

A Quiet Empire

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/585) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/585>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Discovery
Relationship:	Gabriel Lorca/Michael Burnham
Character:	Gabriel Lorca , Michael Burnham , Philippa Georgiou (Mirror) , Ensemble Cast - DSC
Additional Tags:	Nonviolent Non-Con , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Mind Games
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-04 Words: 13,466 Chapters: 1/1

A Quiet Empire

by [nonelvis](#)

Summary

Canon divergence AU from "What's Past is Prologue." Lorca wins the battle in the throne room, and Michael must make good on her promise to stay with him.

Notes

While this is noncon, it is nonviolent ... just still, y'know, messed up, with mind games. Also, this is not a fic where Burnham and Lorca are going to get a happy ending.

Immense thanks to Lizbee for her beta services, especially for her attention to canon detail. You'd think an American who grew up with Star Trek would be more familiar with it than an Australian, but you'd be very wrong.

[Originally posted on AO3 on April 2, 2018.](#)

Burnham had never entered a fight without understanding there was a chance she could lose. Loss was logical, after all; someone would win, and someone would lose, and likely the parties would suffer on all sides. But the human part of her always tried to enter with confidence: logic guided her tactics, and her heart guided her actions.

Yet still she sometimes found herself on the losing side. She and Georgiou had fought shoulder-to-shoulder, and everything about it had felt terrifying and thrilling and achingly familiar, except for the part where the emperor was now battered and on her knees before Lorca and his forces, and Georgiou's warriors were utterly defeated.

"Today is a great day for both of us, Philippa," Lorca said. "I assume control of the Empire. And you get to live."

Only this emperor could manage to look bored while being held captive, as if handcuffs literally weren't worth her time. "I didn't ask for mercy," Philippa said.

"It's not for you. I'm just looking for a little more insurance that your not-quite-a-daughter's going to cooperate with me. Isn't that right, Michael?"

Michael rooted herself to the ground. A strong stance, a deep breath; centering herself the way she'd learned as a small child. She let her stress and terror dissipate into the air and rechannel themselves to support her. "Thank you, Captain," she said. "I appreciate your generosity."

Never mind what favor she might be asked to give in return, no matter how clear she'd been that she'd bargained only her mind against *Discovery's* release. She'd done nothing but think on her feet since she'd arrived in this sideways universe; she could trade away something unknown now and could have something entirely new to hand over later.

With luck, anyway.

"Since you asked so nicely, Specialist Burnham," Lorca said, "I guess we can let her live. Which reminds me – we should get you a new commission, while we're at it. How does Lieutenant sound to you? You can have Lieutenant Commander once I'm sure I can trust you again."

"I would be honored, sir."

“Good.” He turned to Landry. “Take our former emperor to the agonizers. It’s time she got a taste of what she handed out to all of us.”

“With pleasure, sir,” Landry replied.

“Wait! Please, sir,” Michael said, “you’ve been so understanding, but I must ask – can we not give the emperor her own quarters? I know she deserves punishment, but she is ... essentially ... my mother. And I would find it easier to serve you if she were in less pain.”

“And I would find it much more satisfying if she’s not. Request denied for now, Lieutenant. We can discuss it later, after she’s ... more compliant than she is now. Or at least after she’s suffered half as long as I did.”

“You think I’m not prepared for this?” Philippa said. “An emperor has to be tougher than any of her subjects. Even you.”

“I guess we’ll find out then, won’t we?” Lorca nodded at Landry, who dragged Philippa to her feet and marched her out the door. “Adams, take the bridge. Set up a repair rotation. I’m going to take my old friend down to the lab to make sure she gives her ship just enough spores to get home and not a single one more.”

“I’m not going to betray you, Captain,” Michael said.

“That’s ‘Emperor’ now, Michael. But you can call me Gabriel. Whenever you’re ready, of course.”

Michael sucked in a breath and slowly released the fists she’d made without even realizing it. “Of course, Emperor.”

Discovery first. And then ... the rest of her days, however those might go.

* * *

She was assigned quarters in the *Charon*’s imperial wing: close enough to Lorca that he’d always have an eye on her, but at least for the moment, respectful of her stipulation of what she was willing to share with him. The rooms were still larger than she needed or was accustomed to from *Discovery*; a full-sized bed, a small sitting area, abstract art on the wall she didn’t recognize but was almost certainly looted from some conquered world. Lorca had assigned her a human slave, a silent young woman with a facial scar so severe it bisected her face with a contrasting patch of pink. She was missing her left eye and the thatch of chestnut hair above that ear.

“I don’t know what you did,” Michael said, “but I’m sorry they did this to you. And I’m sorry that I don’t need or want a slave. It’s not you; I don’t want any slave. I’ll speak with them. See if they can free you. Or at worst, reassign you.”

“Please,” the woman said, her voice practically a cough instead of intelligible words. “They will punish me if I don’t serve.”

“I’m Michael Burnham. I’m ...” The words flattened on her tongue, too hard to form. “I’m the emperor’s favorite. They won’t harm you if I tell them not to.” She scanned the room, located a PADD on the nightstand by the bed, tapped out an emphatic note. “Here. Give this to your supervisor. I’ve told them if have a problem, they need to come to me, not take it out on you.”

The woman bowed, took the PADD in fluttering hands, and left.

Michael never saw her again. But she was never quite sure why.

* * *

Michael had no orders yet, nowhere to report to, no assignments until the emperor finished re-organizing his bridge crew and setting a course for whatever he deemed the most pressing form of fascist mayhem, now that he had open space to re-conquer. As promised, he had stood watch over Michael as she’d transferred a jolt of mycelium to *Discovery*, looming in the background while she said her final goodbye to Tilly, who’d tearfully accepted the spores.

Now Michael sat alone at the edge of her bed, feet together, hands pressed to her knees. She’d considered exploring the ship, even though she knew she’d be followed by the two guards Lorca had posted outside her door. Or perhaps she could meditate; there had been no time for that today, and her brain wouldn’t stop buzzing, mental vibrations so loud she could practically hear them inside her head.

Instead she sat, and took two circular breaths – in through her nose, out through her mouth – and choked back a sob.

Dinner at nineteen-hundred hours, Lorca had said as he left the lab. *My quarters. Every night. I promise I won’t serve you any Kelpien.*

And: *You can wear your uniform. You don’t have to dress up for dinner. For now.*

Trading herself for *Discovery* had been the honorable choice. The logical choice. She could never fully redeem herself to Starfleet, but she could sacrifice herself for others the way entire ships had unwittingly sacrificed themselves for her previous folly. This was justice, in a way; she had always known someday she’d have to return to the life sentence she’d earned after the Battle of the Binary Stars.

She just hadn’t expected it to be this particular form of imprisonment.

On the *Shenzhou*, in the brig, she’d reached out to Sarek for help. *My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts.* Another set of deep breaths; another call to her father, then again.

He didn’t reply. She’d never know now whether it was the distance across dimensions, or whether he knew somehow what she’d done, and had finally and truly cut her off.

Michael unbuttoned the cumbersome Terran breastplate and tossed it aside. She no longer held the rank to wear it, not that she wanted to in the first place, and there were still a few hours yet before she was expected to report to the emperor.

Instead, she wiped her tears with a tissue, curled in a ball atop the sheets, and slept, dreaming of faraway stars.

* * *

Dinner was quiet; just the two of them and bowls of rice, grilled squid, seaweed, salt pickles Michael hadn't had since the last time she was on Vulcan. She had never been fond of squid – typically, it was chewy, and always, it was a creature nearly too sentient to eat – but it wasn't a crewmate, at least not that she knew of. A silent human servant had poured white wine liberally from a decanter. Michael was still on her first glass. Lorca was on his third.

“How are you settling in?” he asked.

“My quarters are acceptable.”

“They'd better be more than acceptable. What do you need?”

“I don't need anything, Cap– Emperor. I just need time to acclimate.”

“Gabriel, Michael, please. At least while we're in private.”

“It may take some time before I'm accustomed to that. Gabriel.”

“Nevertheless. I want you to feel at home, Michael. You're valued here. You're needed here. Every bit as much as I needed you on *Discovery*.”

“You don't really need me,” Michael said. “You have your empire. I can serve as your advisor, but you're not going to like the advice I offer. Nor do I expect you'll take it.”

“You provide a necessary perspective. Your basic Federation instinct for compassion and peacekeeping gives me insight into how the lesser species think.”

“I won't help you commit genocide.”

“You say that now,” Lorca said, “but as we spend more time together, I think you'll find that sometimes genocide is the compassionate solution.”

“That seems hard to believe.”

“You'll learn,” Lorca said. “You're one of the smartest people I've ever met, Michael. You blended in just fine when we were here undercover. You can learn to do it for real.”

Michael took the last swig of her wine. “Just so we're clear, Emperor – Gabriel – whatever you want me to call you – I don't particularly want to learn to do it for real.”

Lorca flashed that crocodile grin Michael had seen one too many times by now. “You will, Michael,” he said.

* * *

These were her days:

Mornings began with an early run trailed by the emperor's guards. A quick shower and breakfast – eggs and salsa existed in this universe, though apparently not black beans. Vulcan palla beans, larger and darker than their Terran counterparts, served as an adequate substitute, and eventually, perhaps, she might feel less homesick every time Vulcan food passed her lips.

Later: the daily briefing with the emperor and his council, a collection of homicidal weasels and sycophants, or more often homicidal, weaselly sycophants, all eager to carry out Lorca's orders to root out the foreign invaders at the borders. Landry was always there as well, neither weaselly nor sycophantic, but certainly homicidal and a true believer, a more terrifying and committed version of the woman Michael had known for just a few weeks in her home universe.

Already some of the colonial governors who had appeared on holoscreens during the briefings had disappeared and been replaced, or had resurfaced after a day or two sporting wan faces and bruises undiminished by dermal regenerators and what was no doubt the most expensive Terran foundation. Landry always sat and twirled her dagger while those governors spoke, made sure it flipped and shone where they could see it from their remote screens.

Lorca, meanwhile, sat at the head of the table and joked with everyone right up to the moment when his voice turned to ice and an order was issued. None of the councillors or governors ever dissented.

Michael did.

“The beryllium mines on Alzar IV are invaluable, Emperor,” she said. “If the miners are underproducing, perhaps we should consider the reasons why, so we can determine how best to motivate them.”

“The reason why, Lieutenant Burnham, is that Bolians are the laziest species in the universe. That's why we put them in the mines, where we can keep an eye on them, rather than making them personal slaves. They only respond to threats, not to coddling.”

“Forgive me, Emperor,” Michael said, swallowing all her preferred replies and recalculating. Find the most logical course: the path that would lead to the least damage, if damage were inevitable.

Damage, she was finding, was always going to be inevitable now.

“The governor of Alzar IV states there is a supply shortage,” she continued. “The footnotes in the mine supervisor’s report indicate there is a particular shortage of greenbugs, which are a critical part of the Bolian diet. They include a vitamin the Bolians are unable to obtain any other way, and which affects their daily energy levels.”

“Were you aware of that shortage, Governor?” Lorca asked.

“Emperor ...” The governor, a pale, round-faced man with thinning hair, fumbled with something offscreen and drew a PADD up where everyone could see it. “Oh. Yes. Greenbugs. Well, of course those are lower-priority than fuel and potatoes, but I suppose we should add them to the list.”

“Governor, is this you saying you hadn’t read your mine supervisor’s report until Lieutenant Burnham pointed out your workforce is missing something vital to their job?”

“No, no, of course not, Emperor – I merely wanted to focus attention on the most critical shortages across Alzar IV, not just a minor foodstuff only our miners consume.”

“Right, of course,” Lorca said. “Okay, in that case, here’s what I need you to do. You’re going to order the miners to work double shifts for the next week to make up the shortfall. You’re also going to prepare to receive a large shipment of greenbugs Lieutenant Burnham will be ordering for you right now. And finally, I’m going to have my minister of defense send a few observers to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

The governor, already a pale pink, turned white. “Emperor, I’m sure Minister Landry’s observers won’t be necessary.”

“They’re already on their way, Governor,” Landry said, cool and calm. “Please give them your warmest welcome.”

“Yes ... yes, Minister. Thank you for your ... thoughtful intervention, Emperor. It is much appreciated.”

“I’m sure it is, Governor. Is that all we have for today, everyone? Good. We’ll reconvene tomorrow morning.”

* * *

Mid-days and afternoons were spent anywhere Michael could be as far as possible from the emperor, although there was no avoiding his comm signals.

“You should see this supernova,” Lorca said. “We’ve got a brightness filter on the viewscreen, but it’s still spectacular.”

“Did you blow up the star yourself, Emperor?” she asked.

“Look,” he said, “there are only so many ways to make room for a shipping lane. And the gravitational interference is going to shift some lunar orbits into the habitable zone for more Terran colonies.”

Or later, as she rooted through Stamets’ research to see if she could fully grasp how the *Charon*’s power core worked and whether he’d made any effort whatsoever to locate a sustainable source of mycelium: “Burnham,” said the voice on her communicator. “I need you to research Nausicaan defense systems. Find me a weakness.”

“Shouldn’t Minister Landry be doing that, Emperor?”

“Landry is busy with our multipronged alien reduction strategy. I need someone detail-oriented to review telemetry from the *ISS Erebus*’ encounter with the Nausicaans. Figure out how one of our ships got turned into a debris belt in the Laruvan system. You can fill me in at dinner. I’ve asked the chef for some good honest Terran food tonight, so bring your appetite.”

“As you wish, Emperor.” She left a flag on the lab report she’d been reviewing and returned to her quarters. Private space, albeit one she couldn’t leave without Terran shadows following her every move.

Which meant that once she was done with her research, the Nausicaan shield signature and its likely neutralization code carefully logged on her PADD, she had time for another destination before dinner. She’d be followed, and her whereabouts reported on to the emperor, but she doubted he’d be surprised by where she’d gone. If anything, he’d be expecting it.

After all, he’d been so careful to make sure Philippa lived.

* * *

The agonizer room was quiet at every booth and control panel except for one.

“Minister Landry,” Michael said. “I thought you were busy developing a comprehensive plan for multispecies genocide.”

“My team’s investigating the biological weapons stock our previous emperor left behind,” Landry replied, twisting a knob and watching with satisfaction as a visible plasma shock enveloped Philippa’s body. “Care to tell me where the necrotization gas canisters are stored, Philippa?”

Philippa slumped against the back of the agonizer, her hair clumped in sweaty strings across her face. Her knees buckled, and she stumbled nearly to the floor, but she braced herself with her hands in time to keep herself from falling.

“On your feet, Philippa,” Landry snapped. “Or I’ll turn it back on.”

“You will not,” Michael said. “In fact, you’re going to take a ten-minute break. I assume you’ll use it to complain about me to the emperor.”

Landry narrowed her eyes at her, but turned on her heel and left.

Michael rested her palm against the glass. The agonizer was locked with a security code she didn’t know; this was as close as she could get to Philippa, who still lay at the back of the glass column, catching her breath.

But eventually, she held out a hand, touched her fingertips to the glass separating her hand from Michael’s.

“You did not need to come and see me,” she said, “especially not like this.”

“I had to. How could I not?”

“Can you do anything to free me?”

“No.” Michael turned away for a moment. “Not yet. I’m trying. I have to wait until he trusts me again.”

“He also enjoys torturing me.”

“Landry certainly seems to.”

“She’s nothing more than his pawn. When I’m free, you and I will deal with her. And the rest of them.”

“I’m not here to murder anyone, Philippa. I’m not a Terran. I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Don’t be weak. I raised my daughter better than that. You could stand to learn this lesson, too.” She pushed herself fully to her feet, straight and tall. “They will never break me. You do not have to let them break you, either.”

Michael pressed her hand harder into the glass. The barrier was too thick for her body warmth to reach Philippa, but Michael hoped she felt it anyway. “They won’t, Philippa. I can promise you that.”

“Good,” Philippa said. “Now send Landry back in. And tell her I said that last round tickled.”

* * *

A week slipped by, then two, then a third and fourth. Each day brought the briefing where Michael’s advice sank in her stomach, a sharp granite stone that cut and weighed her down. The Bolians were alive, but still grossly abused. The governor of Andoria executed his household staff rather than root out the poisoner Michael could have found from dark patches on the crescents of their fingernails. Landry’s plans were honed every day, sometimes with tests Michael was powerless to overrule.

Lorca had insisted they all watch the experiments with the necrotization gas. Michael didn’t eat anything else the rest of that day, but as she stared at the ravioli Lorca’s chef had prepared, she wondered how long it would be before she could watch something that horrifying and still swallow a meal moments afterwards. Years? Months? Less? She pushed the ravioli around her plate with her fork and pretended to be interested in the emperor’s conversation, but all she saw was bodies crumpling on the ground, dissolving, leaving nothing but pockmarked bone behind.

When Michael had first realized she’d have to impersonate her parallel universe self, she knew she’d have to be tough. Hard as diamond, fearless as a Klingon, subtle and cunning as a cat hidden in tall grass. In fact, playing her alternate self hadn’t been as difficult as she’d expected; she’d taken all the coldness she’d learned as a Vulcan and all the ambition she’d acquired as a human and had pushed them both to the edge.

But now, playing herself here in this awful parody of home, those weren’t the characteristics she found herself cultivating. Detachment and logic to narrow in on the least terrible solution. Restraint when her advice was ignored, or when she was punished for having favored the humane approach. Humility mixed liberally with fear that her patron would tire of her refusal to sleep with him, though she’d begun to wonder whether falling from Lorca’s favor would really be so bad. Like the last emperor, he’d probably propose a simple execution, grant her a quick death rather than torment her in the agonizers.

Michael wasn’t ready to die. But logic compelled her to explore all the possibilities, and one or more of the avenues she chose at any possible moment could lead there.

Someday, it might be a welcome path.

She visited Philippa when she could. Philippa’s torturers tolerated Michael’s presence, and at least the security staff had the good grace to turn off the agonizer whenever Michael visited.

“Michael,” Philippa said, always breathing heavily during the first few moments of a visit, when the pain of the agonizer was still rippling through her body and diminishing slowly, wave by wave. “What do you hope to gain from these visits? He’ll never set me free.”

“He might. He said next week, assuming I’m *good*. He says I’ve been patient. And even if he keeps his word, I don’t think he’ll be giving you guest quarters.”

Philippa made a sniffing noise, rolled her eyes. “You haven’t answered my question. Have you even considered that? Or do you make these visits simply out of pity?”

“Philippa, no. No. That’s ... I would never do that. You don’t want my pity. You don’t want anyone’s pity.”

“Ah. Perhaps you are my daughter after all.”

“I am not,” Michael said. “We both know that. But if I’m here out of pity at all ... it’s for myself, not for you.”

She rubbed her eyes and bowed her head, but eventually, turned back to Philippa’s gaze. “I need someone who reminds me of when I was a better person, Philippa. And believe it or not, you’re the only one here who does that.”

“Michael,” Philippa said, “you are always so hard on yourself. It’s one thing both of you have in common.” She leaned in closer, hand touching the agonizer wall near Michael’s face. “My torturers will be back soon. Remember this, Michael: after myself, you have always been the strongest person I know. It is a credit to your human blood that you remain this way even though you are not Terran. Courage, daughter. I will still be here tomorrow if you need me.”

* * *

Researching the mycelial network and how to repair its deterioration was one of Michael’s ongoing projects. And as frustrating as it was to pore through Stamets’ files without him there to translate them, at least in the lab Michael could feel like she was actively trying to solve a problem properly, not just minimize its damage. Lorca would never give up the power core, and surely Michael’s Stamets would have found a way to make both work, not that he’d have built a drive that destroyed his precious interstellar fungi in the first place.

She’d dug deep into Stamets’ archives: the decade-old papers positing the mycelial network, the collaborations with other astromycologists who mysteriously disappeared from paper authorship once their work had evolved from theoretical to practical, the two years of furious development and testing of the core drive until he was certain it could power the *Charon* without also causing an immediate and irreparable rift in the space-time continuum. (There were also notes about how such a rift could potentially be exploited for cross-dimensional transfer, although Stamets had seemed dubious about the process’ viability.)

Nothing helped. Michael had enough background information to understand how the core quite simply drew more power than the mycelial network would eventually be able to supply, and that Stamets had been investigating solutions. She’d even had the computer brute-force its way into Stamets’ messages, where she’d found countless private recordings handwringing about whether he should support Lorca’s bid for power, how badly Philippa would mutilate Stamets if she caught on, and whether he could make a bid for asylum among the Orions, providing he could supply them with enough Terran tech to keep them from turning him in.

And one last message: “He’s back. Shit. *Shit*. Time for the backup plan.”

A plan he’d apparently kept so quiet it wasn’t mentioned in his recordings or his research, and certainly not something he’d mentioned to his staff, who in any case, displayed limited loyalty to him. “*Stamets*,” his lab assistant had said with the same tone of voice Philippa used when confronting any species other than Terrans. “That man had more lives than a Petraxian cuckoo. If he said he had a backup plan, he probably had three. But he’d never have told any of us.”

So Michael kept searching. Until the afternoon she mounted his data drive backup and found a file timestamped from the day Lorca had executed him.

```
78326 10649 93163 55914 10961 96446 19900 28716 96091 39585
18336 98230 91767 81124 17606 99738 09198 29792 38696 47785
19893 54724 82497 12506 97876 87532 45434 86928 41883 31895
68471 24062 63491 53331 34641 16587 38165 71969 99047 97824
```

The five-digit strings continued for screen after screen, as large as any of the mycelial data files, but in a completely different format. Mycelial data strings were DNA sequences, growth rates, calculations applied to fungal strains and heat and moisture indexes. Strings of letters and numbers, with exponents and decimal places and sometimes negative signs.

Five-digit strings, none of them repeated, were something else entirely. Something Michael had seen before in elementary logic classes. Something like a cipher.

All ciphers followed a set of rules. Sometimes those rules were as simple as substituting one letter for another; sometimes, the letters swapped depending on multiple alphabets, or multiple letters swapped for a single one. The first approach all young Vulcans learned was to apply known patterns, like letter frequency in the Vulcan language, and see how well the ciphertext matched those patterns. Michael had learned to do this in her head, though of course for a task like this, which could be in any language Stamets might have spoken, it was faster to run the file through the computer’s standard decryption protocols.

Ten minutes later, she still had an endless file of five-digit strings and no English, or any other language, to show for it.

She was glaring at the file and contemplating next steps when the emperor walked into the lab.

“Everyone out,” he said, and paused beside the entrance as the laboratory staff managed the tricky job of bowing and running through the doorway at the same time. “Not you, Michael.”

“Is everything all right, Emperor?”

“Everything’s fine, Michael; just want to discuss a few things more privately.” The door snicked shut behind him. “You’ve been spending a lot of time here. Making any progress with Stamets’ files?”

“Not yet.” She tapped her viewscreen closed. “But soon, I hope.”

“Good, good. In the meantime, I have a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise?” Michael asked. Lorca seemed cheerful enough, but he so often was right before he said things like “I’m thinking of having the chef prepare crispy Andorian antennae tonight” or ordering one of his council members to slaughter a troublesome city.

He rested his hand on her shoulder. “You’ll like it, I promise. Come on, follow me.”

The usual corridor traffic parted to let them through, crewmembers melting to the sides as they passed, greeting them with bowed heads and outstretched salutes. Lorca ignored them other than the occasional nod as he chatted with Michael: were Stamets’ former teammates being helpful (yes), how likely was it he’d actually researched ways to preserve the mycelial network (somewhat), which of Michael’s favorite foods from *Discovery* did she miss the most (key lime pie).

A turbolift ride and three other corridors later, Lorca paused in front of the entry to the brig. “Your surprise awaits, Michael.”

“I assume you’re not having me incarcerated.”

“Well,” he said, “not unless you give me a reason.”

Michael’s skin prickled. Lorca couldn’t read thoughts, and she’d been very careful to memorize every note she’d taken about the *Charon*’s inner workings and weaknesses on the off chance she might need them someday. A Vulcan education had its advantages.

But she still hesitated with her first step into the brig, wondering if there would be one out of there.

Even on a ship as large as the *Charon*, the brig was small and nearly empty. Two bored security officers snapped to attention when Lorca, Michael, and the emperor’s bodyguards entered the room, standing tall and straight even after Lorca returned their salute.

“Close your eyes,” he said to Michael. “Take my hand. I’ll guide you.”

His fingers intertwined with hers; warm where her hand was cool, firm where she trembled, at least internally. She stepped forward, letting him pull her gently around a corner and through what sounded like another doorway.

“Open your eyes, Michael.”

She faced another cell, this one slightly larger than the ones she’d passed before, and clearly isolated for security reasons. The VIP cell, as it were.

On the cot, asleep with her knees pulled nearly to her chest, was Philippa.

“You ... you let her go.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. She’s still my prisoner. She’s just not spending twenty hours a day in the agonizers anymore. Maybe eight now. Depends on how she behaves, and how much information she gives me. And ... well, we’ll see.”

Michael suppressed another tremor. “Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate your compassion very much, Gabriel.”

“You’ve been very patient, Michael, and very helpful. You’ve held up your end of the bargain. It was only fair.”

“Nevertheless.”

He leaned towards her, that clever smile on his face that meant he knew how exactly how good he was being. He tapped his cheek. “One more thank-you. Right here.”

Even close enough that she could see the late afternoon’s first stubble below his jawline, Michael had to lean in to kiss his cheek. That itchy tingle beneath her skin simmered and bubbled until surely she couldn’t be standing still anymore, surely her hands must have been vibrating through the cell’s containment field and she’d grabbed Philippa and they’d run as far and fast as they could go.

But instead she stood below Lorca, watching his self-satisfied smile creep across his face.

“You can stay here as long as you like,” he said. “I’ll see you at nineteen-hundred hours.”

“I wouldn’t think of missing it, Gabriel.”

He left. Michael slid to the floor beside the cell and sat, breathing slowly and deeply in time with Philippa.

The tingle faded enough that she could push it out of her head for now. But it lay beneath her fingertips, and waited.

* * *

Michael picked at her dinner, folding the lamb curry into the rice more frequently than a forkful reached her mouth. She ate the key lime pie only because she knew Lorca expected it of her. It was citric and tangy and the custard melted away in her mouth as it should, but every bite was by rote rather than out of pleasure.

Afterwards, she stood in front of his wall-sized window, watching the stars, waiting for him to put away the chessboard they sometimes used to fill the time before he’d let her return to her quarters. The *Charon* was cruising slowly towards the Bo system, where Lorca was letting the local government stew while he took his time arriving to review the status of their dilithium refinement operations.

In the distance, a fuzzy whirl of red and tangerine marked a nebula close enough to see but far enough to be several days of warp travel. Somewhere new, somewhere Michael had never been, somewhere she might never see now except as the person holding a knife to someone else’s neck. Or worse, the person who’d made the craven tradeoff: their neck instead of her own. A few people’s necks instead of hundreds, or

thousands. Their necks left attached to their bodies instead of severed, as if life in bondage was always preferable to death.

“Quite a view,” Lorca said. He’d slipped up behind her, not out of stealth so much as that Michael knew he’d use tonight to get closer to her, and it was just a matter of waiting for the moment.

A tickle at her waist where he’d rested his hand. His lips whispering along her neck; his other hand at the zip of her collar.

The terror simmering beneath her skin bubbled up through her spine, her chest, her lips. But when she opened her mouth, she couldn’t make a sound.

“Michael,” he murmured. “I’ve been waiting for you so long. Won’t you let me in?”

The zip sliding to her clavicle, then lower. His hand grazing her chest with the back of his knuckles, slowly unfurling to cup her breast.

“Stay here tonight, Michael,” he said, his mouth buzzing against her skin.

Her knees began to buckle. She willed them taut, branches that barely bent in the wind.

“I ... I can’t, Gabriel. I’m sorry.” Had she hid the tremor in her voice enough? Would he notice?

“Why not?”

Lorca’s hand at her waist, curling around her abdomen, drawing her against him. He was half-hard already, and moved his hips across her buttocks to make sure Michael knew it.

“It’s been a difficult day. Seeing Philippa freed ... I can’t thank you enough. And I will. Soon. I just need another few days to process everything.”

“You care about her,” Lorca said. “And she had the audacity to criticize my feelings for you.”

“She was my mother in this universe. Can you blame her if she didn’t find any man good enough for me?”

“I don’t care what she thinks of me. I care what *you* think.”

“I think,” Michael said, turning to face him, “I’ll be ready in a few days.”

She let Lorca’s lips touch hers, and she swallowed the fire at her throat. And she returned to her room later that night to stare at the dark walls and the looted artwork and the shivers lingering in her heart.

* * *

78326 10649 93163 55914 10961 96446 19900 28716 96091 39585
18336 98230 91767 81124 17606 99738 09198 29792 38696 47785
19893 54724 82497 12506 97876 87532 45434 86928 41883 31895
68471 24062 63491 53331 34641 16587 38165 71969 99047 97824

No matter how long Michael stared at the sequence, numerically, it made no sense. There were no patterns, and what patterns might be there that she hadn’t yet noticed had been deliberately eradicated through use of the five-number block. Which meant it almost certainly had to be a cipher, which also meant that it was probably keyed to a text Stamets knew well.

Which of course begged the question of which text it was. “Keyed” meant that each numeral in the cipher referred to either a letter position on a page or a page itself, and without knowing what text Stamets had chosen, finding a needle in a haystack was honestly a more likely proposition. And this also assumed that Stamets had coded the text in English and its well-known letter frequencies as opposed to some other language entirely and its unique frequencies ... and in short, every moment Michael stared at the cipher was another eyetwitch and another suppressed curse about why nothing in this universe could be as easy as she needed it to be.

Setting the computer to review Stamets’ most recent reading list, as well as his list of most frequently read texts, wasn’t hard. Waiting for the results, on the other hand, was tiresome and left days and hours of free time Michael was instead supposed to be contemplating how to support her emperor’s political ambitions, not to mention more personal ones that left her stomach queasy and her mind jittering with tension.

She interviewed Stamets’ staff. “What had he been reading?” she asked, hoping for an answer that wasn’t *Astromycology Quarterly* or *Erotic Dreams of the Forbidden Fungus*, the latter of which she had found buried deep in a reading list and which she planned to pretend she had never seen excerpts of. But no one was helpful. His senior lab assistant tossed her impossibly straight blonde hair and sniffed, saying she’d never seen him read anything that wasn’t either an imperial edict or a peer-reviewed paper he’d rant about for hours, claiming he’d come up with the same idea years before. His less senior lab assistants simply rolled their eyes and said they’d kept their heads down, doing whatever Stamets had asked rather than considering the nature of the request. “I like keeping my job, ma’am,” said one of the assistants, “and also my head.”

Two days passed, then three. The computer obligingly spat out analysis after analysis, each as disappointing as the previous one. No keys based on articles from the past twenty-five years of the *Astromycology Quarterly*. None from the *Holy Bible*. None from the *Quran*. None from any other religious text, nor seminal secular text, nor anything from the last thirty years of the official Terran newsjournal. And perhaps most disappointingly, none from *Erotic Dreams of the Forbidden Fungus*, not even volumes two or three.

Michael slammed her fist on the controls. Nothing about the results display changed, but at least she felt a soreness in her hand that meant something had happened.

Another night with Lorca, then; another night feigning a headache or a distraction. At best she had three or four more days before she'd have to give in, regardless of whether she'd found a prybar into Stamets' files. She'd hoped she could put it off until then, use the new information as an excuse for sudden enthusiasm about sleeping with a man instead of stabbing him to death, or preferably, huddling and hiding under a blanket in her quarters; instead, she'd inadvertently given herself a deadline she was supposed to want to meet rather than one she'd wished would never come.

She spent a restless night wondering which would give out first, the mycelial network or the computer's analysis of potential key texts, when she finally remembered that Stamets, or at least her Stamets, had one other great love besides mushrooms and their progeny. He had Hugh. And Hugh had Kasseelian opera. And even if this universe's Stamets had no Hugh, maybe he'd had a point in his life where he'd learned to appreciate a twenty-three-tone scale and the harmonies to match. Maybe he'd keyed his cipher to a Beatles song in a universe where Pete Best had stuck around instead of being replaced by Ringo Starr. Or maybe there was some other nugget in his music collection, rock or opera or for all Michael knew, klezmer, with enough lyrics to supply sufficient letters to decipher the mysterious numeric clusters Stamets had left behind.

Michael set the computer program. And she left her work that afternoon humming the military march from Aalmanei's *Adira's Fortune*.

* * *

Michael had visited Philippa every day since Lorca's initial surprise. There were times Philippa was away in the agonizers – Lorca's mercy had its limits – but at the hours Michael was generally free to visit, Philippa was there as well, and if not awake, would awaken not long after Michael's arrival.

But even in the few days between today and when Lorca had "freed" Philippa, Philippa's appearance suggested she wasn't in the flawless health Lorca's magnanimity was somehow supposed to afford her. It wasn't just that they weren't giving her daily access to a sonic shower; it was a restlessness in her eyes, a twitch at her brow, a tremor at her fingertips.

"Can you hear that?" Philippa said.

"Hear what?"

"That buzz. Like a heat shield placed slightly out of phase."

Michael cocked her head, set back her ears, concentrated. Her Vulcan classmates had always whispered behind their hands when they'd seen her do that; they knew she couldn't hear what they could. But she'd tried, tried so very hard. She would be the best Vulcan any human could be.

"I'm sorry, Philippa. I can't hear anything."

Philippa's head twitched. "It's no matter. It's gone. He does it randomly. A form of sonic torture. Though by now perhaps I have been here long enough that I'm simply hearing things."

"I'll talk to him," Michael said. "Maybe I've been helpful enough that he'll give me something in return."

"Have you, though? Have you really been helpful in the way he wants?"

"I don't think I follow."

Philippa's face had the patchy, oily sheen of poor nutrition and a complete lack of the meticulous skin regimen due an emperor, but her eyes were still clear and sharp and bored into Michael like a fine steel dagger. "Have you slept with him yet? You know you're going to have to."

His lips whispering along her neck; his hand at the zip of her collar. "Not yet."

"But soon."

Michael sighed. "Yes. Soon."

"Be careful, Michael," Philippa said. She rose, paced the few steps from door to her cot, sat down again. "Of all the members of my court, Lorca was the best at telling you exactly what you wanted to hear, then making you believe it even when you knew it could not possibly be true. And he was especially adept at this when it came to women."

"I gather there were many."

"Myself among them, once or twice. But yes. Do not let yourself forget: no matter how much he says he cares for you, he cares for himself more. He won't hesitate to sacrifice me even if it injures you. And he'll do the same to you if he's backed into a corner and can no longer bargain."

"What do you recommend?"

"Back him into the corner before anyone else can, and make sure you have a viable escape plan when you do." Philippa lay back and closed her eyes. "Now leave me be, daughter. I can hear the buzzing again."

There was only silence, unless somehow Terran ears were as sensitive as Vulcan ones. But Michael still bowed her head slightly and walked away.

* * *

Wake up, snack, run five kilometers, shower, breakfast, check the nightly ciphertext analysis results. Fail. Fail. Fail. More fails. Keep

scrolling. Still more fails.

Then: a chime, a single tone Michael almost missed because she was so locked into scrolling past every failed option.

Match, said the system. Aarno Lipiinnii, complete libretto to *Piiri and Paamppo*, music by Fioluluulua Oaana. *Play decrypted text?*

After all this effort, this had better not turn out to be Stamets' mushroom fanfiction. "Proceed," Michael said.

Personal astromycology log, stardate 2250.3. Chief Astromycologist and Rightful God-Emperor of the Mycelial Plane Paul Stamets speaking. That's right, God-Emperor, because I've finally cracked the goddamned code and I know how we can replenish our fungus supply. Good thing, too, because the core doesn't have more than a year left before everything, and I do mean everything, goes kabloolie.

This file contains:

- *Bioenvironmental requirements for growth of Prototaxites stellaviatori*
- *Engineering specifications for terraforming pods supporting spore dissemination and growth*
- *Optimal location for terraforming. Actually, scratch that, we'll cover that first, because there's only one location I've found in the entire universe that will meet our needs without years of additional terraforming work: Delta 2, a class 4 moon in the Holani sector.*

Okay, that's out of the way. Ready, kids? Let's get started.

Michael spent the rest of the day in her quarters reading through Stamets' file until she felt like she'd have passed whatever pop quiz even the evil version of him would have thrown at her. Mycelium humidity percentages? 62%. Terraforming energy dispersal rates? A calculable sigmoid growth pattern. Exact chemical composition of the nutrient bath the spores needed to propagate? A proprietary mix Stamets had outlined in a separate file Michael hadn't yet found – though she did at least know where Stamets had hidden the vial of concentrate – and she knew it had to be diluted 1:100 with distilled water. Transliterated lyrics to the aria Stamets quoted halfway through? (*My love, my love, they come for me / I call to you across the deepest sea / Across the widest chasm.*)

She just had enough time to finish the list of tasks and supplies to hand out to Stamets' former team tomorrow before having to meet Lorca for dinner. For once, she felt light on her feet as she walked the sixty meters from her quarters to his; in all the months she'd been here, there had been so few days when she'd felt like she'd made a genuinely positive contribution to humanity instead of merely minimizing the damage the Terrans caused practically by breathing.

"So," he said through his last forkful of spice cake, "the Holani sector. That's right at the edge of our territory. Might be a good opportunity to plant some stakes in the ground along with the spores."

Michael nudged her cake slice with her fork and tried not to consider how much violence "planting some stakes in the ground" might entail. "How long will it take to get there?"

"A week at full warp. Two with the stops we'll have to make along the way. Got to pick up supplies on Andoria and make the rounds on Larall Prime so the governor remembers who's boss. You can't let the natives fall behind on tribute. They start to think they're in charge, and that never ends well. For them, anyway."

"No, no, of course not."

Lorca nodded at Michael's plate. "You've hardly touched your cake. Not hungry tonight?"

"Just a lot on my mind. Planning for the terraforming ... there's so much to do. We've got to prototype the devices, reproduce Stamets' small-scale tests, analyze his nutrient blend so we can make more even if I don't find and decrypt his notes ... it's hard work, but it's exciting."

He pushed his chair back, rose, offered her his hand. "Let me try to take your mind off that. Come with me."

A flutter in her stomach; her head swirled. There was no question what this meant. And refusing was not an option.

Michael took his hand, swallowed her queasiness, and let Lorca lead her deeper into his quarters. She had seen his bedroom before, once, when he'd given her the grand tour on her first day onboard, and she'd known even then she'd see it again whether she wanted to or not.

This is your prison sentence. You haven't done enough penance. You need to pay for what you've done. Even if it means this.

Lorca cupped the back of Michael's head, tilted it towards him. She closed her eyes when he touched her, and tried to forget the taste of his lips.

* * *

"No, no, no, no ... why can't you hear it, Michael? Are you really that useless to me? Go away if you can't help." Philippa crouched at the edge of her cell, her hands over her ears, her eyes squeezed shut. Her hair hadn't been washed in a week, and even through the containment field, Michael could smell her clothes. "My Michael would have cut down every guard in this facility to free me by now. You are nothing more than a pathetic Federation copy. A pale shadow of the real thing."

"Philippa ..." Michael turned on her heel and approached the two ensigns on duty. "Whatever you're doing to her, it stops now," she said.

"We're not doing anything," the younger of the two said. He had short ginger hair and a face speckled with tiny freckles, and in another universe, literally, he could have been Tilly's brother. "Our orders are to watch her, not to torture her. We're not that lucky. And she's not due for the agonizers for another six hours."

"Show me the controls for her cell." Michael pushed the ensign aside. The screen's indicators covered the usual items – environmental status,

containment field strength, how often the prisoner was due for a meal or shower – but nothing controlled subsonic frequency torture.

“You see, ma’am?” said the ensign. “It’s not us. If it’s happening, it’s over our heads. But she’s probably just going stir crazy. Good.”

“Ensign,” Michael said, “do you love your mother?”

“Most of the time.”

“Then you must surely understand that if Emperor Georgiou were your mother, you might love her too, most of the time. And you might not want her to suffer unbearable agony if it were within your power to stop it.”

A raspy voice floated from across the room. “Michael, you coward. Kill them where they stand. I order you.”

“Ensign,” Michael said, “could someone be transmitting subsonic signals from another location?”

“I don’t think so, ma’am, but I’m a security officer, not an engineer. And if Emperor Lorca or Minister Landry believes Georgiou needs a little more punishment ... I’m not going to argue. And neither should you.”

“Your opinion about Emperor Georgiou’s imprisonment was not solicited, Ensign. Perhaps you’d like me to discuss your attitude with Minister Landry.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Very sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t. Now, get Emperor Georgiou a shower and a hot meal. She’s overdue for both, or aren’t you paying attention to that readout you just showed me?”

“Right away, ma’am.”

“Michael!” the voice called out again. “Michael! Stop talking. I can hear you. I can hear all of you. You must all *stop talking*. Your emperor commands it!”

“You may need to sedate her,” Michael added. “I would appreciate it if you were gentle with her.”

The ensign tapped and slid a control on his screen. Behind her, Michael heard a faint hiss.

“Sleeping gas,” the ensign said. “She’ll be fine in an hour.”

Michael nodded her thanks. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Philippa now fully slumped to the floor. It was for the best, probably; her motto since she’d come to this universe, along with *everything that happens to you now happens because you deserve it*.

But Philippa: as terrifying a force as she had been, did she really deserve Terran punishment? Eight hours a day in literal torture machines; random sonic assaults Michael had yet to prove were happening outside Philippa’s head – and real or not, they were eating away at Philippa’s sanity. Humiliation and occasional neglect from her captors was to be expected, and the sort of thing that happened in Federation prisons regardless of whether it was supposed to. Torture was another matter entirely, and though Michael had tolerated it when Lorca had subjected himself to it, because he’d volunteered – and oh, how she wished he’d never been released from that glass booth – in both principle and practice, it violated every cultural norm she believed in.

She rarely allowed herself the luxury of daydreams about escape. There was no logic to it. She was on the most heavily fortified ship in the Imperial fleet, and she was watched as closely by the Emperor and his guards that she might as well have been part of the crown jewels. Which she was, she supposed; a possession, a trophy, a prize to be shown off and worn whenever Lorca chose. He’d kept Georgiou’s ceremonial sword but demonstrated little interest in the ornate robes and symbolic rings traditional for an emperor.

Michael, on the other hand: Michael was expected in his quarters every evening. Michael was given fine dresses she was supposed to wear and sometimes even did, if they pleased her or Lorca made it clear the dress was not an optional accessory. Michael’s existence was known to the entire ship as the woman who’d given herself to the emperor in exchange for saving the lives of her weak and foolish Federation brethren.

She was precious to him, and worthless to herself.

A soft chime from her wristband, the alarm reminding her it was time to bathe and dress before dinner. Lorca would be expecting her to spend the night again. She’d given in once, and while she hoped he’d never press the issue, the flutter in her belly told her that she’d forfeited the right to not give in again. The star sapphire did not get to choose when it was worn; it merely accepted that it would be worn, that this was its purpose.

She leaned her head against the wall outside the brig and waited for her dizziness to pass. She had to be well. She had to be beautiful, and sharp, and willing. And fleeting thoughts of escape could wait another day, and another, and another.

* * *

From 75,000 kilometers away, Delta 2 was a speckled orange ball that looked like the sour candies Tilly had kept in a jar by her bed. “I just really like citric acid, you know? And there were these ones my mother used to have that were rolled in citric acid powder so they were all chalky before you got to the smooth part. They were so sour they made me cry the first time I had them, and then I stole them all and got in so much trouble,” she’d said. “Anyway, those were lemon, but I like orange better. You want one?”

Michael had, and she’d smiled as the sourness settled on her tongue and mingled with the artificial fruit. Fresh oranges were among her favorites, but candy never tasted right to her without that flavor of facsimile. Sarek had never understood, much less understood why she craved candy, but Amanda had winked at her and made sure that every so often, packages of lemon drops arrived from Earth by diplomatic

pouch.

By now *Discovery* could be anywhere. Delivering humanitarian aid to the systems that had suffered most during the war, helping a convoy of travelers in distress, even taking well-deserved shore leave back on Earth. Wherever they were, Michael hoped they were happy, and that Tilly still snuck in one extra candy before bedtime.

The *Charon* was nearing target range. “So this is the place,” Lorca said, joining Michael at the laboratory viewscreen. “Are you and your team ready?”

“Just about, Emperor. We need to do a final scan to confirm our settings.”

“What are you waiting for? Let’s grow some mushrooms, Lieutenant.”

One by one, Michael’s team ran the scans and reported back to her. Atmospheric pressure and composition: as expected. Soil and air moisture levels: within acceptable parameters. Wind speed: nothing above 25 knots.

Life signs: mostly plants, some rodents and small mammals.

As well as what appeared to be a colony of Vulcans.

Michael’s knees wobbled when the lab technician announced what she’d found. “Could you ... could you repeat that, please, Specialist Jameson?”

“Approximately 300 life signs clustered on a peninsula on the northern continent. Mostly Vulcan, a few Terran, and ... one or two Betazoids, I think. I’m not getting a conclusive reading. They could be half-breeds,” Jameson finished, an edge in her voice.

“Rebels, eh?” Lorca said. “Lurking out here at the edge of our territory, hoping they’ll slide under the radar long enough to build up a fighting force. Michael, will they interfere with the terraforming?”

It was dead quiet in the lab, but all Michael could hear was a buzzing in her ears. Was this what it was like for Philippa all the time now? She blinked, shook her head. “I’m sorry, Emperor, could you repeat that?”

“Pay attention, Lieutenant. You’ve taken it this far; don’t screw it up now. So tell me, will the colony interfere with the terraforming, or do I need to order a missile strike first?”

“Emperor, I’d like to evacuate the colony first.”

“That’s not the question I asked, Lieutenant.”

“Emperor.” Michael gripped the edge of the console more tightly. At this point, she was certain it was the only thing holding her up, because her legs sure couldn’t be. “Please. There’s no need for this.”

“I thought we had an urgent need to restore the mycelial network, Lieutenant.”

“We do, but –”

“‘But’? There is no ‘but,’ here, Lieutenant. There are rebels, and they are in the way. The only question we need to answer is whether their being in the way interferes with our mission. If it does, we have to deal with them first. If not, we might as well save the missiles for some other rebel colony that needs a lesson in humility.”

“Emperor,” Michael whispered, “please don’t make me do this.”

“On the contrary, Lieutenant: the longer you take to decide, the more inclined I am to make you do it. You serve the Terran Empire, not the Federation. Now, one last time: will their presence interfere with the terraforming?”

Michael stared down at the console. She’d known the answer all along but hadn’t been able to bring herself to say it, and almost couldn’t do it now. But an ultimatum wouldn’t just affect her; Lorca would go after Philippa as well, possibly first, and possibly worse than he’d go after Michael herself, all as part of this awful object lesson.

A punishment that affected her was acceptable. She was property. She was sacrificial. Philippa was property, too, of course, but in far worse shape.

There was no point in both of them suffering. Either way, Michael would be scarred. All she had to do was allow this murder, one tiny little set of murders in the great scale of universal death and destruction, and the entire mycelial network would survive.

The needs of the many, like Spock always said. Because of course he was always right, and Michael wondered if he’d have found some unbearably clever way around the particular Kobayashi Maru Lorca had set for her. If he had, he’d never have let her forget it.

Well, she’d never know, would she? All she’d know was that she’d saved the network, and she’d saved Philippa.

“No, Emperor,” she finally said. “The variance the colony’s presence causes in a planetwide terraforming operation is negligible at best.”

“Good. Commence operation.”

She pressed the button to start the process and watched the probes stream towards the planet’s surface, tiny needles packed with spores and nutrients and more than enough environmental programming to kill three hundred people. The first thing to happen would be a thickening of

the cloud cover, followed by a hundredfold increase in carbon dioxide. Maybe, if she and the colony were lucky, there might even be enough carbon monoxide released that everyone would die quietly, painlessly, simply falling asleep and never waking up.

Half an hour later, the terraforming system had been fully deployed on Delta 2. The Emperor had left twenty-five minutes ago, nodding to her and the team without even so much as a “Good work.”

Michael left Stamets’ assistant in charge and fled to her quarters. She set the door to a “do not disturb” protocol. And she huddled on her bed and wept until she could hardly breathe.

* * *

Michael didn’t re-emerge from her quarters until the following morning. Now that Lorca was fully at home in this universe, he never bothered to apologize for his behavior, much less acknowledge anything was wrong with it, but neither had he sent his personal guard to Michael’s door when she’d left him a terse note stating she was too unwell to attend their nightly dinner. It was as close as she ever expected to get to an acknowledgement that he’d pushed her too far.

Stamets’ old team – Michael refused to think of them as her team, because that would imply taking responsibility for their morally bankrupt decisions, and she had enough of those herself – was bustling about the lab, hand-tweaking chemical settings for the terraforming and monitoring progress. The planet that had been shades and stripes of orange the day before now sported patches of turquoise, teal, magenta. Michael reviewed the most recent footage from the terraforming drones: iridescent coral spires curving towards the sky, gnarled fingers grasping invisible ropes in the air, a haze of spores haloing each spire. In ultraviolet mode, the new landscape glowed so brightly she had to turn away until her eyes adjusted. What had been cyan and pink was now neon, pulsing and rippling lights messaging the mycelial network. It brimmed with life.

Three hundred dead lay beneath this luminous landscape. Would they have gone to their deaths willingly, knowing that they’d sacrificed themselves for the good of the universe? The Vulcans, perhaps, but the Betazoids? The half-Terran or half-Vulcan children the scanners hadn’t been able to conclusively identify?

Kilometers below the *Charon*, spores spun their spiral paths into space, into something far deeper and older than those three hundred lives. This universe’s Stamets, this selfish, paranoid, pathetic little man, had saved everything after all. It wasn’t enough to redeem him, and it wasn’t enough to redeem Michael. It would never soothe her conscience. But it did salve a small wound in her heart.

She had to tell Philippa. Perhaps she’d just roll her eyes and sharply question why Michael had wasted brainpower on this problem rather than finding them a way out of here; perhaps she’d smile thinly and thank Michael for not having let the universe explode before she’d had a chance to slit Lorca’s throat. “Bring me a file,” she might say, “I want to sharpen my nails so I can do it with my bare hands.”

But instead, when she visited Philippa that afternoon, Philippa was huddled in a ball on the floor, her knees to her chest, her hair strung limply across her face. “You ... won’t ... break me, Gabriel,” she hissed, then clapped her hands to her ears and moaned. “I can take this. I can take anything you throw at me! I am Emperor Philippa Georgiou Augustus Iaponius Centarius! And you – *aaaaah* – you are a self-centered, vainglorious ...” She howled again; her legs twitched, and she buried her head in her knees. “I ... will ... not ...”

Her voice faded away, and she lay still. Michael’s breath caught in her throat.

“Guards!” she called. “Guards! I need a check on the emperor’s vital signs!”

The ginger ensign who’d been there before tapped at his console. “She’s unconscious, Lieutenant, but she’s unharmed.”

“Does she look unharmed to you, Ensign? Someone is still torturing her.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. You’ll have to take it up with Minister Landry or Emperor Lorca.”

“I shouldn’t have to take it up with anyone.” Her eyes on Philippa; the emperor still locked in her head, uncommunicative. “See that she gets medical attention,” Michael said. “I’ll expect her in better condition tomorrow.”

“Aye aye, Lieutenant,” she heard the ensign say as she left, and the weariness in his voice told her nothing would change.

Every day, she woke dreading what compromises she’d be forced to make. Every day, she negotiated with herself about consequences and damage and the minimum level of harm any being would have to suffer from Terran actions. Every day, she watched the woman she cared for more than anyone else in this miserable universe suffer.

Every day, she subjugated herself, when every day, she could be chipping away at the damage in an entirely different way.

New motto, then: *you can do anything if you want it badly enough.*

Which meant escape was no longer a daydream.

* * *

Some nights, usually the ones when Lorca insisted Michael stay until morning, the idle thoughts of escape occupied her brain until she fell asleep. The logistics were overwhelming: releasing Philippa, learning guard rotations, researching ship authorization codes, sneaking away without being detected or followed.

If she were instead fortunate enough to be allowed to return to her own bed, sleep came quickly. It delayed her half-hearted planning, but it kept her sane. Which was more than she could say for Philippa, who had deteriorated further in the two weeks since she’d passed out in front of Michael. The medical staff had shrugged and said there was little they could do without a definite cause, and even if they did have an

obvious course of treatment, Landry or Lorca would have to approve it first.

Michael had tiptoed around Lorca more than usual after the incident on Delta 2. When they'd started dining together again the day afterwards, he never mentioned the dead colonists, and their very lack of significance to him hung in the air like a warning beacon. If she brought up what he'd done, his threats of punishment would return as well. The discussion was closed. Those lives were gone.

Thus she'd let her questions about Philippa's state lie fallow. Lorca had been sparing with his favors when Michael had first come aboard, and only began to dole them out as she gained his trust that she wouldn't betray him. She'd damaged that trust by crossing him too publicly, too severely, though still not severely enough. If she wanted anything from him, she'd have to be patient, or subtle in a way she hadn't yet determined, so subtle that a man who'd spent more than a year successfully pretending to be someone else wouldn't realize what she was up to.

She added it to the list of impossible logistics. The list grew longer every day. But the more she considered it, the less she was willing to give up on it.

* * *

Lorca curled behind her, quiescent in an afterglow, at least for him. He kissed Michael's shoulderblade, slipped his arm over her waist to draw her closer.

"God, you're beautiful," he said. "I wish I'd found you sooner."

"I wouldn't have slept with you any sooner than I did."

"Touché. But still worth it." Another kiss, and his hand sliding upwards to cup a breast. He rubbed against her, and God, hadn't he had enough already?

Michael ran her foot over his calf. She'd developed numerous moves that suggested she was interested in him, and this was one of them. "I do my best."

"Mmm." His face tilted away from her back. "Hey, can you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That buzzing. Sounds like a vibrating panel."

"Sorry, I can't hear it." Which was true: she'd loosened a ventilation panel while Lorca had been in the toilet, but not enough for her to hear it rattle when the air blew in, so she hadn't been sure her experiment had worked. Terrans really must have more sensitive hearing than humans.

"Eh, it's not that bad. Nothing like what I've been teasing old Pippa with. I'll get Maintenance in tomorrow morning."

Lorca ran his thumb over Michael's nipple. He was getting ready to go again, which didn't leave Michael much time. Let him think the breath she'd suddenly drawn in was because she was desperate for his touch, not because she finally had proof he was the source of Philippa's mysterious auditory torture. "What do you mean, teasing Philippa?"

"Oh, just some noises only dogs and aging, deposed emperors can hear. I promised you I'd take her out of the agonizers most of the time. But I still get to have a little fun now and then."

The hand on her breast shifted lower, and Michael tried not to stiffen as he touched her. "She's suffered a lot already, Gabriel."

"She's lucky I didn't have her vivisected. I keep her alive for you, you know."

"And I'm grateful for it."

"How grateful?"

He shifted in the bed to tilt Michael onto her back and kiss the curve of her neck, his lips gliding up, across her cheekbone, a streak that burned and tingled all the way to her mouth. Could she bite him without him interpreting it as foreplay? Scratch at his neck, or claw his face? All too ambiguous. She knew for certain now, and he needed to know that the gratitude she felt to him had nothing at all to do with his supposed mercy towards Philippa.

She had no plan beyond the next few minutes. It was all she could do to participate in his seduction, kissing Lorca deeply, scraping her nails across his shoulderblades, urging him on. When she flipped him onto his back and sank on top of him, he hissed and grabbed her hips to thrust into her harder.

"Gabriel," Michael said. "Gabriel." She stroked his cheek with her open palm. "You have no idea how grateful I am."

She slid her hand to the point where his neck declined into his shoulder. Sarek had taught her well: a nerve pinch was harder to administer from the front, but by no means impossible.

Michael had betrayed a captain like this once before, albeit one who hadn't deserved it. And she'd have never have done to Philippa what she was about to do to Lorca.

The shock of the pinch took effect, and Lorca arched beneath her one final time.

"Michael," he gasped. His eyelids fluttered shut, and his body sank beneath her.

Lorca rested insensate on a plethora of pillows, the sort of luxury only someone who never had to worry about paying for them could afford. Michael had her choice: green fringed decoratives, a violet velvet bolster, the crisp white pillows they actually slept on. She reached for one with a turquoise sham, the same color as the mycelium spires they'd left behind on Delta 2.

"Never say my name again," she said, and she pressed the pillow to Lorca's face until she was absolutely, positively certain he'd taken his last breath.

* * *

Michael sat with the body for half an hour just in case. After all, this was a man who'd miraculously cheated death in one universe by fleeing to another. But Lorca's corpse was paler now, and he still wasn't breathing.

She'd meant to use the time constructively to plan how she was going to get herself and Philippa off the *Charon*, but somehow between panic and shock and that endless list of impossibilities, she'd only gotten as far as *find Philippa, find a ship, leave*. It wouldn't be the first time she'd flown by the seat of her pants in this universe, and it surely wouldn't be the last unless she and Philippa somehow found a way back to the place Michael called home. And if she didn't make it out ... well, she would hardly be worse off than she would be if she survived to see whoever seized the throne in Lorca's absence, and who would surely be far less interested in protecting Michael than Lorca had been.

She dressed, leaving her jacket off to stash Lorca's phaser inside. Best to look mussed-up anyway so that the guards wouldn't question her leaving in the middle of the night. It happened often enough that they'd eventually stopped making snide remarks about whether she was good enough or whether they'd need to call someone from Lorca's backup rotation to satisfy him. She was there for part of every night, if not all of it, and they had enough sense about them to understand that meant she was not to be messed with any further.

She waved at them and headed towards her quarters, only ducking down the corridor towards the turbolift when she was certain she was out of their sight. She slipped her jacket back on and slid the phaser into the holster she'd been required to keep empty since she arrived on board. One tiny step towards freedom completed. Only about thirty or forty more to go.

The corridor near the brig was practically empty at this hour, and the ensigns behind the control panel weren't familiar: a pale, dark-haired woman with fierce eyes and another with kinked hair in tiny braids haloing her head. "Lieutenant," she said, "how can I help you?"

"I'm just here to see Emp— former emperor Georgiou."

"At this hour?"

"I ... look, this is a little embarrassing. I had a bad dream. I dreamt she'd died. And I'd feel a whole lot better if I could see her."

"How sweet. But you're going to have to take it up with Minister Landry. Georgiou's not here. Landry came by and took her for a little quality time in the agonizer."

"But it's midnight! She's not due for that until six!"

The guard smirked. "Guess you're not the only one having trouble sleeping."

Michael stormed down the corridor. The phaser bounced reassuringly at her thigh, and she thumbed it to the maximum setting without even looking. Landry was the one person on board who merited an automatic *kill*, because the only other one who had was currently a couple hours away from rigor mortis.

This wouldn't be a tiny step towards freedom. This would be a much larger one, or possibly just a more satisfying one. Assuming she and Philippa got out alive.

She paused outside the door to the agonizer chamber to let her heart rate settle. A hundred ten beats per minute, if her math was right. Breathe deep, take ten seconds to meditate while the corridor was empty, breathe again. Ninety beats per minute now.

It would do.

She palmed open the door, phaser pointed at Landry and the control panel. To her left, the agonizer crackled and spat energy, and Philippa screamed and moaned.

"Landry," Michael said. "Turn it off. Let her go."

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Just for that, I'm turning it up."

Another scream from Philippa. The echoing slap of her hand against the glass as she stumbled against it in pain.

Michael fired at Landry's feet. Landry jumped back before her toes could be singed and stared at Michael in shock. "Seriously? You think you can take me?"

"Turn it off. Let her go. I won't ask again."

"Fine." Landry slid a virtual rocker switch to the bottom, tapped a sequence on a keypad. The agonizer switched off, and Philippa stumbled to the floor as the door swung open.

Michael kept her phaser trained on Landry while she sidestepped towards Philippa. She crouched down to get a grip on Philippa's upper arm, hoping to drag her to her feet, but the emperor was still woozy. Two or three seconds to turn away from Landry and pull her up. Two or three seconds she'd have to risk Landry attacking.

Two or three seconds she tried to take anyway, and got a phaser burn on her shoulder to show for it. She gasped and let Philippa slump back to the floor.

Landry had swung around the control panel, phaser trained at Michael. "Drop your weapon," Landry said.

"Not a chance."

Landry shrugged. "Your call." Her finger moved to the trigger.

Nothing Michael could do would be elegant now, but between elegance and death, there wasn't much of a choice. She slammed into Landry's arms, pinning her to the side of the agonizer, and grabbed her at the wrist, twisting to loosen her grip. Landry's knee lifted towards Michael's abdomen, but Michael jumped back in time, dragging Landry's wrist with her. The phaser clattered to the floor, and now she was free to swing Landry around, trying to drop her to the ground, while Landry aimed for Michael's face with one hand and grabbed at her injured arm with the other. Her grip burned, truly burned, pain rocketing from shoulder to hand to the right half of her torso.

Landry connected, and if the arm had burnt and throbbled before, its pain level was nothing like the slam of Landry's fist into Michael's face. Michael staggered backwards, and Landry kept coming. A punch. A kick. A punch Michael was able to block, and that gave her the time to hurl herself at Landry hard enough to drive them both to the floor, where Michael had just enough time to finally land a punch of her own before Landry dug into her arm with her fingers and butted her with her head.

Landry stumbling to her feet now, rearing back with one leg, kicking at Michael's stomach. Michael cried out, folded in on herself, again when Landry repeated the motion. Michael groaned, and out of the corner of her rapidly swelling eye she could see Landry heading towards a phaser one of them had dropped.

And then a streak of black rose from the floor and tackled Landry, and had her arms pinned behind her back before Michael could even finish unfolding herself.

"Minister Landry," said Philippa, "I must insist that you leave me and my daughter alone. And since I expect you can't be reasoned with on this point ..." She slid forward on Landry's body, her legs pinning Landry's arms, and placed her hands on Landry's temples.

"No!" Michael cried. "Philippa, don't! We need her if we're going to get out of here alive."

"Find another way. I've dreamt of snapping her neck for months."

"Please. I don't know of any other way." Michael staggered to her knees and crawled over to Philippa, meeting her eye to eye. "There are so many things that can go wrong. So many. But she's got enough power that if we give her something she wants, we might make it out of here."

"Why would I ever make a deal with you?" Landry panted, struggling beneath Philippa, who calmly raised a hand and smacked Landry's head until she lay still.

"Because I've done you one hell of a favor, Landry. I killed Lorca."

Philippa raised an eyebrow, and her lips curved towards a smile. "Well done, Michael."

"Lorca is dead," Michael hissed in Landry's ear. "I killed him with my own two hands. I sat with his body for half an hour just to make sure he was dead too long for anyone to revive him. By rights, I could be emperor now if I wanted to be."

"But she doesn't," Philippa said. "And I'm certain you do. The military will support you. You could even say you killed Lorca, not Michael. Find a few guards who'll swear they saw you leave Lorca's quarters after Michael, get rid of the ones who had been on duty instead ..."

"Philippa ..."

"All you have to do now is let us go," Philippa continued, ignoring Michael's warning. "Give us a ship. Pretend no one sees us go."

"We promise we'll leave the Empire," Michael said. "We're not going to join the Resistance or start one of our own. We just want to be left alone."

"What if I don't believe you? You, the emperor's favored concubine. And you, the emperor he overthrew. You'd never give up power."

Philippa pulled Landry's head back by the hair and shoved her face into the floor, hard. "Believe it or not," she said, "I'm *tired*."

"And we're willing to offer one more item to ensure your cooperation," Michael said. "The location of Emperor Georgiou's secret vault. Money, weapons, priceless artwork. All worth a fortune."

"Michael! You do not have my authorization to —"

"Philippa, need I remind you how many layers of defense we have to cut through to leave here alive? And how much easier Landry can make it for us?"

Philippa scowled. "Fine. She can have it. Greedy little cow."

Michael continued, "You're as close as it gets to next in line for the throne, but there's enough there for you to start over as a queen somewhere even if you choose not to take over the Empire. Give her the access code, Philippa."

"If I must. 48ZV5YQðZ. Do you need me to repeat that? No? Good girl."

"I'll transmit the location just before Philippa and I warp out of here," Michael said. "Now, do we have a deal?"

Landry's face remained blank. But her shoulders relaxed, and she nodded towards the left. "You'll want the *Eurydice*," she said. "Almost as fast as the Imperial shuttle. Now, let me up, and follow me."

* * *

The *Eurydice* was small and sleek, with sleeping bunks for four and warp five capability. Michael punched it full blast the instant she finished transmitting the vault coordinates. She wasn't even sure where they were headed; she'd slammed the navigational controls to their furthest reach and would worry about whether it was far enough later, after she and Philippa had had a chance to rest.

Philippa was already stretched on the nearest bunk, pulling a thermal blanket over her body. Michael crouched beside her, smoothing the blanket, pressing back Philippa's hair from her face.

"You shouldn't have given her that vault without my permission," Philippa murmured.

"I doubt it was your only one."

"Of course not. The Orion vault is ten times its size."

"Good. We'll need the money to live on."

"Money." Philippa yawned. "I can't believe I'll have to worry myself about such trivialities. I used to run an empire, you know."

Michael smiled at her. "You may yet again. A smaller one, maybe. A quiet empire."

"A private empire. For now."

"Yes," Michael said, and kissed Philippa's forehead. "For now."

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!