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Summary

Discovery is tapped to take President Laira Rillak on a series of diplomatic missions. When Laira falls ill. Michael discovers that Laira has neglected to update her emergency contact information. While she recovers, Laira and Michael realizes that the update should be Michael.

Perhaps they should go on a date first.

Notes

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Chapter 1

It's late when President Rillak beams over. So late Michael waits for her in the conference room that the president will use while she's here. Admiral Vance said the ship she normally uses is in spacedock for refit and repair. Most of Laira's staff is also taking the time to recharge, so Laira beams over alone, without ceremony.

Smiling as she looks at Michael, Laira folds her hands in front of her. "Captain Burnham, my apologies for taking over your schedule."

There's a sincerity there that's entirely unnecessary. A mission is a mission. "We're happy to have you, ma'am." Michael indicates the conference room. "I hope this will be sufficient. Your guest quarters also have a workspace. It might be a little antiquated—"

"I believe desks were old before they came to be on your ship, Captain."

Chuckling, Michael nods. "You've got me there." She leads Laira to the replicator, explains the security protocols and heads towards the door.

"At least it's under better circumstances this time," Laira says, fidgeting with her hands before she walks towards the replicator.

"Much improved, ma'am."

With a sigh, Laira orders a coffee, even though her day must have started earlier than Michael's. She turns, raktajino in hand, and her sheepish smile grows like one of Paul's mushrooms.

"Interesting nightcap," Michael says.

Taking a sip, Laira lets her shoulders fall a little. She starts to speak but Michael finishes for her. It's a guess, because Michael's known enough people who work too hard to know what that little wince is about. "You drink it because it helps with the headache."

"Very astute, captain."

"You're not hiding it well, ma'am. Must be getting tired."

Laira sips her coffee again. "Perhaps I've hid it for hours and just now it's starting to be obvious."

Gently, Michael touches her arm. "Or maybe I'm exceptionally perceptive, ma'am. You look fine."

"You have always been perceptive, but you're not a good liar." Laira touches her hand for the briefest of moments, smiling gently, then nods. "Good night."

"Good night, Madam President." Michael leaves her to her incredibly late coffee, thinking of Admiral Cornwell, and Captain Georgiou. Even Amanda would smile through a terrible headache and insist she was fine. It's a very old tradition Laira seems on course to uphold.

The second night, Michael convinces her to come eat dinner in the lounge. A change of scenery is good for anyone and it's potluck night, when everyone replicates something and they all share. It's an often an eclectic buffet, and Michael prefers to use the old style metal trays so some things don't touch. (Some flavors are not meant to be shared). Laira's very careful with her own tray, politely trying a little of everything - acknowledging all of the crew - and her tray is precariously piled high. Michael guides her to a back corner, so she doesn't have to worry about the crew watching her or any other protocols. She must be hungry.

Still, Laira's very careful with her fork and knife, cutting a piece from her flatbread. Michael tears a piece with her hands and dunks it into the one of the many dips.

"Don't have to stand on ceremony, ma'am."

Laira's eyes widen at the "ma'am" and the way she inhales has a hint of annoyance, but given permission, she attacks her food like a hungry sehlat. Her lunch meeting was nine hours ago, of course she hasn't eaten since then.

Michael swallows a smile. They eat in satisfied silence. Much later, after seconds and dessert, when Reno and Tilly start a card game that will end with someone losing their boots, Laira touches her forehead, just for a moment. The movement is quick, subtle, but it goes with crinkles around her eyes and the way she holds her head. Another headache then, but at least tonight she's smiling.

That's something.

"A local anti-histamine will have less side effects but since the airborne pollen's affecting her eyes, a local will be a little uncomfortable." Hugh shows Michael an ordinary hypospray and a modified one. "Still, she'll probably want the local. The antihistamines yesterday made her groggy."

"So next trip to Xugawa Five needs to be in winter?"

"As far from the blooming trees as possible." Hugh pats her shoulder, tucking the hypos into a small bag. "If you use the local, it has to go

right into caruncles, the corners of her eyes. I'm happy to beam down—"

Michael smiles her thanks, shaking her head. "The negotiations are sensitive. I'm a good shot, don't worry."

"I'm sure you'll do great."

His faith in her helps a few minutes later when she's standing in a corner of the great hall on the planet, trying to help the president of the Federation stop crying.

Laira's eyes are red, and tears run down her face. She sniffs, and it has to be hell on her sinuses but she hasn't sneezed. "Are you going to tell me the pollen has some wonderful torture spikes in the shape of awful little hooks or something?"

"Horrible spikey polyhedra, with spikes in groups."

"Thank you." Chuckling, Laira daubs her eyes with her sleeves. "Now tell me why you're making a face."

"I'm not—"

The tilt of Laira's head insists that yes, she is, so fine.

"I have to inject it into your eyes."

"Oh is that all?"

"Well, you're so tall."

Laira's laughter has this genuine amusement that rings through her. "Should I sit down?"

"I don't know if you want me on my tiptoes while I do it, ma'am."

For a moment, they stare at each other, and Laira bites her lip, swallowing something she's not going to say. "I'm sure your hands are very steady."

She sits on a bench along the wall, and Michael takes the modified hypo from the bag. Lifting Laira's chin, she angles her head.

"I think it stings a little."

"Do your worst, Captain."

Michael could drown in her eyes, even red and weeping. They're blue and endless and there's so much faith in the way she looks through her.

Laira blinks and winces, gasping a little at the sudden pain but she holds still. She scrunches her eyes, blinks again, takes a breath and forces her eyes open so Michael can inject the other. Knowing it hurts, she should flinch, and she does, just a little, but it's in her hands and her body, but her head is still. Then it's over, Laira biting back a little gasp, and Michael holding her head so she can't rub her eyes, as much as instinct must want her too.

"Hugh said it should help almost immediately."

"So when I stop crying because I've been stabbed in the eye, the pollen won't bother me quite as much?"

"Exactly." Michael takes a handkerchief out of the bag - Hugh thinks of everything - and gently dries the tears from Laira's chin. Laira could do it herself, but there's something important about looking after her. President Rillak normally would have aides, probably even has her own doctor, but this is about Laira. She must know that. "How's the negotiation going?"

"Very smoothly, until I started crying uncontrollably." Laira sighs, looking away before she meets Michael's eyes. "The ambassador opened the patio doors so they could show me the redevelopment of their spaceport."

"And it's a nice spaceport?"

"It was a little blurry." Laira smirks a little and Michael hands her the handkerchief when she sniffs again. "Lieutenant Tilly and Commander Reno invited me to play cards again tonight."

"They invited you to clean out the competition."

"Like a palmiri beast?" That's Laira's real smile: the involuntary one that makes her eyes glow.

"Don't tell anyone I told you."

"It's our secret, Captain." Laira's hand covers her for a moment.

The air smells sweet and rich with flowers Michael doesn't know. "The trees making you cry smell incredible."

"Don't they?" Laira blinks twice more, touches her face a last time with the handkerchief and takes a breath.

"The card game starts at nineteen hundred."

"Are you implying they won't wait for me?"

"No ma'am." Michael stands, shifts Laura's sash of office on her shoulder so it's perfect. "Just trying to help your scheduling."

Laura starts to walk away, but pauses, looking back. "It's been awhile since anyone worried about how long my days are." She toys with her bracelet. "It's nice."

"Almost feels like we're alone together again, doesn't it?" Michael says, glancing down at her holo readouts on the empty bridge.

"I believe we are currently enjoying much better circumstances than trying to survive the subspace void left by the DMA."

"Much."

Zora's holographic self changes light patterns for a moment, as if acknowledging Michael's smile.

"It's quiet, isn't it?" Michael glances over the deserted bridge. Being able to give so much of the crew shore leave is a wonderful gift, even if it means the ship is just her and Zora. Tilly and some of her cadets are running some drills in engineering, since it's empty. Letting the crew all spend time on the gorgeous Vuutis II allows Zora to run a few complex diagnostics, even run some of the decks in low power mode.

"I find myself acutely aware of the absence of the crew's life signs. The air on the ship does not need to be recycled, nor do I need to account for their bioelectric signals."

"You're tracking them on the planet though, aren't you?"

"Of course, Captain." Zora pauses, reaching out to examine the crew. "I believe their dopamine levels indicate that they are having fun."

"I heard it's gorgeous down there."

"Sensor scans indicate an abundance of plant and animal life. The topography is also aesthetically pleasing."

Laura will be wrapped up in official functions all day and most definitely not hiking and surfing like the rest of the crew, but even she said it was beautiful. Out of everyone on board, she might need shore leave the most, but she's the one person Michael can't order to take some time off.

Michael finishes the last of the crew evaluations she was behind on, signs off on all the scientific research currently ongoing, and even takes the time to sit at her old science console, to track the passage of a cloud of micro meteors. They appeared to be in an elliptical orbit around the Vuustis star, but their trajectory is shifting.

"Zora, could you track this meteor cloud?"

"Yes, Captain. Do you believe it will endanger the ship or the planet?"

"It's not behaving as anticipated."

"I will continue to monitor it."

"Do you track all the space dust that doesn't behave how you want it to?"

Michael turns towards the voice. She didn't realize how engrossed she was in the micro meteors, but somehow she missed Laura transporting to the bridge.

"I try to, ma'am. Never know what space rocks are up to."

Laura's smile in return is so exhausted that Michael stands, starting towards her before she reminds herself that they're not— She doesn't—

"I have many extra chairs tonight, ma'am, if you'd like one."

Glancing around the bridge, Laura smiles a little more. She touches the back of the captain's chair. "Curious to see which one I'll take or is this a 'sit before you fall down' sort of thing?"

Michael can't tell her that she looks like hell, slightly warmed. The circles under her eyes are dark and there's something brittle about the way she's standing. Exhaustion? Something else entirely? "I would never presume, ma'am."

"You're too polite to tell me I look like shit."

Michael tilts her head, surprised. "Well—"

Passing the captain's chair, Laura touches the pilot's seat, then turns it to face Michael. "If Lieutenant Detmer won't mind?"

"I won't tell her."

"Our little secret then." Laura reaches up for her jacket, undoing the clasp. She sits very straight, forcing herself to have perfect posture. Michael starts towards her center seat, but takes Owosekun's place at OPS instead. Tapping the controls so it looks like she had a purpose for sitting here, she studies Laura under the better light of the viewer. She's flushed, not with pleasant exertion or the joy of shore leave; something

else.

"Difficult discussions?" Michael makes the question light, finding things to check on her console.

"No," Laura answers with a sigh. "They were very pleasant. The planetary leadership council is charming and efficient, and the negotiations were mutually beneficial."

Michael looks at her again, careful not to stare too much. "Could you shift our orbit a few degrees south? I'm trying to get a better look at my errant space rocks."

Laura's eyeridges rise quickly. "I'm not a Starfleet certified pilot, Captain."

"Isn't that the beautiful thing about programmable matter? Do what you want to the interface, and move us to a higher orbit. Unless you're intimidated by the ancient controls."

"I've flown some old freighters, but *Discovery* would be the oldest ship I've ever flown, by several hundred years."

"I believe that would constitute an honor, Madam President."

Laura stretches her fingers, then rests them on the console. Programmable matter surges around her hands, forming an interface she's accustomed to. "What are you going to do if I fly her into the atmosphere?"

"Guess I'll have to trust that your dad was a good judge of talent."

Laura's proud little smile has a softness to it that Michael sees around her crew. Those who loved them are gone, yet they're with them. *Discovery* moves easily to a higher orbit and Michael broadens her scans.

"Captain," Hugh's voice interrupts them from sickbay. "I'm getting scattered reports of some kind gastroenteritis, could be viral, maybe some kind of toxin our initial scans missed. Eight crewmembers have returned so far with painful stomach cramps. "

"Should I recall the medical team?"

"That might be wise, captain. I'll keep you updated." Hugh's channel closes.

"Captain, transport activity is increasing," Zora says "Thirteen people have returned to the ship, all of them beaming directly to sickbay."

Michael turns, catching Laura's eye. She still seems distracted, like there's something on her mind.

"They have no reason to harm us."

"Did you hear any mention of a disease? Seasonal perhaps? Something they wouldn't think to warn us about?"

Laura turns her chair to Michael, keeping one hand on the console, steadying herself as much as the ship. "Most of their population is in the equatorial band, their weather is incredibly stable."

"Zora, use what Sickbay has discovered so far to search for a cause on the planet. Something microbial, perhaps a substance that's not toxic to the Vuustians."

"My space rocks are going to have to wait." Michael activates the biological sensors, turning all of *Discovery's* scanners onto the planet. "An equatorial orbit would be helpful, if I can impose again, ma'am."

Laura's hands glide over the controls, and the ship moves, sailing over the planet below so the sensors can get a better view. "Will this work?"

"Yes, I'm trying to get Zora enough data to help Dr. Culber figure out what it is."

Laura's the last person Michael thought she'd end up alone on the bridge with, but she's gently eager to help. She seems to need the distraction as much as Michael needs another pair of hands. Leaving OPS for the science console, Michael guides Laura through recalling the crew while she collates the incoming data.

There are more than thirty cases of some kind of stomach bug, most of them developing after the crew had been planetside for more than eight hours.

Laura was one of the first to beam down, and her hand's clammy when Michael accidentally touches her. Asking if she's all right will simply be ignored, so Michael works at the task at hand. The space rocks Michael never got to study swing close to the ship, providing the planet below with a spectacular meteor shower.

"Their meteor showers aren't usually until midwinter."

"Something jostled these rocks out of orbit, brought them closer."

Laura nods, both of her hands on the science console. The way she bites her lip seems to help her concentrate. "Is that a gravity problem?"

"Yes, probably a cosmic string fragment or dark matter. Nothing as dangerous as the DMA, don't worry."

"I was worried."

"This is a local phenomena." Patting her hand, Michael notices immediately that Laura's skin is damp with sweat, and the flush she had earlier

is more noticable. Again she swallows the urge to ask if she's all right. Until she gets some of her bridge crew back, Laira is helpful and if she wants to ignore something, Michael can let her, at least for a little while longer.

Keyla and Joann arrive together, still dressed in their wetsuits, their hair wet from the sea. They had been talking about diving along the reef all of breakfast. Michael's happy they had time to do that together.

"Hear we missed out on the stomach bug," Keyla says.

"Maybe it doesn't affect the beach?"

Joann pats Michael's shoulder and Keyla wrings seawater from her red hair. "Hope you enjoyed your alone time, captain."

Laira smirks, taking a step towards the turbolift, ready to leave them alone, but she falters, balling her hand into a fist.

Catching her elbow comes more naturally than perhaps it should.

"Didn't go away?"

"And here I thought I was hiding it better." Laira holds her fist against her stomach.

Michael reaches for her badge, finding Keyla and Joann's eyes. "You have the bridge."

"You don't need to—" Laira swallows her protest, doubling up over her fist.

"Dr. Culber said it was painful."

Laira presses her lips together, reaching for the wall after they materialize into a busy sickbay. "Very."

Michael slides her hand along her arm, wrapping Laira's hand in hers. "Won't be long."

Whatever this is, there are more cases than beds, but Hugh, Dr. Pollard and the medical staff are moving through their patients, and there are a few smiles. They stand in a corner, Laira's warm fingers squeeze hers.

"Can you stand?"

"It's fine."

"You mean it feels like you've been phasered in the gut," Dr. Pollard breezes past them, runs a scan of Ensign Johnson before giving her another hypo. "We've come up with a functional anti-toxin for what seems to be some kind of algal-biproduct the Vuustians aren't affected by. They might even be adding it to their water for flavor."

Ensign Johnson slips from the biobed, the pain disappearing from her face. She's one of their nursing staff and she gets to work with them, still in her flowing yellow dress.

"See if Zora can find a way to replicate this faster."

"The anti-toxin is complex and the molecular construction needs to be precise or the incorrect chirality is dominant," Zora says from above them.

Gasping as she bends, Laira swallows her pain but it's clearly spiralling since the bridge.

Pollard meets Michael's eyes, and they guide Laira up onto the recently vacated biobed.

"None of our neuroblockers have been as effective as we like, but twenty-seven takes the edge off." Pollard runs another scan and mutters a curse. "Of course, twenty-seven is incompatible with your biochemistry, so give me a moment."

Sitting on the bed seems worse than standing, and there's sweat on Laira's temples now, creeping down from her hairline.

"Lie down."

Curling into her side, knees up slightly towards her stomach, Laira pulls both of her hands in, bringing Michael's with her.

"You drop the ma'am's when you're worried."

"Protocol can forgive me tonight."

Laira's incredibly soft blue eyes wordlessly insist that she does, before her eyes close tight. The dark glitter on Laira's eyelids makes a sharp contrast with how pale she's become.

"I'll be back," Pollard says, checking Laira's vitals above the bed.

Inhaling sharply, Laira keeps hold of Michael's hands, as if she's unaware of how tight her grip is. Her eyes open again, pain marring her expression, but she tries to smile. "Neuroblocker twenty-eight's always worked for me, must be my luck."

"They'll find an answer soon."

Nodding, Laira takes a shaky breath. "Thought they had."

Their cure is working around them. The patients on the biobeds vacate them for the crew on the floor and the speed of everyone around them is becoming less frantic. Pollard and Hugh will come to Laira when they can help her. She has to trust them.

"How was the handling?" Michael asks when Laira's focus drifts.

"What?"

"The helm."

"Thought we weren't telling."

"Keyla's on the bridge, she can't hear you."

Laira smiles at her, finding her eyes. "Have you even flown a freighter, captain?"

"Call me Michael, please, if we're ignoring protocol."

Laira nods, biting her lip. She whimpers, and there's an edge to her voice. "Freighters are huge. You have to monitor the bow and stern thrusters separately so you don't--" she stops, losing her ability to speak. Her grip is so tight that Michael's fingers are going numb.

"Spin the ship?" Michael finishes for her.

"*Discovery* is so small."

Chuckling, Michael leans a little closer. "I hope by that you mean quick and responsive, a real pleasure to fly."

"Not what--" Laira broke off again, fighting for words.

Michael whispers that she's all right. That she'll be fine, all the little nonsense things people say when they cannot alleviate suffering. Michael can do nothing to make it stop, but she can be a witness

Hugh and Dr. Pollard arrive together this time, hyposprays in hand. They speak to each other in low tones about Laira's vitals and her potential resistance to treatment.

"When did it start?" Hugh asks her, but the question doesn't get through. Laira's eyes are on Michael. "Ask her if she remembers the onset of symptoms."

Michael tilts her head towards him, confused.

"It's easier to follow one voice."

She leans in close to Laira's head, getting down by her eyes. "When did you feel sick? On the bridge?"

Laira shakes her head, shutting her eyes.

"Before?" Of course she'll nod. She works with headaches, kept working when she couldn't stop crying. Who knows how long she had this.

Hugh leans in, whispering. "We think it's waterborne, maybe something people on the planet drank, a flavoring or something in the ice. President Rillak was one of the first people to beam down."

They'd be hospitable to her, offer her food and drink.

"Why wouldn't she come to sickbay?" Michael whispers back.

"Nilsson said it started slowly, she was fine, until she wasn't. Sometimes people in positions of power put everyone before themselves." Hugh touches her shoulder, and his hand's warm. "You know how that is. This toxin gets worse the longer someone is exposed, Zora's making the anti-toxin as fast as we can, but—"

"Got it."

Hugh leaves her a stool, pulling it up to the bed.

Laira's breathing is too shallow, too fast, and Michael's all too aware of what that's like.

"Take a deep breath."

Grimacing, Laira opens her eyes. "That doesn't help."

"It does," Michael insists, leaning in closer. "Helped when I had a piece of asteroid through my leg."

"Are we trading stories?" Her attempt at a smile is a precious thing. "I—" she stops, swallowing a moan. She releases one of Michael's hands and Michael stretches her fingers.

When Laira looks away, Michael touches her forehead, then her cheek, trying to hold her attention. "I died, on Essof IV. We were trying to catch the Red Angel, who ended up being my mother in a time suit. The atmosphere was toxic." Shuddering at the memory, Michael shakes her head. "Not something I'd like to do again."

"We're lucky you're with us."

"Yes you are." Michael watches Dr. Pollard inject the first of many hypos and tries to think of something more pleasant to talk about.

"Detmer- Owosekun- were they...?"

"They went diving. They were talking about it at breakfast."

Laira finally takes a deep breath, perhaps only so she can better ask her question. "No, no, together. They went together." Something twinkles in her bright blue eyes, not pain or fever, but—

"You want to know if they were on a date."

Laira nods, lips pressed firmly together. That's what she wants to talk about. Joann and Keyla going diving together.

Michael grins, leaning against the bed so she can mock whisper. "They go on a lot of dates, never call them dates, of course, but they go together, every shore leave since we got back from the edge of the galaxy."

"What kind?"

So it's the gossip that makes her smile. Laira must not get to talk to anyone about their lives. Hers is too far away.

"Athletic things, hiking, diving, snorkeling— Joann says pilots don't like to hold still. Don't know if that's a problem you have."

Laira tilts her head towards Michael, making a little more space for Hugh to give her another hypo. "Sometimes."

"Not today."

"No." Laira's little squeeze of Michael's hand is not desperate and painful, but grateful. Gentle. "Saru?"

"Oh they garden. Walk the arboretum, go to the opera. I think Hugh and Paul got them into that. T'Rina has excellent ears for the opera."

That makes Laira smile, really smile, and she even mock stares at Michael. "You can't say that."

"I was merely insinuating that she enjoys opera."

Several more hyposprays later, everyone else has been released from sickbay and Hugh's frowning at Laira's life signs. "It's rather annoying that your metabolism burns through the anti-toxin like we're trying to poison you and ignore the thing that's actually poisoning you."

"I like to provide a challenge," Laira says, almost cheerful. Neuroblocker thirty-one almost works and she's not in so much pain. That, or she's full of enough gossip about the *Discovery* crew to be fully distracted by where everyone is going for their dates.

"You've certainly kept us on our toes," Hugh says, checking another reading.

Pollard guides Michael back, lowering her voice. "We need to keep her overnight."

"Oh?"

"Her metabolism is unpredictable. We had to use some pretty heavy immune suppressors to get her system to accept the anti-toxin, and she'll need to avoid eating for about twenty-four hours."

"That's not going to go well with her schedule."

"I imagine not."

"I'll talk to Admiral Vance." Michael watches Laira and Hugh talk, then turns back to Dr. Pollard. "You need her to stay here because she'd be alone in her quarters."

"This is very unpredictable."

"I'll look after her."

"Captain?"

"If she comes home with me, you would worry less."

"We would."

Michael pats her arm and returns to the bed. Laira's finally on a suitable cocktail of neuroblockers and her smile's much more dazed than pained.

"Suppose it's been awhile since you had a roommate," Michael teases, offering her hand to help Laira sit up. "Luckily for you, I hear I'm an excellent one."

"Lieutenant Tilly and I will have to compare notes." Laira's still a little light on her feet, but she doesn't have to walk far. Getting to the bed would be enough.

"Zora will monitor your vitals, keep an eye on you."

"Make sure I behave myself?"

"Something like that." Hugh finally nods to them both. "Right straight to bed, don't stay up late talking."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Michael looks after Laira, and they have time to talk about what's important to them.

Laira's asleep almost before Michael finishes taking down her hair, which leaves Michael with a long list of holocalls to make. She starts with Admiral Vance, because he'll get the Federation protocol right and even something like Laira taking a day off must be complicated.

"Captain Burnham, I hear Vuustis isn't going as well as we hoped." Vance isn't in his office, she must have taken him from dinner.

"The negotiations were perfect."

"Just the other thing."

"A phenol compound used for flavoring drinks is toxic."

"And a large number of your crew discovered that."

"Unfortunately."

"I trust everyone is recovering well."

"The president is ill, she's getting better—"

Vance raises his eyebrows. "But she needs a few days off."

"Why does that seem more difficult than the negotiations?"

"Because she's only had a handful of days off since she took office, and you might have an excellent understanding of what it's like to be that type of leader."

"You can order me to take leave, sir."

"It's a good thing, isn't it?" Vance taps a set of controls on his holopadd. "I will inform the vice president that she'll be running things for a few days. She'll be thrilled." His expression suggests that is the opposite of the case, but Michael appreciates the effort.

Vance's daughter walks behind him, coming into view on the holo long enough to wave before she disappears. He mock glares at them both as Michael waves at her.

"I trust you can keep an eye on the president."

"I believe that was why you agreed with her that *Discovery* was an excellent choice as a diplomatic ship."

"I am wise, aren't I?" he finishes with a grin. "Don't let her work. The Vice President is an exceptional leader."

"I'll fly the ship into a nebula if I need too."

"Good, I'll send you a list of particularly dense ones." Vance leans a little closer. "Make sure she takes the time."

"I will, sir."

"Good night then, Captain." His final smile is a little smug, but he often is when he's in a good mood.

Next on Michael's list of calls is to Laira's partner, a propulsion engineer named Dar Merak. After the evacuation of Earth's moon, his research team was temporarily set up on one of the moons of Tellar Prime, further from Federation headquarters, making visits with Laira more difficult. Perhaps that was why she hadn't mentioned him on this trip. They simply hadn't had time to see each other, or Laira was struggling to balance her personal life and the rigors of her position, still.

He was listed in her personnel file, and protocol suggested he be contacted before he had too much of a chance to worry.

Michael's holocomm message goes first to a young Bajoran research associate who was a little starstruck by *Discovery's* captain, and Dar has to be summoned from his work. He seems less impressed by Starfleet, or *Discovery*, or perhaps Michael herself. Dar is a tall, elegant Bajoran man with gray in his dark hair at his temples. The circles under his eyes hint that he sleeps less than Laira does.

"Forgive me, Captain Burnham, my research is delicate and I prefer not to be disturbed. I hope we can keep this brief."

"I apologize for the interruption."

"What is this about, Captain?"

"It is my duty to inform you that President Rillak is ill, and will be replaced by the Vice President at official functions for the next few days."

She is recovering well and there's no need to—"

He holds up a hand, tilting his head. "Wait, this is about Laira?"

"You are listed in her personal records."

Dar looks down, then touches his hair self-consciously. He smiles, and it's almost charming. Maybe it would be under different circumstances. "She needs to update that."

Michael waits, giving him time to finish the thought.

"We broke up weeks ago. It's just like her to—"

"My apologies. I wouldn't have interrupted you if I'd known."

"Oh she's busy, always. Too many big things in Madam President's head for the little things to stick."

Michael can finish the thought for him. He was not one of the big things, and he thought he should have been. Michael knows what it's like to precariously balance a relationship and the fate of the galaxy and have one of them topple. This feels different than Book. Book's first thought would be concern for her.

"Of course, that's in the past and I'm proud of her, leading us all. Do you need something from me, or can I let you get back to your work? I'm sure you have something more important to do than talk to me."

Michael's known scientists whose egos don't fit in their quarters. Dar's seems to need a whole spacedock. "I apologize again for taking up your time."

"Must be tweaking her stabilizers that she can't work."

"We're all a little married to our work."

His smile does not reach his eyes. None of them have. "Of course, Captain. I'll return to mine. Dar out."

Her conversations with Sarek were warmer, and something twists her stomach on Laira's behalf. Maybe they broke up and it was messy but that doesn't fit, Laira would have made taking his name off of her record if it had been bad. She'd make the time.

Scrolling idly through Laira's personal record while it's open, Michael sighs. So many close to her are dead. Her parents, and her grandparents, and even some of her father's crew. If she removes Dar's name from her record, whose will she replace it with? Her family on Earth are distant relations, her grandmother's sister and a scattering of cousins. Laira has aides and ambassadors and her professional contacts are legion.

Her personal life is as blank as a member of *Discovery's* crew, but Laira's been here, in this time. She's just been left behind.

Across her quarters, Laira stirs in Michael's bed. She was too tired to argue much when Michael suggested she come to her quarters. After Michael agreed not to sleep on the sofa, Laira fell asleep without protest. Hugh is still concerned that the toxin will reestablish itself in her stomach lining and need more intense treatment to eliminate it completely. Steroids, anti-inflammatories and immune suppressants all build on each other and Laira's unique biochemistry is difficult to balance.

Hugh has already reported that several other cases relapsed in the night, and they are treating them, but the harder this is to eradicate, the more he worries. Michael worries with him, about all of her crew, of course, but especially for Laira, who seems to have no one else to think of her.

Discovery's crew has each other. They've lost everyone, but they have each other to hang onto. They are family.

Laira has a great-aunt, that she's only met when Earth rejoined the Federation. Her aunt is a journalist in North America, far north on the Pacific coast, which is a beautiful area of the planet. Laira mentioned getting to see the beach, but little about her aunt. She's so tentative when it comes to her life, as if it'll all drift away.

Michael sighs, making up her mind. "Zora, what time is it on Vancouver Island?"

"Nine seventeen, Captain."

Michael's over stepping a little, but she can apologize when Laira's awake. "See if you can open a channel."

"Of course, one moment."

Laira's great-aunt is seated and holding a mug in her hands when she shimmers into the holocomm. She regards Michael with a curious smile. "I have never gotten a request from Starfleet before."

"I'm Captain Michael Burnham of the Federation Starship *Discovery*. I'm trying to reach Margo Holte."

"And you have, Captain."

"Ms. Holte—"

"Call me Margo." She leans in, confident. "*Discovery* is the ship Laira was on, you brought her to Earth."

"We did."

"And you left the galaxy, amongst the other very classified things she couldn't tell us about."

"That was *Discovery*."

"You make me want take a holiday from my retirement so I can ask all about it," Laira's aunt sits back in her chair, holding her mug in both hands. "What can I do for you, Captain Burnham?"

Michael pauses when Laira stirs again. The way she sighs in her sleep is almost a whimper and Michael's concern runs just beneath the surface, electric and uncertain. Michael drags herself back to the moment, pulling her thoughts together. "I need to speak to Laira's family."

"Is she all right?"

"She's ill, she'll recover, and we're looking after her, so please don't—"

"Don't worry, everything's fine, but you need to tell me?"

"I didn't want you to see it on the news service and worry."

Margo sips her drink and looks at the surface of it thoughtfully. "You have to inform her family, and she doesn't have much left if you had to speak to me."

"I know what it's like to be alone in the galaxy."

"I imagine you do." Margo looks through her, studying her like an artifact of a distant civilization. "She seemed lonely - Laira - I mean. She was thrilled to meet us, as we were, but it meant something special to her."

"Her family out here has been gone awhile."

"And you're looking after her."

"We are. She's going to be all right, *Discovery's* medical staff are the finest."

"Laira trusts you, she spoke of you and your crew with the highest respect." Margo fidgets with the handle of her mug, finishing the last of her drink. "Earth's been out of the Federation for awhile, but even I've heard stories of heroic Starfleet captains. She's safe with you."

"She is, she absolutely is."

Margo smiles at someone behind the holocam, then hands her empty mug to another woman. "You wanted to make sure someone would worry with you."

Chuckling a little, Michael catches herself fussing with one of her wooden trinkets. The wood's always so warm in her hands. "We should all have people who care about us."

"Let me guess, the partner wasn't what you expected."

"He was very busy."

"Ah." Margo accepts a new mug and blows on the surface. "Laira said his research is very important."

"It is."

"Where is she now?"

"She's here, asleep. She might even be annoyed that I bothered you." Michael rubs her finger across the wood again, listening to Laira's breathing.

Margo's smile is bright and sunlit. "Being bothered by you is the most interesting thing that I will do today, I assure you." Her smile fades. "Laira wasn't unhappy enough with her partner to say anything, but definitely not happy enough to talk about him the way she spoke about others."

If those others includes Michael, that remains unsaid.

"Will you tell me when she's all right again?"

"I will."

"That's not too much—"

"I will make sure you know she's all right."

Content with that, Margo finds Michael's eyes. "I am glad you took the time to contact me. I like knowing she's in good hands. I do believe if Laira had chosen someone like you, she would be happier."

Michael's face warms and she fumbles for a reply.

"Good night, Captain," Margo ends the message before Michael can find a response.

Staring at the bulkhead of her quarters, Michael sits for awhile in the quiet. The warmth of Laira's aunt lingers. Dar was so brusque and self-involved. Margo cares for Laira, as she should, and Dar did not.

Laira carried her feelings for him to the edge of the galaxy and he's mildly annoyed she hasn't removed him from her life completely. In contrast to that, Book and Michael talk, they were friends before they were lovers and they've returned to friends. She trusts him to have her back. How many people can Laira trust the same way?

Michael leaves her trinket on the table and removes her uniform jacket. Slipping off her boots, she changes into her pajamas while Laira turns in bed. Her sleep is trouble as Michael dims the lights and begins to read. One of Laira's sighs is nearly a moan, and Michael sets her book aside.

Laira's eyes flutter open a few moments later. Her lips tightening in pain.

"Same pain or something new?"

Taking a shaky breath, Laira tries to relax, but her fingers curl into the sheets. "Same, I almost wish it was something new, just for the variety."

"Hugh, we need you."

"There's no—" Laira can't even make it through protesting she's fine without whimpering.

"Let me get something stronger and I'll be there in a moment."

"Slow breaths, keep them even."

Tears gleam in Laira's eyes in the weak light. "Aye, Captain."

If teasing Michael helps her wait for Hugh, Michael can go along with that. She turns in the bed, finding Laira's hands with her own. It takes a moment for Laira to unclench her fingers and hold on to Michael instead of the sheet.

"It came back worse." Laira whimpers, but attempts to even out her breathing. "How can it come back worse?"

"Your tissues are already inflamed."

"The vice president's going to be so annoyed if she has to take over for more than a day or two."

"She loves being annoyed."

"She does." Laira twists in close to Michael, Michael opens her arms and then Laira's head slips in Michael's lap. "Breaking my wrist was better."

"How do you navigate with a solar sail?"

"What?"

"I've never had the chance to fly a solar sail ship, and I know you have—"

"You're trying to distract me."

"Is it working?"

Laira swallows a moan. "It's appreciated."

"I think I've told you all the ship's secrets."

Rolling onto her back, Laira smiles up at Michael. "I didn't mean to exhaust your stories."

"I'll make sure to keep some in reserve."

"Is there going to be a next time?"

"Hopefully not."

"It's not all bad, but I'd rather be in your bed for other reasons."

"Hull damage?" Michael teases, "maybe a malfunctioning EPS grid?"

Laira's smile could almost be flirting, if she wasn't trying so hard not to double up in the pain. It's an impressive amount of control.

"Maybe too many ambassadors."

"And I'm hiding from them?"

"I'm sure you must need to sometimes."

Shutting her eyes for a moment, Laira nods, amused. "You'd hide me?"

"I would."

Laira's exhausted chuckle is gentle. "You're very kind."

"You deserve kindness." Michael says it quickly, without thinking, because it's one of those truths of the universe that is especially true for Laira.

The transporter pops as Hugh arrives, beaming right into her bedroom. The circles under his eyes are darker than they were when she saw him last. He must have been working on this continuously.

"Seems you're unlucky again, ma'am."

"Someday you'll tell me something nice about my biochemistry, won't you?"

Hugh sits on the bed, running a scan. "You have lovely hair."

Michael moves a lock of Laira's hair out of the way, and nods. "It is nice."

"I'm glad I have—" Laira stops talking, hissing as she inhales.

Michael speaks for her when she can't. "She said it's worse than before."

"Pollard and I have isolated the bacteria producing the toxin, but they reproduce quickly. If it's not eliminated completely, it recurs, with more of the phenol compound and instead of being phasered in the gut it's more like a disruptor."

Hissing again, Laira nods. "And acid."

"Is this when I compliment you on your pain tolerance?"

"It's not a compliment I like to get from my physicians."

Rubbing her shoulder, Hugh chosers a setting on his hypo and injects her neck. "Neuroblocker eleven seems to work, but you won't be able to make any state decisions until it wears off and the side effects might be annoying."

"Less annoying than this than this?"

"Much."

Nodding when she doesn't have enough breath to speak, Laira turns head towards Michael. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right." Michael pats her hand. "My mission just got scrapped."

"Your tyrannical boss got sick." Laira's breathing starts to ease, and when she exhales it's almost a sigh instead of a hiss.

"Tyrant of the card table, perhaps, my boss is funny when you get to know her."

"Oh?"

"All she wants to do is listen to the ship's gossip."

"It's the best kind."

Hugh makes sure Michael is listening. "She should wait at least twelve hours to eat anything, water or electrolytes are fine, nothing else. Any signs of an allergic reaction, you need to contact sickbay, if her breathing becomes difficult beam to sickbay immediately." Hugh has a few more mildly dire warnings, but he's optimistic when he returns to sickbay. Apparently Laira's had several allergic reactions to various medications in the past, which again makes Michael think of Spock.

For awhile, Michael's convinced Laira's asleep. She's quiet while Michael puts on her pajamas and cleans her teeth. Laira's eyes are open when Michael joins her in bed, and she smiles, released from discomfort.

"What is the Earth name for this?"

"A sleepover?"

"That's it. I've heard that before."

"Usually that's achieved without one member catching some nasty kind of gastroenteritis."

"But not always."

Michael settles the blankets over her chest, looking up at the ceiling. "When I first moved in with Tilly, I was right out of the Federation rehab colony. Famous mutineer Michael Burnham, and she told me a roommate was a built in friend."

"That's lovely. The last part, I mean, not the first—"

"I know what you meant."

Laira shifts at her side, rolling closer as if being able to see Michael will help any of it make sense. "I'm not sure I did."

"Don't worry, tangling your words together isn't a symptom of anything other than exhaustion."

"You spoke with Admiral Vance?"

"The Vice President is going to never let you travel again."

Covering her face with her hands, Laira groans. "She's still mad about the edge of the galaxy."

"You not coming back would have made her president."

"And she would have killed me, even though I was dead." Laira sighs, fidgeting with the sheets. "We would have been dead, right?"

"I suppose we could be stuck limping home from the edge of the galaxy without a spore drive."

"That sounds bad."

Michael turns her head. Laira had been so resolute then, they both had, because they needed to save billions. It wasn't a choice, but now, weeks later, 'that sounds bad' is a perfect understatement. "It would have taken us decades, even if we reached a wormhole or a transwarp conduit."

"We're lucky then."

"Immensely."

Silence holds them, as warm and comfortable as the blankets.

"I'm sorry about Book, Book and you, I mean, because you're not—"

"We're friends, good friends. Love is there, probably always will be, we just- well - the weight of the galaxy is heavy, so is losing a planet and right now, our lives are going in different directions."

"If someone called him because you were sick he would—"

"Be on the next shuttle over, if I asked."

"Must be nice."

"I've got a lot of people who look out for me, from Hugh to Tilly, even Vance." Michael reaches over and smooths back a stray piece of Laira's hair before it can catch in her eyelashes. "You."

"I make your life harder."

"You want me to be a better leader."

"You were so mad when we met."

"Yeah I was."

"Like Vice President mad."

Chuckling up at the ceiling, Michael imagines the petite Vice President in one of her beautiful saris yelling obscenities across a room like she does apparently. "I've never seen her that."

"She waits for the mere mortals to be out of the room, then unleashes hell."

"She didn't want you to go?"

"Too dangerous."

"You have spent quite a lot of time in sickbay."

"Microbes aren't something we can plan for."

"So that means she can't be mad?"

Laira's smile is very coy and bright. "It means I have something to think in my head while she tells me why my idea to come on this trip was terrible."

"You've done well."

"Only because you keep rescuing me."

"Luckily we were assigned to you."

"I asked, Vance offered me all the ships in the fleet and I asked for *Discovery*."

Michael pauses, trying to weave that into her view of their relationship. "You chose us?"

"I like being on this ship." Laira's so tired and she yawns through her thought, fighting sleep. "You make it feel like home."

"It is our home."

Laira's asleep before she can say anything else, leaving Michael unable to clarify if it's the way *she* feels like home or if it's the crew's home or Michael's. Her expression's peaceful, finally. There's no buried headache or nasty stomach inflammation. She's content, for however briefly it lasts. Where is her home? Does she sleep this well at headquarters? Once *Discovery* felt like home, Michael slept better. Now she sleeps terribly anywhere else.

Laira only snores a little; her breathing is soft and even, finally. The stars drift by in lines as they warp towards headquarters. Vance didn't think it was urgent enough for them to jump. Perhaps he wanted to give Laira the time to heal without feeling like she had to go back to work immediately. The Vice President's easy enough to pick up from Betazed if they need to bring her anywhere.

They hadn't even had the argument where Michael would have offered to sleep on the sofa. Perhaps Laira had been too tired to even think of it.

Turning on the pillow, Michael watches her sleep. Sharing a bed again was pleasant, even if it was only for a night or two. Listening to someone else breathe is a beautiful sound. She'll probably end up used to it again, even miss it when Laira returns to her own quarters. That wistful loneliness has been with her awhile, and it will linger.

"Hold still."

"It itches."

"It'll itch less if you hold still."

"That is not scientifically proven."

"Well, wriggle with one arm and hold still with the other and we'll start collecting data."

Chuckling, Laira shuts her eyes and wraps her fingers around the edge of the table. That leaves her forearms exposed so Michael can gently rub in the anti-histamine lotion Hugh provided. The hives she developed overnight crawl up her arms almost to her shoulders, bright red against her pale skin. They're dreadfully itchy, and Laira's been incredibly patient. The lotion's cool, Hugh promises it'll work quickly. It even smells pleasantly herbal. Laira's skin is very soft, and Michael's very careful to use a light touch, but not too light that it tickles, because Laira, President of the Federation, top ambassador, is ticklish.

Even the vicious itchiness isn't enough to beat out how much she wants to laugh. It's adorable.

This is nice. It's intimate and warm and they're staring into each other's eyes and when did they—

How did that happen?

It's not, of course, they're not. They're really not.

They are not.

Admiral Vance diverts them to Ni'Var, because T'Rina needs to meet with the presidents of Earth and Tellar, and Laira of course, when she's up to it again. Saru's thrilled to be able to pick up his girlfriend, and a significant portion of the crew is in various states of recovery - Laira's not alone with her hives, so they take their time, use a lower warp factor so they can have movie night and arrive at headquarters in the morning.

It's peaceful.

So is their day together. Michael hasn't spent a day with anyone, not since Book and Tilly left the ship, and she's out of practice, at least, she worries she is, but this is easy. Laira is fascinated with Michael's paper book collection and she's exhausted, so they read, and Laira falls asleep twice.

They talk about nothing and Michael's family, what her childhood was like on historic Vulcan. Laira tells Michael about running through the farms on Bajor while Michael rubs lotion into her arms again.

How is it easy?

After Laira's twelve hours are up, they eat three different kinds of soup together, sitting across from each other like they've done this a hundred times. It's too easy. Laira has her head on Michael's shoulder, a book in hand, and they could stay here. Not talk about Laira going back to her own bed or what happens tomorrow, they could just exist here.

Steal another hour or two from both of their busy lives and lean in to whatever this is.

"It's movie night, if you're up for it."

Laira sets her book down, cradling the pages. "The infamous *Discovery* movie night? In the cargo bay, with popcorn?"

"I don't know if it's infamous."

"Trust me, it is."

"Do you want to go?"

"Yes!" Laira sits up, still holding the book to her chest.

"I don't even know what movie it is."

"I've never had popcorn."

"Really?"

"It's not—" Laira pauses, her hand still inside her book to hold her place.

Michael takes the book from her, tucking a bookmark inside.

Beaming at her, Laira touches the bookmark. "I've had similar things. Crunchy, covered in butter."

"See, that's the point of it, usually."

"But I haven't had popcorn."

"Or read a book with pages."

"I like the pages, they smell nice, they whisper. It feels very old just turning them." Laira sets the book down on the table, reaching for her sweater.

Michael's eyes are on her arms, the hives are nearly gone, and the effects of the neuroblocker are fading. She's almost herself again. Except, this version of herself is freer, happier— This is Laira, underneath the cape and jacket, as close to the teal-haired cargo pilot as Michael is ever going to get.

And she's beautiful with her hair down and her eyelids pale and unadorned. Her smile lights her eyes and she radiates excitement in a way that warms Michael's chest. Her fingers slip into Michael's, just for a moment.

"Thank you."

"Of course."

Laira's eyes meet hers and that little electric sensation runs up Michael's spine. "No, no, you've gone above and beyond, as you do, and I know you do, but you did this for me."

"I wanted to."

"I don't know how to thank you for being who you are, but I need you to know that I appreciate you."

"I know."

Laira brushes her hand against Michael's cheek, her fingers cool. "I hope you do."

"We reach for each other. Sometimes we hold each other up, sometimes we're held. It's the connection that matters."

"That connection comes so easily to you."

"You'll get there." Michael takes a step towards the door. "Being on *Discovery* has that effect."

In the cargo bay, they sit on a pile of cushions between crates and other members of the crew. Nilsson and Rhys are both getting over the stomach bug, so they're curled up with everyone waiting on them. Joann and Keyla are on Michael's right, wrapped in each other's arms. They were merely sitting next to each other when the lights dimmed, but once the movie's deep into the terrifying xenomorphic organism emerging in a bloody mess, they started cuddling.

T'Rina and Saru sit neatly on Laira's left, eating their popcorn and watching the chaos. Their knees are touching, which is as much of a nod to intimacy as Joann and Keyla.

Laira's thrilled to be in the middle of everything, watching the couples around them with the same interest as the movie. Once it starts to get scary, she grabs Michael's hand, then her arm, and after a few deaths she's buried in Michael's chest, hiding her eyes.

There's no way she's actually frightened by ancient special effects and squelching sounds, but the crowd around them screams, so she does, and the air crackles.

Michael laughs, Laira clings to her, and by the time the final credits crawl over the screen, Laira is as curled into her arms as Joann is into Keyla's and the eyes around them are wide.

And happy.

Michael should walk Laira back to her guest quarters, but she doesn't mention it and Laira follows Michael back to hers. This isn't a date, it's not anything more than comfort - a sense of safety - but they climb into bed together.

It's just one more night.

Laira's turning the pages of her book when Michael finally decides to say what she's been contemplating.

"You need to update your emergency contact before you forget again."

"Can I chose the xeno-monster? They seemed to want to be close to everyone."

"Pick someone who cares about you."

Again they stare at each other, close enough to hug, even kiss as they work out what this looking for each other means.

"You're offering."

"It seems like you have a very short list to chose from."

"It's you or the Vice President's husband at this point."

"As wonderful as he is, I can handle this."

"And you did, splendidly." Laura touches her hand. "I almost enjoyed it."

"Don't admit that, it gives away that you work too hard."

"Maybe I liked the company."

Setting down her book, Michael deliberately meets Laura's eyes. "We can spend time together without invading microbes or hives."

Laura swallows, hard, and her voice is tentative. "I'd like that."

"Then we'll do it."

Laura's responsibilities return like the color on her face, and when she's healed, she's back to her office. T'Rina and Laura's negotiations continue for several days, and Michael doesn't see her. They slip back into the ordinary, their lives busy and full, without intersection.

It was a moment of warmth and connection. Something to be cherished, to be sure, but it's over.

Perhaps they'll talk more on the next mission or Laura's new ship will need them again.

She's not letting go. There's nothing to let go of - they're not together - but it stings a little.

Laura beams onto the ship after dinner. It's unplanned. Her schedule is full, but then she's standing in Michael's ready room in her suit.

"It's movie night at Federation HQ."

"You have movie nights now?"

"We have been know to borrow ideas from the best of the fleet."

"I see," Michael returns her smile, intrigued by the idea of the headquarters having a movie night. "What are you going to watch?"

"Something from Risa. I think it's a musical."

"A musical?"

Laura glances down. "They're known for their elaborate costumes."

"Now that sounds fun."

"I'd like you to come with me."

"That would be nice—" Michael stands, leaving her desk.

Biting her lip, Laura finds a smile. "I want to be transparent with you. This is a date. I am asking you to come as my date."

Michael wasn't the only one who felt that tingle between them. That is real. "I admire your adaptation of ancient Earth rituals."

"I'm a quick study."

They stand in silence, swept into the moment. Laura touches Michael's chin and there's hope in her eyes, as bright as an exploding star.

"Conference level three, starts at twenty-thirty hours."

Michael starts to smile, losing her composure. "I would be honored to join you on a date."

"Gives me a chance to get back to your bedroom under better circumstances," Laura says, keeping her tone flat.

Now it's Michael's turn to flush hot with surprise. There's the kind of flirting she expected - that was flirting - that they've been toying with and then there's *flirting*.

Laira leans in, finding her cheek. It's the gentlest kiss, yet it holds so much promise. "Bring popcorn."

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