. “Yes.”

She meets his eyes squarely. “I was wrong. I wish I’d never learned about her.”

Lorca closes his eyes. “I wish you hadn’t either—” he starts.

“No.” He can’t help but look at Burnham again. She peers at him like a puzzle that doesn’t make sense. “Do you understand what that means—can you? For a Vulcan to wish that their behavior, their logic, would be guided by a false premise?”

He wants to put a hand on her shoulder, reassure her somehow, but he knows it would be the wrong move. “No,” he admits. “But you’re still human too.” Entirely human. He tries to respond in the Vulcan manner anyway. “What if it was the logical decision not to tell you in the first place?”

“Deceit is not logical between people who are trying to build a—relationship.”

“When should I have told you, then? When would it’ve been logical? I told you—a long time ago, I told you, that when I looked at you, sometimes I saw her. I told you what she was like, how you were different, how I thought I loved her.”

“And I dragged that out of you!” For the first time, the emotion overwhelms her careful shields. “You would never have told me any of that, if I hadn’t asked you! You only ever mentioned the Emperor’s daughter when you thought we were all going to die in some kind of time loop.”

“What was I going to tell you? That I’m from another *universe*? That there was a different version of you in that universe? Would any of that have changed how you felt when you saw her?”

Burnham is very quiet for a moment, and he can almost see her drawing her emotions back inside her body. “You brought me to this ship because you wanted *her*. You told me that it was because of my skills, my talents, that you were willing to pluck me out of prison, and I was grateful to you for that, but it was because you wanted me to be another person.” Also to use her as a pawn if he ever returned to the Terran universe, but that’s not a point in his favor. “I based everything I did on my belief that the choices you made, the things you did, were because of how you felt about me.”

He feels like he's watching this argument happen from the other side of the room and wishing it would go a different way. "I don't know how many times I can tell you this, but I'll keep trying. You're nothing like her. That was obvious to me from the first time you told me that you wouldn't build biological weapons for me, from when *you* would've sacrificed me to save that creature. Yes, I brought you on board because I thought you would be—the next best thing," he's not going to pretend that isn't true, "but I fell in love with *you*, here, long after I knew that you weren't the same person." He realizes that he's only ever said that he loves her while fighting about this, about Michael—he wishes he'd said it earlier.

"When?" she demands.

He can't stop the tiniest smile, when he remembers it—when he first realized it. "I stopped loving her a long time ago, but then, with you...it came on slowly," he admits. "I knew it—when you found a way to save Elan. You were angry with me and you knew that I was from another universe and it didn't matter, you found the regulations on your PADD and it was so—*you*. To know Starfleet regulations well enough to save her life. And I realized. And then you slept in my quarters after Tyler, you felt safe with me, you shared your mother's book with me."

There's some kind of dawning hope in her eyes, quickly stifled. "And as soon as she showed up, as soon as I had any emotional reaction at all to that, she became the only thing you could think about."

He can't hold her eyes anymore. It feels like Michael is a phantom presence everywhere. "I made a mistake—I thought you would never forgive me, I couldn't stand hoping, I had to make sure—" His voice is raw. He hates the way he sounds, making excuses for something that only ever made sense in the wave of emotions that swamped him when Michael reappeared.

"You disappeared into your quarters for more than a week to drink and have sex with her. You only re-emerged when she was gone. What logical conclusion could I possibly draw from that, other than that she was who you wanted all along?"

"I'm not a logical person, Burnham! I'm human, and not even a very rational human." He's been trying not to shout at her but the frustration—and, mostly the anger at himself—is overwhelming. "You knew that very well when we started this—"

"One of the few things I knew," she says, her voice acid.

"You're fucking my doppelganger! How is that logical?" He can almost hear Elan saying *Nice work, Gabe, that'll calm things down*, but the words are already out of his mouth.

Burnham actually laughs, once, short and sharp. "Perhaps I'm investigating exactly how different the same person from two different universes can be. Perhaps I find that regular physical satisfaction improves my mental focus." Her tone is ugly. "Given your indulgences with my counterpart, it would be illogical for you to be emotionally affected by my own."

"He's not in love with you."

"He has never claimed to be, nor I him. If you have nothing more to say on our original topic of discussion, I will dismiss myself." Burnham doesn't wait for him to agree before she leaves his quarters.

## Chapter Summary

In sickbay, Culber scans Burnham as she begins to stir. He looks to T'Lac. "If I didn't know better, I would say that—"

"Yes. She displays all of the symptoms." T'Lac's face is grim. "She attacked the captain."

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They've grown cocky, comfortable, out here in this primitive space. Time flows together for Lorca—he hasn't slept in a long time, has justified it by deciding that he doesn't need to—and one shift merges into the next. When Rhys says, voice full of wonder, "Captain, we have incoming warp signatures," Lorca doesn't immediately declare an alert the way he should.

For one unbelievably long second, he can't process what Rhys is saying, and in the end it's Elan who yells, "Red alert, we're being targeted!"

"Captain, they've pulled us out of warp somehow!" The ship has gone into a slow, nauseating spiral and Detmer is frantically trying to regain control.

Three ships appear, smaller than Klingon birds of prey, but when one fires for the first time, the Discovery shudders and Owosekun yells, "Shields down to 70 percent!"

"Fire phasers and hail them!" He should stay in the captain's chair but he takes three long steps to the front of the bridge and braces himself against Detmer's station.

The phaser fire flashes out and hits—nothing. "Minimally effective, sir!"

"No response to our hails, Captain—"

"Target the lead ship and fire photon torpedoes!" The torpedoes seem to bounce off some kind of shielding; one ricochets back and hits the Discovery.

"Shields at 60 percent, Captain, and hull breach on Deck Seven! Emergency bulkheads are holding, but—"

"Engineering, can we go to warp?"

Chrian comms back, "They've put some kind of—lock on the warp drive, it won't engage while we're within a certain range! I'm trying to override it, but—"

The ship shudders again and he barely manages to stay upright. "Keep working—Elan! Do we have anything that will work?"

"All we have are phasers and torpedoes, Captain, and neither one is doing a damn thing!"

"Keep firing phasers anyway—concentrate fire on a single point on one ship, see if you can find any kind of weak spot."

Stamets comms him and says, "Captain, we can go to black alert, I can jump us out of here—"

"Shields down to twenty percent—"

He doesn't have the energy to fight with Stamets over this. "Lieutenant, absolutely not. Elan—"

All at once, she finds the right spot on one of the ships—it must be a weak point over the shield emitter—and that ship explodes as the phaser fire cuts through it. The space around the other two ships flickers and he orders, "Fire another photon torpedo!"

She doesn't argue, doesn't point out that if it ricochets again, it may kill them—she just fires, and the torpedo winks through whatever shield the ships had and detonates, sending both careening away. Then there's a massive secondary explosion, bigger than anything the torpedo should have caused, and all three of the enemy ships are simply...vaporized. No wreckage, nothing floating in space; a complete void in front of them.

"Captain, we have the warp engine again," Chrian says.

"Can we warp without making the damage to the ship worse?"

"Warp five, yes. I would advise it, sir."

"Give me warp five for an hour, and if there's nothing on scanners then, all stop for ship repairs."

It's miraculous that no one is dead. When he asks Owosekun about it—and then goes to sickbay because he's burned his hand somehow—there's nothing but the bruises and lacerations and minor breaks and small electrical burns that go along with any kind of encounter

He knows he's too tired to be in command right now. The battle was a jolt of adrenaline, same as ever, but it's ebbed and this time he's nearly

delirious when it's gone. His skin is fully repaired, now, in sickbay, sitting on the edge of the bed and telling himself to get up, but his legs won't quite hold him. Lorca ends up half-kneeling, one hand still gripping the bed, and tries to drag himself up. His arm won't do it.

Culber turns from ushering the last of the other casualties out of sickbay. "Captain!" He hurries to Lorca's side, already scanning with his tricorder, and kneels to help Lorca up.

"I think I'll—just sit here, for a minute," Lorca says. He lets himself collapse fully to the floor and leans his head back against the edge of the bed. He can admit to himself that, with no other crises to demand his attention, his body is just...out.

"Captain," Culber says, with the look of a man who knows the answer he's about to get. "When was the last time you had a full night's sleep?"

"A...few weeks?" The last night he spent with Burnham. It feels years ago now. "I've been—it's hard to sleep for more than a few hours." It's probably the exhaustion that makes him say, "I wake up—I wake myself up. It feels like there's an attack coming. It always feels that way."

"I'm no psychologist, but it seems like recent events might have triggered some old trauma responses." Culber looks away to give Lorca what little privacy he can have to react to that. "I assume you haven't had any neuro-pressure, since?"

"Doctor." He means it to sound like a reprimand, but his tongue is thick as he says it. "Either give me some sedatives or give me some stimulants."

"I'll knock you out for one night if you agree to stay here in sickbay for observation," Culber says. "And only because I have serious concerns about letting you walk out of here. After that, you know what you have to do."

He accepts Culber's bargain and lets the doctor put him into a full-body scanner and attach sensor nodes to his head, neck, and chest. Culber says, "I'm giving you the dose now," and he's unconscious almost instantly.

Lorca doesn't remember his dreams when he wakes up, and he's almost optimistic until he sees Dr. Pollard's face. "We're not doing that again," she tells him. "You had...a very poor reaction." She doesn't elaborate, but the pain in his wrists and ankles and the way his throat aches tells him that he must have been thrashing.

He holds true to his promise to Culber. In the next report meeting in his ready room, he waits until everyone has finished their reports—no meaningful information on the alien ships that attacked, but they're analyzing what readings they could get, minimal damage to the warp engine from whatever lock it was under—and they begin to file out. "Burnham, a word," he says, and tries to ignore the pit that forms in his stomach.

"Captain?" She had been in the process of collecting three different PADDs when he spoke and is still in her chair.

"This is—a personal request." It curdles in his mouth. "I'm sorry to ask this of you. I know it's awkward, given our situation."

"Captain." Despite the last time they spoke alone, she looks genuinely concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not sleeping. Well. Culber said something about recent events and past traumas and he can't give me anything useful. He told me to—talk to you, about it." He's vividly reminded of the first time he asked her for this, and wants to laugh at how awkward he thought it felt then. "If we could resume neuro-pressure—just a few times. Until I'm a little less worn-down." Until he can function again.

Startled, Burnham reaches her hand out and very gently touches the dark hollow under one of his eyes. He closes his eyes. "I should have realized," she says softly. "We never got far enough." A running theme in their relationship. She lifts her fingers and says, more briskly, "Yes. When would you like to resume?"

Lorca opens his eyes again. It takes some effort. "At the end of shift?" He clears his throat. "If you'd prefer to do it—elsewhere" —not in the room where she saw him having sex with her doppelganger, that is— "I can find an alternate location."

"No." Burnham's voice is perfectly even as she stands. "Your quarters remain the optimal location. I will be there at the end of beta shift."

"And—whatever you're comfortable with," he adds. "Even if it's just the nerve pinch to knock me out. I'll take it."

He tells himself that she smiles, even the slightest bit. "Noted, Captain."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lorca means to tidy his quarters before Burnham gets there, as though she wasn't here a week ago telling him exactly how much he had ruined everything. But he sits down, just for a minute, and then seems to lose track of what's happening until Burnham enters, rolled mat tucked under one arm. "Captain," she says, and he startles back to awareness.

"Burnham. I appreciate it."

There's a moment where neither of them know what to do, and then Burnham spreads the mat out on the ground, sits, and tells him, "Remove your shirt."

He startles. "I assumed—"

"Please sit down and remove your shirt and shoes, Captain," she says. "I am not going to reduce the effectiveness of the neuro-pressure because of our...current personal circumstances." What a way to phrase it. But he obeys, sits down with his back to Burnham, discards his uniform jacket and pulls off the undershirt, and goosebumps immediately ripple out across his skin.

"I'm going to touch you now," Burnham warns, and lays her palms flat against his bare skin, and he flinches hard—how has he already

forgotten the heat of her hands? She stills.

“It’s all right,” he says, and his voice is rough. Despite the blanket of exhaustion, his body is all too aware of the physical contact.

“Remember to breathe.” She begins the familiar silent count down his vertebrae and his head lolls back for a moment before he catches himself. Burnham presses her fingers gently along the top of his collarbone and then works her way down his chest, finding different pressure points that light up in brief not-quite-pain before...smoothing out somehow. When she brushes her hand across one nipple, though, he draws in a quick breath out of sequence and grits out, “Maybe you could work more on the points on my back.” In another world, she laughs softly in his ear, kisses his neck, takes his nipple between her fingers and rubs until he’s too sensitive and he has to turn and catch her mouth and pull her into his lap—

In this world, Burnham simply readjusts and returns her hands to his shoulders. He loses track of exactly what’s happening, what pressure points she’s found, and it might be seconds or minutes or hours before she speaks.

“Do you really have a sister?” Burnham’s question breaks him out of the near-trancelike state she’s put him in with her hands.

“What?” He struggles to expand his awareness to more than just the points where she’s touching him.

“On P3X-712. In that tavern. You told the men that we were traveling for your sister’s wedding.”

“Oh.” One of her hands is flat on the worst scar on his back, the one whose provenance makes him nauseous to remember. “Yes. Half-sister. Erin.” Burnham makes an affirmative noise, but doesn’t resume moving her hands. “A few years younger than me. We grew up on a massive starship—the size of a Federation starbase. Our father was a captain on a warship and my mother was a tactical officer.” He doesn’t know what details to give her. “It was rare to be raised in any kind of family unit, there.”

“What happened to her?” Burnham asks it carefully, but it’s one of the few things from his past that doesn’t hurt.

“She left the Empire. After I was already gone—she was an elite soldier, for a few years”—cognitive dissonance, there, the pride in her accomplishment as a Terran soldier—“and then she met a scientist, John, on a mission, and they disappeared together. I wasn’t sure if they had survived, even, until she contacted me a couple years later when I wasn’t in the Emperor’s favor anymore. They have a child, a son I’ll never meet. She told me they’d found a ship headed out of Terran space and she was leaving and she hoped I’d do the same.” He smiles, drowsy.

“I’m glad you did,” Burnham says, and he lets himself lean back into her touch a little.

“We were difficult children.” He wants to give her everything, every secret, every tiny detail, so that nothing can ever come back to hurt him. “We explored the whole starship by climbing around in different Jefferies tubes. I broke my arm falling off a ladder in one.” Lorca flexes his left arm slightly and remembers it. “We crawled to sickbay together because we didn’t want our father to know. We didn’t really understand the danger we were in, the danger we put our father in, from our behavior.”

“Oh?” Burnham’s hands are steady and warm.

“The *Genghis* had a lot of rules and it wasn’t lenient on those who broke them. It would’ve made our father look very bad for us to get caught, even as children. But he—died saving Empress Sato, at the ceremony where she named Emperor Georgiou as her successor, and that made our family...special. Well-regarded. The Emperor gave me his ship when I was old enough for command.” He feels a little awkward talking for so long about himself, but he’s determined to show Burnham that she can know anything she wants about him.

“You grew up on a ship called the *Genghis*.” Is that humor in her voice?

“That’s how ships were named,” he says. “The very big ones, anyway. After conquerors. The *Genghis*, the *Caesar*, the *Attila*. My mother served on the strike ship *Marauder*. It went down over *Romulus*.”

Burnham hums and walks her fingers firmly up and down the knobs of his spine. “My parents were scientists—my real parents. My father was a xenanthropologist and my mother an astrophysicist.” She says it very quietly, so quietly that he tries not to breathe over the words. “They died—” Burnham stops.

“Klingons.”

“Yes.” It sounds like she’s leaving something out. But then she abruptly says, “There’s no—Erin Lorca, in this universe. Isaac, he never had siblings.”

His whole body tenses, though he’s not sure if it’s more at the mention of Isaac or the idea that such an important person in his own life never existed here. “Maybe his father never met Erin’s mother, here,” he says. He never knew anything about Erin’s mother. “His people weren’t Starfleet.” He remembers to breathe in deeply. “Has he told you much, about—Lorca’s life here?”

Burnham takes her hands away and re-situates herself so that they’re sitting across from each other. She extends one leg and gestures for him to do the same. He’s not sure that he wants her to be looking at him, or vice versa, if they’re going to take about Isaac. “It would be—preferable, if you attempted to show empathy for his situation.” She wraps one hand around his foot and runs her thumb softly over the bone of his ankle—almost affectionately, he imagines.

Lorca keeps his eyes on her hands. He takes her foot and strokes his hand against the bottom of her foot, just firmly enough not to tickle. He’s not making that mistake again. “I’m not known for my empathy,” Lorca says slowly. “But—”

“You’re in the best position.” He realizes that she’s not talking about neuro-pressure. “He went from the *Buran* to waking up in our sickbay and discovering that his crew is dead and his life belongs to someone else now. He hasn’t been awake this whole time and just living somewhere else. He wasn’t in your universe. For him it’s only been a few weeks. You’re probably the only one who knows what his

nightmares are like.”

Lorca freezes, and it’s not at the thought that Burnham has heard Isaac’s nightmares. “I remember,” he says, and his voice sounds very far away to his own ears. He knows the nightmares exactly—the screaming, the fires, the bodies like broken dolls. He has them now. He does remember what the first few weeks were like, waking up frantic and gasping for air in the temporary quarters he’d been assigned. In retrospect, it’s obvious that it was only Cornwell’s personal influence that got him past the psychological exams, not some kind of brilliant trickery on his part. No objective observer could have looked at him then and said yes, this man was psychologically fit to command a new ship. “I remember.” He presses his thumb up and down the length of her Achilles tendon.

“I don’t think your lives were very similar,” she says. Then, after a very long moment of silence, in which he can feel all his muscles relaxing again, she asks, “Were mine and—your Michael’s?”

“I know that the Emperor found the *Terran* Michael when she was nine or ten.” He doesn’t like hearing Burnham call her *his* Michael. “She must have been an orphan then. She never told me anything about her parents, her childhood.” He can’t tell how much she wants to hear. “The Emperor gave her the Shenzhou to captain when she was twenty-four, just—before I met her.”

“It is strange, how we all intersected, considering how different our lives all were.” Funny how she sounds least Vulcan sometimes when she’s doing Vulcan neuro-pressure. “I know you brought me here to Discovery yourself, but even before—that you should both have ended up as captains of the Buran, that—the Terran Michael was captain of the Shenzhou and I was first officer.”

“Who knows, if I hadn’t stolen his life, maybe you and Isaac would have crossed paths too.” She’s just resting her hand on his calf now, warm and soft, and he’s on the verge of sleep now.

“No,” Burnham says confidently. “No. Because he never would’ve gotten himself Discovery to captain next”—he’s not so sure about that—and even if he had, he would never have risked getting me out of prison and onto this ship. *I am* the one responsible for the destruction of his ship and the loss of his crew.” Lorca is about to protest when she adds, “I started the war, Captain.”

“I thought we’d gotten past this.” He remembers when he first met Burnham, when all she wanted to do was serve the rest of her life in prison as penance. “The only thing you did wrong was an incomplete mutiny.” Her hand tightens on his leg. They’ve both stopped pretending that this is still a neuro-pressure session. “If you’d succeeded, the Klingons would have backed down. There wouldn’t have been a war.”

“You weren’t there, at the Battle of the Binary Stars,” she insists. “He was. He saw what the Klingons did, the way they massacred our fleet. I caused that.”

“I’ve been in more battles with the Klingons since then than he ever was on his Buran. Don’t tell me I don’t know what the Klingon war has been like.” He keeps his grip steady, even as he wants to squeeze, make her see reason. “Either the war was already going to start as soon as the Shenzhou appeared, or your actions could only have stopped it.”

“Captain—” Burnham hesitates, and he sees her steel herself. “I let myself kill T’Kuvma. I lost control of my emotions. I made an emotional decision and it was the wrong one.”

“Is that why you spend so much time with him? I’m not—this isn’t jealousy, Burnham, it’s a sincere question. Is helping him just another way of you trying to atone for whatever you think you did wrong?” When she won’t meet his eyes, he flicks the bottom of her foot, just enough to make her look up at him. She can’t look away from him then. “You don’t owe anyone that.”

“Is that why *you* spent so much time with the Terran Michael? Penance?”

Lorca keeps eye contact with her—it’s growing almost unbearable, to look into another person’s eyes for this long. He chooses his words carefully. He’s had so many chances to try to explain what happened, and he’s never managed to convey it to Burnham effectively. “That Michael—I was responsible for her death, or what I thought was her death. She resented being the Emperor’s daughter, bitterly, because no one saw her as anything else. There was nothing she could earn on her own merit. Except the throne, of course. I...encouraged that feeling as soon as I saw it. No one—almost no one—thought she was loyal to anyone but herself. One of my lieutenants detonated a bomb in her shuttle because he believed that she was about to betray me.”

“Was she?”

Lorca’s hand tightens involuntarily on her ankle. “I didn’t believe it at the time.” Burnham doesn’t press him on it, but he feels obliged to add, “It’s possible that she was, to maintain some measure of the Emperor’s confidence. We’d been working together for six years at that point. I thought I was—the exception.” He wants to look away very badly but he doesn’t let himself. “She was like Isaac. One minute she was in the shuttle with the bomb going off and the next she was waking up in sickbay. I didn’t realize how much I’ve changed, this past year—with you—until I saw her again and it was like being myself back then, back in that war. The Emperor destroyed the Buran only half an hour after the shuttle exploded.” He does close his eyes now and shakes his head. “That was my *crew*, Burnham. I don’t even know if any of them survived.”

“*Dulce et decorum est*,” she murmurs.

He releases her ankle. “Not for them.”

“No,” Burnham says. “Not for us.” She stands up then and offers a hand. He takes it and she pulls him to his feet. “Do you think you’ll be able to sleep tonight?”

He looks around his dimly-lit quarters, feels the pull toward his bed. He’d rather sleep there with her tucked close against him, even if that’s all it ever is. She doesn’t cure his sleep problems just through her presence—he would probably still react badly if she tried to wake him up—but he feels safer when she’s there. “Yes,” he says at last. Burnham hasn’t let go of his hand and now she shifts it to lay her thumb on his pulse, on the veins at his wrist. He can’t keep himself from saying, “You could stay.”

Burnham releases his wrist very slowly, letting her fingers slide across the heel of his hand. “Maybe next time.” She sounds like she could mean it.

\* \* \* \* \*

They have a week of neuro-pressure—sometimes successful at reducing the nightmares, sometimes not—before Burnham tells him, “I need to—stop for a few days.”

Lorca wants to ask her why, but Burnham is twitchy and restless in a way that he’s never seen her before, and so he says, “All right. Let me know when—if you can, again.”

Over the next day, she gets worse. She’s irritable—not cold like a Vulcan, but impatient, quick to anger when people talk to her. She taps her fingers on her station constantly, in an irregular pattern that is rapidly going to drive Lorca and everyone else around her insane. She stops that and begins jiggling her leg instead. She leaves the bridge without permission, comes back ten minutes later looking like she’s been sprinting the entire time. It’s so bizarre that he barely registers the insubordination.

Lorca leaves at the end of alpha shift to eat something and then figures he might as well just go back to the bridge. He doesn’t have something else waiting for him. Preoccupied, he actually walks into her in the hallway outside the bridge and catches her by the shoulder to steady them both.

There’s something strange and wild in the way that Burnham is holding her body, in the way that she reaches for him and grips his wrist tight to the point of pain and says, “I need to talk to you, Captain,” and then nearly drags him into an empty room. They’re barely inside the room when she kisses him—it feels more like an attack—and starts unzipping his uniform, and he does want this, want her, but—

“Burnham, stop,” he tells her, and pushes her away. “What’s wrong with you?”

She half-sneers, half-laughs. “I suppose you would think that the only way I’d want you again is if something were wrong.” Her words have none of their usual fluidity, only a choked cruelty that he’s never heard from her before. “You know we both want this, Captain, so just accept it.” She grabs hold of his shoulders, pushes him against the wall so hard that his skull slams against it, closes her hand around his throat and says, “I know you liked it when Michael did this.” Then she kisses him again and bites his lip, hard.

Lorca shoves her away then, firmly enough that she stumbles back, and puts a hand to his throbbing lip. “*Stop*,” he tells her. “We need to get you to sickbay, there’s something wrong. Pollard will figure something out—”

Burnham snarls, “I *know* what’s happening and it shouldn’t be, it can’t be, but it is—”

He doesn’t hear the doors open but suddenly T’Lac is there, holding Burnham back and saying, “Michael, cease this. You are aware that your brain is—lying to you. Humans should not experience the pon farr.”

“Get *off* of me,” Burnham says, trying to shake loose, and her eyes are burning as she looks at Lorca. “You’d help me,” and her voice is suddenly different, enticing, and it makes his skin crawl. “You want me. You’ve wanted me since the day you met me.”

T’Lac grips her more firmly. “You will later regret your cruelty if you continue in this manner.”

“I’ll be *dead* later if I don’t.” Burnham struggles again, nearly breaks loose.

T’Lac manages to reach Burnham’s comm badge without releasing her and say, “Lieutenant Elan, we need you immediately.”

“You know how it feels!” Burnham hisses. He can barely see the woman that he knows in this person. “How do you know I won’t die? A human with a Vulcan *katra* raised around unbonded Vulcans? You think I’m not experiencing it?”

“And so you will force yourself on this man who loves you? You will do that violence to your friendship with him to satisfy yourself?”

Burnham freezes at that, just long enough for Elan to enter, say “T’Lac, step away,” and stun her. T’Lac catches her as she falls and silence descends, broken only by Burnham’s harsh breathing.

“*What is happening?*” Lorca’s head is pounding, whether from hitting the wall or from the general insanity of the situation.

“Computer, four for immediate transport to sickbay,” Elan says, and they disappear even as he finishes asking.

In sickbay, Culber scans Burnham as she begins to stir. He looks to T’Lac. “If I didn’t know better, I would say that—”

“Yes. She displays all of the symptoms.” T’Lac’s face is grim. “She attacked the captain.”

Wordlessly, Culber passes him a dermal regenerator to clean up his neck. He gives Burnham a hypospray that stills her. “I’ve never heard of this happening to a human.”

“No. But she is the only human I have ever heard of being raised among Vulcans. She possesses part of a Vulcan *katra*. And I believe that she—may have engaged in sexual activity, perhaps even a meld, with an unbonded Vulcan. That may have made her—susceptible.”

Lorca puts down the dermal regenerator more firmly than he should. “Someone tell me what’s happening, now.”

T’Lac blushes faintly green for the first time. “Vulcans experience a—mating drive, every seven years, that is called pon farr. A Vulcan in its throes loses all reason, all self-control. It is violent and all-consuming, and it escalates until satisfied. If it is not, the Vulcan will ultimately die. That is why Vulcans are bonded—to avoid a situation such as this.”

His body is going numb. “But she’s not Vulcan.”

“I did not believe it initially, but I have stated several logical reasons that would support a conclusion that she is, indeed, experiencing it.”

“What do we do?”

Culber shifts slightly so that he’s standing between Lorca and Burnham. “Respectfully, Captain, this is between me and my patient.”

“She came to me!” He can’t believe Culber is suddenly going to exclude him from this. “You’re telling me she has to have sex or she’ll die, and she came to me!”

“I believe the doctor will attempt to pursue alternative treatments,” T’Lac tells him. “But I am sure that he is aware of your willingness—as a last resort.”

That hits like a punch in the stomach. He should’ve given in when she first tried it, and damn the consequences; if he had she’d be fine now, instead of tossing and turning on a bio-bed, heart rate rising as Culber and T’Lac hurry to restrain her. “Computer, initiate containment field, privacy mode. Elan,” Culber says. “Please escort the captain out of here.”

Elan half-drags him out as the opaque containment field blocks his view. “Are you fucking joking,” he says as she marches him down the hallway and into the turbolift. “Goddamn Vulcans. Did you know?”

“Athletic facility,” Elan tells the computer and the turbolift starts moving. “Only that it happens to Vulcans. T’Lac told me, when she explained that she was bonded and what that meant for—us. But she never said anything about it happening to humans.”

He follows her, unseeing, into one of the private workout rooms. Elan tosses him a pair of boxing gloves; he catches them, shrugs out of his uniform, pulls them on mechanically. “I thought she was just—experiencing some kind of hallucination, or exposure to some kind of strange new spore. I didn’t want her to regret it later. If I’d known she could die—”

He’s too busy talking to block, and Elan’s first punch catches him squarely in the chest. He doubles over, wheezing. “She’s not going to die. If things get bad enough, they’ll call you in to *save her*,” Elan says.

“Everything you want, in the worst way possible,” he mutters, and sees the beginning of her movement in time to bring his guard up and block the blow.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.” Of course he’s imagined what it would be like for Burnham to look at him again and know—*know*—that this is what she wants, that she trusts him again and maybe loves him, for her to say one of these nights, “I can think of another way to help you sleep” and see desire that’s joyful instead of some kind of obligation. Of course he wants that. And he’s greedy, he wants that and he wants it day after day for the rest of their lives—he wants her to be happy, after all. “It doesn’t even need to be me, does it.”

“What?” That catches Elan off guard and he manages a punch that leaves her shaking her head like her ears are ringing.

“I was just there, but she could ask—Isaac, or Tyler, or anyone else on this ship.”

“Gabe—”

“She could ask T’Lac, she’s a Vulcan, she’d know what to do—” He says it without thinking and Elan punches him in the face, probably intentionally. “No, sorry, I meant—”

“That you’re insecure and it’s boring and it’s making you act like an asshole?” Elan sweeps his legs out from under him and he finds himself flat on his back on the mat, wind knocked out of him again.

He closes his eyes. “Yes,” he says, when he can breathe again. “Why do I feel like this was more cathartic for you than it was for me?”

“Because I process my emotions through violence and you process yours through drinking and moping?”

“Ouch.” Lorca opens his eyes and allows Elan to haul him to his feet. “Why are you having a lot of emotions?”

She frowns and her antennae scrunch down a little. “If I wanted to talk about it, we wouldn’t be in here, would we.”

“Fair,” he says. “I’m done letting you hit me, though.”

“Close-quarters attack simulation?”

“*No*,” and it’s probably too vehement, given the way she looks at him. “No. The nightmares were a little better, but without Burnham, they might get worse again. I don’t think they need any help.” He realizes that his nose is still bleeding from Elan’s punch, but he’s unwilling to go back to sickbay right now. “No, let’s run.”

“Not exactly violence,” Elan points out.

“Call it a race, we’ll figure out the stakes on the way,” he tells her, and they run.



Burnham and Lorca are referencing Wilfred Owen's [\*Dulce et Decorum Est\*](#).

Canonically, Burnham is 30 in the first season of Discovery and served on the Shenzhou for about seven years before that. In my headcanon, the Terran version of Burnham also came to the Shenzhou around the age of 23 or 24, but was given its captaincy outright instead of just being assigned there.

Yes, that's also a Farscape homage you've spotted.

Chapter Summary

“Well? Are they Vulcan-married now?”

Culber won’t talk to him, but he finds T’Lac in the biology lab. “Has anyone ever survived this without...satisfying the drive?”

She carefully sets down the object—a fruit?—that she’s been scanning. “Captain. How may I assist you?”

“Has anyone survived,” he repeats.

T’Lac regards him impassively, but the tips of her ears have turned slightly green. “I have insufficient information to provide you with a meaningful response to that question. There is no recorded data on any non-Vulcan experiencing *pon farr*.”

“You’re telling me *no* Vulcan has found a way around it—”

“Vulcans have never needed to ‘find a way around it,’ as you say. There are meditation practices that have been hypothesized as a possible option. But, Captain, I must emphasize that Specialist Burnham’s experience is—and must necessarily be—different than that of a Vulcan. The Vulcan satisfaction of—the drive—involves a mental, as well as physical, element. Although she is extremely intelligent and has been the subject of a meld in the past, there is no indication that she has the capability of initiating such a meld—”

“Yes,” he says suddenly. “When we were looking for Sarek. She and Stamets built a device—a synthetic mind-meld augment, they called it.”

“I am aware.” T’Lac seems to be considering it. “I was consulted. The device depended on the existence of her connection to Sarek.”

Lorca grimaces. “Could it be modified? To allow her to create a mind-meld with someone else, make her body think that she’s—done what she needs to?”

“...There is logic to your idea,” T’Lac says slowly. “I will consult with Lieutenant Stamets and Dr. Culber.” She turns to leave the biology lab, then turns back. “Should I inform them that you are willing to be the—partner, in the mind-meld?”

“Only if it’s what Burnham actually wants,” he makes himself say. For all the terrible things in his head that he’d rather she not see, he hates the idea of her melding with someone else even more.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Burnham, do you understand what they’re asking?” Culber claims he’s pumped enough different drugs into her that she’s—rational, at least for a little while.

“Yes,” she says with some difficulty. Her wrists and ankles are still in restraints, but with enough slack to allow her to sit up. She holds the device in her hands, turns it one way and then the other. “This will allow me to initiate a meld, and to end it.” Elan keeps a wary eye on her, one hand on her phaser.

“The hope is that initiating what would be the psychic portion of the completion of *pon farr* will make your brain realize that you’re not Vulcan, that this isn’t part of your biology, and the symptoms will...stop.” Culber looks at one of her scans. “The drugs I gave you are only going to work for about five more minutes, so you need to decide by then.”

“Of course, there’s the risk that by allowing me to initiate a meld, this device will also allow me to create a mating bond,” Burnham says. She looks sharply at Lorca. “I assume that’s why you’ve volunteered yourself.”

That hurts, even if it’s also true. “If you want to try it with someone else—”

Burnham shakes her head. “No. This is the only solution anyone has proposed other than locking me in a room with someone I don’t mind fucking.” He’s never heard her speak so crudely—he might have expected some reference to ‘acceptable partner for intercourse,’ some other phrasing, but this version of Burnham doesn’t care. “I’ll take it. What do we have to do?”

Culber releases her from her restraints and fits the device to her head and its partner to Lorca’s. “Behave as you have seen and experienced others initiating a meld,” T’Lac says. “Imagine that you are seeking his consent to enter his thoughts. Do so gently.”

He sits cross-legged facing Burnham, the way they do in neuro-pressure sometimes. She leans forward and places her hand on his face. Before she speaks, he says, “Only if you’re sure,” very quietly.

Burnham doesn’t respond to that. “My thoughts to your thoughts,” she intones, and he closes his eyes. “My mind to your mind.” Nothing happens. She repeats it again, more forcefully. “My thoughts to your thoughts. *My mind to your mind.*”

It feels like a spike driving into his skull—maybe he screams, but he can’t hear it because they’re both in his mind now. Burnham is searching for something—he has a vague impression of a library full of bookshelves, Burnham opening books and rifling through them before tossing them to the side, and he manages to say “Burnham, please—”

She turns, clumsy on her own feet, and the pain lessens, unevenly, until it’s nothing more than a sense of resistance in his own body, a feeling

that something is inside him that doesn't belong there. She opens another book—

They're in one of his nightmares, and she stands and watches the violence all around her, untouchable, with her head tilted to one side—

They're on the high ledge above the slot canyon, and she describes the *kahs-wan* to him, now he knows what that's called, but she sees the darker memory that it triggers in his mind, the circle of people in the cave on the dark planet, the shouting and jostling of his classmates, the hooded prisoner and the weapon in his hand—the cheering afterward, the way he threw up and wiped his mouth and accepted the badge of a soldier of the Terran Empire with the taste still in his mouth, and he can't let her see it, he fights it—

--Is this what a meld is like? he asks, and there's a discordant noise in his head and they're back in the library, that sense of intrusion still deep in his mind.

--I don't know how to do it. He can feel the frustration and anger simmering. --It's...sharing memories, thoughts, but it's not supposed to be so violent, it must be because of the pon farr.

--Can I try to share something not so violent?

--Go ahead. There's bitterness in her thoughts.

He finds a memory he likes—the first away mission they went on together. The planet, lush, humid, color everywhere. Those first breaths of air not filtered through a starship's CO2 processors, the smell of dirt and growing things, plants thick beneath their feet. They'd separated on the mission itself, but this time they don't. They just stand there and breathe, great gulps of air like it's something delicious. The pain in his head is gone entirely now. When Burnham reaches over and takes his hand, there's a strange echo to the touch, as though he can feel her feeling his skin, and she must feel it too because she takes her hand away and then touches him again, just to trigger it all over again.

Then Burnham kisses him—gentle, almost exploratory, to feel the echo of lips through both their bodies; she touches the tip of her tongue to his and the sensation reverberates through him. He deepens the kiss, drunk on the double feeling of it, brings his hands to her face to feel that too. It's both immediate and strangely abstract, as though they've lost their bodies and are tracing the contours of each other's minds, stroking along some place whose existence he never recognized.

--This is how it's supposed to be.

Her thought jars him out of—wherever they were. When he reaches over and touches her cheek, the double sensation is gone, and he regrets its loss. His physical touches are his own now, nothing more. They're in his quarters and Burnham is curled up reading her book on his couch. When he sits down, she presses her bare feet to his thigh and says, *Listen*, and he can hear a vague sweet sort of sound, like someone humming a melody he's never known.

--I think that's right

"I think it worked," he hears Burnham say, and he opens his eyes. She's already lifted her hand away from his face. "I don't feel homicidally horny anymore." He can almost hear Tilly saying the words.

"Well? Are they Vulcan-married now?" Elan is actively avoiding looking at him.

T'Lac walks over to him. "Captain, if you will allow me?" He nods, and she touches his head very lightly. He has the vaguest sense of someone in his mind, gone before he has the chance to test it further. "No," she says. "There is no...bond formed. The device operated as it was designed to do."

"Good," Lorca says at the same time that Burnham does. For a moment, his breath catches—and then she smiles at him and he realizes it was coincidence, nothing left over from the meld. "I feel like I haven't eaten in days," Burnham continues. "Doctor, if I don't need to stay here—"

Culber puts a sensor node on the side of her forehead. "You can go, but I'll be monitoring your vital signs. Come back here if you feel any changes."

Burnham looks at Lorca again. "*Thank you*," she says, and before the moment can hold, she hops down from the bio-bed and walks out of sickbay.

Lorca...climbs down as well. "Come on." Elan grabs his arm. "Let's go."

She takes them deep into the mycelium cultivation bay—"This isn't a meditation retreat!" Stamets yells after them—until the rest of the world feels far enough away, and then she says, "Gabe. What did you do to yourself."

He doesn't know how to answer that. "I helped her." He believes T'Lac that Burnham isn't actually in his head anymore, but that doesn't stop him from remembering it. "Problem solved. No one got hurt."

"You are actively the stupidest man I have met in my entire life," Elan says, but her voice is affectionate.

\* \* \* \* \*

He's dreaming. They're back in each other's minds, on the tropical planet. This time when she kisses him, it's not so light, not so delicate. She pulls his body tight against her own and how he's missed it, the way that *she* feels. Burnham smiles against his mouth, bites his lip very gently, just the barest impression of her teeth, and it shoots through his body. "Burnham," he says, and his voice is wrecked, the way that he's felt ever since she left his mind. "What did you do to me," and he can't keep his mouth off of her long enough to get the words out. She unzips his uniform jacket—he'd had that bruise on his neck when they went down to the planet, the only reason he hadn't taken his jacket off then—and the world tilts as though they're falling and then they're on the ground. He can't stop smiling, pressing his lips to her cheek, hot and wet to her

neck, down to the collar of her shirt, and she sits up and pulls her shirt off over her head, bra going with it.

Burnham pulls him up just enough so that she can drag his shirt off too, then makes quick work of his pants, and somehow they're both naked, bodies pressed together slick with sweat. She tastes her way down his body until she finds him desperately hard, takes just the head of his cock into her mouth, wet and sloppy, holds his hips down as he begs, "Burnham, *please*" and finds himself trying to thrust up, get just a little more of her mouth, and she pulls off entirely before saying "Be patient" right against his skin, and the vibration alone makes his cock jump.

"Let me," he says, and he doesn't even know what he means until she grins and says "Be my guest" and he gets his mouth between her thighs—she yells and grabs his head, holds it in place as she grinds against his tongue. He slides one finger into her easily, she's so wet, and then a second, and she says "more, more," and he adds a third finger, tongue working frantically against her movements, against the way she shoves recklessly down on his fingers. He spreads his fingers a little and she groans and comes, clenching over and over on his fingers. She's barely done before she says "Come on, get up," and he suddenly has her backed up against a tree, her legs locked around his hips.

When he slides into her, he nearly staggers at the feeling—it's the echo again, all through him, the half-drunk noise she makes when she feels the sensation he gets as he pushes in, the residual echo of her physical reaction to it in his own body. When he's buried all the way in her, he stops for a second and drags in a breath—the air is heavy all around them—and slips one hand down between them, just to feel the way she's shaking, tight around him. She bucks her hips hard and he loses himself, thrusting in and in like he can get any deeper inside her. When she leans forward and kisses the bruise that she's left, hot and wet, she whispers "Come," and he does.

Chapter Summary

“Let me summarize,” Elan says. “You just semi-accidentally became psychically bonded to a woman you’re in love with but who you cheated on with your ex who is also her doppelganger. All because you didn’t want to have sex with her. And then had mind-altering sex with her anyway and now you can’t be left alone in a room together.”

“It is 0700 hours, Captain Lorca.”

He wakes up to the computer’s voice and lies in bed for a moment, breathing deeply. Burnham is in the mess hall, he knows. Burnham is in the mess hall and is feeling...alarmed.

Bullshit there’s no bond formed.

He strains to see if he can hear what she’s saying and is immensely relieved to discover that no, there’s nothing like that, only an awareness of her location and a surface-level sense of her emotions. Her alarm heightens.

“Lorca to Burnham,” he comms.

“Yes, Captain.”

“My quarters, *now*.” He doesn’t care what her breakfast companions think, whoever they are. He sits on the couch and knows when Burnham gets on the turbolift, knows when she’s standing outside his door, has a moment of very strange almost-double-vision when she walks in before everything settles into place.

“Captain,” she starts.

“I think we’re past that, don’t you? I don’t care what T’Lac said, what the hell is happening?”

Burnham is uncomfortable. How strange, to be able to see past the Vulcan exterior. It must feel like a gross invasion of privacy to her, but he can’t bring himself to care right now. “I take it you’re experiencing—symptoms of a bond.”

“I don’t know what the symptoms usually are, but I can tell where you are and I can tell how you’re feeling, more or less.” She feels a stab of panic at that. “I can’t hear your thoughts, or anything like that.”

She walks to the couch and drops herself down next to him without asking permission. “Yes,” she says. “That’s more or less what’s happening to me.”

He sits down across from her, clears his throat. “Did you—have dreams last night?” She must be able to sense his discomfort at the question, and she doesn’t answer. He frowns and asks, “Are you—actively trying to keep me from knowing how you feel right now?”

“Yes. It requires—substantial mental focus,” she says, and she stops—it feels like a smudged windowpane has just been cleared and he knows how she feels again. There’s frustration, anger, self-reproach all boiling together in there.

“Can you lie to me?” He wonders how far this will go. “Tell me something true and something false, let’s see if I can feel it.”

Burnham covers her face with her hands and slumps back against the couch. “The mycelium cultivation bay is currently producing twice its typical yield. Two EPS conduits fused in our last battle.”

He knows it immediately. “The cultivation bay is the lie.”

“Yes.” Burnham’s voice is muffled by her hands. Her panic has settled in. “Think hard about an emotion. See if you can feel it, project it to me.” The first emotion that comes to mind is the one that he generally feels toward Burnham—affection, admiration, he’s not willing to call it love right now. She lifts her head, and for a moment he thinks he feels the same thing coming from her—or maybe it’s just a reflection of his own feelings.

Lorca reaches over and touches the bare skin of her hand with one of his own, and it’s almost disastrous how good it feels. Not to the level that it was when they were in each other’s minds, but shocking anyway, and he knows that Burnham feels it too, from the way her breath catches, from the way she grasps his wrist and brings his hand to the soft skin of her face, kisses his palm and the physical sensation is somehow more *real* than anything else in the room, like there are nerve endings in his palm he never knew existed—

and then her face changes and the feeling diminishes and she pulls back, frowning.

“You’re trying to block it again,” he says.

“You should learn. Unless you want me to know how you’re feeling all the time.”

Of course she can tell that he’s starting to think it might not be such a bad thing, at least not always. “I don’t know. I’m not always the best at using my words. And I’m not great at understanding yours. Might be useful.” He tries to smile. “And for tactical reasons, of course. If one of us is taken prisoner.”

Burnham lets out an exhausted breath and he can sense her emotions again. “I apologize for—inflicting this on you. I know you were only trying to help.” The deep regret behind her words stings.

“No one else I’d rather be stuck with,” and of course she knows he’s telling the truth.

“Among Vulcans with significant—psychic abilities, it is considered polite to learn to mask one’s emotions mentally. To avoid unintentional or—nonconsensual intrusion.”

“I know the Aenar try to avoid reading people’s minds.” Elan patiently explained this to him when he learned what it meant that Chrian was part-Aenar and became very concerned about spending time around her.

“We should practice. At the very least, while in each other’s presence.” Not a lie.

He can’t resist saying it. “Or—hear me out—if that’s how it feels to touch my hand, imagine how good the sex would be.” He tries to make it sound joking.

She doesn’t hide the spike of arousal at that, whether because she doesn’t want to or because she’s too tired, and he certainly can’t hide his own. “Yes.” Her voice is rough. “Yes, it would be.” Lorca’s eyes drop to her lips as she licks them—he can feel the nervous energy there—and he can’t help leaning forward even as she does. Their mouths meet and it’s electric, overwhelming, everything heightened. He pulls her awkwardly across the space between them, clumsy and urgent, and Burnham is in his lap, tugging his shirt over his head so that she can get her hands on more bare skin, and if he thought her hands were searing before, her entire body is incandescent now—

“Captain Lorca to the bridge. Captain Lorca to the bridge,” comes over the comm, and they break apart, leaping to their feet almost simultaneously. They’re still holding hands, though, and when he tries to make himself walk away, he finds that the desire radiating from her—from him—deadens the rest of his brain.

Burnham pulls him back against her. Somewhere along the way she lost her shirt and he turns her around so that her smooth back is pressed against his chest, holds her tight against him with one arm as he kisses her neck. She arches back into him soundlessly, but he can feel the shuddery pleasure she’s experiencing and it’s dizzying. He strokes his free hand along her sides, over her stomach, across her breasts, and then slides his hand very slowly down from between her breasts to just below the waist of her pants. Burnham is breathing fast, hips bucking a little to encourage his hand to go lower, rubbing back against him where he’s blindingly hard, and he does reach lower then. His mind blanks out for a second when he feels how wet she is and she grabs his wrist, holds his hand in place so she can rub against his fingers.

“Someday,” he says, “we’re going to do this for *hours*.” His voice is thick, almost unrecognizable. He keeps his hand where it is—as if he would try to move it—and drops his other hand to the waistband of her pants, tugs experimentally, just a little.

“Yes.” Burnham doesn’t release his wrist or stop moving, but she tries to help shove her pants down one-handed; when she steps out of one pant leg, she spreads her legs wider and the angle must change because she shudders and grips his wrist tighter and says “Come *on*.” She gropes blindly behind her until he gets the message and drags his own pants down, just enough that when she bends over the back of the couch and spreads her legs a little further, he can slide deep inside her.

“Fuck,” he gasps, and she inhales harshly and he can feel the satisfaction as she comes. But the sense of joint need doesn’t disappear—if anything it’s stronger now, driving him forward, and he grips her hips and says “Touch yourself for me” and feels her pleasure when she does, when he thrusts particularly deep and her legs give out and the only thing keeping her up is his hands on her hips. It keeps building in both of them until he can’t tell which of them is feeling what, until he doesn’t know if he’s coming or if Burnham is—and there’s nothing else, nothing outside of them, of the pure sensation passed back and forth. Burnham does come again—it echoes in his mind, through his body—and it sets him off, his brain whiting out.

When he can think again, he finds that he’s still inside her; she’s moved one of his hands back to her clit and is clenching on him almost experimentally, twitching her hips just a little, and the desire—hers, his, impossible to tell—is rising again. He’s half-hard again, impossibly, and he says, “God, Burnham—”

“Captain Lorca to the bridge, urgently!”

The voice over the comm should matter to him, should matter to both of them. He knows that much. But Burnham arches her back against his chest, tilts her head back so he can put his mouth on her sweaty neck, lifts one of his hands to her breast and lets him feel it as she pinches her nipple, the shock of pleasure from it. He’s fully hard inside her now and he starts moving again, licks his fingers and rubs her nipples between them in turn, and maybe there’s nothing else in the universe, maybe this is all they’ll do until the end of time—

“Gabe, you have one minute to get decent and then I’m coming in.”

Lorca recognizes the voice very distantly but doesn’t care, Burnham grabs his hair and pulls hard as he thrusts, and there’s the feedback loop starting again as they work each other higher—

“Are you fucking kidding me,” and there’s cold water everywhere, startling enough that he does pull back reflexively and another wave of cold water splashes on him. He releases Burnham entirely, gasping for breath, and turns to see Elan holding a large water canister. “Are you kidding me,” she repeats.

“Captain—oh god!” Tilly has just run in after Elan, and she blanches before turning very red and turning around. “Oh no, I’m so sorry!”

It’s taking him a minute to understand what’s happening. Burnham, whose brain has caught up faster, is humiliated. They both stand there naked, dripping water. “Elan,” he says finally.

Elan steps forward just enough to grab a towel and fling it at him. He catches it and starts to pass it to Burnham. “Don’t touch each other again! It was bad enough walking in on you!” He supposes there’s a difference between the times she’s walked in on him half-dressed and...

this. Lorca gives the towel to Burnham anyway, careful not to let their hands touch.

“Did you—throw water on us?” His brain is slowly catching up too.

“You were supposed to be on the bridge an *hour* ago. People have been trying to reach you for more than half an hour. You put your quarters on secure mode, I had to get another officer just so we could authorize our entrance with two command codes.” He’s seen Elan angry before, but it’s always alarming when she’s angry at *him*.

“We were—it turns out there is some kind of bond. We were talking about it.” The cold water has done its work. He finally has the presence of mind to shift around awkwardly enough to pull his pants back up.

A slightly hysterical laugh escapes Tilly, who’s still facing away from them. Burnham also retrieves her pants, but keeps the towel wrapped around her shoulders and chest. “You can turn around, Tilly,” she says. If Lorca didn’t have a direct line to her feelings, he would think she was completely unaffected by all of this.

Tilly turns around. Her eyes dart from Burnham’s face to Lorca’s face to his chest and then rapidly away to somewhere in the middle distance. “So…the meld didn’t work. To cure it.”

“It appears to have succeeded in…triggering the natural progression.” Burnham walks over to her shirt, drops the towel, and pulls her shirt back on. “It’s not exactly what we were hoping for.”

“Will it go away now that…” Elan gestures to the two of them. “Isn’t that how it usually works with Vulcans?”

“I don’t know,” Burnham says. She zips her uniform all the way up to her throat. “It wasn’t exactly a usual kind of pon farr.”

Elan grimaces. Her antennae scrunch down into little knobs. “You know you both need to go to sickbay. And then maybe try staying away from each other for a few days.”

\* \* \* \* \*

T’Lac also suggests staying away from each other in case the bond will fade on its own. “And practice hiding your emotions from each other,” she adds. “It’s very rude to share them.”

So Lorca goes to the bridge for alpha shift and tells Burnham to show up on beta shift instead and tries to focus on anything but her. Then Elan drags him to dinner in the mess hall and fills a tray for him. “I’ve seen too much of you now and you could stand to put on a few pounds.”

When they sit down, he says, “Elan. I don’t even know how to describe what’s happening.”

“Let me summarize,” Elan says. “You semi-accidentally became psychically bonded to a woman you’re in love with but who you cheated on with your ex who is also her doppelganger. All because you didn’t want to have sex with her. And then had mind-altering sex with her anyway and now you can’t be left alone in a room together.”

“Well.” He looks around, but no one in the mess hall is paying attention to them. It’s not exactly public knowledge, the bond.

“What are you going to do?” When he doesn’t answer, Elan adds, “You know what you should do.” She takes a long drink of her katheka and makes a face. “Gabe.”

“I’m practicing trying to hide my emotions. From her.”

“Yeah.” Elan looks unconvinced. “I’m sure that’ll do it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The problem is, ever since they bonded—ever since they had sex—it’s very difficult to just *not* think about Burnham. She already occupied a not-unsubstantial portion of his thoughts. Now, without trying, he knows where she is; he knows when she’s intensely focused, when she’s happy, when she’s frustrated and—he assumes—trying not to show it. He takes a shower that night and is washing his body innocently when a phantom feeling flashes through him and suddenly he’s rapidly hardening, stroking himself without realizing that he’s started, and he feels an answering sensation from Burnham in her quarters. He can’t help imagining what she might be doing when she feels this way, and it’s the feedback loop all over again. He doesn’t even know which of them started it, but it only takes a minute and then he’s coming and reminding himself over and over that he can’t go to her quarters, they can’t start this again.

It doesn’t matter. She’s in his quarters before he’s even gotten out of the shower. She pushes him back against the shower wall and kisses him and he has only the briefest moment to wonder how he ever lived without this before Burnham pins his hips to the wall and takes him in her mouth, so deep in her enthusiasm that she coughs and has to pull back a little before continuing. They’re going to drown in each other like this. He pulls them both down to the cool floor of the shower and she sinks down onto him—

It’s a lot later when they make it out of the shower. “You have to go,” he tells her. “You have to go or we’ll start again and I’ll die.”

“Yes,” she agrees, and kisses him, long and filthy, before she pulls herself away with obvious force of will. “All right. We’re going to give each other space now.”

He’s exhausted when she leaves—unsurprising, it must be past 0200 by now. It seems like he should be exhausted enough that he’ll get another night free from the nightmares.

Chapter Summary

“You aren’t trying at all. You *want* me to know how you’re feeling and you *want* to know how I feel.”

Lorca doesn’t remember the details of the nightmare when he wakes up, but he knows it was one of those where he’s trapped in an agonizer. He thinks Stamets was in it this time, maybe, watching the machine curiously as he contorted himself to try to get away from the pain. He can’t help the slight shudder when he sees Stamets in the mess hall—quickly suppressed—before he takes a seat next to Elan.

“You look terrible,” she says. “Late night?” Her antennae waggle suggestively.

“Why do you say that?” He yelps when she pokes a bruise just barely showing beneath the neck of his shirt. “Elan!”

“I thought you were going to try to stay away from each other.”

“She’s all the way down in Engineering,” he says automatically. Oh. “I’m going to try to learn how to block it out,” he assures her. “It’s just—if you could know how someone else was feeling, someone you—cared about, wouldn’t you want to know?”

Elan shakes her head and pushes his coffee closer to his hand. “Look, I’m Andorian. We don’t hide our feelings.”

“T’Lac does.” Burnham is getting on the turbolift.

“No,” Elan says. “She’s just careful about how she shares them and who she shares them with. I can’t imagine how awful it would be for her to not be able to do that. Like Burnham.”

“Burnham isn’t Vulcan,” he repeats. When Burnham steps off the turbolift, he realizes too late that she’s headed for the mess hall. It’s like that brief moment of double vision all over again, his awareness of her location and her visual presence overlapping.

Elan elbows him, hard. “You’re staring at her. In a really creepy way.”

“I need to leave,” he agrees. Before he does something very stupid. He can feel Burnham trying to block him out and he tries to do the same, he really does—he gulps the rest of his coffee, regrets it as it burns his mouth, leaps up from his chair and escapes the mess hall.

Elan follows. “How long until you’re on?”

“An hour.” He’d been planning to review Pollard’s last report about Stamets and his ability to jump to remind himself that he’s right.

“Come on, I’ll distract you.” As usual, Elan’s plan for distraction is just beating the crap out of each other, but there’s a fierce mindless satisfaction to it that keeps him from thinking about Burnham. That’s the key, he decides, while he waits for his nose to stop bleeding so he won’t get blood on his uniform. Staying busy.

The problem with that is that if they aren’t both fully occupied at the same time, there tends to be some...mental bleed. She must have felt the sparring, he realizes, because he can feel her own satisfaction as she runs multiple hard laps with Tilly in the lower decks. He feels her excitement when she’s in Engineering and she’s solved some kind of problem that he’ll probably never know existed, the thrill she gets, and it hits him low in his gut. He likes knowing she’s happy.

Of course, there’s also the morning that he’s in his ready room and he realizes that Burnham is in her quarters just before he gets a sense of blinding arousal, enough that he gasps and involuntarily clutches the edge of his desk. He’s reaching one hand into his pants before he even thinks about it and he manages to choke out, “Computer, privacy mode.” The feeling flickers, disappears for a moment like she’s trying to shield her own thoughts, but then it reappears and he hopes no one is about to attack them.

Three days later, he’s too distracted with crew reports on his PADD to realize that Burnham is approaching his quarters until she’s walking into it and accusing him, “You aren’t trying at all. You *want* me to know how you’re feeling and you *want* to know how I feel.”

He looks up from the reports, but he doesn’t get up. “You’d know it if I tried to lie to you.”

“That’s not fair to either of us,” she says. Even if he couldn’t know her feelings, he would see it on her face. “This is—I spent years teaching myself to contain my—emotions. Not to feel them, not to be affected by them the way that humans are. Finding the way to avoid being affected, or at least affected strongly, by the emotions of others. And now you have a direct window—not a window, an open door—into everything I keep contained. And not only that, but you send all of your own emotions into it, until it’s overflowing.” There’s deep pain behind the words.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.” He stays very still in his chair. He’s been hoping to avoid this conversation, which Burnham obviously can tell. “I’m not trying to make it uncomfortable for you. But—you are hard to read, intentionally, and sometimes it’s nice to know where we stand without having to try to get through ten layers of Vulcanisms.”

“I never meant for this to happen.” Even if he didn’t know how she feels, he can see it on her face. “I never intended for us to form some kind of—bond! During the pon farr, all I wanted was to have sex with you.” True statements that sting all the more for being true.



“Obviously I should’ve said yes then, I’m sorry I thought it would be wrong to take advantage of your less-than-lucid demand!” It turns out that arguing while knowing that the other person is angry only makes the argument worse. “I think we’ve both gotten some benefits since then. Are you saying you want to—try to break the bond?”

Burnham’s mental shields slam into place and after a moment she says, “Yes.”

“Oh.” Something is roaring in his mind and then, there, suddenly he finally knows how to block himself off from her, like turning a containment field opaque. He can only maintain it for a minute before he has to release the attempt, and she winces when he does. She keeps tight hold of her own mental control.

“Do you have the slightest idea how to do it without destroying both of our brains?” He understands why she doesn’t want to experience the pain he feels right now at the idea of losing this connection that he’s grown attached to. “Just do the meld over and hope that the bond undoes itself?”

“It’s either that or learn some more effective way of blocking it unless we need it,” she says. “Yes, it would be useful to be able to find each other when necessary, sometimes. But this emotional transfer, the awareness, that isn’t sustainable.” Burnham hesitates. “Captain—your nightmares.” She winces at the dread that surges through him.

“You…have them?”

“I wake up multiple times a night with feelings of inexplicable horror. I know you’re in your quarters and I can barely breathe from the terror you’re feeling.” He tries to clamp down on his emotional reaction to that, but it’s very hard. “The only treatment I know of that’s ever helped is neuro-pressure, and I think we both know that if I start to perform neuro-pressure on you, it’s going to end as something very different.”

“No, you’re right,” he says. If they can barely shower without setting each other off, neuro-pressure is out of the question. “I never thought you would—”

She sends him some kind of comforting emotion. “I know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They don’t waste time after that. Lorca doesn’t want to inflict another night’s worth of nightmares on her. They consult T’Lac, who gives a Vulcan sort of shrug—she’s probably still a little annoyed about being wrong in her original diagnosis—and says, “You may try to engage in some sort of visualization exercise. Once you are connected, in your minds. Whatever metaphorical structure you find useful to construct a bond in which the default state is *not* the sharing of emotions and physical awareness.”

“Do you have a suggestion for a metaphorical construct?”

“None that would be useful for a human,” T’Lac says, and walks away.

So they sit in sickbay—he wishes passionately that this could be done somewhere else, and he can tell that Burnham agrees—and this time he and Burnham each put a hand on the other person’s face on the meld points, and recite in unison, “My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts.” He remembers the feeling of trying to send her an emotion and tries it again, and this time tries to ride the forefront of it—

It doesn’t hurt this time. There’s no sense of intrusion, of *wrongness*. They’re suddenly on P3X-712, but the village is deserted.

--I don’t like this construct, Lorca thinks. Good things happened here, but I was also held prisoner and tortured.

--That’s fair. The village dissolves around them.

--I have an idea. He thinks about it and they’re on P3x-524 instead, on the high ledge above the slot canyon. There’s the camp light, and the single emergency shelter, and their packs lying on the stone. When he picks up the second emergency shelter from their packs—the one that Burnham had never set up—she understands.

--Of course. She accepts the packed shelter from him and steps away, lays it out on the stone, and taps the control that expands it. Two identical shelters now sit side-by-side, a few feet separating them.

--We can come out here, when we need to?

--Yes. When we need to. Burnham turns to walk away and then turns back.

--I never thanked you. You were willing to risk the meld to save me. And you didn’t—accept, when I tried to force you to cure the pon farr the traditional way. I appreciate that.

--You know I would do anything for you. Neither of them are surprised, but the words echo off the stone walls around them until it sounds like he yelled them down into the canyon.

--And the rest of it wasn’t exactly a hardship.

--I know. She steps just close enough to brush her lips across his—how he’ll miss that intensity of feeling, though perhaps not the total loss of control whenever they’re around each other—and then walks into her shelter.

Lorca stands for a moment, looking out over the expanse of the slot canyon. They never figured out how the canyons were created. If the ship can ever jump again, after they’ve dropped off everyone who wants to go home, maybe they can come back here. He ducks his head and walks into his own emergency shelter.

“How do you feel?”

Lorca opens his eyes. They're still sitting across from each other, but Burnham has taken her hand away from his face. He lifts his own away, realizing that the hypersensitivity he felt when touching her before is gone. Now, of course, there's only the usual desire to touch her. "Well, I don't know how *you're* feeling, so I suppose that means it worked." He tries to project an emotion again—love, he admits it, love—and gets no reaction.

"Do you know how to—walk outside, if we need to?"

He closes his eyes and considers. There, there's an image in his mind—the slot canyon, seen from orbit. He knows that if he investigates it more closely, he'll find himself in that shelter, and he'll be able to walk out. "Yes." He stands up and stretches, grimaces at the crick in his neck. "I suppose the real test will be tonight." Elan and Culber both have the decency not to ask.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's good that they disentangled, before this night. It's one of his least-favorite nightmares, though he'd be hard-pressed to pick a favorite. He's back on the Klingon ship, in a cell with Tyler and Burnham. When the Klingons come they come with Michael and she says "Choose your pain, Gabriel," and attacks Burnham before he can say anything. A Klingon with Tyler's face holds him in place, unable to move, until Michael gets bored. She laughs and stops and says "We have questions for you," and they drag him to the torture chamber and strap him into the chair, but this time the Klingon has knives instead of light—

He wakes himself up struggling against the restraints and sits up with a knife in his hand. It's probably not a good sign that he's started keeping it under his pillow again. "Computer, locate Michael Burnham," he gasps.

"Michael Burnham is in her quarters."

"Status?"

"Michael Burnham is asleep."

So. At least it worked.

Chapter Summary

There's something strange happening to his heart, like a funny kind of arrhythmia. "I love you," he says very quietly.

In the morning, he and Elan sit in the mess hall and stare into their respective hot beverages. Eventually Lorca says, "I know why I feel terrible, but why do you?"

Elan dips the tip of her finger into her katheka and her antennae bend forward in a frown. "It's never hot enough," she grumbles.

"You can tell the machine to make it hotter, you know."

She flicks the drop of katheka on her finger onto her tray. "The normal setting should be hotter. I shouldn't have to tell it that."

"I shouldn't have to ask you what's wrong more than once."

Her mouth pulls down into a grimace. "T'Lac is being—very Vulcan, since you and Burnham had your bonding experience. Talking about the illogic of...interspecies romantic relationships."

"I'm sorry," Lorca says. Usually Elan is the one listening to his personal problems. "She—seems to care about you a lot." At Elan's face, he adds, "She does seem to trust you. Even though you are an illogical Andorian."

Elan's antennae straighten up a little and she elbows him. "*You're* illogical." She does lift her katheka and actually take a drink this time. "Your turn, the usual problem?"

"Well, we're not bonded anymore, not the way we were." He sees Burnham walk into the mess hall. "A day ago, I would've known she was coming."

Elan elbows him again, a little more gently. "It was creepy and she didn't like it. I'm still amazed you gave in so easily, though. I expected you to try to talk her out of it."

The coffee tastes sour in his mouth and he sets the cup down. "She was being affected by my nightmares." He says it quietly, but it echoes in his ears. "She told me she was—waking up, multiple times a night. Terrified."

"Oh, Gabe." Her antennae droop. "No wonder."

"It's good that it worked." His voice is very rough and he takes another drink of coffee. "Bad enough that I can't sleep, I didn't want that inflicted on her too."

"Well." They sit in silence for a few minutes, watching sleepy ensigns and specialists and the cadets sweaty from their morning runs filter into the mess hall. "Now that you two don't spontaneously combust when you're in the same room, at least you could start neuro-pressure again."

"True." He's—uneasy at the thought of it. They haven't touched each other since silencing the bond.

"You're afraid of her," Elan says gently. When Elan is gentle, it's a sign that things are truly pathetic. "That if you touch her it'll re-start things."

"Yes." He's learned not to bother lying to Elan anymore. "What if we couldn't shut it off again? She'd hate me."

"She can make that decision for herself." The bottom drops out of his stomach at the voice. Both he and Elan turn simultaneously to see Burnham. "I apologize for overhearing. I was coming to ask you when you would like to resume neuro-pressure. I'm willing to take the risk if you are."

Considering that they've just finished being mentally linked, it's probably not catastrophic for her to overhear him reveal something that's pretty obvious. Still, he hates to admit to being afraid. "All right. Tonight?"

"Yes," she says. "I'll come to your quarters at—2200?"

He nods and she walks away. "Elan—" he starts.

"Try not to worry," she tells him, though her antennae wave uncertainly. "It won't do any good."

Lorca drinks his coffee. It's cold now. "Why don't you distract me by telling me more about your own problems," he says, and at least she keeps him talking about something else for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

Burnham arrives promptly at 2200, accompanied by Elan and T'Lac. "Just—in case," she says. "They're only here in case something happens the first time we touch."

He's glad he hasn't already taken his shirt off. He offers up his hand, for lack of something better to do, and Burnham shakes it firmly. Nothing happens. "Great," Elan says. "I'm out of here."

T'Lac nods. "I will accompany you." At least there's some hope for Elan.

When the doors close, it's only him and Burnham. "Looks like we're safe," he says. It doesn't break the tension, at least not for him. He pulls off his shirt; Burnham strips down to her tank top. "Just tell me what to do."

"Sit down," Burnham says. She sets a fat pillar candle on either side of him, maybe a foot away, and lights them. "Facing away from me." He obeys, and then comes the familiar warning, "I'm going to touch you now."

"Thanks for warning me," he says. It comes out sounding sarcastic and he adds, "I mean that sincerely. I don't like people coming up behind me."

"I know." As promised, Burnham lays her hand flat on his shoulder. He flinches—just a little—at the memory that surfaces, the bite marks that she left in the skin on that shoulder. She lifts her hand away. "Is something wrong? The bond?"

He laughs, his voice rough. "No, just a normal memory. Not the bond. Go ahead." Maybe she's managed to suppress the memories entirely. It seems like something that Vulcans would learn how to do.

She replaces her hand and presses hard with the heel of it, until he winces, and she knows that reaction to neuro-pressure well enough not to worry. "Remember to breathe," she tells him. "It hurts because it's been a little while."

"No, that always hurts," he gripes.

"Well, it probably hurts more because I haven't done it recently." She sounds annoyed too. She presses harder.

"Ow!" It's not the kind of thing he would usually say, but this neuro-pressure is startlingly more painful than it usually is.

"Maybe you're just not in the right frame of mind for it." Burnham takes her hands away. "Fine, let's try starting with meditation."

Lorca had just started learning to combine it with neuro-pressure when she'd begun her...pon farr. He sighs and adjusts until he's sitting cross-legged in front of the candle, glaring at it. Burnham, across from him, stares at the other one.

"Focus on the candle flame," she says. "Clear your mind of all other thoughts."

The only way Lorca has ever managed to do this is to imagine himself in a massive cargo bay and then imagine each of the objects inside being transported away, one by one, until he's the only one left. He doesn't think it's really how you're supposed to do it. "All right," he says.

"Really?" He explains his cargo bay approach. "Interesting." Burnham actually does sound interested. "That's a very—concrete way of thinking about it. All right, do it again."

"Ready," he says, when the last crate of salvage has disappeared.

"Now the square breathing." This is the breathing he likes the least. Breathe in, two three four; hold, two three four; breathe out, two three four; hold empty, two three four. He tries to focus on the shape of the square, his breath marching up one side, across, down the other side, across. Eventually, he hears Burnham say, "All right. Let's try again." The candles have burned down visibly, and he wonders how long it's been. This time, Burnham's hands don't hurt at all, and he's almost surprised when she says, "Turn around and put your hands on my back."

He's never gone through a neuro-pressure session feeling such a sense of emptiness—peaceful in some ways, but very lonely in others. There are no real thoughts occupying his brain, but every so often he realizes that Burnham isn't talking and that there's a place in his brain where she used to be all the time. When Burnham says, "All right, we're done," it's almost a shock.

"We used to—talk more, during neuro-pressure. Is it supposed to be this silent?"

She stands and turns to face him. "It can be, or it can be noisier. Now that I have a—sense—of what happens in your mind when you have the nightmares, I thought it might be more helpful to focus on emptying your mind. Would you prefer it the other way?"

Lorca stands as well. The candles have burned themselves out, wicks submerged in wax. "I suppose we'll see what happens tonight. Maybe it'll be better."

It's not better. The only difference is that he's alone this time—alone in an agonizer, alone in a Klingon prison cell, alone in a disabled shuttlecraft, alone sealed in the silent white cargo bay as the life support fails. He wakes up gasping for air.

"Computer, locate Michael Burnham." He can't help checking.

"Michael Burnham is in her quarters."

"Status?"

"Michael Burnham is asleep."

He closes his eyes and imagines the cargo bay full again. It takes a long time to fall back asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the next neuro-pressure session, Lorca tells Michael, "The nightmares were different, but I wouldn't say they were better. I was—alone in

them. Completely.”

“All right,” she says. “No more silent neuro-pressure.” They talk, quietly, about nothing in particular—Tilly’s latest campaigns to improve crew morale, Chandavarkar’s surprising knack for the ushaan-tor, whether the food synthesizers produce adequate plomeek soup and how they would ever know if not. At the end, Burnham says, “Hopefully you won’t have the dreams, but if you do, hopefully you won’t be alone.”

He remembers their neuro-pressure sessions before the pon farr, the way he used to end them by saying— “You could stay.”

Burnham touches the back of his hand, as though reassuring herself that it’s safe. After a very long time, she repeats the refrain: “Maybe next time.”

At least he’s not alone in the nightmares this time. Michael and Isaac somehow persuade everyone that Burnham and Lorca are the impostors and the crew pursues them through the corridors, even crawling through the Jefferies tubes, until they’re cornered at an airlock—

“Status?”

“Michael Burnham is asleep.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“All right,” he says at the beginning of neuro-pressure. “When we didn’t talk, I was alone, and when we talked about the crew, I dreamed about them chasing us through the ship and blowing us out the airlock. We need to find another option.”

Burnham doesn’t comment on ‘us.’ “We’ll return to face-to-face neuro-pressure positions, I think.” They sit facing each other, legs fully extended, and begin the breathing.

An hour later, after they’ve finished the neuro-pressure, after he says “You could stay” very carefully, Burnham says, “All right,” and goes to the bedroom. Lorca follows, then turns away as she half-undresses. They’ve seen each other naked plenty of times, in and out of this bed, but always as a precursor to sex, and this time it feels—different. He replicates a pair of sleep pants in her size, gives them to her without looking too closely, and they both get into bed.

Burnham lies facing him, her forehead just touching his own, and they breathe almost the same air. It’s all too much, too intense, too close to what’s come before, and so he says, “I’m going cross-eyed trying to look at your face.”

That startles a laugh out of her. “My apologies, Captain.” That sounds so strange lying in bed with her, to be called Captain. Burnham rolls over and eases back, just enough that her back is pressed against Lorca’s chest—the way they slept that very first night together in the cold on P3X-524, though with less bare skin. He takes it as permission to wrap one arm around her and they fall asleep.

The neuro-pressure can’t stop every nightmare, though.

He knows this one well: it’s the Buran all over again, but on Discovery. They’re taking fire from the Emperor’s flagship and the Klingons all at once and Klingon soldiers have boarded the ship. Stamets yells, “There’s something wrong with the spore drive!” over comms and then there are Klingon voices in the background and he screams. Chrian staggers onto the bridge with half her body covered in plasma burns and says, “They’ve taken Engineering!” before she collapses. Detmer starts to speak and then another round of torpedoes hit the ship, directly on the bridge, and she and Owosekun are gone, vaporized, in the blast—only the emergency forcefield keeps the rest of them from being sucked out. Rhys is down—when Lorca looks at him, there’s blood everywhere, his head nearly caved in from a strike to his station.

“Elan, Burnham, with me.” The air is turning noxious. Elan steps first through the doors of the bridge and disappears in a flash of green disruptor fire. Chandavarkar charges after her and is struck down in a single blow by a Klingon in battle paint. Lorca tries to shield Burnham with his body but he hears her scream and when he turns, there’s a bat’leth through her chest and he yells “Burnham—”

“Gabriel!” The voice cuts through everything. He flings himself upright, groping for a weapon. There’s nothing, no phaser or knife or anything of use—“Gabriel,” he hears again, and he realizes where he is.

“Lights to low,” he croaks, and he’s in his bed, blankets flung to the ground. “Burnham,” he says, and sees her across the room. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she says. “I woke up when you cried out the first time and moved away. You told me never to wake you by touching you.”

He gasps in another breath. “Good. Good that you remembered.” He has to get out of bed, has to get out of this room. “Computer—”

“Site-to-site transport to cultivation bay,” Burnham says. In an instant they’re both in the mycelium cultivation bay, a few feet into the bright wilds of the mushrooms. “Try to breathe as you would in a neuro-pressure session.” She doesn’t come any closer.

The air of the cultivation chamber is fresh, entirely free of the chemical fumes that had crept into his nightmare. He counts his breath in, his breath out, the space in between, until the soft damp ground beneath him feels real and the tiny rustling noises of the spores have replaced the sirens in his head. “It was—a bad one,” he admits. “You can come closer now.”

She doesn’t look afraid as she walks to him, only contemplative. “You were yelling names. You yelled my name.”

Lorca huffs out a breath. “The Emperor and the Klingons had joined forces to destroy Discovery. They killed—everyone.” He doesn’t want to think about the details again, doesn’t want to revisit that image of Burnham dead. “Did you call me Gabriel?”

“You didn’t respond to Captain, or to Lorca.”

“I appreciate it.” His body is slowly calming. “There have to be drugs for this that the doctors just won’t give me.”

Burnham offers him a hand again. He accepts it and stands. “Have you considered sleeping in a different room?”

“I slept in Lieutenant Riley’s old quarters after the other Michael escaped.”

“Did it help?”

Stamets’ smoke creature approaches slowly down the path between stands of mushrooms, a gentle wave of spores preceding it. “I don’t think so,” he says. “No one was there to wake me up, but—I don’t think it was better.” The creature slides up Lorca’s leg and enfolds him the way it does Stamets sometimes, and a strange calm settles over him. “This is better.”

“I’m not sure the room of a man whose death nearly resulted in your own was the best alternative.” Burnham takes a deep breath. “You could try sleeping in my quarters.”

“What, with Tilly and Agatha?” The image of himself and Burnham squeezed into one bed while Tilly and Agatha snuggle in the other is funny enough to make him chuckle despite the lassitude sweeping through him.

Burnham looks up into his eyes and smiles a little. “Saru gave Tilly her own quarters, now that she’s a lieutenant. And gave me my own too.”

“Do you want me to sleep there? We were—bonded for almost a week. You knew everything I felt, all the time. Neuro-pressure is one thing, Burnham. You don’t have to do all of this—I’m not your penance either,” he says.

“I’d like you to try to sleep there.”

When he steps toward her, the smoke creature pulls away and for a moment he sees something dark and oily leaving his own body into the creature. Whatever it is, the creature sifts through it, until it’s nothing but a fine gray powder falling to the path. He’s probably hallucinating.

They walk to Burnham’s quarters instead of transporting. It loosens a little of the tension in his muscles, lets him continue to steady his breathing, and he can see the hallways of the ship intact, no screaming or fires or bodies. Three ensigns jog past with only a breathless “left.” From the windows, he can see only space, silent and starry. There are no birds of prey, no strike ships, no torpedoes. Burnham doesn’t try to talk to him as they walk.

Her quarters, when they arrive, are small and spartan. It shouldn’t be a surprise—the photo reels, the knick-knacks, everything decorative in the quarters that she shared with Tilly must have belonged to Tilly. There’s a single framed photo on the table, too hard to make out in the dim light, and two paper books. One must be *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Burnham follows his gaze. “I can read a little, if you’d like. If it would help.”

“Yes,” he says. “What’s the other book?” He sits down on the edge of the neatly made bed. They walked here barefoot, he realizes.

“Computer, reading light,” Burnham says, and a warm glow appears at one side of the bed. Lorca takes this as his indication that he should take the other side. She picks up the book and brings it over. “It’s *Through the Looking Glass*. The sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.” When she hands it to him, he sees that it’s not a match to the other book. “Tilly made it for me a few months ago. She printed out the original text on individual pieces of replicated paper and then bound them together herself.”

“So it would feel like a real book. Tilly does love you.” He settles himself next to her atop the covers, gives her back the book, and slides down until his head rests on the pillow.

“She’s a good friend,” Burnham says. “The best possible person I could have been assigned to live with.”

“She’ll be a great captain someday.”

Burnham opens the book with one hand and strokes her fingers through his hair with the other. He closes his eyes at the feeling. “Go to sleep—Gabriel,” she tells him, and then begins to read. “*I really must get a thinner pencil. I can’t manage this one a bit; it writes all manner of things that I don’t intend.*”

He drifts off with Burnham’s hand warm on his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of Lorca’s dreams are full of snicker-snacking vorpal blades, without a ship in sight. He wakes up warm and finds Burnham sitting cross-legged next to him, reading something on her PADD.

“You slept,” she says.

“Yes. There was something wrong with the universal translator, in my dreams.”

Burnham looks confused for a minute and then laughs. “No,” she says. “Some of the words are invented just for the book. For a poem in it.”

“Seems appropriate,” he says. He pushes himself up until he’s sitting next to her, back against the wall. “What’s that?” She tilts the PADD screen so that he can see it. When he leans in for a better look, he finds her cheek very close to his own. He admits, “It’s strange to be so close to you like this and not be—”

“Out of control?” She tilts her head to rest against his own. When she blinks, he can just barely feel the brush of her eyelashes. “Yes.”

He looks at the PADD in her hand and scrolls through it while she holds it steady. “Some kind of spore drug?”

“The cultivation bay always seems to help you. When we were there last night, it looked like the creature had drawn something out of you

somehow. It would be unrealistic for you to sleep there every night, but I thought that we might be able to use the spores in some way—maybe a more directed exposure—to reduce the intensity of your nightmares, if not the frequency.”

There’s something strange happening to his heart, like a funny kind of arrhythmia. “I love you,” he says very quietly.

“I think…” She takes a deep breath. “I love you too.”

It should be something dramatic, all-consuming, the way it felt to touch her when they were bonded. Instead it’s just the two of them, curled together in bed, cheeks pressed together as Burnham shows him her brilliance one more time. She turns her head slowly and he does the same, until their lips meet.

He brings one hand to her cheek, gentle, to feel the shape of her face as they kiss. It’s different than before, than all the times that were fierce and fast. Burnham strokes his cheek, his neck, fits her hand around his shoulder and holds him there. It’s a long time before they separate. “Say it again,” he breathes.

Burnham smiles widely, unreservedly. “I love you.” She kisses his cheek, gives him the PADD, and gets out of bed. “Do you want to get breakfast before shift?”

Chapter Summary

Elan punches him in the side. “Ugh, happy people are the worst.” Her tone says she’s glad for him, though. When the turbolift arrives at the mess hall, she adds, “No point telling you to be careful, you never listen to me anyway.”

They go to breakfast. His entire body feels buoyant. Burnham follows him to his usual table in the mess hall and he smiles stupidly at her between bites of pancakes while she drinks her green juice. She nudges him under the table with her toe and says, laughing, “Stop that, people will think you’re happy.”

“Wouldn’t want to frighten them.” He hides his smile behind his coffee cup. Elan begins to approach his table on autopilot and then stops and makes a series of faces at him, punctuated with increasingly emphatic gestures of her antennae. “I’ll see you on the bridge, Lieutenant,” he calls, and if anyone on the ship hasn’t already heard about him eating breakfast with Burnham and gossiped about what it means, this will seal both of their fates. “You’re smiling too,” he tells her. “Not concerned?”

“What, about this?” Burnham raises her eyebrow and gestures vaguely at the two of them. “This isn’t that big of a ship. There aren’t a lot of secrets.”

“Anymore.”

“Well, ever.” She has a slight green juice mustache. “Deeply personal secrets, maybe. But the kind that make good gossip? Never.”

“It’ll probably cause more good gossip if you come into my ready room with me before alpha shift starts.”

She smiles again. “We have to give the people what they want.”

The doors to his ready room have barely closed before he pulls her to him and kisses her the way he’s been dying to do since they got out of bed. Burnham has the same idea and they stumble back against a wall as they kiss, then toward his desk, and he never should have let them leave her bedroom without this, without some kind of—*consummation*. He settles for the green-juice flavor of her tongue, the heat of her hands, the way she slides them up under his shirt as he pins her against the desk to drown in her. Burnham bites his lip and he pulls back, breathing hard. “This uniform isn’t exactly—” he starts. It’s one thing for the bridge crew to suspect what they’re in here doing, and quite another to walk out there with a visible erection.

“I know. Maybe we should have skipped breakfast.”

“Oh, well, what’s eight more hours of waiting?” He’s been waiting *months* for this, after all. He can make it through an entire shift on the bridge.

Eight hours, it turns out, is a very long time to sit a few feet away from the person who has finally—finally!—declared her love, and not be allowed to touch her or even really talk to her beyond occasional reports on their progress through space. There are a few blips on sensors that provide some distraction, but they all turn out to be minimal: a comet comprised of ores they already know, a planetoid that they scan for a few hours before moving on to find something more exciting. It’s excruciating to wait. When alpha shift finally ends, he and Burnham jostle each other on their way through the bridge doors and she says, very quietly, “My quarters?”

“Ten minutes.” He keeps his voice low and watches her step into the turbolift with a tiny private smile.

“Gabe!” Elan throws an arm around him. “Sparring? Food? What do you want to do next?” Her antennae are almost—bouncy.

“You’re such an insubordinate officer,” he tells her. “Why haven’t I demoted you yet?”

“My natural charm.” She jerks her head toward the turbolift doors and says, “Come on, we’ll ride the next turbolift down together.” When he starts to protest, Elan practically drags him. She must be radiating some kind of warning to everyone else, because they end up all alone on the turbolift.

“I have plans,” Lorca says. “That don’t include you.”

“And thank goodness for *that*. Do you know what you’re doing?” When he starts to answer, she adds, “Do you know what you’re doing *this time*?”

“She told me she loves me.” Lorca can’t help the giddiness that creeps into his voice like a teenager. Undoubtedly that’s supposed to be private, but telling Elan doesn’t count.

Elan punches him in the side. “Ugh, happy people are the worst.” Her tone says she’s glad for him, though. When the turbolift arrives at the mess hall, she adds, “No point telling you to be careful, you never listen to me anyway.”

When he gets to Burnham’s quarters, she’s waiting for him. “I never get tired of seeing you smile,” she says when he walks in.

“No? I think half the crew thinks I’ve finally lost my mind.”



She catches his wrist and pulls him close. “Only just now?” But she doesn’t let him answer, kisses him instead. She’s warm and solid against him, a comforting shape in his arms even as his breath comes faster. The kiss is slow, surprisingly so compared to this morning, but they’re still gradually moving toward the bed, trying to kick shoes off without separating. Burnham unzips his uniform, pushes it off his shoulders and grips his biceps with her hot hands, guiding him. They’re unsteady as they go, clutching each other as he kisses her neck, starts working on her jacket—

There’s a massive impact and they’re both thrown to the ground. For a minute, his brain can’t process it. Then he hears “*Red alert. All hands, red alert.*” His blood runs cold at that. They’ve only had one other red alert out here, and they barely survived it.

Burnham is already pulling her shoes back on, tossing him his, and the ship jolts again as something strikes it. Lorca shoves his feet into his shoes, doesn’t bother finding his uniform shirt. “Computer, site-to-site transport—”

“*Internal transport systems nonfunctional,*” the computer tells him. “*Internal transport systems nonfunctional,*” just in case he didn’t hear it the first time.

He and Burnham both race out the door to her quarters. “Computer, are turbolifts still functioning?” She’s at his side, running for the turbolifts as she asks the question.

“*Affirmative. Red alert. All hands, red alert.*” It’s like he’s back in one of his nightmares, feeling the ship jolt, hearing the hull scream with torpedo fire as he runs through the hallways. The attack ships outside are two-man fighters, strafing the hull with lines of eye-searing light and this is it, he knows deep in his gut, as he did on the Buran, they’re not going to survive this fight.

“Bridge, direct,” he tells the turbolift as soon as they’re both inside, and when the ship jolts again, he reaches for Burnham, cradles her face in his hands, kisses her and says “I love you,” and the turbolift doors open onto the bridge as the ship shudders again. He staggers to his chair. “Owosekun, report!”

“Shields at 50 percent,” Owosekun warns. “Hull breaches on decks seven, eight, nine, emergency forcefields are holding but just barely.”

“Evacuate all three decks and then pull the forcefields back.” He looks to Elan. “What’s our weapons situation?”

“Firing all phasers at will, looking for any break in their shields. Ineffective on the bigger ships, but we’re picking off the little ones.”

“Torpedoes?”

“If we fire torpedoes while their shields are still at this level, they’ll ricochet right back onto us!” She bares her teeth as their phasers stitch through two of the little ships. “We have to find a way in—”

Lorca looks from Elan to Burnham. “Can we transport past their shields? A bomb, a person, some poisonous gas, anything?”

Burnham shakes her head. “Not at their current shield strength, and not without lowering our shields too.”

Something punches through their shields and sparks blow out of two consoles; from the corner of his eye he can see a crumpled form on the ground, and this is it, this is his nightmare, soon there will be bodies in space. “Shields at 20 percent!”

“Transporters are offline,” Burnham says. So much for that possibility.

He knows the answer before he asks it, but he says “Warp?” anyway.

“No chance,” Chrian says from engineering. “They’ve—locked it again somehow, killed it. And no, tell Elan we can’t eject the warp core and detonate it, every system down here is malfunctioning—” He hears an explosion and her voice cuts off.

“Launch an escape pod that’s rigged to blow, hope they scoop it up? Blow one ship, maybe their shields go down?” Elan is still firing phasers as she says it, hoping for a weak spot somewhere.

“Escape pods are offline,” Detmer says. There’s no tremor in her voice, even after the wreck of the Shenzhou.

Elan swears long and loud and he realizes that the only fire is coming from the other ships now. “They’ve knocked out all weapons,” she snarls, and he hears the helpless rage in her voice. “Couldn’t fire a torpedo even if we were willing to risk it.”

The lead ship fires at them and the ship shudders again—he can almost feel the rupture, can almost see their shields evaporating even as Owosekun says, “We’ve lost shields, sir. Hull breach on deck six—”

Suddenly every one of the ships stops firing. “They’re...hailing us, sir.” Detmer’s voice is flat, almost disbelieving.

“On-screen.”

Maybe he should have known, or should have guessed. Somehow, he’s still surprised when Michael Burnham’s face appears on the viewscreen. “Hello, Gabriel,” she says.

“Michael.” He feels a pure surge of anger. “Stop your attack and stand down your ships.”

She laughs with a viciousness that he hates to see on a face that looks so much like Burnham’s. “Why would I do that? I can see as well as you can that your ship is crippled. Your warp drive has failed, your shields are down, and you’re venting atmosphere. Prepare to surrender.”

“Captain!”

Lorca mutes the transmission. “What is it, Lieutenant Tilly? We’re in a situation—”

“Sir, I couldn’t stop him—he’s in the spore drive chamber—”

Lorca knows who she means. “Get him out,” he says, without the vehemence that he should. Stamets is their only hope now.

“He’s locked in the coordinates! Sir, I can’t—”

“Black alert. Black alert,” the computer warns.

Time slows. Somewhere down in sickbay, Dr. Culber must be screaming. On the viewscreen, Michael’s laughter has turned to rage. She’s yelling something he can’t hear. “They’re firing torpedoes,” Elan says.

“Hull integrity is failing.”

He sees the approaching torpedoes and he knows what Stamets knows: there’s no other way out of this. Even a jump may tear them apart, but there’s no other choice. “*Go.*”

The ship jumps. He can almost feel the torpedoes passing through where they used to be. He can imagine Michael’s howl of disappointment.

And then. Every system is critical, hull integrity still failing but not failed yet. There, hanging in front of them, a planet he’s only seen a few times in his life, blue and green and white, and from the way that Detmer, Owosekun, and Rhys gasp, he knows for sure.

“Incoming transmission,” Rhys warns.

Lorca, still stunned, says, “On-screen.”

Admiral Cornwell’s face fills the screen. “Welcome back to Earth.”

## Chapter Summary

“Let’s get out of here, then,” Lorca says. “Any final farewells to the Alpha quadrant?”

Burnham meets his eyes and shakes her head. “Let’s fly,” she says.

“Admiral Cornwell,” Lorca says. “You can’t imagine how glad we are to be home.” The words taste insincere in his mouth.

“You’ll be escorted to Jupiter Station.” Even over the video screen, he can tell that she’s staring fixedly past him. “It appears your ship has sustained heavy damage. Are any of your systems *not* damaged?”

He weighs answering “external communications” but decides against it. “Mr. Saru?”

“Life support is functioning adequately on most decks,” Saru says delicately. “I’m afraid internal sensors are only intermittent, so it’s difficult to determine what else is intact.”

Cornwell—Kat? Katrina? He stumbles over how to think of her. Cornwell nods shortly. “You’ll be in strict quarantine at Jupiter Station until we can verify that there’s nothing infectious aboard. Do you have adequate supplies for a two-week quarantine?”

Lorca is still reeling. It hasn’t even been five minutes since Michael was telling him to surrender. “Yes,” he says automatically.

“Our scanners are having—difficulty, but it appears that there are substantially more life-signs aboard *Discovery* than should be aboard. Are you aware of this?”

“We had to take on—provisions,” Lorca says. He’s not about to say that it feels like half the crew has a pet thumper these days. “We’ve had no problems with them.”

There’s a cross between sorrow and anger writ large across her face. *When I return, we’ll talk about how you step down*, he remembers. *And after you get some help, maybe we’ll talk about how you get back in that chair*. Does she think he sent her there to die? They didn’t have a chance to talk, before she was evacuated off the ship for emergency surgery—and anyway, he hadn’t wanted to talk to her. “Once you arrive at Jupiter Station, I expect a full report,” she says.

“Our warp drive and impulse engines are very badly damaged,” he warns. “We’re starting repairs, but we may need a tow.” That will take at least an hour, he knows. Time to figure out what to do next.

“All right, Captain. I’ll contact you when you’re secure. Cornwell out.” The screen winks into darkness.

He can feel the undercurrent of tension on the bridge. “Saru, Elan, Burnham, in my ready room, five minutes. Get Chrian, and Stamets if you can. And Isaac.” All three nod and leave their stations, Burnham with that raised eyebrow he loves. “Detmer.”

Keyla turns in her chair to look at him. “Sir, I plan to cooperate fully with the tow, to the extent that it doesn’t—strain *Discovery*’s engines or hull integrity,” she says, and exchanges a glance with Owo.

Lorca nods. “Let me know when things change.”

They gather in the ready room. Tilly and Dr. Culber have both come along with Stamets. Isaac looks as though he isn’t quite sure what he’s doing there, glancing between Lorca and Chrian and Burnham in confusion. “Isa—Gabriel,” Lorca says, because it’s time to stop pretending. “I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“We’re back to Earth,” the man says carefully. “Headed for Jupiter.”

“Admiral Cornwell expects a full report.” Lorca meets his eyes. “In about two hours.”

Gabriel’s breath catches. “She’s all right?”

“All right enough to be very dangerous.” He looks around at the rest of the senior staff. “I think we all know that not everyone in this room is going to do very well once we’re back in Starfleet’s hands.”

“What, because we’ve been off cavorting at the other end of the galaxy? Something went wrong when we tried to jump home, we spent some time fixing things, we jumped back as soon as we could,” Elan says. “No reason for it to be any more complicated than that.” Her antennae somehow manage to demonstrate the biting sarcasm beneath her words.

“The thumpers have confused our life-sign readings,” Tilly interjects. “Even if they hadn’t, we’re—at the same number of humanoids that we had before.” She carefully doesn’t mention Lieutenant Riley’s death.

“Are you—” Saru looks around the ready room. “Captain, are you suggesting *not going back*?”

Lorca has known, for a long time, that many of them *didn’t* want to. Oh, there were plenty of people who were more or less agnostic about it, but most of the people in this room—Elan, Burnham, Stamets and by extension Culber, and even Chrian don’t really want to try to slot

themselves back into the lives they had before. And he, of course, has no life other than this one. There are the others, too, outside of this room—Tyler, who will never be let out of a laboratory until Section 31 figures out how to reverse-engineer what was done to him—who don't want to return. "Everyone who wants to return home will do so," he says. "No one will be left on this ship who doesn't want to be here. Including you, Mr. Saru."

"I'll go back," Gabriel says. "As—myself. They'll think I stole the ship, if I go with you."

"They may never let you fly again," Lorca warns.

There's a hungry look on Gabriel's face that's been there since Lorca mentioned Cornwell. "I don't care."

"Then Dr. Culber should return you to your original appearance," Burnham interjects. "Immediately. The sooner that you're the one interacting with the admiral, the more successful this will be—whatever *this* turns out to be."

Culber reluctantly releases Stamets into Tilly's hands and moves to stand next to Gabriel. "One more Captain Lorca, coming up," he mutters, and the computer whisks them away.

Lorca turns to Stamets next. "Only if you can do it," Lorca says. "Only if you can jump one last time."

"Only if it's not *one last time*," Stamets says. He looks remarkably well, actually. "This jump was—nothing, captain. I could do it again in a heartbeat. I think I've figured it out, how to do it—forever."

"I don't need it forever," Lorca cautions. "Your husband would kill me if I suggested that. Just once more, for now."

Stamets smiles a little dreamily. "I can do that. Just tell me when it's time."

Lorca knows Elan is with him, so he looks to Tilly. "I need someone to find out who actually wants to stay. I don't want to drag anyone with us who wants to be home."

"We'll need to disappear," Burnham says. "Not just run away. They'll need to think that we're dead."

Lorca starts to warn Saru that he should leave if he's not planning to come with them, but Saru says, "Not to worry, Captain. I'll excuse myself. I understand what you are doing, and I believe I understand why, but I...do not wish to participate."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Saru," Lorca says. "It's been an honor to serve with you."

The plan falls into place swiftly after that. Lorca stands out of view as Gabriel, newly restored, reports to Cornwell. It's a slightly truncated and much more confused narration of events, which makes sense considering that Gabriel was only present for about twenty-five percent of them. At the end of it, Cornwell says, "Thank you, Captain Lorca. External repairs will begin shortly. We expect to release you from quarantine in fourteen days."

Before she can sign off, Gabriel says, "Kat, wait." His voice is very rough. This isn't part of the plan. "I know you have no reason to believe me when I say this, but the last year—everything since the Buran—it feels like a different person has been living my life."

"Gabriel—"

"I'm stepping down. In fourteen days I'll walk off this ship and I'll be—anything but a captain." This is too open, too gorily emotional, and Lorca would leave the room if not for the fact that he has to know if Gabriel warns her in any way. "I'll be a civilian if you want me to be." And there, if ever he needed proof that he and Gabriel are entirely different people—there's no power in this galaxy that would lead Lorca to volunteer to yield his ship, let alone his commission. No power that would make him give up the stars.

Cornwell's voice is halting. "I want to believe you, Gabriel—"

"I'll prove it," he says. "Whatever you want me to do. I'll—I'll move to Massacre Rim and take over the sanctuary station, your mother deserves to retire, you can stay with me when you're planetside—"

Lorca has no idea what he's talking about, but Cornwell clearly does. "I'll see you in fourteen days, Gabriel," she says, and her voice is soft now. She does believe him, Lorca can see it. As soon as the transmission ends, Lorca leaves the room.

The repairs begin almost as soon as they dock at Jupiter Station. The smile on Owo's face grows as she begins to report each increasingly functional system. Tilly has begun sending him lists on his secure padd of crew that will want to leave and crew that will stay, and he's unreasonably flattered at his own good judgment when he sees how many of them want to stay.

Burnham laughs at him when he says that, when they finally go to bed together that night. "I don't think it's all down to their desire to serve under the great Captain Lorca," she tells him, and kisses him lightly.

He catches her around the waist and holds her tight. "I doubt it's much of that at all," he says. "But it means this isn't just—me being selfish." The laughter leaves Burnham's eyes, and she looks at him somberly. "I told you I would never let them take you back to prison."

She lays a gentle hand on his cheek. "I wouldn't let them take you *to* prison," she tells him. "I don't recommend court-martial." Burnham pulls him down into a kiss.

It's the first time they've been alone together since all of this started, since they first arrived back at Earth, since Michael attacked. He'd almost forgotten that they can have this now, that he can taste the bow of her lip and slide his tongue across hers, that there's no reason not to tug down the zipper of her shirt as they do. She pushes him a few steps back as they kiss, until he finds himself half falling, half sitting on the edge of the bed, and then she climbs onto the bed too, straddling his lap. Lorca slides her jacket off her shoulders and then grips the cloth there,

trapping her hands very gently behind her back. Burnham smiles and circles her hips, rubbing against where he's hard in his pants. His breath catches. "You know," he pants, as she does it again, "aside from the torture, P3X-712 did have some things to—recommend it."

She draws in a long breath. "The hot spring was tolerable." He remembers licking cold raindrops off her nipple as the water steamed around them, the way she had held his head there to keep him where she wanted his tongue, even as she ground down against him in the water. If he's honest, that's all he wants—for Burnham to show him what she wants him to do so he can make her happy. Lorca pulls her undershirt over her head too, pulls it and the jacket off and drops them to the floor as he looks at the expanse of her skin. She must be able to feel how hard he is, because she makes a low kind of groaning noise and says, "The lack of clothing at the hot spring was helpful."

"These damn uniforms," Lorca agrees, even as he's working one hand down the front of the pants as best he can. Burnham rises up onto her knees and he mourns the loss of pressure but at least now he can get her pants undone, slip his hand inside and appreciate briefly the way that her underwear is soaked through before he's pulling it aside. Two of his fingers practically glide inside her as soon as he touches her skin, and the noise she makes then sends a jolt straight to his cock. "You're," he says, and grasps for an adjective, any adjective, that can capture the feeling of this. He wants—Burnham leans forward, onto one arm and then the other so she can try to wriggle out of her pants, and every time she moves, she clenches around him. He presses his thumb against her clit as she does it, unexpectedly, and she gasps and bucks against him.

Once her pants are off, Lorca looks down to where his fingers disappear inside her and slides them in and out slowly, just enough to see the way they're glistening. "Burnham," he says. He wants out of his clothes, but Burnham only wraps her hand around the back of his neck and pulls his head to her breast. Lorca touches the tip of his tongue to her nipple, once, and then says "Did you want something?"

"Use your imagination," she tells him, and so he lays kisses on her breast in ever-widening circles, never quite touching her nipple, and slides a third finger inside her as he works her clit. She's almost frantic now, riding his fingers, knees spread wide. "The—bond—" she gasps out, and he remembers how to get there, that place in his head with the two tents set up on the ledge.

In his mind, he steps out of the tent and sees her on the ledge too—and in the real world, he sucks hard at her nipple and the sensation rolls through both of them as Burnham comes. They're both still gasping from it as he pulls his fingers out of her and Burnham urges his hips up, enough that she can yank his pants open and slide them down just far enough to free his cock. When she slides down onto him, the feeling reverberates, echoes, increases until Lorca's awareness encompasses only his cock buried deep in Burnham—and then it's more than that, it's the tight slide in and out, it's the fierce pleasure of the fullness she feels with his cock inside her. They both come and he has some vague sense that they've rolled over and that he's fucking into her with her legs over his shoulders, thrusting deep, but it's hard to stay connected to anything outside the two of them and the way that every touch is intensified, magnified—

He comes a second time, blindly, shaking, and hears Burnham cry out with him. Slowly, slowly, she eases out of the bond, and he finds himself doing the same even before he's fully conscious again in the real world. He's lying next to Burnham, not quite touching her, and she's staring at him with a poleaxed expression that he's probably mirroring. "All right," Burnham says slowly. "So maybe we shouldn't do that every time."

Lorca laughs a little breathlessly. "Special occasions. Once we're—safe."

"We are about to steal the most advanced starship that the Federation has ever made, including the only living being that can fly it or could ever develop genetic therapy necessary for someone else to fly it. Logically speaking, this is one of the least safe things a person could do."

"Oh, no," Lorca says. Burnham raises an eyebrow. "We could be stealing it from the Klingons." She smiles a little and darts forward just enough to steal a kiss too. "I love you," Lorca tells her, because the novelty of being able to say it freely hasn't worn off yet. He's not sure it ever will. "Do you think it's a bad plan?"

"It's an extremely selfish plan," Burnham says.

"We'll leave message buoys. We'll send our data back. This was always meant to be a science ship, you know that. Not a warship." He closes his eyes. "There's another fourteen days for everyone to change their minds."

\* \* \* \* \*

They don't change their minds. No one is sanguine about Stamets' future, or Culber's for that matter. Or Tyler's. Privately, Lorca thinks that Burnham's future is probably a toss-up—if they'd gone straight to the starbase, however long ago it was, she might have gotten a medal and she might have been sent straight back to prison with a "We'll call the next time we need you." Or someone in Section 31 might have decided that she knew much too much and had already demonstrated disloyalty and left her dead in a prison camp riot. Now, he thinks the Section 31 option is the likeliest. His own future—they would make him an admiral, most likely. That's what they'll try to do with Gabriel, thank him and put him safely away in an office where his post-traumatic stress disorder can't put anyone else in danger.

"Tell me the truth, Gabe, how fucked is this plan?" The mess is deserted or he'd be annoyed at Elan, who is leaning back in her chair with her feet up on the table. The crew is going a little stir-crazy trapped in spacedock, and Elan is no exception.

"I'd say thirty percent we make it, thirty percent we get caught, thirty percent we blow up," Lorca says. "People eat off those tables, you know."

"They eat off trays," Elan says. "What's the other ten?"

"Oh, five percent we make it and blow up, five percent we get caught and blow up."

Elan grimaces. "I don't like your math. Give me and Chrian and Stamets some credit. Either we get caught or we make it—we're not going to fuck up the timing and blow up the ship."

"Fine, what's that, fifty-fifty now? How's that?"

“Much better.” Elan picks at an imperfection in the table with one fingernail.

“Has she decided yet?”

Elan’s antennae stiffen. “It’s complicated.”

“We leave in three days, Elan.”

“Oh, excuse me, would *you* like to have this conversation with her too? Just because you’re disgustingly happy—”

“Would that—help?”

She stares at him in horror. “Would what help.” The lack of a question mark at the end of her sentence suggests she can’t believe what he’s about to say.

“Would it help if I—”

“*Absolutely* not.” Elan’s antennae scrunch a little and then droop. “I appreciate it, Gabe. But she—knows all her options. She’s doing her logical processing, considering the variables, et cetera. I’m sure she’ll tell someone when she finally makes up her damn mind.”

He leaves it alone. “Rhys tells me we’re almost fully restocked?”

“Everything that can be transported in without attracting notice.”

The lights come up a little. People are beginning to trickle into the mess hall. No one can sleep right anymore, even though the duty shifts continue as normal. It’s just that there’s nothing to do. The ones who don’t know better have been trapped for 11 days and are counting down until the minute that they can escape the ship. The ones who do are on edge and counting down until the minute that they escape spacedock.

Saru is coming. That surprised him, when Saru told him. “I feel it is—important, that you continue to have someone on your bridge crew of—my temperament,” he’d said, and from someone else it would sound pompous, but Saru is both sincere and absolutely correct. They’re about to be a Federation ship wanted by the Federation, trying to operate more or less according to Federation guidelines. Even with all the bridge crew coming, and—Lorca thinks—about eighty percent of the crew, things are going to be tight. Saru is cautious where Lorca is not, interested in the minutiae of running things where Lorca is emphatically not. “I’ll be glad to have you,” Lorca had told him, and meant it.

The timing has to be perfect, which is hard when there are twenty people involved who have no idea that they’re involved at all. When the time comes, Gabriel transports off the ship first. “Good luck,” Lorca tells him outside the transporter room, carefully out of sight.

“You need it more than I do,” Gabriel says.

The first two groups transport off the ship, carefully selected to include only those who are supposed to leave. The Klingon L’Rell goes with them, and Lorca is glad to see the last of her.

This is when things get tricky. Right now, Chrian is setting off what appears to be the beginning of a warp reactor overload. “Jupiter Station, this is Discovery,” Saru transmits. “Be advised, we’re showing fluctuations in our warp core—”

“We’re seeing the same thing, Discovery. Do you have it under control?”

Saru’s tension on the video transmitted to Jupiter Station is no performance. “Jupiter Station, engineering advises me that the fluctuations are worsening—”

“Discovery, we are releasing the docking clamps. Please proceed to a safe distance. We will prepare to transport the remaining crew if you are unable to resolve the problem.” They’ll be seeing worsening readings now, watching Discovery limp toward a safe distance as though one of its thrusters isn’t working properly. “Discovery, please continue your course away from the station. Do you need emergency transport?”

“Yes, that would be best,” Saru says, and his voice is calm enough but anyone who knows him can see the anxiety. “Please begin transport immediately.”

There’s a moment of silence, during which Chrian is triggering the next stage. “Discovery, lower shields, we are unable to transport.”

“Jupiter Station, shields are down—please transport immediately! Engineering, prepare to jettison the warp core!”

Chrian yells some string of technobabble back over the comm at Saru, which ends with “Matter/anti-matter containment is breaking down—”

“Stamets, prepare for black alert,” Lorca says over the encoded comm channel. “On Elan’s mark.” It’s up to the three of them now; Chrian and Elan’s carefully-constructed bomb has to be timed perfectly with the jump.

“It’s away—jump!” The blue fire of warp detonation blooms all around them as Stamets jumps.

“Status?” The ship re-materializes just where they’re supposed to, in the shadow of a remote outpost moon.

“All systems normal,” Owo says. “Hull integrity and shields at one hundred percent.”

“Chrian? How’s the warp core?”

“Fine, no thanks to any of you,” Chrian snaps. She’d been very angry about being asked to manufacture a warp core detonation that would justify the absence of substantial debris when Starfleet investigated. She’d said a lot of words that the Universal Translator was too prudish to translate and then some other words that would’ve gotten her court-martialed on an ordinary ship, but she’s done it, as far as Lorca can tell.

“Burnham, Detmer? What about our—other package?”

“Preparing to transport,” Rhys says.

The thirty people who materialize in the cargo bay are a ragtag bunch, but each has been vouched for by someone on the crew that Lorca himself trusts—not-so-wide-eyed explorers, a few disillusioned soldiers, even one or two Vulcans. New friends for T’Lac, maybe.

It had been a hell of a fight among the senior staff, whether to try to bring on any new crew before departing the Alpha quadrant altogether. Every person told about the plan was a person who could blow it up. “Only people you would trust with hundreds of lives,” Lorca had said, over and over. “If someone pointed a gun at them and told them to shoot you—the people who would turn quick and shoot the person giving the order. Those are the only ones we want.” Not that most of the people they agreed on would be willing to shoot any person. Eventually, in private, Saru had told him that they had to take the risk to have enough crew members, and then even more privately, Burnham had reminded him that this entire plan was insane and they might as well do everything they could to make it a success.

“Let’s get out of here, then,” Lorca says. “Any final farewells to the Alpha quadrant?”

Burnham meets his eyes and shakes her head. “Let’s fly,” she says.

## Chapter Summary

It's not a federation, and it's certainly not an empire, but it feels right.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's hard, that first year. There's friction between the new arrivals and the old crew, subtle jockeying for position. T'Lac runs two different new biologists out of the lab, both of them nearly in tears, before she and Elan—resolve whatever their issue was. There's a fight—a physical fight—over who gets to adopt the latest round of thumper pups, which is not really about adopting fluffy creatures. The plants in the hydroponics lab are finicky and tend to die when not treated very gently, a task that seems to baffle people who have multiple degrees in taking care of plants. Chrian actually bites an engineering ensign, who goes to sickbay stammering “she just—bit me!” and holding his hand, and everyone is very sympathetic until it turns out that he was about to accidentally initialize a jettison sequence. The sympathy swings back to Chrian. The ensign is reassigned to build the new crew lounge that replaces the mess hall and informal bar space.

But. They explore a sector of the galaxy that Stamets has started to call the Epsilon quadrant (“You know that's not what *quadrant* means,” Hugh says every time, and Stamets just smiles, which makes Hugh smile). Tyler begins training some of the thumpers as scouts and some others as therapy animals, claiming he read about it in an old database, and stops carrying a gun altogether. Elan and T'Lac get their shit together, as Elan would say, and T'Lac smiles when she thinks no one is looking. The emotionless Vulcan mystique is bullshit. Chandavarkar and Tilly and Rhys are—irrepressible. Sometimes he thinks Saru is the only sane person on the ship.

Along the way, one of the new arrivals and one of the original crew decide to get married and join a small farming community, and Lorca lets them go because there are two teenagers in that community who are desperate to leave. They come very close to breaking the prime directive several times, mostly because Lorca is discovering that he has a very decided sense of injustice and has to stop going on away teams. They meet—aliens, for lack of a better word, who look like humans but with slightly different forehead ridges, on starships. The aliens are mostly friendly or at least curious, and then there's trade and exchange of ideas and sometimes occasionally Discovery takes on another crew member, or (rarely) loses one. When the aliens are unfriendly, Discovery is firm, and as time goes on, the friendly ones sometimes show up to support them. It's not a federation, and it's certainly not an empire, but it feels right.

And Burnham. Burnham, who he loves and still loves him back, even after the time that he insists the crew should have shore leave on a sandy beach that turns out to be infested with biting flies; even after the time that she insists she's right about a new propulsion system that, despite performing perfectly in all simulations, knocks out the warp drive and leaves Chrian baying for her blood. They argue sometimes—the first time he tells her “I'm the captain,” to end an argument, she reminds him “I'm a convicted mutineer”—but they don't *fight*, and it's startling to come to realize that he feels safe with her. With this crew.

"I love you," he tells her, whenever he can, and he never gets tired of seeing her quirk an eyebrow, smile her hidden smile, and say "I love you too."

## Chapter End Notes

I began this fic in May 2022 and finished it in January 2023...wild. And I have to admit that I've still only ever seen the first three seasons of Discovery.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!